

Storytelling and Resistance: The Documentary Practice of Alanis Obomsawin

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Alanis Obomsawin is the best-known of the Native documentary filmmakers in Canada.¹ Born in New Hampshire in 1932, she spent part of her childhood near Sorel, Quebec, on the Odanak reserve of the Abenaki nation. She lived there with the family of Jesse Benedict, her maternal aunt, until she moved at the age of nine with her parents to Trois Rivières. Of the period in her life at Trois Rivières, Obomsawin recalls her cultural estrangement and, as the only Native child at school, her first encounter with prejudice and racism.² After moving to Montreal in the late 1950s, having learned English during a two-year stay in Florida, she performed as a singer and a storyteller, making appearances on reservations, in prisons and schools, and at music festivals.³

In 1965, she was invited by Wolf Koenig and Bob Verrall, both veteran producers at the National Film Board of Canada, to act as a consultant on various projects dealing with Native people.⁴ Obomsawin directed her first film, *Christmas at Moose Factory*, in 1971 and, after joining the permanent staff at the NFB, produced and directed two films in 1977: *Amisk* and *Mother of Many Children*. Since then, her accomplishments on film, stage, and television, as well as her work with young Native people and her activism on behalf of Native rights, have earned her a Governor General's Award (1983), a Native Arts Achievement Award (1994), and honorary degrees at Concordia University (1993) and Carleton University (1994).⁵

Although the release of *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), a documentary on the explosive events of the summer of 1990 that drove the Native 'problem' into the spotlight, brought national and international recognition to Obomsawin, her previous documentary work remains relatively unknown. Characteristic of Obomsawin's work is the emphasis on the affirmative resolve of First Peoples to revitalize their cul-

tures, reclaim their right to self-determination, and envision a new and better future. As she has said, 'Native filmmaking is important because there are so many communities, cultures, and traditions. Many traditions have been lost, some are coming back, and some have remained underground for a long time. There was survival of the people through everything. It's so important to document how the people feel and what they have experienced. Each family and tribe has its own history. So there will never be enough people making documents.'⁶

Obomsawin is a filmmaker who is committed to redress the invisibility of First Peoples. Her documentaries reveal a deep commitment to and solidarity with Native causes, documenting how political struggle has changed the lives of Inuit, Métis, Cree, Mohawk, Ojibway, and Mi'kmaq communities.⁷ Obomsawin's own engagement in First Nations' politics is revealed by films that are grounded within ongoing struggles and in 'full awareness of the contradictions at play,' to use Thomas Waugh's description of committed documentary practices.⁸

Like the work of other Native filmmakers, her films have been produced by the NFB and sponsored by the federal Department of Indian Affairs. Although her films appear to fit into the style institutionalized by the NFB, which emphasizes information and education, Obomsawin's practice sidesteps the prescriptive imperatives of the NFB didactic documentary. Her films rework documentary conventions and place representation at the service of a Native political and aesthetic agenda.

Her work demystifies notions of disinterested observation in *cinéma direct* by inscribing her presence in the film, as narrator and subject. In her hands documentary practice becomes a rhetorical intervention that places the enabling subject at the centre of discourse. The interview, used to shape point of view, becomes a valuable instrument to validate individual biography, make intelligible the ongoing struggles for Native self-definition, and contest Eurocentric narratives of First Nations history. In addition, Obomsawin's documentaries challenge what Brian Winston calls the 'Griersonian obsession with the victim' organized around the 'image of [a] heroically suffering humanity.'⁹ Her work subverts the objectifying tendencies of the social documentary by revealing a heartfelt respect for the past and present of the people she has filmed. Obomsawin's approach to human emotion is premised on creating a place for empathy that promotes the circulation of affect between protagonist and viewer.

As a result, Obomsawin has been able to negotiate the difficult path between the human solidarity that permeates her films and the partisan,

often controversial perspective that motivates her work as a Native documentary filmmaker. Thus, her films have fundamentally altered the way in which the cause of First Peoples has been communicated to non-Native Canadians. She has been successful in altering common perceptions, both about the ability of Native communities to take charge of their destinies and about the urgency of institutional change. In the process, as Peter Steven suggests, Obomsawin's films 'live beyond their original context ... largely because of the strong emotions she generates on the screen.'¹⁰

Self-representation and the Testimonial Narrative

Obomsawin's documentary work makes consistent use of the on-camera interview because, as she has stated, 'the basic purpose [of my films] is for our people to have a voice. To be heard is the important thing, no matter what we're talking about – whether it has to do with having our existence recognized, or whether it has to do with speaking about our values, our survival, our beliefs, that we belong to something beautiful, that it's O.K. to be an Indian, to be a native person in this country.'¹¹

