

Alanis Obomsawin Lifework

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

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

HKW

PRESTEL
Munich · London · New York

Contents

14	Richard William Hill, Hila Peleg	Introduction: The Children Have to Hear Another Story
20	Jesse Wentz	Christmas at Moose Factory
28	Doreen Manuel	Mother of Many Children
48	Karrmen Crey	In Situ: Indigenous Media Landscapes in Canada
62	Alexandra Juhasz	The Gift of Time: Listening in Amisk
84	Richard William Hill, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Joseph Naytowhow	What Resurgence Looked Like
96	Ursula Johnson	Incident at Restigouche, Is the Crown at War with Us?, Our Nationhood
116	Elizabeth A. Povinelli	Salmon Stills in Motion: The Local as Colonial Critique in the Films of Alanis Obomsawin
132	Loretta Todd	Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child
142	Richard Fung	Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place
152	Robert Verrall	Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance
164	Richard William Hill	Indian Roadblocks: Five Things That Happened from 1973 to 1990
174	Lisa Steele	Walker, Sigwan, When All the Leaves Are Gone
190	Jessica L. Horton	Listening, Dreaming, Fabricating
214	Monique Nolett-Ille	Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises
228	Jason Ryle	The People of the Kattawapiskak River, Hi-Ho Mistahey!, Trick or Treaty?, We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice, Our People Will Be Healed, Walking Is Medicine, Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger
246	Alanis Obomsawin, Monika Kin Gagnon	"Before I made films, I was singing"
258	Biography	
259	Filmography	
260	Contributors' Biographies	
261	Acknowledgements	
266	Alanis Obomsawin	What Drives Me

The Gift of Time: Listening in Amisk

—Alexandra Juhasz

I think time is the greatest gift you can give to someone.

—Alanis Obomsawin, interview for CBC's *Our Ottawa* (2017)

Ever since our people have been in being, it must have been being sung. And it has been carried out until this day, passed through the generations.

—Concert announcer, *Amisk* (1977)

Style and Encounter

Alanis Obomsawin gives the gift of time. Of course, it isn't really hers to give, although I, for one, am thankful to receive it. For we each already have it, in that we are all in being. But things get in the way of time—seeing it, being in it, listening to it. Obomsawin's gift, as expressed in her 2017 interview for *Our Ottawa* on the occasion of her fiftieth film, helps us see and feel time, in all its simplicity and vast complexity, from her point of view as an American Canadian Aenaki female film director working in solidarity with her subjects, other indigenous people. She explains: "it's so precious: time. I spend a lot of time with people I work with. This is why I listen for hours. I think time is the greatest gift you can give someone. Give the time: to hear, to listen well. Spend the time to communicate. For me, that's very important." Obomsawin's gift happens during the procedural time of each film's making and in its lived time of viewing. Her offerings span time: the films bridge fifty years. Each film encompasses many times—the present, past, and future. Obomsawin's unique approach to making films with indigenous people in their specific places and times begins with taking the "time to communicate"—"listening for hours. She combines this with a style of organizing the material into a completed film that reflects her process and represents what she has shared and shares with her subjects.

For clarity, I will call the process of being in time and place with people, and things, and a camera Obomsawin's

encounter, and the distinct film forms by which she renders this visible and audible to future listeners, both Indigenous and non-, her style. The encounter and style—rendering a multifaceted gift of time to many, from a point of view shared with other Indigenous people with whom she communicates—are a complex yet simple process featuring three vital components: thoughtful and compassionate listening, in a time and place, to a human's words, while also paying heed to their music, dance, and the natural environment in which they dwell; the lived activities of the encounter allowed by filming: listening, speaking, making music, dancing, and being in the natural world; and a personal film style that weaves together those who were present in one place, performing, recounting, and listening in the natural world, with those who couldn't be present in the time of that encounter.

Obomsawin's significant body of work offers viewers fifty years of encounters between herself and Indigenous Peoples of Canada and elsewhere, as supported by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and thereby made accessible to a larger and more diverse audience than is reflected in her films' discrete encounters. I gratefully watched these films (during a Covid-19 lockdown at my home in Brooklyn, New York, in 2020–21) through the NFB's comprehensive online collection of her works.¹

I am a white, Jewish, middle-aged, feminist film scholar and activist. I am so thankful for this gift and what I have learned from Obomsawin and her subjects, across and in time. In this essay, I look closely at one film, *Amisk* (1977). I attend carefully—I listen as invited—to this one film, and its lessons and performances, to consider five modalities defining Obomsawin's style as she, her Indigenous subjects, and her (inter)national audiences encounter and learn from time together. I discuss her uses of listening, the interview, performing, testifying, and double-voicing as filmic methods of being present together in time—what Diana Taylor defines as "Presentel" in her recent book, *Presentel: The Politics of Presence*, about her own related work as a performer and performance studies scholar and in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples around the globe.²

Listening to: Interviews

My approach hasn't changed. I am a listener.
—Alanis Obomsawin, interview for CBC's
Our Ottawa (2017)

Obomsawin takes the interview one
step further.

—Zuzana Pick, "Storytelling and Resistance"
(1999)

In a typical Obomsawin film, we see on the screen, in interviews that act as each film's through-line, its indigenous subjects speaking. We also see another person, Alanis Obomsawin, the American-Canadian Abenaki filmmaker, singer, artist, activist, and director, listening. She is present on-screen (and firstly, in the world) with her films' subjects as they explain on camera (and to her, and hence to us) their activities, histories, and beliefs. Her subjects discuss their daily lives, memories, and the past of their peoples taught through the generations. She listens. We listen. A student and colleague of Scottish documentarian John Grierson, Obomsawin gently expands on his ideology and practice of the interview with this signature technique. She explains how Grierson supported and taught her: "He told me, people would go to movies and see beautiful people, looking at something they can never attain. He felt that people who didn't have those means should be able to see themselves on the screen. And this would make a difference in terms of their lives."¹ Gently expanding the hierarchical structure of most documentary interviews with what might seem a simple gesture of self-inclusion, Obomsawin's work helps render what theatre and film scholar Janice Radick has understood as something quite complex: "A political practice that rewrites colonial experiences."² Obomsawin alters the on-screen power relations between the indigenous filmmaker and her indigenous subjects (and hence the experience of the interview for the viewer) by foregrounding a shared commitment to how we perceive the listening and the receiving of testimony.

