

The Children  
Have to Hear  
Another Story  
Alanis  
Obomsawin

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# An Introduction to the Exhibition

by Richard W. Hill and Hila Peleg

Alanis Obomsawin was born into a dark period of Indigenous history, when options for social and political agency were radically and systemically foreclosed. Despite this, she managed to consistently access public platforms to advance Indigenous concerns and tell Indigenous stories. She has done this so effectively and with such integrity as a documentary filmmaker working at the National Film Board of Canada that she has become a revered and beloved figure within Indigenous communities and celebrated both in Canada and internationally. In the process, she has created a model of Indigenous cinema that privileges the voices of her subjects and challenges core assumptions (economic, environmental, political, epistemic, ontological) of the world system created by colonialism that we all now inhabit and contend with.

This exhibition attempts to explain how Obomsawin achieved what she did and what it has meant for her to do so. It is organized chronologically by decade, beginning in the 1960s, when she first came to public attention as a performer and activist commenting on Indigenous issues. Although social and mission developments never fit neatly into discrete decades, the exhibition structure nevertheless helps make visible important changes that occurred over time. Each section is organized around her major films, with artwork, documents, and ephemera providing additional context. Select items from each decade are briefly discussed within these pages. There is also a library that includes newspaper clippings and audio recordings of Obomsawin speaking about key issues in her lifework.

It is important to understand how early Obomsawin committed herself to helping her community and the obstacles she had to overcome in her childhood. In the year she was born, 1932, Indigenous children in Canada were sent by the state to church-run residential schools. These schools had the explicit mandate of destroying Indigenous cultures, beliefs, and languages and replacing them with the cultures and Christian religions of European settlers. 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 Rights and other 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. 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 of 1876. And if you hoped to see Indigenous people in the public sphere, you would find a deluge of “Indian” imagery in popular media but very few Indigenous people representing themselves or their cultures. Likewise, in academia and public-policy discussions, there were anthropologists and other “Indian experts” speaking confidently about and proposing solutions to the “Indian problem.”

Having moved from her home community of Odanak to Trois-Rivières (at about the age of five) to start grade school, Obomsawin was spared residential school, but nevertheless taught a curriculum that slandered and disparaged her Abenaki heritage. As the only Indigenous child in her class, she was subject to vicious racist bullying 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.”

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. [...] By the time I got to be fourteen, I knew exactly why and how all this had happened.” She then put this knowledge into action. Her commitment to children and the transformative potential of education has remained a driving force of her lifework. Looking through her personal photograph collection, she can be seen again and again surrounded by children—playing, performing, telling stories. When asked what she wished to do on her visit to Berlin for the opening of this exhibition, she said immediately, “I would like to be able to visit schools and talk with children.”

Alanis Obomsawin quickly put into action her adolescent insight that children needed to hear a different story about Indigenous Peoples. She began locally, visiting Scout troops, “telling them stories and going to the bush to talk about the things I learned as a young person. Eventually I started going to the classroom.” Around the same time, she worked as a model in Florida, later making Montreal her home. She became immersed in the city’s cultural foment of the late 1950s and 1960s, meeting influential artists, photographers, and musicians and gaining a reputation as a singer and storyteller.

By the early 1960s, the media had discovered Obomsawin. And she discovered the media—quickly grasping the opportunity to direct the attention she was getting to the issues she cared about. By 1964, she began appearing occasionally on CBC/Radio-Canada television programs, talking about Indigenous issues and performing songs. Her activism on behalf of children in her home community of Odanak also drew attention, including a Christmas Eve 1965 article on the front page of the *Montreal Star*: “Princess’ Rival to Santa.” It reads: “The Abenaki children, like paleface youngsters, believe in Santa Claus, but they are depending mostly upon a sort of ‘fairy princess’ to bring them gifts tomorrow.” This was, of course, Obomsawin, who still provides gifts to every child on her reserve each Christmas. Like other media coverage of her in this period, the tone is sympathetic and somewhat patronizing at the same time, but her own agenda nevertheless comes through.

## 1960s

### Excerpts from CBC/Radio-Canada TV programs, 1964–69

This series of clips from Obomsawin’s CBC/Radio-Canada appearances provides a sense of how she used her presence as a singer and advocate in this important national forum. In the 1964 interview with Jean Ducharme on *Aujourd’hui*, Obomsawin discusses the importance of maintaining Indigenous heritage against the pressures of assimilation as well as flips popular assumptions by arguing that Indigenous cultures have also contributed a great deal to the wider world.

On *The Observer* that same year, Obomsawin speaks with host Alan Hamel about Indigenous issues and performs several songs. The program takes what can only be described as a bizarre turn at the end. As Hamel and Obomsawin conclude their conversation, he says, “I know that the bear is the symbol of the Abenaki, and so we have decided to cook a little bear meat today. Have you ever had bear meat?” Obomsawin, looking a bit embarrassed and perplexed, answers, “No, not me.” Hamel then proceeds to fry chunks of bear meat that have been rolled in on a trolley. One can only hope that in 1964 this seemed strange to most viewers. Today, it is surely evident to almost anyone how inhospitable this supposed gesture of hospitality was, even if one does not know the taboo against eating bear meat if one is Bear Clan, or that Obomsawin is a lifelong vegetarian.

The 1966 profile of Obomsawin for the program *Telescope* is the most thoughtful and aesthetically compelling approach to her life and career from this period. Directed by Ron Kelly, the episode centres on Obomsawin’s efforts to raise money for a swimming pool for the children on the Odanak reserve; it also addresses the challenges she herself had to overcome in dealing with racism growing up. The river that the children previously swam in had become too polluted to use. The town of Pierreville built a pool, but the Indigenous children were not welcome there. So Obomsawin spent several years raising the funds to build a pool on the reserve for them. Just recently, she reports, “the same community who would not accept our children came to the band council and asked if their children could come and swim in Odanak because they don’t have a swimming pool anymore. Of course, they said yes. I was very happy about that, because I wouldn’t want them to behave like they did.”