Yet Obomsawin takes the interview one step further. In its different modes (conversant, off-screen as pseudo-monologue or narration), the interview provides a space from which people can speak and subverts the 'culture of voicelessness' that has, in the words of Emma LaRoque, 'literally and politically negated' the 'vast storehouse of our oral traditions.'¹² Obomsawin's use of the interview, a staple of direct cinema, has a political and aesthetic function that draws on the tradition of Native storytelling (and other modes of oral history). It becomes a vehicle whereby Native history can be validated, pre-contact and colonial experiences can be retold.

What distinguishes Obomsawin's work from standard historical compilation documentaries is that the interview challenges pre-established categorizations of discourse and representation. In this way, the interview also evokes the testimonial narratives that, as Chon Noriega points out in regard to Latin American radical practices, are a preferred vehicle, 'to give "voice" to communities or a national identity, not in a passive sense, but rather through "constant, ongoing discussion" between filmmakers and film subjects.'¹³

Most importantly, in Obomsawin's films the interview – as a testimonial narrative – ceases being simply a statement, an interpretation or an account. It shapes point of view and becomes an explanatory template for self-representation. The interview is characterized by a tension between

first- and third-person address, between individual agency and group identity, to enable the circulation of subjectivity across a range of narrative registers.¹⁴ While third-person address is mostly reserved for historical and collectively shared knowledge, first-person address inscribes the complex negotiation between what is experienced simultaneously at the personal and the communal level.

Moreover, the interview in its testimonial form affectively anchors the relationship between Obomsawin and her social protagonists, between social protagonists and audiences. As such, the interview implicitly acknowledges the collaboration between the social subject and the filmmaker who records and edits the narrator's testimony. As Obomsawin has explained, the process of filmmaking depends as much on personal involvement as on collaboration. Through private conversations and individual (and sometimes collective) consultation and advice, the filmmaker builds a level of trust between herself and her subjects. As a result, her work speaks from what Steven calls an 'insider voice' – a voice that speaks individually and collectively from within Native culture.¹⁵ Furthermore, this relationship between Obomsawin and her subjects is visually and aurally inscribed into the film either by her contiguous presence in the frame or the role she assumes as a narrator. In this way, the spectator becomes, in the words of Noreiga, "complicit" not through a one-to-one identification with the narrator, but through an identification with the narrator's project.¹⁶

Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance, for instance, disrupts the standard protocol of the interactive documentary by structuring complementary functions of agency. The opening segments illustrate how this rhetorical strategy operates, and how the filmmaker and her interviewees assume concurrent roles as narrators, interlocutors, participants, and witnesses. The confrontation that occurred in Oka, Quebec, during the summer of 1990 between the Mohawk and the provincial police and federal military is introduced in the pre-credit by Obomsawin's opening statement ('The story you will see takes place ...') and is accompanied by a drawing that locates the Kanehsatake, Akwesasne, and Kahnawake territories, and by shots of the golf course and the Mohawk cemetery in the Pines. Positioned inside the Pines, the camera establishes the centrality of a Native point of view, which is maintained throughout the whole film (as in the sequences recorded from behind the Mohawk barricades and the Treatment Centre) to represent the social dynamics and political dimensions of the Oka conflict.¹⁷

The title sequence deals with events that led to the shoot-out between Mohawk warriors and the Sûreté du Québec (SQ). This sequence marks a

shift in location (the Pines and the Mohawk cemetery) and address (on-camera interviews with Kahentiiosta, Ellen Gabriel, and Robert ‘Mad Jap’ Skidders). Narrated by Kahentiiosta, Gabriel, and Skidders, the confrontation in the Pines is visually rendered through the juxtaposition of images originating from broadcast television and home video and Obomsawin’s film crew. Because Obomsawin’s film crew arrived after the shoot-out, the raid itself is conveyed through a series of swishpans of the forest, accompanied by the noises of gunshots, implying chaos. It ends with a pastoral shot of the Pines and the golf course, suggesting the uneasy calm that followed.

