



Alanis  
Obomsawin  
Lifework

# Leseprobe

**Alanis Obomsawin**  
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This book contains reprinted documents as well as references with terminology related to Indigenous Peoples that was used at the time but has since evolved to better represent Indigenous preferences.

Cover: Alanis Obomsawin rests on a rock beside the Lake of Two Mountains, Kanehsatà:ke, 1990

# Alanis Obomsawin Lifework

Edited by Richard William Hill, Hila Peleg, and Haus der Kulturen der Welt

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# Preface

What does it take to create an Indigenous counter-space and the space for counter-stories within a country such as Canada, formally just over 150 years old? What does it mean to work among the colonial newcomers and settlers of other tongues who have constructed a way of life that is in crisis because it depends categorically on the destruction of relations between lands, waters, air, animals, peoples, and spirits? What does it mean to take the camera and, with that very instrument of anthropological gaze, create other ways of looking, listening, speaking, sounding, imagining, and storytelling? What body and soul, what strengths and dreams, can hold a collective imagining for the nation-state to change?

Such is the lifework of Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin. Her history of documentary filmmaking has indelibly shaped the trajectory of Indigenous resistance in Canada, with global implications. It has woven and continues to rebuild the relations between her peoples and their histories, stories, sounds, lands, communities, traditions, and languages. Mobilizing against the hauntings of erasure, her works are a testimony of resilience and inexorable recovery, sustained as much by children's voices as by the warriors who stand the ground for their land. Her passion and commitment—to create another story for all generations—carry through to her most recent film honouring the powerful voice of Murray Sinclair, the former senator who chaired Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008–15), which exposed the history and lasting impacts of the Canadian residential school system for Indigenous children. This report prompted substantive and ongoing policy changes, but it also led to the discovery of missing and murdered children, long known but physically revealed as never before this past year. "The power of the word is sacred," Obomsawin says of her latest film, and, we add, so is the power of her films.

This book and the exhibition owe their realization to the brilliant work of Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) curator Hila Peleg, who initiated this project, and Richard William Hill, art historian and Smith Jarislowsky Senior Curator of Canadian Art, Vancouver Art Gallery, both of whom

worked closely with Obomsawin. We are tremendously indebted to all the writers in this publication, who have supported and contributed to Obomsawin's work in multiple ways. A very special thanks to Michael Shu, Obomsawin's gracious and tireless assistant, for his generosity and attention to detail. Critically important has been the support of the National Film Board of Canada and CBC/Radio-Canada. We are immensely thankful to our funders, especially the Canada Council for the Arts and the Embassy of Canada, Berlin, for supporting this collaboration.

But, above all, we express our deepest appreciation to Alanis Obomsawin herself, who has contributed not only her work but her grace, intelligence, kindness, deep insight, and enthusiasm to make this project possible. It has been an honour and a profound pleasure for all of us to be able to work with her, and we are deeply grateful.

Barbara Fischer  
Art Museum at the University of Toronto

Anthony Kiendl  
Vancouver Art Gallery

Bernd Scherer  
Haus der Kulturen der Welt

# Introduction: The Children Have to Hear Another Story

—Richard William Hill and Hila Peleg

Alanis Obomsawin was born into a dark period of Indigenous history, yet somehow she was able to manifest a light in that darkness. Over the course of many decades, this light has grown from an initial spark to a fire around which many gather to share counsel and hear stories. Or to say it differently: despite beginning her life in a period when the options for social and political agency of Indigenous Peoples were radically and systemically foreclosed, Obomsawin has managed to consistently create and access public platforms to advance her peoples' concerns and tell their stories. The texts and images in this book are all, in one sense or another, about how she did this and what it has meant that she did. We hope to reflect on how much light Obomsawin has helped to bring into this world through a tribute of careful analysis and personal reflections.

