

An Interview with Indigenous Filmmaker *Alanis Obomsawin*

By Christine McDonald



Alanis Obomsawin, whose family roots are of the Abenaki Nation from New Hampshire, has spent much of the past decade and more documenting the standoff of the Mohawk warriors at Oka, Québec. In a filmmaking career spanning four decades, she has directed 23 films and is also known as a singer, storyteller, and historian. Her films give voice to First Nations people whose history Obomsawin reclaims through the lens and through careful research. Working with the National Film Board of Canada, she has a distinguished career as a documentary filmmaker in Canada. Among other awards, her film *Kanehsatake* was awarded the 1993 Toronto Festival of Festivals Award for Best Canadian Feature Film.

Before interviewing Obomsawin at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, I attended the second day of a two-day seminar for Indigenous filmmakers by invitation only that she developed. She graciously extended the invitation to me, and I was able to attend the second day. Here is a brief synopsis of her presentation:

She discussed how images of Indigenous people are manipulated in the press. She quoted an essay by a reporter about her work. "When you see someone beaten up, you think he's bad. Alanis Obomsawin shows an entirely different view of the person." The impression one gets, Obomsawin explained, depends on the image—it's sacred and powerful once the people [indigenous] talk about the images and the story. How CNN shows images, Obomsawin believes, is designed to make you think a specific way. In documentary, she cautioned, you are dealing with people's lives—and their lives are sacred. Since the documentary will be there forever, she recommended that great care be taken. She feels that when the camera is pointed at people, such as the police in *Kanehsatake*, sometimes they "behave a little better."

When she was filming the standoff at Oka, she was threatened in many ways and ultimately, all the film crews from news outlets abandoned her. She was left alone to document

the warriors and their struggle alone behind the lines. "No time to feel bad," she explained. A filmmaker does what is necessary, which is the ultimate choice that has to be made. At Oka, she said, she only had one dress, which she washed and wore over and over. She said, "That dress became my dress of hate." Her decision was to wait with the warriors until the end because she saw how courageous they were. This was a personal decision. Each person has to decide why he or she is filming a certain event. Although she was afraid at Oka of being gassed or shot, she felt that she wanted to be there and "suffer the common fate" of her people. Despite the fact that one's own people may question a certain decision, the decision is an individual one. She suggested that Indigenous filmmakers develop an "inside eye" so they can see in new ways.

As a filmmaker, she sees her role as a servant to her people. When she was very young, she realized that what the culture was telling her about her people was

wrong: "I'm self-educated and I learned English by reading the Indian Act. I wanted to understand what was affecting our lives." This led to her lifelong interest in reclaiming the "lost" history of her people: "The more I learn-ed, the more I became a fighter."

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Christine McDonald: I wanted to ask you about Is the Crown at War with Us? You mentioned the divisions within the Mi'gmaq. And the divisions seemed to be a threat, in the film. I wondered if you stayed away from these divisions. [Note: In my review of the film, it seems clear that all the Mi'gmaq were victims of government manipulation of their rights.]

Alanis Obomsawin: Yes, because I don't think that that would help the situation; it would only aggravate it. I don't want to start seeing people fighting with each other and have to take sides. I think what was important was to show how together [the Mi'gmaq] were when they stood together—they were all together—for them to see that, to see themselves, how great that was, and the strength of that, what it can bring. That's much more important than people watching them fighting or not being in accord with the pact—signing or not signing.

CM: The treaty you mentioned, in 1752—clearly on camera the government was not abiding by the treaty. And the testimony in court against the fishermen—they also saw the footage [of the boats being destroyed by the government officials] so why did the court react as it did?

AO: This is not the first time; that's usually the case. What was important here is the fact that in 1999 the judge said that people did have rights. And that the treaty rights had to be respected. Not only that, the rights to resources and land must accommodate Native people first, before anything else. This is what sent the message that a lot of people were against [the decision] and were trying to reverse it, and that didn't happen. They still have the right to fish in the pact, which is an incredible decision for our people—to have their rights recognized. And it's not the end of the story; it's going to continue, there's going to be more stories like that because when each Nation goes to fight, they have to go to court to prove their rights. Then the localities of the area or the province are against it and there will always be this kind of conflict.

That comes from the root of the problem—the fact that the population and the country have never been educated in terms of what the real history is. If in school—if the history was taught the way it [happened] and recognized the rights of the people, of the first people of the country—then their history would be different. The rest of the country would have respect for Native people. But as it is, they don't, because they don't know what the history is. So every time there is a stand and people are fighting for what's rightly theirs, they're persecuted. They're called criminals; they're criminalized in everything that they do. And that's why there are problems. And that's what the film is about, to show what that situation is and why these incidents happen and why there's so much misery and poverty. These are the reasons.

CM: I know in Kanehsatake you certainly brought out the hidden

history of the Native Americans in Québec and it may have been—I mean obviously it's in the history books—but did you feel that bringing out the history on film had more of an effect or reached more people than it would just from the historical record?

AO: The fact is, there's history in almost every film I make. It comes from the fact that people are not educated about the history. And it falls on our back to educate people. You have people accusing Native people of all kinds of things, and then once they hear what the real story is or the history is, they are surprised. They say, "Oh, I didn't know that." And "How come I didn't know that?" It makes people think, it makes people want to do more research, and there are discussions. And for me, that's the most important thing. These are the reasons why I do these documentaries. And it's not just for the moment but it's for the future, for many

generations so that these [film] documents will be there and they can study them and they can see what really happened in those situations.