The representational contrast in the confrontation and its aftermath is reinforced by a contrast in rhetorical forms. These forms range from chronicle to autobiography, interpretation, and reminiscence, and they integrate affective, experiential, and interpretative modes of speech. By bridging distinct forms of discourse, these rhetorical forms reveal the multilayered character of testimonial narratives. Obomsawin’s voice-over narration (‘the people in the Pines are very sad about the shooting of Corporal Lemay’), spoken in her characteristically soothing voice, and in present tense, evokes what the shot of the Pines cannot represent. Gabriel’s on-camera response to the SQ tactical team, whose faces were concealed behind shielded helmets (‘we were fighting something without a spirit’), voices the anxiety in the face of colonial aggression, bringing the conflict to a symbolic level. At another level, Kahentiiosta’s description of Mohawk resolve (‘but we weren’t leaving’) suggests self-assertion. Both Skidders’s interpretation of Lemay’s shooting (with Obomsawin appearing, this time on camera) and his account of the behaviour of police during the raid (‘they started screaming and taking off’) evoke bewilderment and uncertainty.

These opening sequences of the film disrupt the unified position of the narrating subject. Not only is the narrative multivocal, but the non-homogeneous sources of the visual records destabilize point of view and reinforce the impossibility of submitting a single ‘interpretative frame’ from which the events surrounding Lemay’s death can be coherently re-arranged.¹⁸ These segments illustrate what Obomsawin herself has said about her film: ‘There are many stories to Kanehsatake, or Oka, or Kahnawake during the crisis – thousands of stories.’¹⁹

Ethnographic Imagery and Subjectivity

Obomsawin’s films place the protocol of documentary at the service of

alternative modes of historical and ethnographic representation. *Mother of Many Children* (1977) is such a film. While documenting how First Nations women experience life from birth to old age, the film situates the multiple ways in which First Nations women's identities and experiences have been historically shaped and articulated.

Mother of Many Children suggests, through its aesthetic and discursive strategies, the unpredictable ways in which colonization affects Native efforts to retrieve the scattered pieces of First Peoples histories. It translates into a documentary structure the Native dilemma of self-representation, and renders visible the predicament faced by Native filmmakers when they have to rely on images inherited from traditional, European-centred anthropology.

The two sequences that make up the birth segment of *Mother of Many Children* are a good example of a reflexive strategy that exposes the tension between one regime of knowledge, which is embodied and localized, and the other, which is imaginary and deferred (the discursive and representational archive of colonialism). On the one hand, the stylistic contrast between these sequences brings out differences between contemporary and traditional representations of childbirth. The sequence that shows the birth of a baby girl in a Fort George hospital to Alassi Anakayak, a Cree woman from the Eastern Arctic, is recorded in the style of observational documentary. The interview with Césaire Newwashish, a Manowan Elder from Atikameok Iriniokaa, is given mostly off-screen. On the other hand, these two sequences establish a tension between lived experience and historical memory, between the affectivity of mother-child bonding and the third-person plural account of how in the past Cree women managed pregnancy and delivered babies.

In addition, Newwashish's narrative reveals the tension between Native storytelling and the silent subject of colonial imagery. Although the affiliation of Newwashish's narrative to oral history is obvious, oral history is not idealized. While Obomsawin's off-camera translation of Newwashish's on-camera account de-fetishizes the speaking subject, the elder's account is laid over archival footage. This juxtaposition suggests that what is remembered by oral history – what constitutes the historical consciousness of the Manowan Cree – cannot be reconciled with ethnographical knowledge, as represented by the archival footage. The normative bond between speech and representation is suspended, exposing a multiple self shaped by sedimented layers of historical consciousness.

Newwashish's narrative begins with 'they always lived in the bush and canvas tents there were none,' and ends with the remark 'she was more

powerful than man.’ It is accompanied, respectively, by traditional ethnographic images of a traditional tepee and then of an older woman. These photographs, like all the archival stills used in the film, assert the local and the specific. Images showing Native family groups and individuals in a variety of domestic and occupational situations appear to have been selected for their affective, rather than their descriptive, value. Thus, the alternation between testimonial narratives and ethnographic imagery in *Mother of Many Children* functions as a ‘recuperative strategy in the face of the erasure of difference characteristic of colonialist representation,’ as Gareth Griffiths points out in relation to Aboriginal representation in Australia.²⁰

This strategy also has a corrective function that fits well into the agenda of the political and aesthetic enfranchisement that guides Obomsawin’s documentary practice. In *Mother of Many Children* this agenda is illustrated in the ‘walking out’ ceremony. Performed for the camera in a northern Cree settlement (and described by Obomsawin’s voice-over), this sequence concentrates on ritual and affective gestures. What is significant in this segment is the appropriation of the traditional ethnographic protocol. The parade of women and children, and the welcoming embracing and somewhat timid kissing of the babies by the men in the tent, inverts the anonymity and lifelessness of the archival stills seen previously in the birthing segment. Moreover, this sequence foregrounds – through the subjects’ direct look at the camera – the ‘impulse to “pose,” to control one’s photographic representation.’²¹