Earlier critics have described Obomsawin's representation and use of the interview as a "testimonial narrative" that "shapes point of view" and links the filmmaker with the represented subject and the audiences viewing the representations.³ In *Amisk*—and in all of Obomsawin's work—she makes that commitment visible, audible, and always present in her own words:

I am a listener. I listen for hours and hours for people I am going to make a film about. I have very severe rules. First, I listen with a tape recorder. After having heard a story, I go back. I have to understand that I really know what it is about. Only then will I go with a crew. I haven't changed that way of working.⁴

Film historian Zuzana Pick understands Obomsawin's style as one of storytelling and resistance, writing:

Her work subverts the objectifying tendencies of the social documentary by revealing a heartfelt respect for the past and present of the people she has filmed. Obomsawin's approach to human emotion is premised on creating a place for empathy that promotes the calculation of affect between protagonist and viewer.⁵

Obomsawin's films are grounded in empathetic, heartfelt interviews born from a process of communal commitment and a recorded act of respectful, political listening. She shows herself in the frame as filmmaker and interviewee: quiet, attentive, connected, focused on her subject's words. This is the first of many models for listening offered in her work as a matter of style. She shows us that in an encounter between indigenous people, the camera, and the anticipated audience, the gift of time is best received by listening. While simple in form, it is a complex political gesture, one of many created stylistically in her body of work and in *Amisk* in particular. Pick continues:

Like the work of other Native filmmakers, her films have been produced by the NFB and sponsored by the Federal Department of Indian Affairs, which emphasizes information and education, but Obomsawin's practice sidesteps the prescriptive imperatives of the NFB didactic documentary. Her films rework documentary conversation and practice representation at the service of a Native political and aesthetic agenda. Her work demystifies notions of disinterested observation in cinema direct by inscribing her presence in the film, as narrator and subject in her hands documentary practice becomes a rhetorical intervention that places the enabling subject at the centre of discourse.⁶

Pick goes on to explain how, in the simple act of including herself in her interview shots, Obomsawin opens up the documentary to "work against the individualizing logic of the form," creating a frame that reveals the "dialogical character of the interview," so that "a sense of collectivity is made visible" as well as sharable and learnable.⁷

Over the course of the following pages, I think alongside previous critics, as well as with Obomsawin, to learn how her filmic style in *Amisk* widens beyond self-reflexively presenting herself in the interview encounter to embracing several more tactics that work similarly as modes of listening and learning to listen. In *Amisk*, we listen to witness, to understand, and to be educated by the multiple offerings of the James Bay Festival, which took place over nine days in Montreal in 1977: a "historic event held in support of the James Bay Cree whose territory, resources and culture were threatened by the expansion of hydro-electric dams."⁸ Over the film's short forty minutes, we are offered vivid excerpts of roughly twenty performances by "First Nations, Métis and Inuit performers [who] came from across North America to show their support in an act of indigenous unity and solidarity." But this is not your typical concert film—even while many greats from this documentary genre, like *Monterey Pop* (1968) and *Woodstock* (1970),

were made around the same time. In *Amisk*, there is a similar commitment to listening to music, but there is also a listening to the words of Indigenous people.

Yes, in *Amisk*, much of our time is taken up enjoying the "rarely seen early performances by legendary indigenous artists Gordon Tootoosis, Tom Jackson, Duke Redbird, Willie Dunn and director Alanis Obomsawin herself."⁹ However, Obomsawin offers three other modes of listening as models to engage with her (and hence our) encounters with these performances so as to "raise support for our people" and witness an "act of indigenous unity and solidarity." These are the words the filmmaker herself uses about the event and the film in her signature voice-over at the start of *Amisk* (we will also hear her in this mode in two more short interludes of off-screen narration). Here is the first mode of listening, this one entirely directed at the viewer: those participants who aren't present at the initial encounter. Her presence (on-screen) and her voice (off-) are two speaking subjects in a much larger Indigenous cast. The second mode of listening comes from the short, elegant, and, perhaps at least initially, idiosyncratic frame of *Amisk*—its brief opening and closing sequences outside the world that will be the subject of the film, a concert. The film begins and ends not in Montreal, where the concerts take place, but in Eyyou Istchee—James Bay Cree territory. The third mode of listening comes through her notable and intense interspersing of the performance footage with testimony by five James Bay Cree men, whose "stories reveal first-hand experiences of the negative impacts of capitalist expansion on Cree land."¹⁰

The amalgam of testimony, performance, and frame built from James Bay Cree land and people proves *Amisk* to be a fine example of the filmmaker's oeuvre: "Characteristic of Obomsawin's work is the emphasis on the affirmative resolve of First Peoples to revitalize their cultures, reclaim their right to self-determination, and envision a new and better future."¹¹ And, as is likewise true of all her films, *Amisk* feels simple, purposeful, and political. Writes film critic Jerry White:

One aspect of Obomsawin's cinema that quickly distinguishes it from her contemporaries is its oddly pared down form. Her work displays little in the way of stylistic flourish or excess, and usually features explanatory voice-overs that might remind some of dull, pedagogical (NFB?) documentaries of the 1950s. However, what's important to keep in mind about this apparently simple aesthetic is that it is peppered with a pronounced subjectivity.¹⁴

Obomsawin's commitment to support, unity, and solidarity for and with indigenous people is pooled with her subjects—a pronounced and shared subjectivity—for future viewers. Respectful, welcoming, and warm, her style in *Amisk* is also dense, careful, and multilayered.

It will take time for me to describe her art about time. So I will attempt to move slowly and carefully—and I will listen—just as the film, its subjects, and its filmmaker modeled for me in 1977.