In 1969, Obomsawin appeared on the program *Take 30* in a roundtable format strikingly different from her previous appearances on CBC/Radio-Canada programs. *Take 30* began in the early 1960s as a weekday afternoon “women’s program,” covering subjects like entertainment, travel, and household hints, but by 1969 it had evolved to take on serious social and political issues. The roundtable, featuring all women, was moderated by Adrienne Clarkson, who came to Canada from Hong Kong as a refugee and went on to become one of CBC’s best-known interviewers and eventually the first person of colour to be appointed governor general of Canada. In the conversation, Clarkson positions herself as a classical liberal in conversation with women representing movements for change on the themes of “violence, oppression, and action.” Aside from Obomsawin, they include the now iconic public figures of urban planning theorist Jane Jacobs and Kathleen Cleaver, a leader within the American Black Panther Party; also present are sociology professor Margaret Norquay and Jennifer Penney, introduced as a “student leader, feminist, and political radical.”

### Mariposa Folk Festival, program brochures and photographs, 1969–77

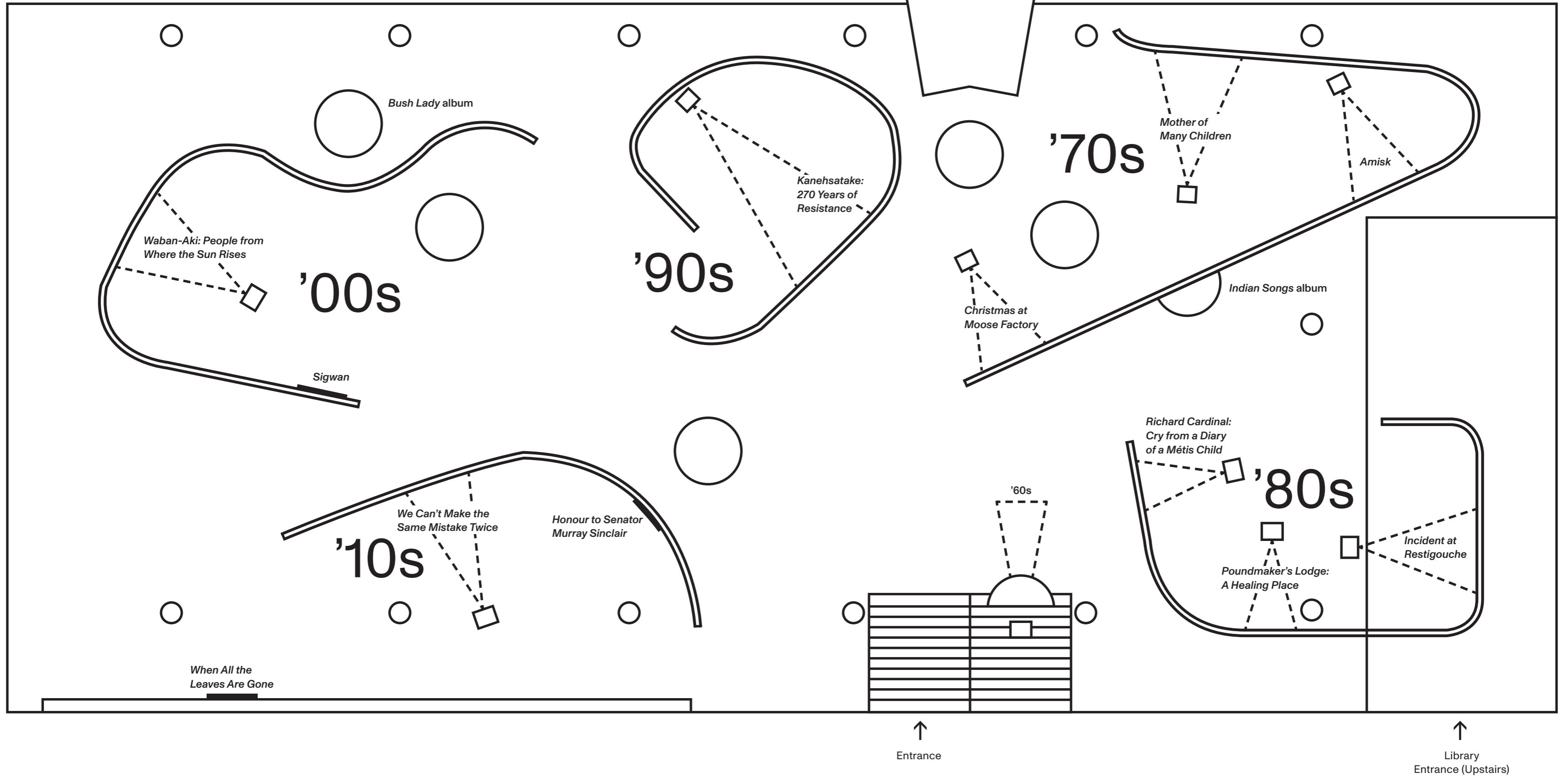
In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Obomsawin performed at and was a programmer for the Mariposa Folk Festival in Southern Ontario. The recovery, celebration, and revitalization of folk traditions that the scene was initially premised on created space for the appreciation of Indigenous musical heritage. For a number of years, Obomsawin was responsible for programming a “Native area” as a regular aspect of the festival, bringing in performers from many different Indigenous communities.

### Excerpts from the CBC/Radio-Canada TV program *The Day It Is*, 1969, and the film *Our Dear Sisters* by Kathleen Shannon, 1975



Alanis Obomsawin at the Mariposa Folk Festival, Orilla, Ontario, n.d.

# Floorplan



Alanis Obomsawin’s work as a filmmaker began to be released through the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) in the 1970s, although her relationship with the NFB began earlier. Her profile on the CBC program *Telescope* caught the attention of Robert Verrall (NFB animator and production director) and Joe Koenig (NFB director and producer), who brought her in as a consultant because of their discomfort with how the NFB was portraying Indigenous Peoples in its documentaries. Her criticism of how the NFB was portraying Indigenous Peoples was right on point: in the films, “we never get to hear the people speak.” Verrall was impressed and offered her a contract in 1967, which would turn into a permanent position about a decade later. She has worked at the NFB ever since and is now the only remaining filmmaker on staff.

