

At the Forks: Where Indigenous and Human Rights Intersect

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More than entertainment: Indigenous women are teaching through filmmaking

Jocelyn Thorpe and Kaila Johnston



Indigenous women decolonize through filmmaking. Photo credit: Celeste Sutherland

Boys fish with their mother and grandmother. A young woman trains as a mixed martial artist. Relay riders race horses around a track, leaping from horse to horse. A twelve-year-old navigates the Oka Crisis. A mother joins an underground freedom movement in order to get her daughter back. A young girl learns she can change the story.

At The Forks

Each sentence above links to a film made by an Indigenous woman. And films by Indigenous women have recently attracted mainstream attention and critical acclaim.

Danis Goulet's *Night Raiders* premiered in 2021 at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), and Goulet also won the 2021 TIFF Emerging Talent Award. Tracey Deer won the same emerging talent award in 2020, and her 2021 film, *Beans*, recently won the Toronto Film Critics Association's Rogers Best Canadian Film Award.

Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers's 2021 *Kímmapiiyipitssini: The Meaning of Empathy* premiered at Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival, where Tailfeathers won the Emerging Canadian Filmmaker Award. Tailfeathers, an actor as well as director, describes filmmaking as "life changing." She says "having the agency to control the narrative" is "empowering and liberating" and to "feel seen and heard, and to see your people's joy and love onscreen, is a very powerful thing."

More than entertainment

The highly acclaimed and prolific Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin, who has made more than 50 films in her remarkable and ongoing career, has been clear about the purpose of her work: "My main interest all my life has been education, because that's where you develop yourself, where you learn to hate, or to love."

Her films, on topics ranging from wild rice harvesting to the contested meaning of treaties, are themselves a remarkable source of education about life in various Indigenous communities, the determination and strength of people fighting for justice and Canadian law.

Yet films are often thought of as entertainment rather than education. We go to the movies to turn our brains off, to take a break from school, work and life. Education and entertainment regularly appear to be the opposite of one another.

But we are always learning, meaning everything is education, including what is commonly labelled as entertainment.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission states that education must go beyond formal institutions in order to remedy the gaps in knowledge that perpetuate racism. Education for change needs to be able to touch minds and hearts, and film has the power to do both.

Assini: challenging the meaning of ‘Indian’

Hollywood’s representation of Indigenous people over time has educated the general public through stereotypical and racist portrayals. But that’s changing.

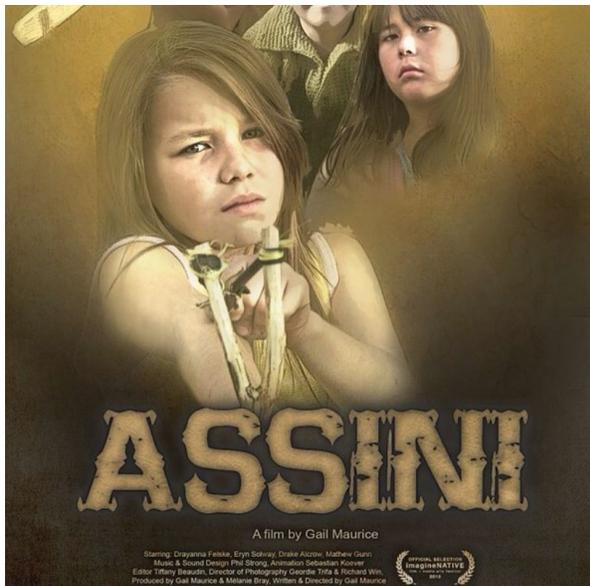
In Gail Maurice’s film *Assini*, seven-year-old Assini says to her friend after watching a western, “Indians are stupid. They always get killed. Cowboys can kill seven with one shot.”

Assini later discovers that she herself is “Indian,” and at first rejects the label — unsurprising given what Hollywood westerns and dime-store comic books have taught her.

Upon reflection and the ever-present love of her grandmother, Assini comes around to the idea that “Indians rule” and that racist representations must go. She wins a stand-off with a “cowboy,” stomps on a comic book, cheers with her friends and calls it a day.

Assini shows that films can be a source of education that succeed in interrupting rather than reproducing racist stereotypes.

The work *Assini* does for viewers parallels the work the character Assini does in the short film. It analyzes popular forms of entertainment, such as movies and comic books, shows their consequences in everyday life — Cree and Métis characters in the film understand “Indian” as an insult — and creates a new ending, or, more accurately, a fresh start.



Assini challenges and exceeds the meaning of “Indian” as scripted by popular culture. The film makes abundantly clear the beauty of Assini’s wide-open childhood landscape, as well as the humour and love in her community.

This is education. There is so much to learn and unlearn.

Image 2. Poster for *Assini* by film maker Gail Maurice.

Indigenous media is on the rise

The [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) provides a framework for the Government of Canada to recognize “the dignity and diversity of [Indigenous] cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.”

The declaration similarly states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.”

Establishing media and appropriately reflecting the diversity of Indigenous people, histories and lives go hand-in-hand. Indigenous filmmakers are changing the world by telling their own stories in their own ways.

It matters what we watch, what we pay attention to and what we learn. Even if we think we are not learning, entertainment and media play a crucial role in [shaping our beliefs about the world around us](#).

Amazing films by Indigenous filmmakers are not just fun to watch, but are also an important component of working toward a more just future in which respect for Indigenous territories, rights and responsibilities are fundamental to how we all live.

[In disrupting stereotypes](#), showcasing Indigenous excellence and teaching about histories and contemporary realities that matter, Indigenous filmmakers are leading the way toward a better future.

Not every great film is made by an Indigenous woman, but a lot of them are. We should all be paying attention, watching, learning and, yes, being entertained.

Doing so is easier than ever, with many incredible films available on platforms such as [Crave](#), [CBC Gem](#) and the [National Film Board](#).

[Next time you're looking for a movie, look up Janine Windolph, Caroline Monnet, Alexandra Lazarowich, Tracey Deer, Danis Goulet, Gail Maurice, Tasha Hubbard, Amanda Strong, Sonya Ballantyne or Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers](#). These are directors to follow.

Acknowledgement

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We thank Jocelyn Thorpe and Kaila Johnston for permission to reproduce. We also thank Gail Maurice and Celeste Sutherland for permission to feature their artworks.

About the Author



Jocelyn Thorpe

Dr. Jocelyn Thorpe (she/her) is an associate professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Program and the Department of History, in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Manitoba. She studies histories and legacies of colonialism and environmental injustice, as well as the creative ways that people fight for a more just world. She has been the Director of the Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture since 2021.



Kaila Johnston

As the Supervisor of Education, Outreach, and Public Programming, Kaila oversees matters related to the support of educators, development of resources, establishment of outreach initiatives, as well as public engagement on residential schools and their legacy. Prior to joining the NCTR, Kaila worked with the TRC as a statement gatherer and coordinator to support statement gathering activities. She holds a BA (Hons.) in Criminal Justice from the University of Winnipeg and a MSc in International Crimes and Criminology from Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.