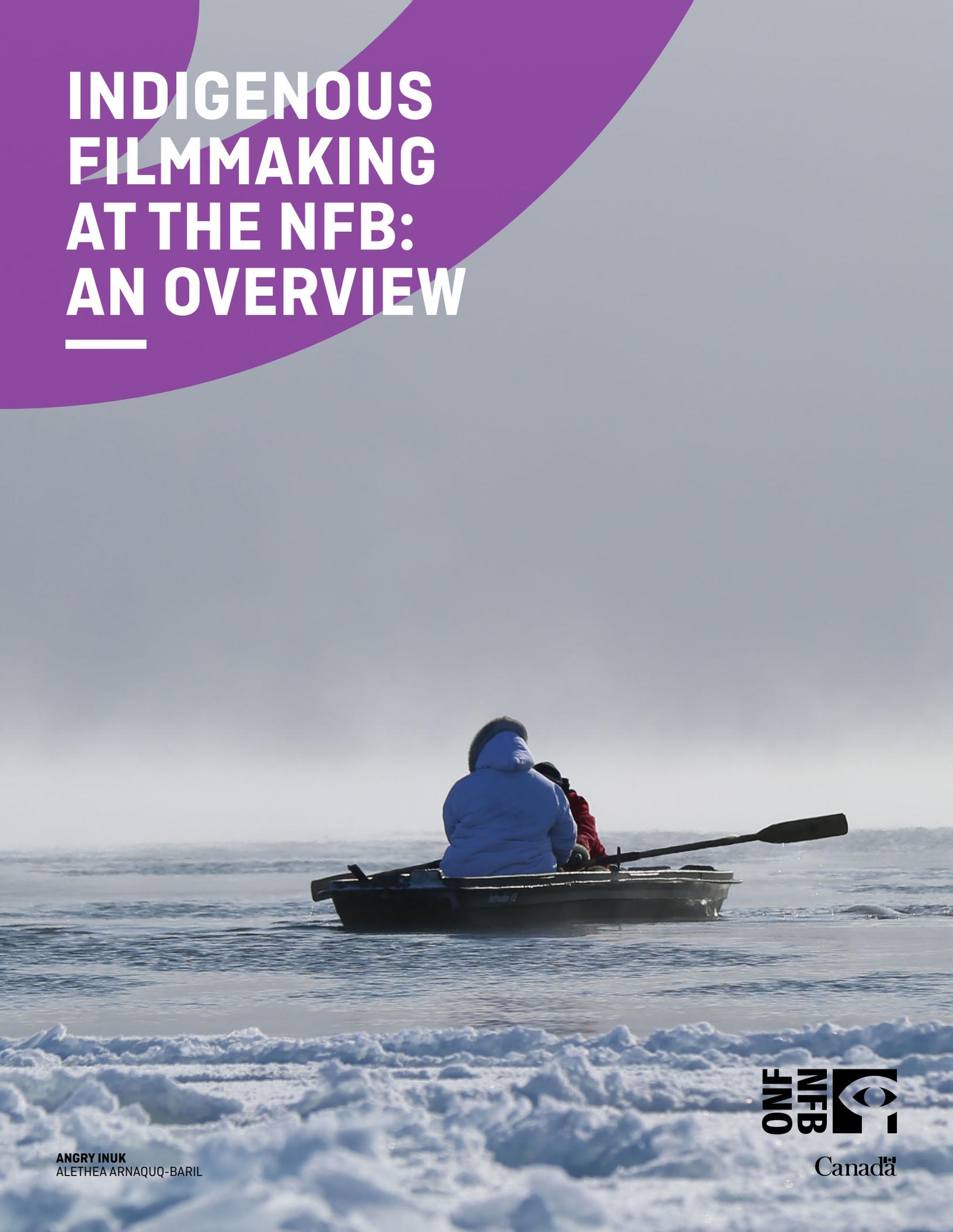


# INDIGENOUS FILMMAKING AT THE NFB: AN OVERVIEW

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## INTRODUCTION

The National Film Board of Canada (NFB) has been producing works about Indigenous lives and experience since the early 1940s, but for the first three decades of the NFB's existence, Indigenous people were restricted to being subjects in films by non-Indigenous directors. It was not until the late 1960s, when **Challenge for Change** ushered in a radical new participatory approach to production, that Indigenous people began putting their own stories on film. Since that time, the NFB has produced over 280 works by First Nations, Métis and Inuit directors.

Today, more than 20 projects by Indigenous directors are underway at the NFB's studios across Canada, and over the past four years Indigenous production has represented 9.5 percent of overall production spending at the NFB. But these gains were hard won.

The struggle of Indigenous people within the NFB mirrors broader social and political struggles to confront Canada's legacy of internal colonialism and the long, repressive shadow cast by the 1876 *Indian Act*.

In 1939, when the NFB was founded, attitudes within the organization reflected those of the dominant culture. The Indian residential school system (IRSS) that separated children from their families and their culture and forbade them from speaking their languages was still firmly entrenched, and viewed in a positive light by many non-Indigenous Canadians. The pass system obliged First Nations people to secure permission from Indian Agents before leaving their reserves or risk going to jail. Indigenous people were not allowed to vote, they were denied basic rights of assembly, and their life expectancy was dramatically shorter than the national average.