The films that Obomsawin released in the 1970s aim directly at giving their Indigenous subjects opportunities to tell their own stories. This agenda fundamentally and permanently shaped Obomsawin’s approach to cinema, which, whenever possible, involves visiting communities and taking the time to build trust. This includes listening to and recording stories solely on audio tape until she thoroughly understands her subjects’ perspectives and everyone involved is comfortable enough for camera and sound crews to come in and do their work.

The 1970s also saw the rise and growing influence of “red power” activist groups, such as the American Indian Movement in the US and Canada.

## 1970s

### ***Christmas at Moose Factory* (1971), 13 min., Moose Factory, Ontario, along with archival material, production photographs, and children’s drawings**

Obomsawin’s debut film does something unprecedented: it depicts the Cree community of Moose Factory in Northern Ontario through the drawings and voices of its children. While focused on a period around Christmas, the drawings and stories nevertheless provide a rich portrait of various facets of the community and its institutions from the children’s perspectives. This includes not only family life but also experiences at two schools: the residential school, run by the federal government—some of the students come from town, but many others from the reserves—and the village school in Moose Factory for locals.

The NFB has kept many of the artworks used in *Christmas at Moose Factory*. This selection of visually compelling drawings offers a sense of the breadth of themes seen in the film. To coordinate camera movements when filming the drawings, transparencies were created as guides, displayed here with the transparency placed over the drawing to present a glimpse into this process.

As the film represents Moose Factory primarily through the children’s artworks, the production stills on display provide an especially valuable record of Obomsawin’s work with the children and the warm relationships she established with them through play and attentive listening.

### ***Mother of Many Children* (1977), 58 min., Burns Lake, British Columbia, et al., along with archival material and production photographs, 1975–77**

Obomsawin’s first feature-length documentary provided the opportunity for Indigenous women from diverse communities across Canada to discuss their experiences as women. The result is a fascinating collage of insights from many Indigenous communities, generations, and experiences. As the vignettes accumulate, the viewer is given an increasingly complex understanding of the ways in which the strength of women holds communities together and keeps Indigenous values vital and active, even as people’s lives change.

### ***Amisk* (1977), 40 min., La Grande Rivière and Montreal, Quebec, along with archival material and production photographs, 1974–77**

When the James Bay Cree began to protest an unwanted hydroelectric project, including building a dam, 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 and the US, she helped to organize the nine-day James Bay Festival in Montreal in 1977 to support the struggle. At the same time, she made *Amisk*, a unique document of the intersections of Indigenous cultures, musical traditions, and activism at this generative moment. “Amisk” means “beaver” in Cree and is part of the livelihood of the James Bay community. Beavers are incredibly industrious and also make dams. In the film, concert and other performance footage is interspersed with interviews with members of the James Bay Cree centred on their struggle and amplifying their voices through a show of political unity amid diversity.

### **Education Kits for *Manawan* (1972) and *L’il’wata* (1975), various materials, along with production photographs, ca. 1970–75**

Another of Obomsawin’s NFB projects was to create education kits that could be sent to schools across Canada to aid teachers in their lessons on Indigenous Peoples. It was a project that aligned perfectly with her goal of reaching children with more accurate information. The box kits each focused on a particular community and contained short filmstrips, vinyl records, colouring books, and photographs, as well as objects that appealed to children’s tactile senses, such as miniature snowshoes created by the children themselves.

### **Excerpts from CBC/Radio-Canada TV programs, 1971–78**

The excerpt from the CBC/Radio-Canada series *This Land* (1971) provides a vivid sense of the growing influence of Indigenous activists like Obomsawin, who were connecting with one another and thinking about how to adapt mainstream professions and institutions to Indigenous needs. It also provides an understanding of the active nurturing of connections between urban activists and reserve communities at this time.

### ***Indian Songs* (n.d.), vinyl, EP, along with performance photographs of Alanis Obomsawin, n.d.**



Alanis Obomsawin conducts an interview for *Mother of Many Children*, 1977



Production photograph, *Manawan*, ca. 1972



Production photograph, *Christmas at Moose Factory*, 1971



Production photograph, *L'il'wata*, ca. 1975

Through the late 1970s and into the 1980s, the attempts of earlier activist movements to articulate a positive vision of Indigenous cultures began to develop into a broader and more explicitly political program. This included building on the connections being made across Indigenous communities to create coalitions to defend Treaty Rights and work toward sovereignty over government organizations, social services, and territory. This shift was mirrored in Alanis Obomsawin's films.

Along with persistent land and Treaty Rights issues that erupted at times into open conflict between Indigenous communities and the state, Indigenous Peoples were also addressing the multigenerational damage to families and cultural institutions inflicted by colonial dehumanization and assimilation. This included attempting to gain control of and provide culturally specific social services to their own communities.

## 1980s

### ***Incident at Restigouche* (1984), 46 min., Listuguj and Montreal, Quebec, along with archival material and production photographs, 1982–84**

On June 11, 1981, 550 members of the Quebec provincial police, dressed in riot gear, descended upon the Restigouche reserve, a small Mi'kmaq community of 150. The ostensible motivation for the raid was to inspect the community's modest salmon fishery, but the scale and brutality of the police action—which Obomsawin was able to document through interviews with the community—made it clear that it was aimed primarily at creating a spectacle of the province's authority at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty. One of the film's most compelling moments is Obomsawin's heated interview with Quebec Minister of Fisheries Lucien Lessard, which she conducted in her own home.

Internal documents from the National Film Board of Canada show the challenges Obomsawin faced in getting *Incident at Restigouche* approved. Aside from the usual hurdle of responding to an unfolding crisis quickly through a slow-moving bureaucratic approval process, the programming committee forbid her to talk to the “whites” and only allowed her to speak to the “Indians.”

### ***Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986), 29 min., Breynat, Alberta, et al., along with archival material, press clippings, and production photographs, 1984–87**

On June 26, 1984, a bright and thoughtful seventeen-year-old Métis boy, Richard Cardinal, walked out into a wooded area on his foster parents' property in Sangudo, Alberta, and hanged himself. He left behind a heartbreaking diary documenting his short life spent being neglected and abused as he was moved through twenty-eight different foster homes. Obomsawin uses Cardinal's own words from his diary, along with interviews and staged re-creations, to tell his story. She also made the difficult ethical choice to include photographs of Cardinal's death scene in the film. These are hard to look at and even harder to forget. The film ends with a demand for Indigenous control of social services.