Listening to: *Amisk*'s James Bay Cree Territory Frame

Really listen. In documentary, if you are doing a story on someone, never forget it is not your story. It is the story of that person. You have to give it all the time for that person to be heard. Not to say, "I know a story. That's how it is."

The care and the service is all toward that person. Then you have a chance to learn a lot by listening. Not just for the film you are making but even for your life.

—Aanis Obomsawin, interview for CBC's *Our Ottawa* (2017)

For less than two minutes at *Amisk*'s opening and about thirty seconds before the film's conclusion, we begin and end in James Bay Cree territory, in motion and quiet on the water and the land. The film starts with the sounds of

water—we soon learn, of rowing—which plays under the opening credits for the National Film Board of Canada (listen: the sounds of indigenous people on their land are part of this national encounter). The first scene places the viewers in a boat, with a point-of-view shot where a prow cuts forward and upward into the frame. Credits enter into this image—"The National Film Board of Canada and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs present"—as pines appear on the shore in front of us and fresh snow on rocks in the water on either side. *Amisk*'s second shot shows us a boat from another perspective, from outside, witnessing its quick slicing through the water. We see three people rowing in a medium long shot, and the direction of the boat's movement has almost reversed, now coming down and to the right of frame. The sounds of rowing continue. "*Amisk*" enters the frame. The third shot continues with an image of a moving figure from top frame to bottom right. Now we see a man, small in the same landscape—pines, snow, grey sky—moving toward us. It is quiet. Really listen.

A voice enters the frame, in Cree. After a boat, subtitles appear on top of the image. We hear a man speaking, his words translated into English and added to the image for a national and diverse audience: "Hunting and trapping is my way of life." A double-voicing, one that might lead us to assume these words, spoken in Cree and written in English, are the words of the man walking. And perhaps this is what we see in the image as well: hunting and trapping. The male voice continues in Cree, with the English translation on top of an image of the man's face: "I was never taught in school or anything else from the white man." We see the same man walk through the white, snowy frame. He exits frame right. Obomsawin gives us the time for this movement, and only then comes a cut. The man is now walking over the land and toward us, getting close enough to the stationary camera to reveal he is carrying a tool. Obomsawin cuts to a close-up of a hand using the tool and a tree bough. The man is cleaning a dead animal. The camera pulls out to include a witness to his hunting and trapping. This is the first on-screen model for how to watch and listen; the frame is now a prototype

for how to teach and learn. The witness, a person in bottom frame right, quietly watches the man tend to what is now visible as a dead beaver by brushing it with the tree bough and whacking it back and forth on the snow to clean it. Cut to a short scene of a woman making another tool, also shot in the same winter environment, although this one shows more signs of human settlement: a house and shed are in the background. She works quietly. We are requested likewise to listen quietly, to watch and learn, as did the previous on-screen witness. The woman is doing, and she is teaching. *If you are doing a story on someone, never forget it is not your story. It is the story of that person.* She runs a stick along the top of an animal hide pulled tight in a wicker frame, smoothing it. Then, a dissolve, incongruous, to a group of indigenous men and women, *inside*, in what looks to be an airport, walking in the same direction as the boat and the man from the previous shots, top frame to right corner. We are only one and a half minutes in, but we've twice been invited to watch and listen to Cree people, to welcome more indigenous people, and to make a connection between the James Bay Cree and these people arriving at the airport.

The people moving into the frame begin to smile. They recognize someone. A voice enters off-screen, a woman's, soft, warm, and informative: "People are coming to Montreal from all over Canada..." And indeed, we see these indigenous people coming, and we watch them meet someone and shake her hand. *The care and the service is all toward that person.* The one welcoming them is seen from behind. (It is Obomsawin, although we do not know this yet, modeling this act of service as an aspect of listening and learning.) Hers is also the off-screen voice we hear (although we may not know this yet either), which continues: "And the United States..." The woman, Obomsawin, shakes a second man's hand, and she now speaks on-screen, diegetically, as part of the airport encounter caught in the film's frame, even as her voice also continues off-screen as narrator: "To take part in the James Bay Festival." Now her voice is double-voiced. (I will return to this technique of speaking and listening later, in my discussion of the concert sequence.) We also hear her ask in the encounter: "Your

trip was good?" "Not too baggy," says the next visitor. "Not too baggy," she repeats as she continues down the line, greeting each visitor in turn. In off-screen narration, she explains simultaneously: "It will last for nine days"—"Oh, hello," we hear at the airport—"In an effort to publicize and raise money."

Commitment, welcome, indigenous teaching and learning, and listening (and double-voicing) are all given to us in this simple but dense frame, which continues apace. The film cuts to an outside daytime scene, a street in Montreal, and we see Obomsawin and a man carrying luggage toward a parked car. Her voice-over continues: "In support of the cause of our people in the north." More people enter the frame on their way to the car. "They are in danger of losing their land to the James Bay hydroelectric power project." Four Inuit women (I assume, based on their dress) have entered the dynamic frame and are putting their bags in the car, too. Cut to back inside the airport, where two white women, in medium close-up in the left of frame, and an indigenous man on the right are all engaged in something bureaucratic. Mumbling, filling out forms. Then a loud and clear woman's voice, belonging to one of the two pictured, rises above the pleasantries, surprised: "Oh, they do speak English!" A quick pan to an indigenous woman: "We speak everything." *You have a chance to learn a lot by listening. Not just for the film you are making but even for your life.* Then, one final dissolve to a Montreal hillside at night, accompanied by the sounds of singing and drumming as the shot pans right and pulls out to present a large public building: a performance hall.