It's important to understand the current position of Indigenous filmmakers at the NFB within this historical context of government policies that aimed explicitly to efface Indigenous cultures from the Canadian body politic. It is also important to see the evolution of Indigenous filmmaking within a broader history of Indigenous survival, activism and resilience, one propelled forward by acts of resistance like the Indigenous civil-rights activism of the 1960s and the 1990 Oka standoff, by movements like the Constitution Express and Idle No More, by instances of public reckoning like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—and by the creative work of Indigenous artists and filmmakers.

## I. REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS REALITIES AND THE RISE OF INDIGENOUS VOICES WITHIN THE NFB'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE STUDIOS

Production at the NFB is structured along linguistic lines, with two parallel programs that have evolved and developed in response to distinct sociohistorical realities. This section traces the evolution of Indigenous filmmaking within the context of English-language production at the NFB.

### 1939 to 1967: Seen but not heard

Indigenous subjects were featured in about 55 English-language NFB films produced during this period—but they were never authors of their own stories. The US-born anthropologist and musicologist Laura Boulton directed several Indigenous-themed shorts as part of

*Peoples of Canada* (1944), an ethnographic series featuring titles like *Eskimo Arts and Crafts* and *People of the Potlatch* alongside films like *Poland on the Prairies* and *Ukrainian Dances*. A male “voice-of-God” narrates the entire series, and Indigenous participants are not given individual credits: in *Eskimo Arts and Crafts*, Boulton identifies her subjects collectively as “Eskimos of the Eastern Arctic.” Cultural paternalism pervades this early ethnographic work, with Indigenous subjects invariably presented through the lens of the dominant Euro-Canadian society.

### **Falsely romantic and ahistorical representations**

In the early 1950s, the NFB began producing documentary series for the new medium of television. *Window on Canada*, one such series, included several titles on Inuit culture. *How to Build an Igloo* (Douglas Wilkinson, 1949), an engaging instructional doc, remains popular but other titles in the series, such as *Angotee: Story of an Eskimo Boy* (Douglas Wilkinson, 1953), have been taken to task for presenting a falsely romantic and ahistorical image of Inuit life, suggesting a people frozen in time, a culture destined to disappear.

### **Assimilationist narratives and the residential school system**

Throughout this period, the NFB was frequently commissioned to make films for various branches of federal government. This work functioned as a vehicle for official government messages, promoting federal policy as it pertained to trade, agriculture and so on. Films like *No Longer Vanishing* (1955) and *Northern Schooldays* (1958) actively promoted residential schooling as well as the desirability and inevitability of assimilation.

Film scholar Joel Hugues, in a 2016 thesis entitled *Film Exhibition at Indian Residential School, 1930–1969*, reveals how some of the most offensive federal-sponsored productions, such as *No Longer Vanishing*, were shown to Indigenous children attending residential schools, institutions routinely visited by travelling projectionists working the NFB rural circuits. Hugues argues that, in targeting Indigenous children in this way, the NFB was complicit in advancing the “culturally genocidal ideology and curriculum” of the residential school system.<sup>1</sup>

### **Pete Standing Alone speaks for himself**

Certain films made by non-Indigenous directors during this period reveal a shift in both the representation of Indigenous experience and the degree to which they allow their subjects to speak for themselves. Among them is Colin Low’s *Circle of the Sun* (1960), in which the voice-of-God narrator who opens the film is replaced part-way through by Pete Standing Alone, one of the first Indigenous subjects to tell his own story in an NFB production.

### **Challenge for Change: Dawn of a new era**

A further shift takes place in 1967, with the creation of **Challenge for Change**, a participatory media program with a mandate to use film and media as instruments for social change.

In its first year, C4C produced a number of “Indian Dialogue” films, conceived as tools to combat poverty within Indigenous communities. Among them were *Indian Dialogue* (David Hughes, 1967), *Indian Relocation: Elliot Lake* (David Hughes & D’Arcy Marsh, 1967) and

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<sup>1</sup> *Film Exhibition at Indian Residential School in Canada, 1930–1969*, Ph.D. Thesis, Joel Hughes, Concordia University, 2016, p. III.

***PowWow at Duck Lake*** (David Hughes, 1967), one of the first NFB films to incorporate an Indigenous critique of residential schooling. The film documents a gathering in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, attended by young activists like Ojibwe poet Duke Redbird, and Harold Cardinal, the young Cree leader who later came to national attention as the author of the *Red Paper*, a critical response to the 1969 *White Paper*, the contentious and ultimately unsuccessful federal proposal to abolish the *Indian Act*. Also among ***PowWow***'s subjects is Métis activist Howard Adams, seen denouncing the racist ideology of the residential school system. "This is segregation, this is apartheid," says Adams. "The principle behind this kind of rule is that all men are *not* created equal."