Mother of Many Children is a powerful, cross-cultural statement that is ‘made with full, sometimes painful awareness of what has come before and of the representational residue available for adaptation, rejection, and redress,’ as Bill Nichols has noted of new forms of ethnography.²² This imaginative deployment of documentary devices also defies the rigid taxonomy of ethnography, itself a colonial construct, and creates a tension between stable categorizations of self (and group) and social relations. *Mother of Many Children* offers a poignant portrayal of matriarchal cultures that have, over the centuries, been pressured to change and to adopt new habits and customs.

Visual Materials, Knowledge, and Representation

In Obomsawin’s films, archival materials and found footage signify the historical conflict between the knowledge that First Nations people hold about themselves and the knowledge that others have constructed

about Natives. This strategy is the cinematographic equivalent of what Georges E. Sioui Wendayte has termed 'Amerindian autohistory.' Amerindian autohistory strives 'to demonstrate, by showing convergence with non-Native documents, the "scientific" validity of Native historical sources (written, oral, pictographic, mnemonic, esthetic, etc.) as testimonies of Native perceptions of themselves and their world.'²³ While this approach validates Native sources as legitimate historical accounts, it also recognizes that 'accredited colonial documentary sources ... continue to exist as the ultimate fortress of Euro-American discourse on Amerindians.'²⁴

Yet, these Eurocentric images also become a site from which master narratives can be challenged and counter-narratives can be told through a process of reframing and repositioning. This strategy is present in most of Obomsawin's films; it manifests itself concretely in discrete segments that set up the films' historical and thematic frameworks and are made up of illustrations, paintings, photographs, and film clips. Some of these images are archival; others are contemporary or have been specifically commissioned for the film. Initiated by the filmmaker's own voice-over narration, these expositional sequences complement the historical, cultural, or testimonial narratives of the film and, at the same time, unsettle the epistemological stability of didactic documentaries. By alternating archival and contemporary images, Obomsawin's films forge powerful and visually engaging links between metaphoric and metonymic narratives to represent the ritualistic and contingent aspects of social and cultural Native experience.

Among these representational forms, drawings, illustrations, and etchings perform a greater variety of functions than do archival footage and still photographs. In *Incident at Restigouche* (1984), for example, Native representation is constructed as a process that acknowledges change and that situates how Mi'kmaq traditions continue under different forms in the contemporary world. The film contests the traditional antinomies – pre-contact/colonial, old/new, Native/Euro-American – by parallelism and repetition. A pastel drawing of a river landscape is alternated with night-time shots of Mi'kmaq fishermen. The drawing's implicit romanticization of America as a 'land of abundance' is superseded by Chief Metallic's account about how the Mi'kmaq adopted European fishing techniques. In addition, the waterfall in the drawing is used again to articulate a Native-specific view of representing history. It introduces a musical segment where found footage on the life cycle of the salmon is accompanied by 'Salmon Song,' performed by Willy Dunn. With the closing

images of a crying baby, and of two young smiling children, the lyrics of the song link Native cosmology and cultural survival.

First used in *Incident at Restigouche*, and again in *My Name is Kahentiiosta* (1995), courtroom sketches illustrate individual narratives – the trials of Donald Germain and Kahentiiosta, respectively – and render representable those aspects of Native experience that have been made invisible. In *Incident at Restigouche*, sketches challenge the neutrality of images of court proceedings and expose the systemic racism of the Canadian justice system. The voice-over commentary (spoken by Obomsawin and a male actor) names the judge and reads the charges brought against the Mi'kmaq fishermen in May 1982, while the interviews (with Germain and witnesses Richard Barnaby, Fay Metallic, and Sally Caplin) expose the way in which the court testimony of Natives was delegitimized. Similarly, sketches in *My Name is Kahentiiosta* are used to show what happened after the Mohawk left the Treatment Centre on 26 September 1990. Accompanied by Kahentiiosta's testimonial narrative, the sketches visualize situations that could neither be documented by the camera nor by a sympathetic photographer, like the bus trip to the Farnham military base and the trial at the St Jérôme courthouse. While this strategy explicitly acknowledges the limitations imposed on documentary filmmakers, it constructs a new visual space for Native self-representation.

In *Mother of Many Children*, female initiation is presented through Marie Leo's story of her own initiation. This narrative takes an epistolary form and is accompanied by black and white drawings that emphasize the ceremonial aspects of the transition to womanhood. Complemented by archival stills (an Indian settlement in winter, a tent made of fir branches, women preparing food for winter storage) and family photographs, these drawings validate the place of ritual and tradition in the construction of identity.