We cut to the source of the beautiful, powerful sound to which we are listening. Eight men, inside what we can assume is the building we just saw, well lit and surrounded by the darkness of a stage: some are drumming, some clapping, one is dancing, all are singing and engaging bodily with the sounds they are making. We learn here, and across the performances, that indigenous people—men and women, young and old—work together to make this (and every subsequent) performance. These first performers are identified with titles showing their name and

territory, set atop their image: "Dogrib (Northwest Territories)." The Dogrib Dene (Tłı̨chǫ̀) performance is followed by another with two men, one on a guitar and the other a fiddle, titled "Métis (Alberta)." First pictured alone, well lit in a sea of dark, the two performers demonstrate music integral to their culture as a cut reveals related artistry: they are accompanied on stage by two dancers performing intricate footwork. The dancers are elderly, one male, the other female, and their performance is expert. Cut again, and now we see a long shot of a lone person dressed in blue, lit by a small circle of light on the otherwise black stage, and seen from the rafters, small and far away, establishing the large space of the performance hall. The camera pushes forward, and we see and hear a woman in a warm coat performing with a mouth instrument: "Akalise Novalinga, Inuit (Eastern Arctic)." Applause. Bows. Smiles. She puts her hands on her hips, delighted by the attention from and connection with an unseen but supportive audience. She smiles again and exits the stage.

We are six minutes and thirty seconds into the film. Already, we have been given a critical frame that's teaching us to listen, and we have seen three performances to which we can attend as modelled. Now we are about to cut to the film's third formal teaching in *Listening to Indigenous Peoples*: testimony. But before I explain the radical filmic style Obomsawin uses for testimony, I ask us to consider what we have already learned. What has Obomsawin taught and shown us about time and listening?

Amisk's opening sequence is composed of images of James Bay Cree (and of behind the scenes, the camera and filmmaker) moving, hunting, and working in stillness on their land, accompanied by the audio of one man's testimony and its translation in subtitles over otherwise quiet images of indigenous people in their territory: "Hunting and trapping is my way of life." "I was never taught in school or anything else from the white man." We see Cree territory and Cree practices, but not in a strict observational style. Rather, a voice—not of God, but of one Cree man—descends into the scene, framing our encounter with the land and with the film: this man has a way of life

with his community, which we are privileged to see, and it has not been taught to him by the white man. As is true of the first sequence of *Nanook of the North* (1922) and so many other ethnographic films, *Amisk* opens on live-action rowing and daily work. But these actions are accompanied and explained by the voice of an indigenous man, not an outsider ethnographer. Then later, when we see indigenous people engaging cross-culturally with each other, creating solidarity, it is Obomsawin's signature voice-over that gives us guidance. In sonorous, elegant, gentle, Québécois-inflected English, she offers her perspective, the film's perspective: another indigenous point of view. Like the film's frame—of moving, living, and using Cree land—her voice and vision is a cradle that holds and extends the documentation of the performances and verbal testimonies (two forms of the same thing) that are the primary focus of the film.

We have been shown several ways to listen to people and time through film, given that we might not be from the place and period recorded (James Bay Cree territory and Montreal, 1977). As does the film, its maker, and its indigenous subjects, we can attend with respect. We can afford the speakers and performers our time and attention. We can name ourselves as part of this process: who we are, where we watch from. We can welcome visitors (and we too are welcomed). We can understand that words and sounds, edited over footage, alter the lived environment and all that we see from a human point of view. We can understand that the perspective of this film is that of indigenous people: those we see speak and perform, as shaped by a camera, and narrator and filmmaker: Arianis Obomsawin. This position and related politics prove true for all her films. Says White: "Even though she draws on a semi-minimalist form, Obomsawin's films are extremely subjective. This subjectivity is most clearly expressed by her own voice, which forms the soundtrack of almost all of her films."¹⁰ In my own work as a theorist and maker of feminist video documentary, I think about how the collective making, sharing, and expressing of subjectivity for people hitherto made into objects by documentary film and otherwise is a political tactic: "film and patriarchy

share the project of women's objectification—they make victims. Video and feminism see women as complex, worthy selves—they produce subjects."¹¹ In my work, I teach people to work together to make videos about their own experience, subjectively rendered and spoken.

I learn related methods as *Amisk* teaches me more. We are made to understand that indigenous people speak their own languages, English, and all languages. We can understand that indigenous and non-indigenous people have different lands, songs, dances, and clothing. We can understand that the performers and audience of the James Bay Festival have come together "in an effort to publicize and raise money," and that we have been included, thanks to the film, in its nine days of performances and "in support of the cause of our people in the north." And we already know this will be a different style of teaching, as "I was never taught in school or anything else from the white man."

These lessons have been easy to watch, simple and gentle in form. Now, the film proper, the concert film, can begin: fifteen performances by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit performers from across North America. The place of this coming encounter is in Montreal, on a brightly lit stage surrounded by darkness, which also functions as a frame. Because they are on a stage, the artists are seen in a space nothing like the natural world where we began, and where they began, where their people have been in being since the beginning. Scenes from the recorded performances are short, usually one to three minutes. However, many of these performances are intercut with images and sounds rendered through another style of filmmaking, offering a third kind of encounter with listening—one particularly notable for its radical filmic style, as we will explore in the following section. Obomsawin once said: "I like to make [the film] as plain as possible, so that the attention has to be on the work and what the people are saying.... I don't like to do fancy things where your attention is on other things."¹² How does she, in this way, extend the simple work of attention?

Listening to: Testifying

"It's been about forty years since we met the first white man." Although these words, heard in Cree and seen in English subtitles, are not a fancy thing, they cause a serious shift in our attention following the performances we have just witnessed in the concert segment. A hard cut takes us to the final element of *Amisk*: a new stylistic contribution by Obomsawin, which ensures and emphasizes that "attention" stays on "what the people are saying." She cuts from the concert hall in Montreal, where we joined an audience watching performers from a distance and in darkness, to an unexpected and tight medium close-up on a middle-aged indigenous man wearing glasses in a well-lit interior. He speaks in Cree, looking slightly to the left of camera. There is no establishing shot to this location (as there was to the hall), and we are never provided one (unless it is, existentially, the Cree land in *Amisk's* frame). The close-up shots of testimony thus all occur in another time and place that will go unidentified. This is a place of words and of listening, outside of geography but about and in time. "It's been about forty years since we met the first white man." These words, in English, are the subtitles to this man's testimony, which we now see on the image of his face. He is seated on a couch in what feels like a small room. "First came the geologists and prospectors, and I did not know what they were looking for."