Another early C4C film that depicts emerging Indigenous activism is ***Encounter with Saul Alinsky – Part 2: Rama Indian Reserve*** (Peter Pearson, 1967), in which young Chippewa residents of the Rama First Nation discuss the *Indian Act* with American community organizer Saul Alinsky, author of *Rules for Radicals* (1971). Although the intention was to promote dialogue, this film in particular has been criticized for cultural tone-deafness. Critic D.B. Jones describes it as "a remarkable example of cross-cultural non-communication," noting how Alinsky's aggressive, impatient manner was at odds with the culture of his Indigenous interlocutors, who are not identified by name.<sup>2</sup>

In September 1968, at an internal NFB screening, Mohawk activist Kahn-Tineta Horn spoke to the shortcomings of the Indian Dialogue films. While praising the NFB for attempting to facilitate communication between communities, she argued that "if the objective is to communicate, then of these four films there is only communication in one of them, and that communication is to white people only."<sup>3</sup>

### **The Indian Film Crew**

In 1968, George Stoney, the executive producer of C4C who later pioneered public-access television in the USA, established the Indian Film Crew (IFC)—and a first generation of Indigenous filmmakers finally got the opportunity to put their own stories and concerns on screen from their own perspectives. Stoney explained his rationale: "There was a strong feeling among the filmmakers at the NFB that the Board had been making too many films 'about' the Indian, all from the white man's viewpoint. What would be the difference if Indians started making films themselves?"<sup>4</sup>

Jointly sponsored by the Company of Young Canadians, a federal volunteer program, and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, the IFC was active between 1968 and 1970, providing training to seven Indigenous filmmakers (six men, one woman). In 1971, the Indian Film Crew evolved into the Indian Film Training Program (IFTP). This iteration of the program focused more on offering training and work opportunities than in forefronting Indigenous perspectives. The IFTP remained active until 1973, providing training to six participants from across the country.

Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell, an Akwesasne Mohawk and member of the IFC and IFTP, described the experience: "We didn't have the technical skills of the veterans, but we had a

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<sup>2</sup> "The Indian Film Crews of Challenge for Change: Representation and the State," Michelle Stewart, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Fall 2007, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from George Stoney, Executive Producer, Challenge for Change, Jan. 3, 1972.

whole lot of new ideas about how to make films. The work we did... was spreading the message we didn't want to be Canada's Indians anymore.... We started promoting an attitude of taking into account of who we are, and where we belong in this country."<sup>5</sup>

### ***The Ballad of Crowfoot***

The IFC released its first production in 1968: ***The Ballad of Crowfoot***, directed by Mi'kmaq filmmaker and folk singer Willie Dunn. Making inventive use of archival imagery paired with an original song by Dunn, the short pays homage to the Blackfoot leader and is often referred to as Canada's first music video. ***Who Were the Ones?*** (Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell, 1972), another popular and widely distributed IFC film, took a similar approach, employing original artwork and another original song from Dunn, performed by Bob Charlie, to put forward an Indigenous perspective on colonial history.

### ***You Are on Indian Land***

One of the most influential and widely seen IFC films was ***You Are on Indian Land*** (1969), initially attributed to Mort Ransen but formally re-credited to Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell in 2017. A cinéma vérité account of a protest blockade on the international bridge separating the Akwesasne reserve, it was screened extensively on both sides of the border, helping to galvanize Indigenous communities across the continent and shifting public perceptions of First Peoples. Notably, the American Indian Movement (AIM) screened it during their 1969–1970 occupation of Alcatraz. It continues to be taught in film and Indigenous studies programs across North America.

Among other important IFC titles were ***These Are My People*** (Roy Daniels, Willie Dunn, Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell & Barbara Wilson, 1969), the first film made entirely by an Indigenous crew; and ***The Other Side of the Ledger: An Indian View of the Hudson's Bay Company*** (Martin Defalco & Willie Dunn, 1972), which was narrated by George Manuel, President of the National Indian Brotherhood.

### **Indigenous filmmaking takes root: 1973 to 1991**

In 1973, Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell, now an associate producer with the IFTF, proposed the creation of an "Indian Studio"—an Indigenous-led production unit. It would be another 18 years before the creation of Studio One, but in the intervening decades Indigenous filmmaking would take root at the NFB. Among the early Indigenous directors at the NFB were Alanis Obomsawin (***Christmas at Moose Factory***, 1971, ***Incident at Restigouche***, 1984); Mosha Michael (***Natsik Hunting***, 1975); Raymond Yakeleya (***The Last Mooseskin Boat***, 1982); Carol Geddes (***Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief***, 1986); and Gil Cardinal (***Foster Child***, 1987).

### **Alanis Obomsawin: "First Lady of First Nations Film"**

Having begun her career as a performer, Abenaki activist and artist Alanis Obomsawin arrived at the NFB in 1967. Initially hired by producer Robert Verrall as a consultant, she became the first Indigenous staff filmmaker and is now recognized as one of the world's leading Indigenous directors, amassing an extraordinary body of work—49 films and counting—including the landmark documentary ***Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*** (1993). Recipient of multiple national and international honours, she was hailed as "First

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<sup>5</sup> *Screening Culture: Constructing Image and Identity*, edited by Heather Norris Nicholson, Lexington Books, 2003, p. 128.