It is necessary, however, to first probe more deeply into the darkness. In the year she was born, 1932, Indigenous children in Canada were sent by the state to church-run boarding schools. These schools had the explicit mandate of destroying Indigenous cultures, beliefs, and languages and replacing them with the cultures and Christian denominations of European settlers. They were not only often poorly funded vocational schools offering inadequate education but also sites of frequent physical and sexual abuse. And in all Canadian schools, children were taught a version of history that held Indigenous Peoples and cultures in contempt, one that vilified and belittled them as savages.

If you were an Indigenous person who wanted to vote in a federal election in 1932, you would be required to give up your "Indian status" and associated treaty and collective rights—few people chose to do this. If you were an Indigenous woman and married a non-Indigenous man, you would automatically lose your status. And if you wanted to practise ceremonies such as the Sun Dance or the Potlatch or even create the objects associated with them, you would be breaking the law as laid down in the Indian Act. Perversely, however, if you wanted to create traditional objects for sale outside the community, this was almost always acceptable, and the patronage of such markets was often driven by stereotypes and ignorance of actual local traditions. If one hoped to see Indigenous people in the public sphere, you would find a deluge of "Indian" imagery in popular media, from pulp magazines to Hollywood westerns, but very few actual Indigenous people representing themselves or their cultures. Likewise, in academia and public-policy discussions, there were anthropologists and other "Indian experts" to speak about and confidently propose solutions to the "Indian problem."

How, then, did Obomsawin manage such a successful campaign for creating visibility and cultural resurgence in the face of these obstacles? It is true that she came of age when attitudes and social conditions were changing in the world, however slowly. And there was a growing number of people who, like Obomsawin, were learning to navigate

the institutional systems of the dominant culture and becoming agents of change capable of helping the wider community. But what were the sources of vision that made this possible for Obomsawin? Our first task is to listen carefully to her own explanations.

A good place to start is her account "Alanis Obomsawin: What Drives Me," which you can find at the close of this book. Growing up away from her home community, she was spared residential school, but nevertheless taught a curriculum that slandered and disparaged her Waban-Aki heritage. As the only Indigenous child in her class, she was subject to vicious racist bullying and abuse at school and in town. Her circumstances would have broken many strong people, or at least prevented them from achieving their full potential. Yet when her father died when she was twelve—another terrible blow—Obomsawin resolved: "Nobody's going to beat me up anymore. I'm the one that decided that." This act of will was followed by a surprisingly adult insight: "I thought, if the children could hear the stories I hear, maybe they would be behaving differently." Her commitment to children and the transformative potential of education has remained a driving force throughout her lifework.

For Obomsawin, this combination of strength and vision has been supported profoundly by her vivid dream life. "As a little girl," she said, "it's my dreams that saved my life." In part they were an escape: "At least when I was sleeping, nobody was beating me. I had a whole world." In this world she had "hundreds of animals ... always protecting me, dancing with me, [playing] all kinds of games. I call them horses, but they don't look exactly like the horses we know. All the animals that are my friends, I give them names that are like the ones we see. But they all look different." There are many horses and other nonhuman persons to be seen in her works on paper, each passing on their energy, strength, and compassion to the woman who dreams them.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Obomsawin's documentary filmmaking begins with children. As Jesse Wente notes in his contribution to this volume on Obomsawin's 1971 debut film, *Christmas at Moose Factory*, her decision to depict this Cree community from the perspective of its children, through their own drawings and stories, was unheard of at the time. It was, however, entirely consistent with her commitment to listening to children and treating their opinions with respect. In another 1970s film, *Mother of Many Children* (1977), Indigenous women from a range of communities across Canada share their strength and wisdom. Doreen Manuel's text reflects on the crucial role of not only motherhood but intergenerational exchange in the development of Indigenous cultural activism, as seen in the film.

A crucial context to understanding Obomsawin's body of work is her home community. For almost her entire adult

life, she has lived between her home in Montreal and her home reserve of Odanak, a little over one hundred kilometres to the northeast. Obomsawin made a film about her people and community, *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, in 2006. As Monique Nolett-Ille, an esteemed member of the community, writes, the film provides a deeply informed and historically layered portrait of her people's resilience and cultural vitality.