Oddly, abruptly, noticeable in its strangeness, there is a cut to six faces, the camera a little farther back. An indigenous man with a cap is seated with others: two women, another man, and a child wearing a toque, a winter hat adorned with a maple leaf. Their faces are surrounded by black. They, too, could be anywhere and in any time, but they do not seem to be in the same room as the speaker, even as they listen attentively. This and each subsequent cut to a sea of indigenous listeners tells us that this space is constructed by cinema alone (another place of encounter). We hear the man's voice, but we see the faces of his listeners. Wherever they are, the place is one of indigenous people joined (with us) in the quiet act of listening. There is another cut to even more listeners: a sea

of concerned, focused people—perhaps in some sort of auditorium or public place (it feels larger than where the man sits, testifying). A third cut, and yet another group of listeners join the auditory chorus: elderly, middle-aged, children. Men and women listen in this shot. We've learned about communal practices earlier: men and women, people of all ages, dance and sing, live and work together on the land. We return to the man testifying. We have been introduced to his witnesses, his listeners, as well. They will stay unidentified as individuals and as a people, although all are clearly Indigenous. We are welcomed to join them; they model a practice.

The man continues. Listen. "Then the surveyors came to divide up the land by putting in claim posts." Even though the shot is close on his face, another man enters the frame through a movement. We realize our speaker is not alone on the couch after all; he is seated close to another Indigenous man, also listening. "And the rest came in to test the depth of the water." Our speaker gestures with his hands. His testimony is slow and thoughtful. He is choosing the right words. "We asked all these people what they were doing, and they never told us," reads the English accompanying his voice as text on the screen.

Then we are no longer with him. We now see a man on a stage with a drum, singing. The subtitles read: "Gordon Tootoos's, Cree (Saskatchewan)." We can listen to this testimony now. The sound of drumming is linked to the words that came before and those that quickly follow as the film cuts to another elderly Indigenous man, the warm lighting and wallpaper of the space of testimony behind him, the shoulder of another man to his left, as he says: "But when the government agent first came, the way he put himself to the Indian people was that they were totally dependent on him. But it was not like that." Now, a third speaker, a corner of the same room behind him, a map of Mistassini over his shoulder, adds his point of view to the dialogue. "Not many people living here"—another man's shoulder to his right—"saw what it was like then." Cut to an extreme close-up of an elderly Indigenous woman wearing a kerchief, face wrinkled and attentive, surrounded by black

(like the performers), listening. Subtitles enter on her face as the third witness testifies, and she listens. "Now today, I think that the store is the wilderness." She looks down. We return to the third speaker: "Everything that I needed to survive on came from the land." The man gestures with his hand. We listen. She listens. The crowd of Indigenous listeners listens. "So, I would never want to part from my land. No, I would never."

The camera pushes in, and the film cuts to another observer, another listener, also in extreme close-up. These words appear in subtitles on his concerned, attentive face: "If I did, I would not be the only one, because if somebody lost his land, it's just like shooting him." The intensity of these words is not lost on the listeners—they are connected to it, doubled with the words through their presence and witness, through the words as sound and image, as are we. We return to our speaker. He finishes his thought. Hard cut back to Montreal, the stage, and now seven women performing work to the music of a flute. We see a musician and then two men making tools. "Samson Neacappo, Cree (James Bay)," accompanied by singing, as two women stretch a hide and others sew. And then a woman in a beautiful long red dress, with two braids, speaks into a microphone and describes what we will see next: a game set to drum and dance by "Dogrib (Northwest Territories)." Though not yet identified, we will soon learn—at almost exactly the halfway mark of the film—that this woman in the red dress is Obomsawin. We are finally given her name when she joins the performers on stage and sings a lullaby in Abenaki and French and English (not all the languages, but many).

We are now eleven minutes in, and all the film's complex elements of listening, offered through simplicity, have been shared. What to make of this radical practice? What have we heard? What have we learned? We are self-reflexively listening to and watching song, music, dance, and the testimony of Indigenous people who have been welcomed to this land from all over North America, who have come together in Montreal to raise support and engage in solidarity, and this demands our careful, exact-

ing, and full attention. The testimony and the dance are one thing. The performances are of the same power and have the same educational capacity as the testimony we see and hear; all testify to the colonial violence of white people, who engage with the land and its people without expertise, without knowledge. We learn this from spoken testimony, expressed by those old enough to have witnessed the initial brutal acts of conquest: surveying, measuring, setting up stores, taking land—all of this, "it's just like shooting him," as we've already heard from one of our Cree witnesses. We learn this from the song, dance, and music of Indigenous Peoples, performed in solidarity with the James Bay Cree, from all over what is currently known as North America. We are instructed in how to watch and listen. We do.

Another Indigenous piece-time is built through the film's style, in the distinct ways that Obomsawin engages, stages, films, edits, and shares the encounter of the performance with the encounter of the testimony and the encounter of listening. Although this is not coherent in space-time, it is in message: solidarity, unity, attention, learning, listening. Obomsawin's practice, writes Hiadki, like that of other Indigenous female filmmakers, provides "a decolonization of both normative media practices and the violences of imperialism and capitalism."¹⁸ In *Amisk*, Obomsawin has extended her gentle, capacious gesture of including her own listening face when Indigenous people speak about their past and daily life. She has added more context by narrating herself in voice-over. She has included analysis of conquest from many others who take up a variety of positions: performers, witnesses who testify, a sea of Indigenous listeners, an unseen audience at the performances, and us, the viewers of the future, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

The performances are shot in a traditional observational style. But Obomsawin creates a unique, idiosyncratic rendering of time-space for testimony and witness. When we see Indigenous people who listen, rapt and animated in their attention, just as Obomsawin's when we see her performing this function—the Indigenous witness, the local

listener, the active receiver—we are taught a new way to perform our function as well.