Lady of First Nations filmmaking” by New York’s Museum of Modern Art in the context of a 2008 retrospective. The NFB continues to provide a base for her lifelong documentary project focused on telling Indigenous stories from an Indigenous perspective. “My main interest all my life has been education,” says Obomsawin, “because that’s where you develop yourself, where you learn to hate, or to love.”<sup>6</sup>

### Indigenous filmmakers and official multiculturalism

In 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as official policy. Scholars like Heather Norris Nicholson discuss how the specific concerns of Indigenous communities and artists tended to be overlooked during this period. “Aboriginal people were largely ignored in the contradictory, inconsistent, and problematic conceptualization of federal multicultural policy,” says Nicholson in *Screening Culture* (2003). She commends the NFB for its support of Indigenous production during this period: “The NFB was one public agency that did include an Indigenous dimension within its action on encouraging cultural plurality.”<sup>7</sup>

### Indigenous women filmmakers get support from Studio D

The NFB made history in 1974 when it established Studio D, the world’s first production unit devoted exclusively to work by women filmmakers. In 1990, the studio launched **New Initiatives in Film** with the goal of expanding production opportunities for women of colour and Aboriginal women. Among Studio D releases by Indigenous directors were *Keepers of the Fire* (Christine Welsh, 1994) and *Hands of History* (Loretta Todd, 1994).

### Oka Crisis and Studio One

The Oka Crisis of 1990 thrust longstanding Indigenous grievances into the international spotlight, bringing new urgency to the work of Indigenous artists and filmmakers. Obomsawin’s *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993) is perhaps the single most important document of the events. In the wake of the crisis, Edmonton played host to the Aboriginal Film & Video Makers Symposium, which in turn gave birth to Studio One, an NFB production unit dedicated exclusively to Indigenous filmmaking. Housed at the NFB Northwest Studio in Edmonton, it was supported by executive producer Graydon McCrea. “Non-Native people have documented what they perceived to be the mystery and romance of North America’s Indian, Inuit and Métis people since the earliest days of filmmaking,” he observed. “It is no longer acceptable for Native people to be portrayed as only others see them—they must be portrayed as they see themselves.”<sup>8</sup>

Carol Geddes, the Tlingit director of *Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief* (1986), was appointed head of the new unit. “As First Nations people move into an era of greater self-determination, one of the important aspects of that self-determination is to interpret our own realities in

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<sup>6</sup> “For 150 years, people have been told lies about Canada’s history,” Alanis Obomsawin, tiff.net, 2017.

[www.tiff.net/the-review/for-150-years-people-have-been-told-lies-about-canadas-history/](http://www.tiff.net/the-review/for-150-years-people-have-been-told-lies-about-canadas-history/)

<sup>7</sup> *Screening Culture: Constructing Image and Identity*, edited by Heather Norris Nicholson, Lexington Books, 2003, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> “The Aboriginal Voice: The National Film Board and Aboriginal Filmmaking Through the Years,” Gil Cardinal, [www.nfb.ca/playlists/gil-cardinal/aboriginal-voice-national-film-board/](http://www.nfb.ca/playlists/gil-cardinal/aboriginal-voice-national-film-board/)

media,” she said. “We must take the means of production of our images into our own hands as a way of taking our place as distinct cultures in Canada.”<sup>9</sup>

### **1991 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples**

In direct response to the Oka Crisis, a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was formed in 1991, and its final report, released in 1996, called for a complete restructuring of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

### **Aboriginal Filmmaking Program, 1996**

In light of concerns that Studio One, headquartered in Edmonton, was not accessible to filmmakers working in other parts of the country, in 1996 the NFB replaced Studio One with the Aboriginal Filmmaking Program (AFP), which expanded production and training opportunities through a programming stream dedicated to Indigenous filmmaking. Gil Cardinal would later note that many Indigenous people currently working in Canada’s film and TV sector credit the AFP with starting their careers. The AFP was phased out in 2008 and all Indigenous projects were integrated into core NFB programming.

### **New Indigenous-run platforms and venues**

1992 saw the establishment of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), an important new platform for work by Indigenous filmmakers. The 1990s also witnessed the emergence of numerous Indigenous film festivals. The Toronto-based imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival, founded in 1998, is now the world’s largest Indigenous film festival, and has collaborated with the NFB on numerous initiatives, including an Interactive Partnership established in 2012 for the development and production of digital and interactive works by Indigenous artists.

### **Indigenous filmmaking flowers**

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a flowering of Indigenous filmmaking across Canada and at the NFB in particular. While veteran filmmakers like Gil Cardinal, Alanis Obomsawin, Loretta Todd and Carol Geddes continued to be active, they were joined by a host of newcomers—filmmakers like Catherine Anne Martin, turning her gaze on the Mi’kmaq peoples of Atlantic Canada; Barb Cranmer, intent on documenting Indigenous life in the Pacific Northwest; and the late Clint Alberta, whose feature doc ***Deep Inside Clint Star*** (2000), a provocative exploration of Indigenous sexuality and identity, made waves at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival.