The displayed press clippings are from Obomsawin's research files for the film *Richard Cardinal* and provide a glimpse of the extensive press coverage Cardinal's story received across Canada. It became one of the galvanizing moments in the struggle for Indigenous Peoples to govern social services in many communities at this time.

### ***Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place* (1987), 29 min., Edmonton, Alberta, along with archival material, 1984–87**

Where the case of Richard Cardinal demonstrates the vulnerability of Indigenous children in the care of social services, *Poundmaker's Lodge* presents the hopeful model of an Indigenous-run addiction and mental health facility. The facility, which was named after the nineteenth-century Plains Cree Chief Pihtokahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker), was founded in 1973 to provide culturally specific services to its Indigenous clients. Obomsawin probes deeply into the underlying causes that have led to high levels of substance abuse in Indigenous communities, including the destructive impact of colonialism on Indigenous families and social systems.

### **Excerpts from CBC/Radio-Canada TV programs, 1982–83**

As seen in these two clips, Obomsawin's role as both a performer and public intellectual with important things to say about Indigenous issues continued in her appearances on CBC/Radio-Canada programs during these years.





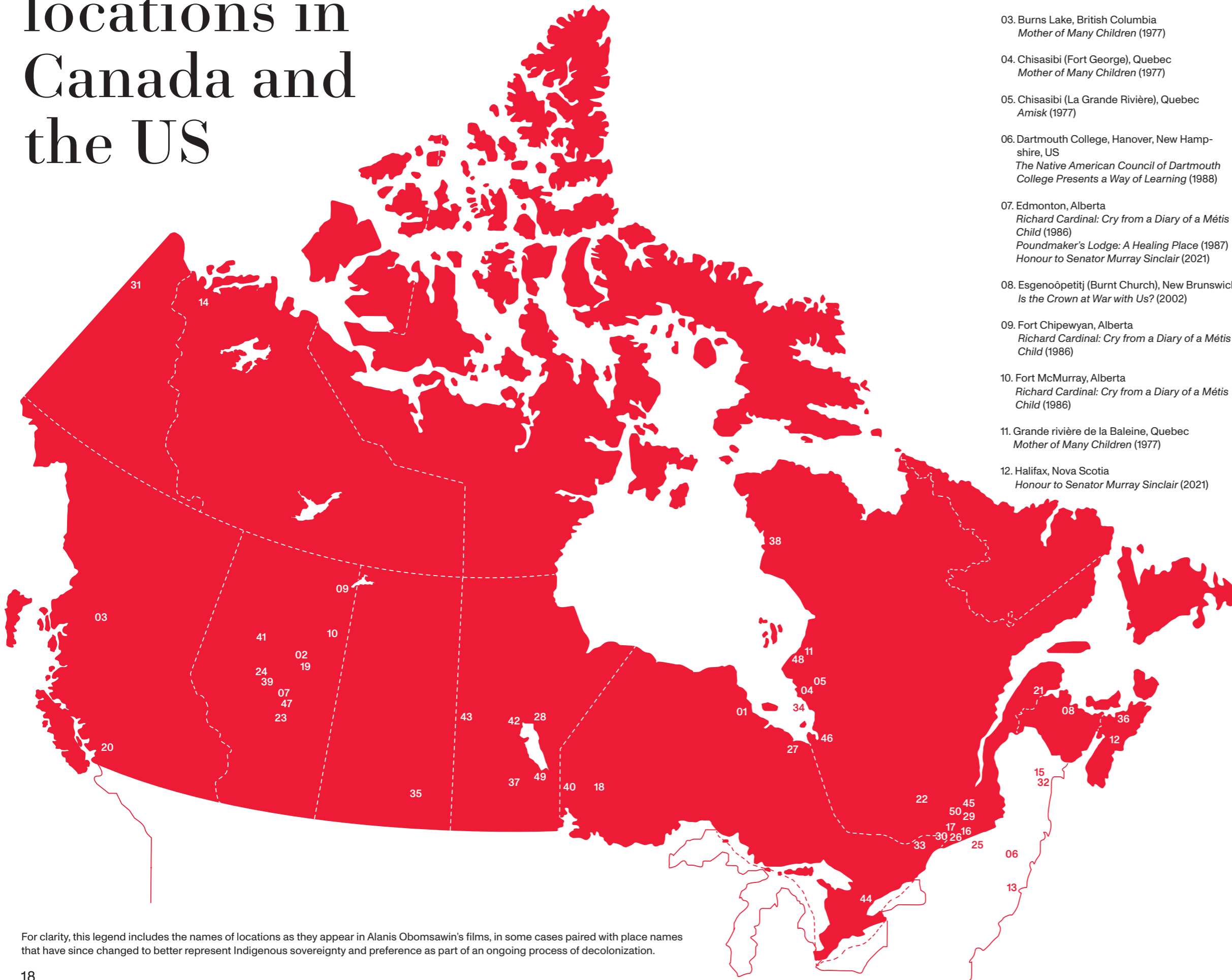
Production photograph, *Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child*, 1986



Production photographs, *Incident at Restigouche*, 1984



# List of filming locations in Canada and the US



For clarity, this legend includes the names of locations as they appear in Alanis Obomsawin's films, in some cases paired with place names that have since changed to better represent Indigenous sovereignty and preference as part of an ongoing process of decolonization.