Listening to: Performing—Double-Voicing

The normative bond between speech and representation is suspended, exploding a multiple self, shaped by sedimented layers of historical consciousness.
—Zuzana Pick, "Storytelling and Resistance" (1999)¹⁹

It's hard to understand that where the white man walks, you are bound to lose your property.
—Interviewee, *Amisk* (1977)

Around minute fifteen of the film, we see Obomsawin, arms folded, listening, still as yet unnamed, as another male concert organizer (in a rad-pled '70s leisure jacket!) introduces the next performance: "Throat music, chanting with their throats, in our language is called Katajao, and this is a very ancient tradition. Ever since our people have been in being, it must have been being done. And it has been carried out to this day, passed through the generations." Two women and then two men offer a beautiful, profound performance, music-making technique, game, and interaction. "Inuit (Eastern Arctic)" lies as words atop the images of their stunning interpersonal engagements. Bodies touching, face to face, mouth to mouth, together the two pairs make sound and music. One voice flowing into and learning from the other body and mouth to create a unified sound, astounding in its simultaneous complexity and simplicity: listening and being together in harmony—two mouths, two bodies, twice. Many listeners, as we know. Musicologist Nicole Baudry, in her writing on Inuit throat singing and related forms, elucidates:

It is difficult for the listener to tell which sounds are produced by whom even when one understands how the game is played. This probably

explains why it is so important for the women to stand very close to each other while playing and to play with a partner whose voice is similar in range and quality. In a way, the players are not only playing with each other but they are also playing with whomever is listening by using sounds that are hardly recognizable as words and by consciously concealing who is doing what.²¹

What are we learning by watching and listening to Katajjaq, double-voicing? Obomsawin, like us, now observing, is also filming and editing. She presents again, in another form, what we have seen before—interview, testimony, performance, listening—a respectful, attentive back and forth of personal experience and social critique, of here and now in dialogue with then, of witness and testifier in harmony, of many people informing the other and each other, of building and dispersing authority, agency, voice, and meaning between two or more, of everybody singing and dancing and listening and learning, but not as the white man has modelled. Literary scholar Maria Lúcia M. de M. Martins explains how polyphony itself is a “poetics of resistance” in Obomsawin’s films and related Indigenous art forms: “In the Bakhtinian sense of the word, polyphony, which includes a diversity of voices and points of view, promotes dialogism, disturbing the pretentious unity of dominant discourses.”²² After *Amisk*, Obomsawin would go on to make several films about this profoundly simple and complex practice.²³

In what is now the recognizable rhythm, or double-voicing, of the film itself, we cut from a performance of double-voicing on the stage to more testimony from the place of Indigenous time and space, the place of witness: “Wherever we try to go, the white man’s presence is always there. It’s hard to understand ... that wherever the white man walks, you’re bound to lose your property.” Cut back to the stage: the woman in red. Now a shawl is on her shoulders, and her arms are pantomiming the holding of a baby. Written on top of her image as subtitles: “Aianis Obomsawin,

Aberakis (Quebec).” She performs for us in the same visual style and on the same stage as her colleagues and film’s subjects. In *Amisk*, Obomsawin—filmmaker, singer, activist, teacher, listener—is present multiply, doubly, visibly, aurally, as another model for the Indigenous filmic encounter: she is an image alone on the stage, and she is a witness on that very stage; she is a voice both alone as narrator and in community. She is singer, interviewer, welcomer, filmmaker, listener, and once again, as we move to a conclusion, narrator.

We hear her voice-over once more. We have seen more testimony, more dance, more song, more listening. We have watched the masterful Hoop Dance of Jerry Saddleback, Cree (Alberta).²⁴ Then, as we move to the film’s end, there is a cut to the same nighttime streets of Montreal from the film’s beginning. Obomsawin explains: “We performed all over Montreal. Three or four concerts each day. Many other entertainers came to take part and give their services for free.” Now a cut to a man performing in a smaller venue, standing at a microphone with a guitar. He—“Paul Ritchie, Ojibway (Ontario)”²⁵—begins to sing, performing folk music with lyrics about the natural world and white people’s violence against it, another Indigenous man listening in the background behind him. Following this, we see several more performers, all dressed in Western garb, expressing their points of view as Indigenous artists taking up Western music and poetry practices, performing in English, and re-collecting the past and witnessing the present.²⁶

In *Amisk*, the style through which we encounter the land, the people, dance, song, testimony and its witnessing, all via Obomsawin’s point of view and that of her Indigenous subjects—expressed doubly through her voice and her witnessing, listening, performing, and framing, and thus our own witnessing through her simple and yet complex frame and process—allows us time with Indigenous knowledge, creativity, analysis, and politics. Another way of looking at Obomsawin’s juxtaposition of past and present through our and her attention is by considering Stó:lō poet Lee Maracle’s notion of “lineage memory”

Martins explains: “To claim lineage memory and juxtapose it with current memory is to articulate the most sacred of one’s entire thought from the beginning to the present and is intended as future memory.”²⁷ As lineage memory, we have heard a poem (and countless performances and testimonies) through Obomsawin’s style before we once again see the building that opens the film directly following the frame in Cree territory. We hear Obomsawin: “At the end of the week, we gave two large concerts at the Paul Sauvé Arena and Place des Arts. Eighty-four people performed at Place des Arts for four hours to a packed house.” Cut to eight men in a circle dancing together around a drum (the only performers on this stage not to be identified by name or territory), her voice continuing: “For the first time ever in Montreal, people became aware of the strength and richness of our culture. And we became aware”—cut to the opening shot of the ship’s prow—“of the unity of our people.” The sound of Indigenous people singing carries over to, double-vocalizes with, this familiar shot—more lineage memory—from the film’s opening. Cut to what is now two boats, three people in each, moving across the frame with speed and power, listening to the sounds of the unity of their peoples, as are we. Fade to black: “With special thanks to all the artists who came to perform and all the other people who helped to make this festival possible.” The singing continues: “Produced and directed by Aianis Obomsawin.” The credits roll.