New-generation Indigenous directors and artists who began working with the NFB during this period include: Robert Adams, Dennis Allen, Josephine Bacon, Shirley Cheechoo, Dana Claxton, Greg Coyes, Doug Cuthand, Tasha Hubbard, Tracey Deer, Gary Farmer, Annie Frazier Henry, Drew Hayden Taylor, Tina Keeper, Daniel Prouty, Paul Rickard, and Reaghan Tarbell. A number of Indigenous filmmakers established their own production companies and began co-producing work with the NFB. In 1999, the NFB marketing division issued the *Aboriginal Directors Video Collection*, a catalogue promoting work by more than a dozen Indigenous directors, half of whom were women.

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<sup>9</sup> *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast*, Kristin L. Dowell, University of Nebraska Press, 2013, p. 56.

## Addressing the residential schools legacy

In 1998, responding to the findings of the Royal Commission, the federal government released *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*, which included the following admission: "The Government of Canada recognizes and apologizes to those who experienced physical and sexual abuse at Indian residential schools and acknowledges its role in the development and administration of residential schools." In 2001, the Office of Indian Residential Schools Resolution of Canada was established with a view to resolving claims filed by former IRS students, and in 2004, the Assembly of First Nations released its *Report on Canada's Dispute Resolution Plan to Compensate for Abuses in Indian Residential Schools*.

It's important to note that this process was not instigated by government but rather by Indigenous people themselves, mounting lawsuits against the government and church authorities behind the IRSS. Some litigation took the form of class-action lawsuits, and in May 2005, Supreme Court Justice Frank Iacobucci was tasked with negotiating a settlement among the various parties—Aboriginal communities and IRS survivors on one hand and churches and government on the other.

Agreement in principle was established in November 2005, and the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) came into effect in September 2007. Among its provisions were the Common Experience Payment, to be paid to all eligible former students, and the creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Aspects of the IRSS experience and its inter-generational impacts are documented in NFB-produced films such as *Christmas at Moose Factory* (Alanis Obomsawin, 1971), *Richard Cardinal: Cry From the Diary of a Métis Child* (Alanis Obomsawin, 1986), *Foster Child* (Gil Cardinal, 1987), *We Were Children* (Tim Wolochatiuk, 2012), *We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice* (Alanis Obomsawin, 2016) and *Birth of a Family* (Tasha Hubbard, 2017).

### **Atanarjuat: First Inuit feature film**

In 2001, Inuit director Zacharias Kunuk made history when *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, a dramatic feature co-produced by Isuma Igloodik Productions and the NFB, won the Camera d'Or at Cannes. It was the world's first feature film to be written, directed and acted entirely in the Inuktitut language.

### **Regionally focused capacity building**

Since the early 2000s, the NFB has mounted a number of regionally focused capacity-building initiatives to help expand the range of Indigenous voices using film as a medium of expression.

**First Stories** (2005) and **Second Stories** (2007), run out of the NFB's Northwest Studio, were designed to create documentary training and production opportunities for emerging Aboriginal filmmakers from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

In 2006, the NFB and the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation joined forces with the Banff Centre, APTN, the National Screen Institute and the Government of Nunavut to establish the **Nunavut Animation Lab**, creating new opportunities for Inuit and non-Inuit animators, and in 2010, the NFB partnered with the Nunavut Film Development Corporation to create **Stories from Our Land**, a multi-year initiative offering new training and production opportunities to

emerging filmmakers in Nunavut.

### Indigenous projects underway

There are currently more than 15 Indigenous-directed projects in development or production at NFB English-language production studios across the country. The lineup is nothing if not eclectic, ranging from an inventive documentary musical and an Instagram project anchored in Winnipeg's North End, to interactive work by Mohawk graphic artist Walter Kahero:ton Scott and projects by emerging talents like Christopher Auchter, Isabella Weetaluktuk, Bonnie Ammaaq and Echo Henoche.

Recent releases include ***The Road Forward***, Marie Clements' audacious documentary musical about West Coast Indigenous activism, and ***Birth of a Family***, Tasha Hubbard's powerful insider account of the Sixties Scoop, which both launched at Hot Docs in April 2017. ***Angry Inuk***, Alethea Arnaquq-Baril's powerful indictment of the anti-sealing campaign, has been travelling across Canada and the world since its April 2016 screening at Hot Docs, where it won the audience choice award. ***We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice***, Alanis Obomsawin's epic chronicle of a decade-long legal battle against the federal government on behalf of Indigenous children, launched at TIFF in September 2016 and has been screening non-stop in communities across Canada ever since. ***this river***, Katherena Vermette and Erika MacPherson's poetic account of a grass-roots response to the issue of missing Indigenous people, recently won the Canadian Screen Award for best short documentary. Also recently released are two shorts in the **Naked Island** animation series: Amanda Strong's ***Hipster Headdress*** and Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers' ***Detention***.