The sketches made by Bob Verrall – and animated through an optical printer – for *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* mimic, through viewpoint and camera movement, the forced migration of Mohawk begun with the arrival of Sulpician missionaries in 1566 and ending in 1721. The recurring drawing of the Sulpician church in Oka – shown frontally, as if seen from the river – surrounded by the forest, signifies colonial intrusion and the estrangement of Mohawk from their traditional land. These commissioned drawings make up for the scarcity of Native historical visual sources. This production of Native representations (like the rearticulation of history and discourse through testimonial narratives) implies an awareness of how First Nations peoples have been represented and how their history has been told.

In Obomsawin's films, the combination of images from diverse sources creates a space to visualize cultural knowledge and social experience, retrieve traditional and contemporary stories, and question colonial representations. Most importantly, Native history and knowledge are presented from multiple perspectives that enable both individual agency and collective identity. This approach reflects what Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin have termed a 'meeting of cultures' that foregrounds 'historicity, cultural conquest, Aboriginal title, identity and sovereignty.'²⁵

The Aesthetics of Affectivity

In *Poundmaker's Lodge: A Place of Healing* (1987) and *No Address* (1988) – as in *Mother of Many Children* – multiple voices speak for, and within, the experience of being a First Nations youth. These two films establish a discourse through which self-abuse and healing is effectively represented as a process of self-recognition.

Poundmaker's Lodge: A Place of Healing is centred around the accounts of the young men and women who have come to St Albert (north of Edmonton) to break out from the vicious cycle of alcohol and drug abuse. Through their interactions with the social workers, medicine men, and elders at the Poundmaker's Lodge, the film reveals the struggle – in the words of Chief Poundmaker (spoken by Brian Eyahpaise) that open the film – 'to find a place in the world for our people.' *No Address* deals with homeless Natives who live in the streets of Montreal. The film's main protagonist is Tonatsee, a Great Whale Cree. Through him, the film generates an affective context for the plight of inner-city Natives whose only support to find a way out of drug abuse and prostitution comes from a handful of agencies (the Montreal Native Friendship Centre, La Mission Colombe, and Dernier Secours.)

What distinguishes these two films from Obomsawin's earlier work is the dramatization of individual stories and the personalized segments that reveal, with extreme sensitivity, the long road toward recovery. Affectivity in these films is the result of empathy, but also of respect for the young people. By maintaining a discrete distance, the camera establishes a private space for emotional release. In *Poundmaker's Lodge*, for instance, when Leslie Brunon, a twenty-five-year-old man, breaks down, unable to submit himself to the healing powers of the fire in the sweat lodge, the filmmaker lets him walk away from the camera.

Amid the bleakness of the young Native men and women's stories, there is always a precarious sense of hope. The relentless presentation of

pain is counterbalanced by lyrical images of hope. The recurring image of a tepee set against a Prairie sunset in *Poundmaker's Lodge*, for instance, becomes a representational motif for centuries-old traditions of Native empowerment through spirituality. The promise of restoration is furthered in the lodge sequences where the young people gather in a circle to burn sweet grass and vocalize their anger. In *No Address*, Obomsawin uses the bleak winter landscape as a backdrop for the stories of those she calls 'the orphans of the city' and establishes how the Montreal Native Friendship Centre has become a physical and emotional refuge for young Native alcohol and drug abusers. The film follows the journey of each character from derelict neighbourhoods and abandoned buildings to the centre, from a self-destructive recklessness to a still precarious, but genuine, awareness of the need to take control of their despairing existences.

While both films denounce the systemic racism that has disenfranchised Natives, they also construct a social and psychological framework for hope through solidarity and empathy. As Robert Houle suggests, 'this social realism is what makes Obomsawin's narratives potent and cathartic, they are like the axiom which says one has to deal with the poison before a process of healing can begin.'²⁶

Nowhere is affect more prominent than in *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986). This film chronicles the story of a boy who, between the ages of four and seventeen, was placed in sixteen foster homes and twelve shelters, group homes, and lock-up facilities and who, after three attempts, killed himself in June 1984. The film relies on the alternation of quotations from Richard Cardinal's diary (read by David Mitchell) with dramatized images of Richard as a young boy (played by Cory Swan), interviews with his brother, Charlie Cardinal, and some of the foster families with whom Richard was placed, and Obomsawin's voice-over commentary to narrate the tragic outcome of the child's story.