Listening to: The Frame

It’s so precious: time. I spend a lot of time with people I work with. This is why I listen for hours. I think time is the greatest gift you can give someone. Give the time: to hear, to listen well. Spend the time to communicate. For me, that’s very important.

—Aianis Obomsawin, interview for CBC’s *Our Ottawa* (2017)

Like my father or my father’s father, they can’t remember how far back the Indian has survived

off the land. So it must have been happening all the time. This is why all the people are concerned about the land.

—James Bay Cree testimony, *Amisk* (1977)

In conclusion, in conversation or double-voicing, I offer again the words of Obomsawin from 2017 and the testimony of a James Bay Cree Elder from her 1977 film: a frame for my close work here as well, learning from and listening to Obomsawin’s gift of time in one film, *Amisk*. To be present, to be in and to see time, begins and ends with listening, in all the times.

1. The NFB's collection of Ohmsawwin's films is available at <http://www.nfb.ca/directors/aiandisohmsawwin/>.
2. Diana Taylor, *Presence: The Politics of Presence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).
3. Zuzana Piek, "Storytelling and Resistance: The Documentary Practices of Aaiia Ohmsawwin," in *Gendering the Nation: Canadian Women's Cinema*, ed. Kay Armitage et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 78.
4. Aaiia Ohmsawwin, interview for *Our Ottawa*, CBC News, February 11, 2017.
5. Janice Hudki, "Deconstructing Colonial Violence: The Subversive Practices of Aboriginal Film and Video," *Canadian Women Studies* 25, no. 1-2 (2006): 83.
6. Zuzana Piek, quoted in Hudki, "Deconstructing Colonial Violence," 84.
7. Ohmsawwin, interview, *Our Ottawa*.
8. Piek, "Storytelling and Resistance," 77.
9. *Ibid.*.
10. *Ibid.*, 80.
11. "Amisk," National Film Board of Canada, 2021; <http://www.nfb.ca/film/amisk/>.
12. *Ibid.*.
13. *Ibid.*.
14. Piek, "Storytelling and Resistance," 77.
15. See Jerry White, "Aaiia Ohmsawwin, Documentary Form and the Canadian Nations," *CineAction* 40 (June 1997): 26-36.
16. *Ibid.*.
17. Alexandra Julius, "No Woman Is an Object: Reclaiming the Female Subjective Voice," *Cinema Obscura* 18, no. 3 (2003): 71. In this quote, I'm discussing *BELEUSED: Five Short Films about Women and Prisons*, a project about, by, and with formerly incarcerated women that I produced in 2000.
18. Aaiia Ohmsawwin, quoted in White, "Aaiia Ohmsawwin, Documentary Form and the Canadian Nations."
19. Hudki, "Deconstructing Colonial Violence," 83.
20. Piek, "Storytelling and Resistance," 81.
21. Nicole Boudry, "Slapping, Laughing and Playing: Three Examples from the Inuit, Dene and Yupik Traditions," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 8, no. 2 (1988): 278.
22. María Lúcia Millán Morales, "Dionne Brand and Aaiia Ohmsawwin: Polyphony in the Poetics of Resistance," *Ilu da Deterior: A Journal of English Language, Literatures in English and Cultural Studies*, no. 56 (2020): 152.
23. For example, *Canada Figuettes: Jane in Parangaitak—Quebec, Arctic (1982)*. She repeatedly reuses this footage in subsequent films.
24. See, for example, the poem of "Daise Boudry, Chigogawa (Deterior)," reproduced on pages 82-83 of this volume.
25. Morales, "Dionne Brand and Aaiia Ohmsawwin," 88.





People are coming to Montreal from all over Canada and the United States to take part in the James Bay Festival. It will last for nine days in an effort to publicize and raise money in support of the cause of our people in the north. They are in danger of losing their land to the James Bay hydroelectric power project.



2014

February 28th, 1974

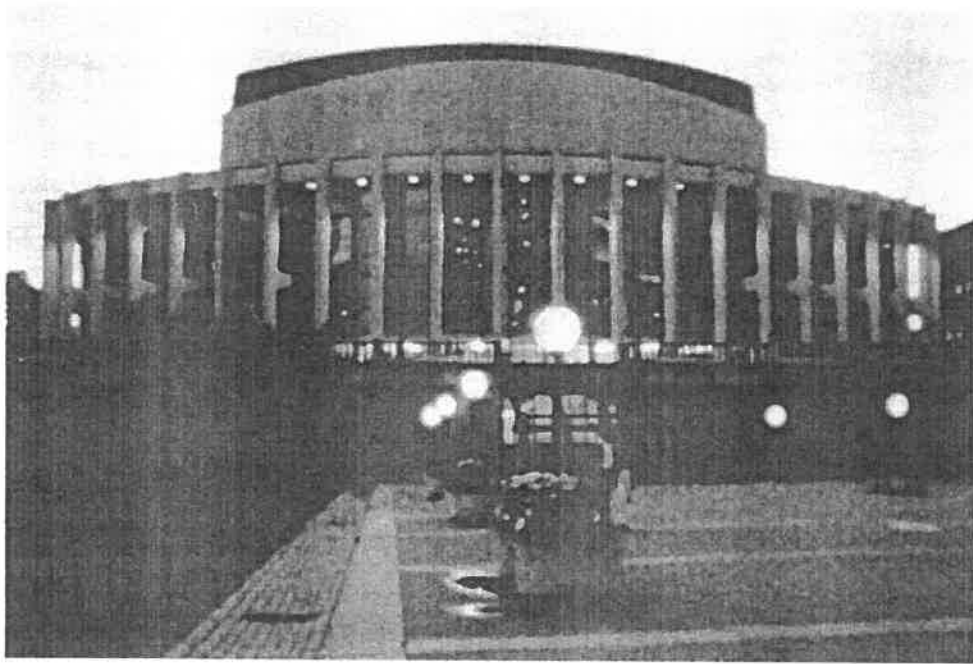
In April 1973, 84 people (Eskimos, Indians, Metis) came to Montreal for ten days to participate in several concerts and panel discussions. They came to stand with their brothers, the James Bay people, in their fight for their land and their rights.