Upcoming releases include ***The Mountain of SGaana***, a vivid retelling of a Haida myth from animator Christopher Auchter; ***Holy Angels***, an artful reflection on residential schooling by Cree/Métis filmmaker Jay Cardinal Villeneuve; ***Three Thousand***, a meticulously crafted, archive-based documentary by Isabella Weetaluktuk that reframes Inuit past, present and future; ***Shaman***, an animated short by first-time Labrador director Echo Henoche; and ***Norway House***, the latest work from Alanis Obomsawin.

Projects in development include ***Brother's Story***, a work about family and identity by Loretta Todd; ***The Inconvenient Indian***, based on the book by Thomas King and directed by Michelle Latimer; ***West Wind***, a post-apocalyptic VR project by Jeff Barnaby; ***Dust Settles***, Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers' film about harm reduction; and a series of short docs being made in partnership with the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres.

## II. REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS REALITIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF INDIGENOUS FILMMAKING WITHIN THE NFB'S FRENCH PROGRAM

In 1964, following the creation of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (known as the Laurendeau-Dunton commission), the NFB restructured its production along linguistic lines and created a French-language production sector.

This put an end to a system that had seen projects by francophone filmmakers require the approval of unilingual anglophone producers who did not always understand the issues at stake. For the first time, the NFB had a self-contained French Program, managed and run by francophones.

Spurred on by this newfound independence, francophone filmmakers expanded their

horizons. It was during this period that they began to make films about the realities of Indigenous people. As was the case with English Program, initially it was their own take on Indigenous experience that emerged in these documentaries, not the points of view of Indigenous people. Since then, Indigenous people have rightly demanded space for their own voices—to film their stories in their own ways, from their own points of view and perspectives. Here is a brief overview of the road that has brought us to 2017—as the NFB commits to implementing concrete measures to create more space for Indigenous stories told by Indigenous voices.

### Representing the Other

In Canada, the cultures, languages and lifestyles of Indigenous people have long been misrepresented, if not completely obscured in mainstream culture. This lack of understanding—and, to be frank, pure ignorance—spawned systemic misunderstanding, mistrust, paternalism and, frequently, racism on a national scale.

The perspectives found in NFB film productions of the 1960s are a part of this reality. Reflecting the dominant ideas of the day, history texts and schoolbooks served as points of reference and inspiration, continuing to reinforce negative stereotypes deeply rooted in Canadian and Quebec culture.

For example, *Le festin des morts (Mission of Fear)* (1965), a film by Fernand Dansereau that depicts the agony and interrogation of a missionary threatened by death in Huron country, was inspired by *Jesuit Relations*, published between 1632 and 1672.

A number of films made during this period dealt with the concerns of Indigenous people, but they were conceived and directed by non-Indigenous filmmakers. It was the start of a long journey.

The Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 was supposed to reflect the heritage and legends of Indigenous people, but was not developed by them. In *Mémoire indienne (Indian Memento)*, Michel Régnier details the problems faced by Indigenous people in modern Canada, from a powerful and deeply human—but nevertheless non-Indigenous—point of view.

In 1971, fascinated by the depth of knowledge of César Newashish, an Atikamekw man from the Manawan reserve, Bernard Gosselin documented the steps that go into building a canoe using traditional methods. The craftsman's search for perfection is in evidence in the resulting film without words: *César et son canot d'écorce (César's Bark Canoe)*.

Director Maurice Bulbulian spent time with the Montagnais people of the Lower North Shore of the St. Lawrence in 1978, asking them to describe the freedom of their traditional way of life in their own language. Subtitled in French, *Ameshkuatan: Les sorties du castor* was the first film produced by the NFB's French Program that was in an Indigenous language.

Pierre Perrault also worked in Montagnais territory. *Le goût de la farine* (1977) served as a reminder that white settlers had a lot to learn from Indigenous people; it was followed three years later by *Le Pays de la terre sans arbre ou le Mouchouânipi*, a film about nomadic Indigenous people.

### Deepening understanding and pressing for action

The **Challenge for Change** program was launched by the NFB's English Program on an

experimental basis in 1967. Based on participatory principles, it aimed to promote knowledge of and raise awareness about marginalized people and groups and address social problems. It became an autonomous program by ministerial decree in 1969, incorporating a French component called **Société nouvelle**. NFB filmmakers at first used **Société nouvelle** as a means to fight for francophone rights. In the spirit of solidarity, they quickly turned their cameras to the demands of Indigenous people. Once again, however, while the intentions may have been commendable, these works were all made by non-Indigenous directors.

In 1971, the Government of Canada announced its multiculturalism policy, recognizing Canada's ethnic plurality and affirming the status of two official languages and the rights of Indigenous people.

Shortly thereafter, the NFB, in partnership with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and the Government of the Northwest Territories, launched a series of training workshops for Inuit people on the production of documentary and animation films. The resulting works promoted the rights and values of Inuit people and bear witness to their battles, exposing the dangers and challenges facing Inuit culture.

In ***Debout sur leur terre*** (1982), Maurice Bulbulian highlighted the voices of Inuit dissent against the James Bay Agreement. A few years later, he followed Indigenous representatives to London, where they protested to the British Parliament that the Canadian Constitution does not take into account their fundamental rights. ***L'art de tourner en rond (Dancing Around the Table)*** covers the main events of four conferences on the rights of Indigenous people, including the 1987 conference in which it is clear that Indigenous demands continue to encounter the same old forms of opposition.