CM: As you know, when you screened in Glens Falls you had a standing ovation,

which was a first [for our library]. And your film [Kanehsatake] is checked out as much as our feature films.

Did you ever see Sandy Ozawa's Lighting the Seventh Fire? It's also about fishing rights [of the Chippewa].

AO: I'm not sure.

CM: Well, exactly the same thing happened. I was really terrified to see the racism in Rocks at Whiskey Trench and in Is the Crown at War with Us? It crosses borders...

AO: It's the same story everywhere. It all has to do with rights and the respect of the people, and you know we want the Native people to have their rights recognized, obviously.

CM: I think people are nervous about the treaties being recognized [in the courts] and that lawyers and judges are recognizing them and so the reactions from people are brutal.

AO: Very.

CM: That's true. When I saw this film I thought a lot about the Rodney King videotape. And you were talking today in the seminar about the difference between what the person felt as they were being filmed versus what the news reporters say happened and what the courts may say happened. I wondered if you could comment on that.

AO: Well, you know, this is why I put a lot of importance on the word and the sound in themselves. The voice of the people is too important. If you see the same image on televi-

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KANEHSATAKE: 270 YEARS OF RESISTANCE

Directed by Alanis Obomsawin • Produced by Wolf Koenig and Alanis Obomsawin

Photo by Shaney Komulainen © 2003 Film Board of Canada. All rights reserved.



IS THE CROWN AT WAR WITH US?

Leo Bartibogue and lobster fishermen from Esgeoopetitj

Directed by Alanis Obomsawin

Produced by Alanis Obomsawin

Photo by Pamela Mitchell © 2002 Film Board of Canada. All rights reserved.



IS THE CROWN AT WAR WITH US?

Supporters of the Esgeoopetitj First Nation gather

Directed by Alanis Obomsawin • Produced by Alanis Obomsawin

Photo by Pamela Mitchell © 2002 Film Board of Canada. All rights reserved.

sion and you have a reporter who's saying what this is about, and has a judgment, whatever the situation, it's very different than to hear the people who've gone through this—beating, for instance, or nearly drowning from being rammed [by the government boat] in the water. It's a very different story. So [my goal is] to allow the people to speak for themselves and tell their own story. They're the ones that are going through it; it's not us, the people who are watching. So it's important to have their voice.

CM: You've been working in documentary for more than 30 years. And could you say if there's something that you feel has united your work in your heart and on the screen?

AO: Well, the reason I began to do this was the same reason I was so busy singing and talking to students across the country for years. I was fighting for Native peoples' inclusion in the curriculum. I wanted our history to be taught the way it is, and the way I knew it happened. And the language, which has been gone for a very long time, is coming back. It comes down to this: I do it for the children. If they are able to have a document that will guide them or educate them about themselves and their lives, about their history, about contributions that their nations made, about the other nations that have come here....It's very important for their future, to be able to recognize who they are themselves, for them to see themselves on television or in a film to see what their history is, to recognize their traditions, their culture, their language. It makes for a much better people, a much healthier people. Stronger. Because you are allowed to be who you are. Then you can learn anything about any other nation or any language or any trade—from a doctor, a lawyer, anything. And we need that truth for our nation.

CM: Was it your idea to do the workshop?

AO: I'd been doing master classes in Canada and in a lot of different festivals. Bird [Runningwater] came and saw me doing a master class...

CM: I noticed the respect that the filmmakers have for you and I assume you've made many connections with them. You made a strong statement that documentary is political and that if they're in it for something else besides helping their people, then they shouldn't be in it—that they're doing more damage. But how do you see this new crop of young Indigenous filmmakers? Are you heartened?

AO: I am excited about the future. Everywhere I go there are young people doing things. And we have our own channel now in Canada. Our own television channel.

CM: APTN?

AO: Yes. It means Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. And it employs a lot of people who are doing some unusual documentaries. A lot of people are being trained to use the

camera, lighting, sound in every aspect of filmmaking, so it's a very exciting time. And they have 80 hours a week of programming in English language, 18 hours in French, and 30 hours in Aboriginal languages. This is going to grow; it's growing all the time. All the programming is done by Native people or about Native people. There are a lot of children's programs in Aboriginal languages. It's an incredible time. There are jobs, and training programs are going on all across the country. So I think that it's very different from when I started out. As a result, in the school curriculums and the communities the language is being taught and people are using their own videos to teach even the elderly people.

CM: What do you recommend to young filmmakers, in terms of seeing film?

AO: Young people are very much into looking at Hollywood films and what is being advertised, and of course you know, there is a lot of violence in films that they look at. So it's very important for us to have our documents or our fictions to show something else. In doing this workshop here, I want to make [young filmmakers] conscious of being professional and doing good quality work—to be aware of all we've talked about.

CM: You want to finish two more films and then you want to work with children. How do you want to work with children, and do you feel your work is coming around full circle?

AO: Well, one more thing that I'm finishing now, then after that I'm going to work again with children. I am not prepared to discuss it now, but this is what I really want to go back to. I've never forgotten children.

CM: I remember you told me you used to make dolls for the children in the shelters?

AO: Yes, and I was so late this year.

CM: But you did it.

AO: Oh yes, I finished on time. I did some for a group of children that had their party much earlier and I had to be ready a week or two before that time. With all my traveling, I was running late, but I did it. 📖