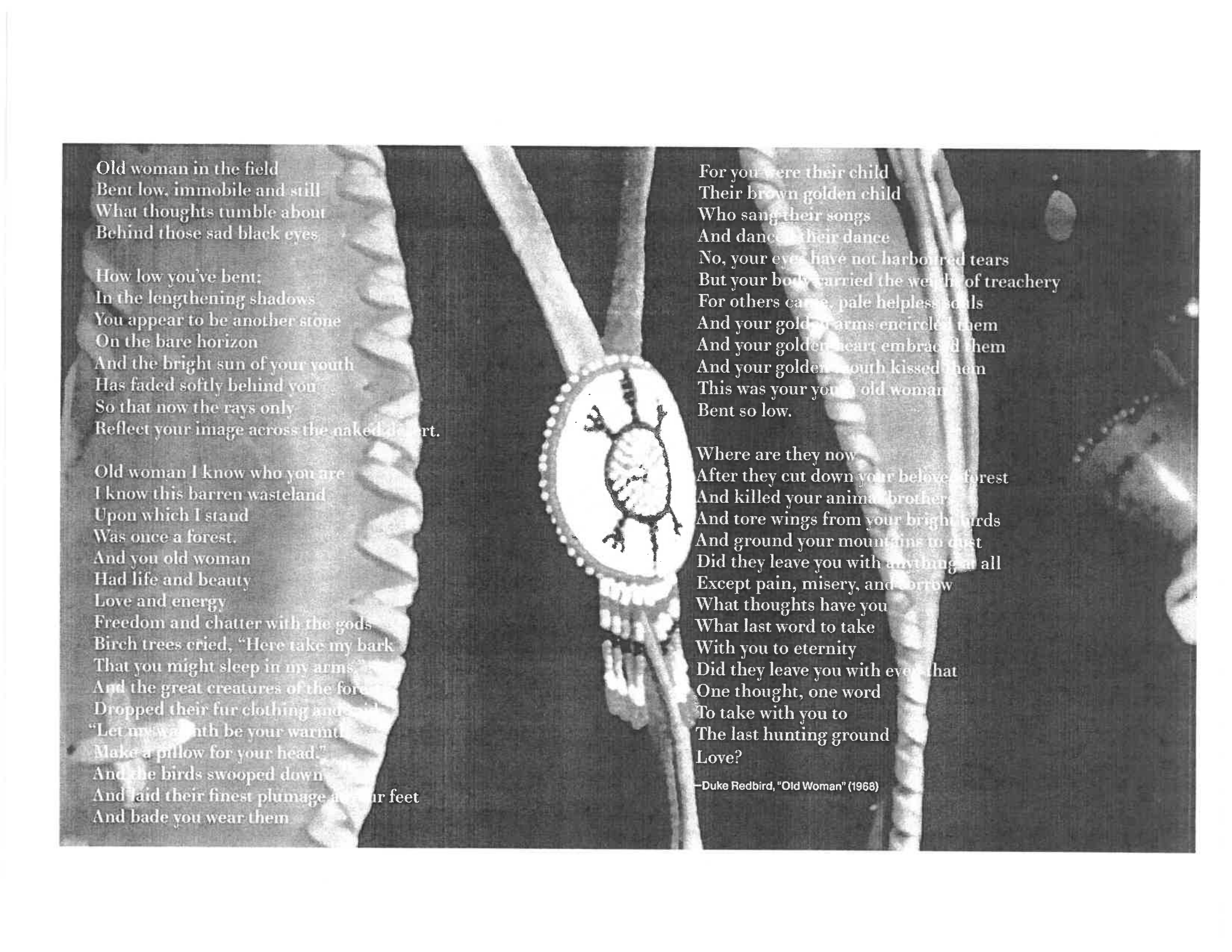
Much footage was shot by the four people who were part of the Indian crew at the Board - Buckley, Patewabano, Alec Redcrow, Albert Canadian, Bob Charlie, with the help of Don Virgo, Eva Pearce, Jean-Jacques Parent and myself, Alanis Obomsawin.

Now we wish to finish this film as it is an important record of what happened and also to display the difference in the cultures and the quality of the performance.

Alanis Obomsawin







Old woman in the field
Bent low, immobile and still
What thoughts tumble about
Behind those sad black eyes

How low you've bent;
In the lengthening shadows
You appear to be another stone
On the bare horizon
And the bright sun of your youth
Has faded softly behind you
So that now the rays only
Reflect your image across the naked desert.

Old woman I know who you are
I know this barren wasteland
Upon which I stand
Was once a forest.
And you old woman
Had life and beauty
Love and energy
Freedom and chatter with the gods
Birch trees cried, "Here take my bark
That you might sleep in my arms"
And the great creatures of the forest
Dropped their fur clothing and said
"Let my warmth be your warmth
Make a pillow for your head."
And the birds swooped down
And laid their finest plumage at your feet
And bade you wear them

For you were their child
Their brown golden child
Who sang their songs
And danced their dance
No, your eyes have not harboured tears
But your body carried the weight of treachery
For others came, pale helpless souls
And your golden arms encircled them
And your golden heart embraced them
And your golden mouth kissed them
This was your youth old woman
Bent so low.

Where are they now
After they cut down your beloved forest
And killed your animal brothers
And tore wings from your bright birds
And ground your mountains to dust
Did they leave you with anything at all
Except pain, misery, and sorrow
What thoughts have you
What last word to take
With you to eternity
Did they leave you with even that
One thought, one word
To take with you to
The last hunting ground
Love?

—Duke Redbird, "Old Woman" (1968)