For his part, Arthur Lamothe directed ***La conquête de l'Amérique*** (1992), a two-part documentary in which young Montagnais chiefs warn that the time for using peaceful protest to draw attention to long-standing injustices has passed.

In 2007, with ***Le peuple invisible (The Invisible Nation)***, Richard Desjardins and Robert Monderie shone a light on the harsh realities facing residents in some communities of the Algonquin Nation in Quebec, who live in extreme poverty while their fundamental human rights are ignored.

### **Evolving toward a collaborative cinema**

In 1971, the French Program animation studio undertook a series of films on Inuit myths, sponsored by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. Five "Eskimo" legends were recounted on film: ***L'homme et le géant (The Man and the Giant)***, ***Le hibou et le lemming (The Owl and the Lemming)***, ***Le hibou et le corbeau (The Owl and the Raven)***, ***Lumaag*** (Co Hoedeman) and ***Le mariage du hibou (The Owl Who Married a Goose)*** (Caroline Leaf).

These films marked the first time in NFB history that Inuit crew members directly participated in the production of a film, contributing to the script development, music, sound design, art direction and narration, with the film's voice tracks partly in Inuktitut.

Several years later, Co Hoedeman brought to the screen a story whose idea came from a group of First Nations and Inuit inmates at the La Macaza Institution. Written in collaboration with the inmates, ***L'ours renifleur (The Sniffing Bear)*** urges young people to consider the harm caused by drug use.

In the early '90s, members of the Ditidaht First Nation welcomed Maurice Bulbulian to the village of Nitinaht in British Columbia. Made over a period of seven years, the resulting film, ***The Nitinaht Chronicles (Chroniques de Nitinaht)*** (1997), is a raw portrait of the community's struggle to put an end to a painful history of sexual assault, incest, and family violence.

***Martha qui vient du froid (Martha of the North)*** (2009), by Marquise Lepage, was the result of a close collaboration between the filmmaker and her main subject, Martha Flaherty, the granddaughter of director Robert Flaherty. The film tells the story of the members of an Inuit community displaced from their village and relocated to Ellesmere Island, one of the most inhospitable places on the planet. The relocation took place in the 1950s, part of a Canadian government effort to reinforce the country's claims to Arctic sovereignty. On August 18, 2010, the Honourable John Duncan, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, apologized on behalf of the Government of Canada for the High Arctic relocation and the suffering it caused.

### **Creating a truly Indigenous cinema**

Over the years, several initiatives in French Program opened up new opportunities for the voices, perspectives and talents of Indigenous creators in fields ranging from documentary to new media and digital productions.

### **Programme Cinéastes autochtones (1995–2001)**

Launched in 1995, the Programme Cinéastes autochtones invited Indigenous filmmakers to direct a first professional auteur documentary.

The first film to be produced through this initiative as part of French Program was ***Le Français aux cheveux rouges (French Man, Native Son)*** (Monika Ille, 1997), which tells the story of a white man embraced and adopted by the Yakima Nation.

The end of the 1990s saw the creation of the territory of Nunavut (on April 1, 1999) and coincided with the emergence of a truly Inuit cinema. Two young participants in the Programme Cinéastes autochtones were a part of this movement. Bobby Kenuajuak directed ***Mon village au Nunavik (My Village in Nunavik)*** (1999) from the point of view of a young man who is open to the outside world but clearly loves his village, and Elisapie Isaac made ***Si le temps le permet (If the Weather Permits)*** (2003), an epistle to her late grandfather in which she questions the links between tradition and modernity.

### **Wapikoni Mobile**

In the early 2000s, when director Manon Barbeau came up with the idea of a mobile studio for First Nations youth that could serve as a centre for the production of audiovisual and musical projects, the NFB's French Program enthusiastically agreed to participate in getting it off the ground.

The project, called Wapikoni Mobile, was co-founded by Barbeau, the Council of the Atikamekw Nation and the Youth Council of the First Nations of Newfoundland and Labrador, with support from the Assembly of First Nations and the collaboration of the NFB. It launched in 2004 during the Montréal First Peoples Festival.

That same year, French Program co-produced the films ***Courage*** (Samuel Tremblay), ***La forêt de mon grand-père*** (Sonia Chachai), ***J'ai marché autrefois sur cette terre*** (Gloria Cocoo), ***Main***

*dans la main* (Jean-Marc Niquay), *Vivre comme Anna* (Mélanie Kistabish) and *La lettre* (collective), all of which came out of Wapikoni Mobile.

### **The Tremplin competition**

Launched in 2007 in partnership with Radio-Canada, the Tremplin competition is aimed at emerging filmmakers from minority francophone communities in Canada, providing them with the opportunity to direct a first or second documentary in a professional context. As part of this competition, Caroline Monnet directed *360 Degrees* (2008), a film about a French-speaking member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Manitoba whose spiritual journey and efforts to understand his identity have led him to study traditional Indigenous medicine.