01. Attawapiskat, Ontario  
*The People of the Kattawapiskak River* (2012)
02. Breynat, Alberta  
*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)
03. Burns Lake, British Columbia  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
04. Chisasibi (Fort George), Quebec  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
05. Chisasibi (La Grande Rivière), Quebec  
*Amisk* (1977)
06. Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, US  
*The Native American Council of Dartmouth College Presents a Way of Learning* (1988)
07. Edmonton, Alberta  
*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)  
*Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place* (1987)  
*Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021)
08. Esengoôpetitj (Burnt Church), New Brunswick  
*Is the Crown at War with Us?* (2002)
09. Fort Chipewyan, Alberta  
*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)
10. Fort McMurray, Alberta  
*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)
11. Grande rivière de la Baleine, Quebec  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
12. Halifax, Nova Scotia  
*Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021)
13. Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, US  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
14. Inuvik, Northwest Territories  
*Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021)
15. Penobscot Indian Island, Maine, US  
*Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2006)
16. Kahnawà:ke (Kahnawake), Quebec  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)  
*Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993)  
*My Name Is Kahentiosta* (1995)  
*Spudwrench: Kahnawake Man* (1997)  
*Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (2000)
17. Kanehsatà:ke (Kanehsatake), Quebec  
*Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993)  
*My Name Is Kahentiosta* (1995)
18. Kenora (Rat Portage), Ontario  
*Canada Vignettes: Wild Rice Harvest Kenora* (1979)  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
19. Lac La Biche, Alberta  
*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)
20. Lil'wat (Mount Currie), British Columbia  
*L'il'wata* (1975)  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
21. Listuguj, Québec  
*Incident at Restigouche* (1984)  
*Our Nationhood* (2003)
22. Manawan, Quebec  
*Manawan* (1973)  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
23. Maskwacis (Hobbema), Alberta  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
24. Mayerthorpe, Alberta  
*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)
25. Missisquoi River, Vermont, US  
*Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2006)
26. Montreal, Quebec  
*Amisk* (1977)  
*Sounds from Our People: Gabriel Goes to the City* (1979)  
*Incident at Restigouche* (1984)  
*No Address* (1988)  
*Le Patro Le Prévost: 80 Years Later* (1991)  
*Professor Norman Cornett: "Since when do we divorce the right answer from an honest answer?"* (2009)  
*Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021)
27. Moose Factory, Ontario  
*Christmas at Moose Factory* (1971)  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
28. Norway House, Manitoba  
*Our People Will Be Healed* (2017)  
*Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger* (2019)
29. Odanak, Quebec  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)  
*Sigwan* (2005)  
*Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2006)
30. Oka, Quebec  
*Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993)  
*My Name Is Kahentiosta* (1995)
31. Old Crow, Yukon  
*Sounds from Our People: "Old Crow"* (1979)
32. Old Town, Maine, US  
*Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2006)
33. Ottawa, Ontario  
*Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2006)  
*We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice* (2016)  
*Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger* (2019)  
*Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021)
34. Paint Hills Islands, Nunavut  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
35. Piapot, Saskatchewan  
*Sounds from Our People: Cold Journey* (1979)
36. Pictou Landing, Nova Scotia  
*We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice* (2016)
37. Portage la Prairie, Manitoba  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
38. Puvirnituq, Quebec  
*Canada Vignettes: June in Povungnituk – Quebec Arctic* (1980)
39. Sangudo, Alberta  
*Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child* (1986)
40. Shoal Lake, Ontario  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
41. Slave Lake, Alberta  
*Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021)
42. St. Laurent, Manitoba  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)
43. The Pas, Manitoba  
*Sounds from Our People: Cold Journey* (1979)
44. Toronto, Ontario  
*The Federal Court Hearing* (2012)
45. Trois-Rivières, Quebec  
*When All the Leaves Are Gone* (2010)
46. Waskaganish, Quebec  
*Sounds from Our People: Cree Ways* (1979)
47. Wetaskiwin, Alberta  
*Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger* (2019)
48. Whapmagoostui, Quebec  
*Walking Is Medicine* (2017)
49. Winnipeg, Manitoba  
*Mother of Many Children* (1977)  
*Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger* (2019)  
*Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021)
50. Wôlinak, Quebec  
*Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2006)

Most of Alanis Obomsawin’s energies as a filmmaker in the 1990s were spent living through and then analyzing, in one film after another (four in all), the causes and effects of what is often referred to as the Oka Crisis or, by many Indigenous people, the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance. For much of the Canadian public, the crisis—an armed stand-off between the Mohawk (Kanyen’kehà:ka) and the Quebec provincial police, called the Sûreté du Québec or SQ, and later the Canadian military—appeared to erupt from nowhere. However, as Obomsawin would show, it was in fact a long time in the making: an outcome of the legacy and ongoing reality of colonial dispossession as the town of Oka continued to expand onto territory that the Mohawk community of Kanehsatà:ke claimed as their own. The final straw was a plan to expand a golf course into an area known as the Pines that is sacred to the Mohawks. As tensions rose, the Mohawks began to arm themselves, the provincial police were sent in, and more Indigenous people joined the Mohawk defenders.

On July 11, 1990, a SQ tactical unit was commanded to remove the Mohawk warriors, attacking with concussion grenades and tear gas; a fifteen-minute exchange of gunfire between the two sides then followed, ending with SQ Corporal Marcel Lemay shot and killed and the SQ retreating. A tense standoff ensued that lasted seventy-eight days. Throughout the crisis, protests in support of the Mohawk defenders broke out across Canada, but there was also a powerful backlash and many Indigenous people reported new levels of hostility and harassment in their daily lives. The events playing out on the nightly news—however they were spun—shattered mainstream Canada’s illusions that the state’s relationship to Indigenous Peoples was essentially benevolent.

## 1990s

### ***Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), 119 min., Kahnawá:ke, Kanehsatà:ke, and Oka, Quebec, along with archival material, press clippings, 1990–93**

Obomsawin shot *Kanehsatake* from behind the barricades, providing a critical Indigenous view of the crisis; it has become her best-known film. On her way to work at the National Film Board (NFB) one morning, listening to the radio, she heard about the blockade and immediately decided to change the project she was working on. With the challenges she faced getting approval for her earlier documentary *Incident at Restigouche* (1984) in mind, she called in to work to say she wouldn’t be in that day and went to Kanehsatà:ke immediately. After seeing the situation, she returned to the NFB offices in Montreal, announced that she would be switching to a new production, and left for the barricades with approval for a “four-day shoot,” with a camera operator in tow. Working with a small crew and on her own, Obomsawin was able to remain in Kanehsatà:ke for the duration of the crisis, capturing vividly the ongoing tensions and constant threat of violence that the defenders endured on their side of the razor wire.