The opening sequences of *Richard Cardinal* set up distinct ways to reconstruct Richard's life by moving from the shots of a young boy in a field of wild flowers to photographs of Richard. A line from the diary ('Dear Chuck, if I die, try to understand') and a black-and-white photograph of Richard's body hanging from a white birch tree act as catalysts for the film. At the same time, the account given by foster parents Terry and Leo Crother of Richard's final days serves as a motivating drive for the film. The purpose of the film is validated by Leo's efforts to bring

Richard's death to the attention of government officials and by his reasons for taking pictures of the body ('somebody else should see'). This affective investment in disclosing the tragic circumstances that led to the boy's suicide is confirmed by Obomsawin's on-camera presence in the early sequences of the film.

With its retrospective narrative structure, compelling imagery, and persistent questioning of the treatment that Richard received, the film reveals the systemic inadequacy and racism of child welfare policies. The excerpts from Richard's diary set up a space from where a withdrawn and abused Métis child can speak, evoking the anguish that leads so many young Natives to suicide. Accompanied by images of Swan in a variety of settings, these excerpts have an affective impact on the representation of agency; they foreground the liberating potential of self-expression.

The film's re-enactment sequences have a double function. First, they reveal a dark world of abuse, fear, violence, and neglect. Richard's account of his arrival at the Jones home is illustrated in a sequence that shows him locking himself into a car and then being led into a building by a man. Shots of Richard sitting alone in the car, with a small suitcase on his knees, and of his crying face while being reassured by the social worker that 'everything will be fine,' portray his well-founded apprehension of what awaits behind the tiny basement window of the room assigned to him. The re-enactment sequences also provide an insight into a private world, one where a child can do those things that children should be able to do. Shots of the boy playing a flute, chasing after frogs in a pond, collecting flowers, and skipping along a railway track set up an alternative perspective. As Obomsawin has said, 'I want people, who look at the film, to have a different attitude next time they meet what is called a problem child, and develop some love and some relationship to the child – instead of alienating him.'²⁷

Richard's tragic search for an identity is condensed into the final images of the film: Richard as a young boy running along a railway track, his arms filled with wild flowers, and, in voice-over, a diary excerpt speaking of sadness and depression. These melancholy saturated images represent, at an affective level, what the film has so successfully attempted to articulate: the need to rescue children who have lived similar situations, and to allow them to speak about those experiences. As such, *Richard Cardinal* reiterates the premise behind Obomsawin's documentary practice: 'Obomsawin calls film a "place" where Native people can talk to each other about their losses, their memories of injustice, their desire to share

what is good about their way of life, and with that sharing viewers of her documentaries perhaps arrive at a better appreciation of how the dispossessed, dislocated, and disoriented try to come out of an abyss.²⁸

Storytelling through Documentary

Obomsawin's films constitute a compelling and politically important contribution to a family album where the stories of First Nations people in Canada are told, where their setbacks and victories are recorded with anger, compassion, and respect. Native people are no longer the silent 'other' and 'exotic' object of colonial representation; rather, Native subjectivity and agency are localized. Knowledge and history are embodied through narratives that express the struggle to reclaim the right of First Nations communities to imagine a better future. Each film explores the bewildering journeys of individuals and communities who have fought for self-determination. Obomsawin's work resituates Native history and tradition, social experience and mythology.

The bonds established between First Nations peoples and place serve to reconstruct Native identities in ways that reflect the twin sense of alienation from and belonging to the Canadian landscape. As a documentary filmmaker and Native activist, Obomsawin recognizes herself as a storyteller within a tradition where, in the words of Loretta Todd, 'storytellers were part of the governing of their nations, as they were holders of cultural history ... Through story, dance, song, ceremony ... the holders of the culture kept the histories and the visions alive, told by image and voice, by word and by action.'²⁹

Obomsawin's skill as a storyteller is eloquently and effectively rendered in the historical segment of *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. This segment contextualizes the events of 1990 within the historical conflict between the Mohawk and successive colonial powers. It follows a shot of a military helicopter landing behind the Sulpician church in Oka, which Obomsawin's voice-over introduces as being the place 'where the trouble all began 270 years ago.' Illustrated with historical prints, paintings, Diorama reconstructions, archival stills, Mohawk family photographs, and contemporary drawings, this historical exposé centres around four historical moments.³⁰ The expositional form taken by this narrative is complemented by exegesis, as in the description of the Two Mountain wampum. Spoken by a male voice, this description reproduces the traditional oral recital of the Great Law of Peace by the wampum keepers of the Iroquois Confederacy Longhouse. The last episode in this historical segment tells

the story of Chief Sose Onasakenrat (also known as Joseph Swan), who fought to claim the land back from the Sulpicians in 1869, and includes a dramatized exchange between Chief Onasakenrat and a Sulpician priest.³¹ In this way, the film negotiates the complex history that has forced Native people to take up arms because, as Obomsawin has stated, 'for hundreds of years, our people tried everything. Nobody listened until now.'³²