Karrmen Crey's essay, "In Situ: Indigenous Media Landscapes in Canada," maps out the Indigenous media world in Canada that has been the developing context for Obomsawin's work. Crey begins with the many representational challenges Indigenous Peoples faced in the early decades of Obomsawin's career—that ubiquitous Hollywood Indian—before charting the growing sovereignty movement and the attendant and quickly expanding Indigenous media environment.

"Indian Roadblocks: Five Things That Happened from 1973 to 1990" provides a more personal context. Richard William Hill narrates events from his early life sorted through an awareness of the issues that have dominated Obomsawin's work: mothers and children, education, political activism, and struggles for sovereignty. It is as much a story of his mother as himself: a child's evolving perspective on how she found her way to higher education and a career empowering Indigenous families and communities. In her essay "Animal Magic," which considers the films *Walker* (1991), *Sigwan* (2005), and *When All the Leaves Are Gone* (2010), Lisa Steele, who lost her own mother at a young age, has written a moving review on the connection between animals and Indigenous children who have experienced loss and trauma.

In the years leading up to her filmmaking, Obomsawin worked not only as a singer and musician but as a programmer of the Mariposa Folk Festival in Southern Ontario. When the James Bay Cree began to protest an unwanted hydroelectric project on their territories, Obomsawin characteristically brought all the tools at her disposal to address the situation. Drawing on her connections with Indigenous performers across Canada, she organized the James Bay Festival in Montreal in 1977 to support the struggle. At the same time, she made a film: *Amisk*, a unique document of the intersections of Indigenous cultures, musical traditions, and activism at this generative moment. Hill spoke with two wise and experienced Cree performers, Cheryl L'Hirondelle and Joseph Naytowhow, about this documentary; their conversation provides insight into the many challenges faced by Indigenous performers at the time and their remarkable role in that period of cultural resurgence. Alexandra Juhasz also took *Amisk* as the subject for her essay, "The Gift of Time: Listening in *Amisk*." Obomsawin's strategy of listening long and attentively before bringing in cameras and crew is Juhasz's entry point for a close reading of the film, making

legible the complex relationship between the content and form of what might look at first like a simple "concert film," yet is anything but.

Through the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the attempt to articulate a positive vision of Indigenous cultures that characterized earlier activism began to develop into a broader and more explicitly political program. This included movements to defend Treaty Rights and sovereignty over political organizations, social services, and territory. Because of the multigenerational damage to families and cultural institutions inflicted by colonial dehumanization and assimilation, Indigenous Peoples have long been overrepresented as recipients of social services. Until the 1980s, these services were not administered by Indigenous communities. One of the galvanizing moments in the struggle for Indigenous control of social services was the tragic suicide of a bright seventeen-year-old Métis boy, Richard Cardinal, who had spent his short life being neglected and abused as he was moved through twenty-eight different foster homes. Loretta Todd provides a moving discussion of Obomsawin's 1986 film, *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child*, sharing the film's moral outrage and profound desire that Indigenous children no longer be harmed by neglect and societal indifference. As a revealing counterpoint, *Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place* (1987) presents the hopeful model of an Indigenous-run addiction and mental health facility. Richard Fung discusses Obomsawin's film through the lens of his own growing awareness of Indigenous issues as an activist filmmaker and long-time ally who understands the productive movement between the personal and the political.

From the 1980s onward, struggles for sovereignty over territory and resources at times erupted into open conflict between Indigenous communities and the Canadian state. The L'nu artist Ursula Johnson looks at three films Obomsawin has made about her peoples' struggle for fishing rights: *Incident at Restigouche* (1984), *Is the Crown at War with Us?* (2002), and *Our Nationhood* (2003). Johnson frames the films through her own history of engagement with the issue, including very recent confrontations that remind us that the problem persists. We have also included internal National Film Board (NFB) documents that provide a vivid sense of the challenges Obomsawin had to face in funding *Incident at Restigouche*.