The long roll of calculator tape displayed here is a record of the number of feet of film that Obomsawin shot during her time behind the barricades. She recorded so much footage that it took her editor, Yuri Luhovy, six months just to view it all.

In September 1990, the Sûreté du Québec secured a court injunction to cut service to Obomsawin’s NFB cell phone. NFB executive producer Colin Neale sent a fax to Lieutenant General Kent Foster expressing concern that one Major Cameron had obtained and passed along Obomsawin’s telephone number to the provincial police. A response from military lawyers arrived the next day.

### **Production drawings by Robert Verrall**

Although Robert Verrall had retired from the NFB four years before the Oka Crisis, he made a commitment to continue supporting Obomsawin’s work. They kept in touch during the crisis, but it wasn’t until she began editing the film that she requested his help. Obomsawin felt it was essential to put the resistance at Kanehsatà:ke into historical context. Verrall writes: “She wanted me to illustrate part of the long history of betrayal with drawings. [...] The work took several weeks to complete. It was a labour of love.” Sadly, it is a story of shamefully broken promises.

### **Excerpts from CBC/Radio-Canada TV programs, 1990**

Obomsawin stayed behind the barricades for the duration of the standoff, even during a tense period when CBC/Radio-Canada withdrew its news reporters, because she feared what might happen if a camera was not present as a witness. The day before the standoff ended, she learned that the defenders planned to burn their weapons and walk out the next day. She chose to leave that day on foot to avoid being taken away in a military truck. Upon leaving, she gave powerful interviews to the media in English and French.

### ***Sesame Street*, 1994**

Throughout the 1990s, Obomsawin was a frequent guest on the Canadian edition of the children’s TV program *Sesame Street*. Although watching her drum and tell stories to children stands in sharp contrast to the intense images she documented of the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance, one can see that these two aspects of her practice are very much linked. As always, Obomsawin was thinking beyond the particular crisis to the long term and following her conviction that the dehumanization of Indigenous Peoples can be fundamentally challenged by showing children another way of thinking. Likewise, it is no surprise that the poster for *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* highlights the face of a child rather than a face-off between soldiers and Mohawk defenders.



Mohawk women marching in solidarity during the Kanehsatà:ke Resistance near Oka, Quebec, 1990

Robert Verrall, drawing for *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, 1993



Alanis Obomsawin pictured in *Le Téléjournal* (CBC/Radio-Canada) newscast, 1990

At the same time as direct Indigenous political activism was continuing across Canada in the first decade of the new millennium, many significant changes were occurring without fanfare inside institutions as attitudes evolved and long-closed doors began opening. More and more Indigenous people were graduating from universities and entering professions in which they worked with allies to change institutions from the inside. In the arts, this had already begun to show fruit in the early 1990s, and by the early 2000s, many institutions, including the important federal funder the Canada Council for the Arts, began to prioritize Indigenous inclusion.

With increasing access to mainstream cultural institutions, Indigenous people began to use these platforms to explore a wide range of questions, including how Indigenous thought and values might be sustained and put into action in these spaces. These are issues that Alanis Obomsawin has been addressed throughout her body of work, but in the 2000s, some of her films came to be centred closer to home, and they are, arguably, some of her most personal works.

## 2000s

### ***Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises* (2006), 114 min., Odanak, Quebec, et al.**

In *Waban-Aki* (the Waban-Aki being a group of Indigenous Peoples that includes the Abenaki), Obomsawin directs her lens toward her home community of Odanak, and from there creates a collective portrait of her people and their territory that is at once intimate, poetic, and steeped in history. While the film does not flinch away from the many difficulties the community has faced and continues to deal with, the stories it weaves together of voice and image present a rich appreciation of the many personalities as well as cultural richness and resilience of its people.

### ***Sigwan* (2005), 13 min., Odanak, Quebec**

Filmed in Odanak, *Sigwan* is a fable of alienation and reconnection. At first the alienation appears to be simply between a young girl, Sigwan, and her community. However, when she is befriended by a group of bear people, who bring her into their circle, it is not only Sigwan's connection with her community but also her community's links with the bear people that are renewed, and a balance is restored. The film uses storytelling as a framing device and handmade masks to transform actors into nonhuman characters.

### **Baskets made by Émilie M'Sadoques, Barbara Ann Watso, and unknown Abenaki women**

The creation of ash splint baskets features prominently in *Waban-Aki*, both for their economic significance during dark times and as objects of cultural heritage and pride. This beautiful selection has been loaned by Musée des Abénakis in Odanak, which is not only a remarkable community resource but also plays an important role in educating visitors.

### **Handmade animals and presents by Alanis Obomsawin, since 1948**

When Obomsawin was sixteen years old, she reflected on her own experiences of hardship and made the remarkable decision to do something for the children on her home reserve of Odanak: she would provide each child with a present at Christmas and Easter. At sixteen, this meant making toys by hand, baking cookies, painting Easter eggs, and creating whatever else she could think of. Her first homemade stuffed animals were somewhat two-dimensional creatures copied from children's drawings, made while she taught herself to sew. Since then, every generation of children on the Odanak reserve has had their Christmases brightened by gifts from Obomsawin.

### **“Princess' Rival to Santa,” *Montreal Star*, December 24, 1965**

In 1965, Obomsawin's Christmas generosity found public recognition on the front page of the *Montreal Star*. The accompanying article was illustrated by a tableau from the community's nativity play, with Obomsawin in white buckskin as the Virgin Mary. In 2000, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Obomsawin could not distribute her Christmas presents at the community centre as she usually does—these days, five for every child—so she delivered them door to door, followed by three pickup trucks piled high with toys. Many of these presents are store bought, but others have been made or embellished by Obomsawin and her friends throughout the year. The basement of her Odanak home appears to be primarily dedicated to toy production.

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### ***Old Crow* (1979), 29 min., from *Sounds from Our People*, a six-part television series, Old Crow, Yukon**

Decades before *Sigwan*, Obomsawin made a short film involving children in the creation and performance of bird and animal character masks.