Kanehsatake exposes moments of intense emotion. The mounting tension at the barricades, for instance, is conveyed through reactions of anxiety, anger, and frustration by individual Mohawk warriors. Thus, what the film offers is more than a Native account of the events that were broadcast live into Canadian homes.³³ It provides an uncompromising and partisan perspective of what happened around the Oka golf course to open up a space from which Mohawk historical narratives can be re-articulated and Native struggles for self-determination can be legitimized.

The aspects of Obomsawin's work that are highlighted in this chapter demonstrate how the filmmaker politically used the prevailing techniques of documentary. Obomsawin has used these techniques to reinstate what Nichols sees as being central to performative documentaries – 'the sense of the local, specific, and embodied as a vital locus of social subjectivity,' because this approach to documentary 'gives figuration to and evokes dimensions of the political unconscious that remain suspended between an immediate here and now and a utopian alternative.'³⁴

Furthermore, by bringing to her documentary practice a deep awareness of her own identity, she has placed her work at the service of a political and aesthetic agenda that aims at the reappropriation of an audiovisual space for Native representation. The consolidation of cultural-specific strategies in her work places Obomsawin's films within Native struggles for cultural autonomy and recognition of Aboriginal entitlement. As Loretta Todd states, 'the basis of cultural autonomy is contained within the concept of Aboriginal Title and Rights. Aboriginal Title has been described as a concept of jurisprudence that articulates a relationship of a people to their traditional lands. Traditional lands are defined by traditional use and occupancy: from Aboriginal Title flow Aboriginal Rights.'³⁵

In the opening of *My Name Is Kahentiioosta* the transmutation of the National Film Board of Canada logo is a visual symbol of a transaction. A white drawing of an eye is transformed into a human figure and is placed within a larger design that incorporates Native motifs. As the cube on

which the logo changes from an ocular to an anthropomorphic shape rotates, the Native eye drawing multiplies before progressively dissolving into the official image. This incorporation of Native iconography (like the Native drum sounds accompanying the NFB logo in *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*) is a sign of institutional validation. For Obomsawin, as a documentary filmmaker, it is a recognition of her status within the National Film Board of Canada. For Canada's First Nations, it is an acknowledgment that Native artists can have equal access to existing cultural institutions in order to foster, create, and develop Native cultural practices.

NOTES

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- 1 Given the fragmented, and underdeveloped, state of Canadian film studies, the contributions of Native filmmakers have yet to be documented. I hope that the comments and interpretations presented in this article may contribute – in a modest way – to a better understanding of the politics of Native documentary.
- 2 'Nous étions la seule famille indienne, là-bas, évoque la cinéaste. Toute mon enfance, je me suis fait battre, insulter, cracher dessus. Après je n'ai eu qu'une envie: combattre l'injustice.' Odile Tremblay, 'Alanis Obomsawin: La douleur d'être Amérindienne,' *Le Devoir*, 19 April 1995, A3.
- 3 Obomsawin's talent as a singer and storyteller and her commitment to Aboriginal cultural practices were documented in *Alanis* (Ron Kelly, 1965). Incidentally, it was through the broadcast of this film on CBC's *Telescope* that she was approached by the NFB. She appeared in *Our Dear Sisters* (Kathleen Shannon, 1975), which is part of the Working Mothers series. This short film shows highlights of her participation at the Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto and includes an interview in which she talks about being a performer and a single mother.
- 4 Details about the specifics of Obomsawin's work as a Native 'consultant' at the NFB are difficult to come by. Yet, her role in the salvaging of *Cold Journey* (Martin Defalco, 1972) has been documented both in Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 213–14, and D.B. Jones, *The Best Butler in the Business: Tom Daly of the National Film Board of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 191–3.