With this experience in mind, when Obomsawin learned that a standoff had developed between Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk) communities and the Quebec provincial police over the town of Oka's plans to expand a golf course into territory claimed by Kanyen'kehà:ka, she did not wait for permission. She simply went there and announced she would be making a film. This became *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), a defining Indigenous-filmed account from behind the barricades during the

seventy-eight-day armed standoff during the summer of 1990. It was an event that is seared into the minds of every Indigenous person in Canada who lived through that period, and it demolished for many Canadians the illusion that their country had a benevolent relationship with First Nations. Obomsawin was so affected by the crisis that she ended up making four films about it, but *Kanehsatake* is the best known and most discussed. Despite this voluminous literature, Obomsawin's former NFB colleague Robert Verrall shares a novel perspective from inside the making of the film, including creating the featured drawings that illustrate the history of the region.

Obomsawin's voice is central to this book—texts from the narration of her films are present throughout. Monika Kin Gagnon also took on the daunting task of interviewing the woman she describes as the “queen of the interview.” Their conversation provides insight into Obomsawin's life and work as well as her powerful, generous personality. It becomes clear from their discussion that, existing long before the emergence of social media, relational aesthetics, or social practice art, Obomsawin's foundational medium might be best described as the development of social networks of care and support.

These networks require an ethics of responsibility to all who are involved, and mapping these connections requires knowledge and attention. In “Listening, Dreaming, Fabricating,” Jessica L. Horton dives deeply into the imagery in Obomsawin's films and print works to explore the cultural specificity of her practice and how this then organizes a worldview. Horton attends closely to the web of connections between the dream world, the other-than-human world, and the sensuous modes of fabrication depicted in her films and prints, arguing that Obomsawin is able to mobilize these as strategies of resistance to colonial logics. In “Salmon Stills in Motion: The Local as Colonial Critique in the Films of Alanis Obomsawin,” Elizabeth A. Povinelli begins with a similar insight and objective—to disrupt Western imaginaries about the ways in which the more-than-human world is connected to the political. Povinelli begins with the very specific subjects and locales in Obomsawin's films and her techniques in representing them to then draw out a powerful critique that expands to the scale of the global system. In doing so, she collapses convenient geographic distances to reveal a legacy of often troubling connectedness; she also implicates European viewers, directly and explicitly, as products of a colonial history that has not yet truly ended. Jason Ryle then discusses the persistence of Obomsawin's activist concerns in a series of her more recent films, noting how often her decision to address a particular issue continues to be motivated by concern for the well-being of children.

The Indigenous world in Canada is a brighter place now than it was when Obomsawin began her life's journey. Her

artistic practice is evidence that steady hard work can produce real change. Yet it is equally evident that there remains much to be done. Speaking with us about the recent discovery of unmarked graves at former residential schools in Canada, Obomsawin said:

We knew that in the early '60s; we talked about it when nobody was listening—they said, “Ah, the Indians, they're always complaining.” Now it's different. People are appalled by that and they want to know more. They say, “How come we never knew that?” Well, they weren't listening. Now they are.

And she also said:

I think of all those young [Indigenous] people making films now. They're so curious, and they're so responsible, and they're so beautiful. The doors are open. If ever there was a time when anything is possible, it's right now.

# Mother of Many Children

1977 / 58 min. / Canada / 16 mm / colour / sound

I first came to know of Alanis Obomsawin through my father, George Manuel. He met her for the first time in the summer of 1966 and talked of her often after that. In the daily journal he kept most of his life, he recorded the impression she made on him: “I met Alanis Obomsawin for the first time, she is a lovely girl, a great singer and making a tremendous contribution to Indian society.” According to my father’s journal entry, he, Alanis, and Duke Redbird stayed up until three in the morning visiting and then had to be up by six to catch their flights—she heading back to Montreal and my father to Vancouver Island. She made an impression on him, one that would last for a lifetime. When I first met her, she made a similarly lasting impression on me. At a time in history when there were few other Indigenous filmmakers, Alanis blazed a trail for all of us as a people, as women, and as filmmakers.