Photograph of Alanis Obomsawin with her handmade animals, n.d.



Alanis Obomsawin, *Untitled (Horse)*, n.d., drypoint, 22.2 x 30.5 cm (plate mark)



Still from *Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises*, 2006

Over the past twelve years, Indigenous issues have been at the forefront of public conversations across Canada, and “decolonization” (variously imagined) has become a priority in many academic, cultural, and political institutions. The structural depth of these changes remains an open question, and many worry that symbolic gestures are too often offered in place of real action on long-standing substantive issues, such as Treaty Rights, land claims, and unequal social spending. Nevertheless, more Canadians have begun to reckon with histories of colonialism that have, for decades, been wilfully ignored. With growing connections being made between Indigenous communities around the world and increasing awareness of Indigenous issues, the importance of Alanis Obomsawin’s work to the global conversation on decolonization has never been clearer. She has remained continuously active, using the recent COVID-19 lockdown to explore her personal archives and produce a series of new films.

Several important events and movements have helped to shape this period. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created in 2008 as a condition of the settlement of a lawsuit against the federal government on behalf of Indigenous residential school Survivors. After faltering in its initial composition, the TRC was reconstituted under the leadership of Murray Sinclair, a Anishinaabe judge then sitting on the Court of Queen’s Bench of Manitoba. The commission heard testimony and took statements from over 6,000 Survivors across Canada and released its final report in 2015. As Sinclair put it: “Reconciliation is not an Indigenous problem. It is a Canadian one.”

Also influential has been Idle No More, a grassroots protest movement that began on Facebook in 2012 and quickly spilled out onto the streets with flash-mob Round Dances and other protests that drew the attention of the mainstream media. The movement has often addressed the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. This ongoing problem, a long-standing concern of Obomsawin’s, came to wider notice in the 2010s, leading to a public inquiry that began in 2016 and submitted its report in 2019. The report details the appallingly high levels of violence Indigenous women face in Canada.

## 2010s to the present

### ***When All the Leaves Are Gone* (2010), 17 min., Odanak and Trois-Rivières, Quebec**

This evocative film continues the personal turn in Obomsawin’s work, condensing many of her own childhood experiences into the narrative of Wato, a young Indigenous girl facing many hardships. These include the serious illness of her father, overt racism in the classroom, and racist bullying in the streets. Wato counters these in her powerful dreamworld, where she finds love and support from her guardians.

### ***We Can’t Make the Same Mistake Twice* (2016), 163 min., Ottawa, Ontario, and Pictou Landing, Nova Scotia, along with archival material, 2010–16**

This documentary rewards the viewer’s investment of time with genuine insights as Obomsawin follows a decade-long court case filed by the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada against the federal government for its failure to provide the same care and services to Indigenous children as other Canadian children. Obomsawin builds a compelling and detailed picture of long-standing inequity through the accounts of those fighting the issue and the drama of courtroom testimony.

### ***Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair* (2021), 29 min., Montreal, Quebec, et al., along with archival material and press clippings, 2021**

Cutting between a public talk given by Murray Sinclair and footage of testimony from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission court hearings that he oversaw, Obomsawin provides an emotionally searing reminder of the devastating effects of the residential school system on Indigenous individuals and communities. The subject is particularly timely because of the recent discoveries of unmarked graves at former residential school sites across Canada, which has drawn international attention. Disclosure of church and government records on the death and burial of children at residential schools was one of the issues raised by the TRC and not properly followed through on, but the issue has been discussed in Indigenous communities all along. As Obomsawin said recently: “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.”

### ***Bush Lady* (1985/2018), vinyl, LP**

Obomsawin’s only full-length album provides a sense of the breadth and depth of her musical influences and abilities, blending and moving effortlessly between the traditional and the contemporary. The first recording was released by CBC/Radio-Canada. She was not entirely satisfied by the track “Bush Lady,” however, and so rerecorded this song and then released an independent album, which was remastered by Constellation Records, in 2018.

The titular song, written many years ago but still sadly relevant, is about a young Indigenous woman who comes from a reserve to the city only to be victimized and exploited. The narrative plays out between two voices: the young woman and the taunting and predatory men who refer to her only as “bush lady.” As the song proceeds, we hear in the woman’s replies her tragic awareness of her victimization as she struggles to appropriate the term and articulate the reality of her position, although no happy conclusion is provided.

### **Excerpts from CBC/Radio-Canada TV programs, 2015–19**

Obomsawin has been honoured throughout her life, from being named Outstanding Canadian of the Year in 1965 by Maclean’s magazine to the many recent honorary doctorates that line her staircase in her Montreal home. All the same, it is fascinating to compare this series of recent television clips to her earliest appearances on CBC/Radio-Canada in the 1960s and realize not only is Obomsawin now recognized as a national treasure but also that the changed attitudes we witness are the fruition of the activism in which she has played such a significant role.

### **Horse and animal prints, since 1990**

The dreamworld explored by Obomsawin in *When All the Leaves Are Gone* also appears in her print work. “As a little girl,” she has 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 prints, each passing on their energy, strength, and compassion to the woman who dreams them.



Still from *We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice*, 2016



Still from *When All the Leaves Are Gone*, 2010



Alanis Obomsawin performing at Le Guess Who Festival, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 2017



# Filmography

Unless stated otherwise, Alanis Obomsawin was the writer, director, and producer of the film listed.