### **Tremplin NIKANIK**

In 2012, French Program created another partnership, this time with the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), to launch Tremplin NIKANIK, aimed at francophone filmmakers from First Nations in Quebec. Thérèse Ottawa, originally from Manawan, was among the finalists, directing her first film, *Red Path* (2015), which follows a young man from an Atikamekw community on his quest for identity.

### **Déranger: Challenging perspectives**

There is a wealth of Indigenous talent expressing itself loudly in film and in many other media—such as the many multidisciplinary Indigenous artists whose daring works are on display in museums and galleries both in Canada and around the world. This abundance of creativity led French Program head Michèle Bélanger to launch the Déranger project. Started in 2016, in collaboration with the OBORO artist-run centre in Montreal and Wapikoni Mobile, this creative lab is aimed at established, multidisciplinary francophone artists from Inuit and First Nations communities. Working in various fields, such as the visual and graphic arts, film, video, electronic music, and sculpture, seven artists collaborated to create three experimental-media art works that were shown at OBORO in November 2016 to an audience of broadcasters and major producers in Montreal's cultural scene.

An innovative new installation that emerged from the 2016 lab will be on display as of fall 2017 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Building on the success of this initiative, French Program is preparing to launch a new western Canadian version of Déranger in 2018–2019.

## **III. COLLECTION MANAGEMENT AND DISTRIBUTION**

### **Decolonizing access and classification systems**

In response to the work of the TRC, NFB library staff have been working with the Canadian Federation of Library Associations with the aim of decolonizing internal access and classification systems. Work is underway to address structural biases and language within existing classification systems, and to develop protocols to protect Indigenous intellectual property. Initiatives are also underway to offer Indigenous communities greater access to the NFB collection, and a growing number of titles are now available in Indigenous-language versions.

### **Connecting with audiences**

The NFB's ever-growing collection of work reflecting the perspectives, lives and experiences

of Canada's Indigenous peoples is shared with Canadians through a range of distribution channels (NFB.ca and other online platforms such as Netflix, YouTube and iTunes; television; festivals; community screenings; public libraries, etc.) and is widely used in Canadian schools and universities.

A number of distribution initiatives are tailored to the needs of Indigenous audiences. With ***Unikkausivut: Sharing Our Stories***, launched in 2011, the NFB worked with the Inuit Relations Secretariat of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, the Government of Nunavut's Department of Education, and various Inuit organizations to create and distribute a program of over 60 films, representing all four Inuit regions of Canada (Nunatsiavut, Nunavik, Nunavut and Inuvialuit). The project includes an online channel, study guides and a two-volume DVD box set, and films have been versioned in four regional dialects of Inuktitut. This project was followed in 2016 by ***Unikkausivut–Nunatsiavut***, a box set showcasing work about the Labrador Inuit, released in partnership with the Nunatsiavut Government.

The full breadth and vitality of the NFB's collection of Indigenous-directed works is currently being showcased in ***Aabiziingwashi (#WideAwake): NFB Indigenous Cinema on Tour***, a national program of free public screenings of work by First Nations, Métis and Inuit filmmakers from every region of the country. ***Aabiziingwashi*** is a partnership with TIFF Bell Lightbox, APTN and imagineNATIVE, and is being undertaken with the participation of community organizations across the country. These films offer unique Indigenous perspectives on Canada and the world, providing a basis for recognition, dialogue and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

## **CONCLUSION: REDEFINING THE NFB'S RELATIONSHIP WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

Established in 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its final report in June 2015, meticulously documenting the devastating history and impacts of Canada's policies of internal colonialism. Acknowledging that a century of damage would not be undone by a single inquiry, the commissioners issued a comprehensive call to action—94 recommendations addressed to policymakers and church leaders, but also to a broad range of social and cultural actors. "Reconciliation is not an aboriginal problem—it is a Canadian problem. It involves all of us," stated Justice Murray Sinclair, the First Nations lawyer who chaired the commission.

The Commission's final report highlighted the key role of public-memory institutions like the NFB in reframing national collective memory. It also underlined the critical role of culture in expanding our understanding of history and laying the groundwork for reconciliation.

In 2017, the NFB decided to redouble its efforts in this regard, developing an ambitious plan to go forward with new initiatives and to improve existing ones. It is now releasing its three-year plan, entitled *Redefining the NFB's Relationship with Indigenous Peoples*. It outlines a series of commitments responding to the work and recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to Indigenous creators' concerns about systemic inequities in the current production environment.

The commitments in the three-year plan will transform the face and institutional culture of the organization, allow the NFB to play a leadership role in the industry, and ensure the prominence of Indigenous films and talent. The plan also includes measures to make the

NFB's collection of Indigenous work more accessible, to increase knowledge of both older and newer works and to connect them to Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences across the country.

As we move forward, we take our inspiration from the careful and critical work of the TRC: *"Reconciliation must inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share."*<sup>10</sup>

The NFB's three-year Indigenous action plan was launched on June 20, 2017. The complete text of the plan is available here: [nfb.ca/indigenous-action-plan/](http://nfb.ca/indigenous-action-plan/)

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<sup>10</sup> *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 7.