When I was a traditional fancy dancer, my goal was to create a centroid embraced by my spirit, the spirit of the drum, and the song. At that place of convergence, the world and all of its knowledge becomes clear, still, and real. I feel like Alanis does this with story. She is a spirit-caller, the point where the spirits of the story meet and dance to the music; she creates for them, and weaves a ceremony for us, her children, who seek her embrace.

*Mother of Many Children*, Alanis’s first feature-length documentary, carries meaning for me in many deeply cultural ways. I also relate to it personally, because the year she produced this film is the year I became a mother for the first time—my eldest son, Rainbow, was born in August 1977, and *Mother of Many Children* was released just one month later, in September 1977. Our babies were born just one month apart.

Our Elders carry story, history, and teachings forward to lay a foundation for our survival. At a time in Indigenous history when we were just coming out of generations of abuse suffered in Indian residential schools, when we were fighting for our human right to survive, many of our people focused on civil rights actions and political lobbies. Alanis, a visionary, captured the journey of our people in a new medium that would teach generations of our people. It is imperative in the journey forward that people know the history they come from.

*Mother of Many Children* documents the central role of motherhood in Indigenous cultures through vignettes depicting the life stages of women from multiple nations. The film opens with a birth in a hospital and speaks of the struggle that mothers must endure travelling to hospitals. Watching this, I am reminded that despite everything Indigenous women have been told about the physical dangers of home birth, today we are also aware of its emotionally

and spiritually nurturing qualities. We now talk about home birth as a measure of decolonization, and some communities work to develop Indigenous birthing centres. When a baby’s first touch is metal and their first sight is bright, harsh lights, they enter into a colonized world. We have come a long way in our ability to determine our destiny, and this film offers an opportunity to examine our history with birthing.

Alanis goes on to document the Lilwat First Nation Protocol for the coming of age of a young woman, and I remember seeing this section as a short film in 1977. When I was a teenager in the 1970s, I had been released from Indian residential school and I knew nothing about my community’s traditional Protocols. At that time, the Indigenous Peoples of Canada began what some call a resurgence of our traditional and spiritual ways. Alanis’s film helped me shape my own practices and Protocols that I revived from my nation for my nieces. I lived with my grandmother for some time, and I was able to experience her teachings, which were similar to what I had learned from this film.

After leaving residential school, I returned home to my reservation and saw that many people were living with alcoholism. When people in *Mother of Many Children* speak about substance abuse and loneliness, that memory floods back to the forefront of my mind. But I also remember the wave of spiritual and cultural resurgence that swept in to fill the loneliness caused by sustained abuse, lost family, and lost culture stemming from the assimilation endured by generations of Indian residential school Survivors. In this film, Alanis records testimony of people suffering from the detrimental effects of alcohol on the Indigenous family system and brings us face to face with the pain it caused.

Indigenous people are healing from the harsh effects of colonization a little more each generation. *Mother of Many Children* is a timeless film because it speaks about issues that still concern Indigenous people. This film is important for the youth of today and for people outside of Indigenous communities, because it offers the opportunity to examine the effects of colonization and maps the progress, and in some cases deterioration, of Indigenous communities. It also offers introduction to people in remote communities who we normally would never hear from. When we *see* history, it’s deeper than just hearing about it; it gives us a visual into our parents’ and grandparents’ lives.

In November 2008, the students in my Indigenous digital filmmaking program at Capilano University, North Vancouver, had the opportunity to meet with Alanis for an entire weekend. It was booked as an opportunity to learn about filmmaking, but it turned out to be more like a three-day

# In Situ: Indigenous Media Landscapes in Canada

—Karrmen Crey