- 5 The article by Maurie Alioff and Susan Schouten Levine remains the most comprehensive biographical account on Alanis Obomsawin. See 'The Long Walk of Alanis Obomsawin,' *Cinema Canada*, no. 142 (June 1987): 10–15.
- 6 Alanis Obomsawin, 'It Was Painful to Make, I Can Tell You That,' in Peter Steven, *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary Film and Video* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1993), 186.
- 7 Her films focus on children (*Christmas at Moose Factory*, 1971; *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child*, 1986), young people (*Gabriel Goes to the City*, 1979; *Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place*, 1987; *No Address*, 1988), and women (*Mother of Many Children*, 1977; *My Name is Kahentiösta*, 1995). Others document situations of crisis (*Incident at Restigouche*, 1984; *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, 1993; *Spudwrench*, 1997) or chronicle cultural history (the Canada Vignettes *The Wild Rice Harvest, Kenora*, 1979 and *June in Povungnituk*, 1980) and place this history within contemporary struggles for self-determination (*Amisk*, 1977). She has also directed short dramas such as *Walker* (1991).
- 8 Thomas Waugh, 'Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries,' in *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), xiv.
- 9 Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 258.
- 10 Obomsawin, 'It Was Painful to Make,' 177.
- 11 Alioff and Schouten Levine, 'The Long Walk of Alanis Obomsawin,' 13.
- 12 Emma LaRoque, 'Preface,' in *Writing the Circle: Native Women Writers in Western Canada*, ed. Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance (Edmonton: NeWest Publishers, 1990), xv.
- 13 Testimonial narratives are primarily associated with the literary genre of *testimonial* but have also been linked to radical forms of Latin American documentary. Chon Noriega, 'Talking Heads, Body Politic: The Plural Self of Chicano Experimental Video,' in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Elizabeth Suderburg (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 211.
- 14 This tension is described by Noriega in terms of an 'ethics of identity.' Doris Sommer has used this term to explain the relationship between the speaking subject and the interlocutor: 'The testimonial "I" does not invite us to identify with it. We are too different, and there is no pretence here of universal or essential experience.' Quoted in Noriega, 'Talking Heads,' 210.
- 15 Obomsawin, 'It Was Painful to Make,' 184.
- 16 Noriega, 'Talking Heads,' 210.

- 17 By 2 September 1990 the Canadian army advanced on the Mohawk in the Pines and set up a military barricade that prevented journalist and filmmakers from leaving the Treatment Centre. While Obomsawin remained in the Treatment Centre, her crew continued shooting material for the film on the other side of the barricades. These are the only sequences in which the point of view shifts to the other side of the military barricades. Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera, *People of the Pines* (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1991), 375.
- 18 I'm borrowing the term 'interpretative frame' from Bill Nichols, who has used it to analyze the political context and ideological assumptions that surrounded the use of audio-visual evidence, and the Rodney King tape, during the first trial of four Los Angeles policemen in 1991. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 19.
- 19 Sandy Greer, 'Mohawks and the Media: Alanis Obomsawin's *Kahnehsatake*: 270 Years of Resistance,' *Take One*, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 19.
- 20 Gareth Griffiths, 'The Myth of Authenticity,' in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 238.
- 21 Thomas Waugh, 'Words of Command: Notes on Cultural and Political Inflections of Direct Cinema in Indian Independent Documentary,' *CineAction*, no. 23 (Winter 1990–1): 36.
- 22 Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 91.
- 23 Georges E. Sioui Wendayete, '1992: The Discovery of Americity,' in *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, ed. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre; Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), 60.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 25 Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, 'Introduction,' *Indigena*, 12.
- 26 Robert Houle, 'Alanis Obomsawin,' in *Land Spirit Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, ed. Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle and Charlotte Townsend-Gault (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 107.
- 27 Alioff and Schouten Levine, 'The Long Walk of Alanis Obomsawin,' 12.
- 28 Houle, 'Alanis Obomsawin,' 107.
- 29 Loretta Todd, 'We Dream Who We Are: The Development of the Aboriginal Film and Video Arts Alliance,' *Talking Stick* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 7.
- 30 These moments are: the pre-contact period; the migration of Mohawk to the Lake of Two Mountains – what is today Kanehsatake – during the French regime; and the two land claim petitions during the British regime – the first in 1787 and the second in 1868. For details of these events, see 'The Two Dog Wampum,' in York and Pindera, *People of the Pines*, 82–98.

- 31 These lines are quoted in Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The 'New World' through Indian Eyes since 1492* (Toronto: Viking-Penguin, 1991), 332.
- 32 Quoted in York and Pindera, *People of the Pines*, 274.
- 33 A systematic and detailed study of television coverage still needs to be undertaken to understand the differences between CBC Newsworld's live coverage of the Oka events and Obomsawin's films.
- 34 Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, 106.
- 35 Loretta Todd, 'Notes on Appropriation,' *Parallélogramme* 16, no. 1 (1990): 26.