2021	<i>Honour to Senator Murray Sinclair</i> , Digital HD, colour, sound, 29 min.	2000	<i>Rocks at Whiskey Trench</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 105 min.	1979	<i>Canada Vignettes: Wild Rice Harvest, Kenora</i> , dir., writer, 16 mm, colour, sound, 1 min.
2019	<i>Jordan River Anderson, the Messenger</i> , Digital HD, colour, sound, 65:30 min.	1997	<i>Spudwrench—Kahnawake Man</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 58 min.	1977	<i>Mother of Many Children</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 58 min.
2018	<i>Walking Is Medicine</i> , Digital HD, colour, sound, 5 min.	1995	<i>My Name Is Kahentiosta</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 30 min.	1977	<i>Amisk</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 40 min.
2017	<i>Our People Will Be Healed</i> , Digital HD, colour, sound, 97 min.	1993	<i>Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 119 min.	1976	<i>L'il'wata</i> (seven short films; remastered in 2009), dir., prod., film strip, colour, sound
2016	<i>We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice</i> , Digital HD, colour, sound, 163 min.	1991	<i>Walker</i> ("Playing Fair" series), dir., D-2 video, colour, sound, 14 min.		<i>Puberty: Part 1</i> , 14 min.
2014	<i>Trick or Treaty?</i> , digital video, colour, sound, 85 min.	1991	<i>Le Patro Le Prévost: 80 Years Later</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.		<i>Puberty: Part 2</i> , 17:30 min.
2013	<i>Hi-Ho Mistahey!</i> , digital video, colour, sound, 100 min.	1988	<i>No Address</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 56 min.		<i>Basket</i> , 13 min.
2012	<i>The Federal Court Hearing</i> , digital video, colour, sound, 20 min.	1988	<i>The Native American Council of Dartmouth College Presents a Way of Learning</i> , video, colour, sound, 40 min.		<i>Mount Currie Summer Camp</i> , 8 min.
2012	<i>The People of the Kattawapiskak River</i> , digital video, colour, sound, 50 min.	1988	<i>The Native American Council of Dartmouth College Presents a Way of Learning</i> , video, colour, sound, 40 min.		<i>Xúsum</i> , 4 min.
2012	<i>The People of the Kattawapiskak River—Six Months Later</i> , digital video, colour, sound, 6 min.	1987	<i>Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 29:30 min.		<i>Salmon</i> , 4 min.
2010	<i>When All the Leaves Are Gone</i> , digital video, black-and-white and colour, sound, 17:30 min.	1986	<i>Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.	1973	<i>Manawan</i> (seven short films; remastered in 2009), dir., prod., film strip, colour, sound
2009	<i>Professor Norman Cornett: "Since when do we divorce the right answer from an honest answer?"</i> , Super 16 and DigiBeta, colour, sound, 81 min.	1984	<i>Incident at Restigouche</i> , dir., writer, 16 mm, colour, sound, 46 min.		<i>History of Manawan: Part 1</i> , 18:30 min.
2007	<i>Gene Boy Came Home</i> , Super 16, colour, sound, 24:30 min.	1980	<i>Canada Vignettes: June in Povungnituk</i> , dir., writer, 16 mm, colour, sound, 1 min.		<i>History of Manawan: Part 2</i> , 18:30 min.
2006	<i>Waban-Aki: People from Where the Sun Rises</i> , Super 16, colour, sound, 104 min.	1979	<i>Sounds from Our People</i> (a six-part television series)		<i>Moose Call</i> , 5 min.
2005	<i>Sigwan</i> , Super 16, colour, sound, 13 min.		<i>Old Crow</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.		<i>Snowshoes</i> , 7:30 min.
2003	<i>Our Nationhood</i> , Super 16, colour, sound, 97 min.		<i>Gabriel Goes to the City</i> , 35 mm, colour, sound, 28:30 min.		<i>The Canoe</i> , 2 min.
2002	<i>Is the Crown at War with Us?</i> , Super 16, colour, sound, 96:30 min.		<i>Cold Journey</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 29 min.		<i>Children</i> , 5:30 min.
			<i>Cree Way</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 28:30 min.		<i>Partridge</i> , 2:30 min.
			<i>Mother of Many Children</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 28 min.	1971	<i>Christmas at Moose Factory</i> , dir., writer, 35 mm, colour, sound, 13 min.
			<i>Amisk</i> , 16 mm, colour, sound, 28 min.		

# Schedule of Events

**A public program will take place at HKW on the weekend of April 2–3. Please consult our website for updates on the schedule and Covid-19 admission regulations.**

## A Conversation between Alanis Obomsawin and Monika Kin Gagnon

From her very first film, *Christmas at Moose Factory* (1971, 13 min.). Alanis Obomsawin has devoted her lifework to the stories of children and to their futures. This conversation between the artist and Monika Kin Gagnon will focus on the importance of voice in Obomsawin's filmmaking, explore the intimate nature of sound, touch upon her singing and music, and introduce the five new films she has made from her personal sound archives over the COVID-19 lockdowns.

**Monika Kin Gagnon** is Professor of Communication Studies at Concordia University, Montreal. She has published widely on cultural politics as well as visual and experimental media arts since the 1980s.

## The Freedom to Develop What Is Necessary

A conversation between Alexandra Juhasz, Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning, and Krista Belle Stewart, moderated by Richard Fung

In a 2020 interview, artist Maria Thereza Alves discussed the importance of having "the freedom to develop what is necessary." Many artists with agendas for political or social change that are (or once were) outside the mainstream have struggled with the question of reconciling these agendas with the existing state of the media they work in, including Alanis Obomsawin, who works across disciplines while shaping each to her particular needs. At the same time, Alves's statement also suggests a philosophical tension or implicit connection between freedom and necessity in political and ethical commitments.

**Alexandra Juhasz** is Distinguished Professor of Film at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. She makes and studies committed media practices that contribute to political change and individual and community growth. **Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning** is an Anishinaabe artist and Assistant Professor at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, who works at the intersection of Indigenous philosophy and ways of knowing, contemporary continental philosophy, and art. **Krista Belle Stewart** is a citizen of the Syilx Nation currently based in Berlin and Vienna. Stewart works primarily with video, photography, sculpture, and performance, drawing out personal and political narratives inherent in archival materials while questioning their articulation in institutional histories. **Richard Fung** is a video artist and theorist who was born in Trinidad and lives in Toronto. He is Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Art at OCAD University, Toronto.

## Guided Tour by Alanis Obomsawin

### Two Films of Merata Mita

*Patu!* (1983, colour, sound, 112 min.) & *Hotere* (2001, colour, sound, 82 min.)

Presented by Jason Ryle

Merata Mita (1942–2010) was a trailblazer of Māori film in Aotearoa New Zealand and a leader of international Indigenous cinema. She was also a dear friend and close confidante of Alanis Obomsawin. The evening showcases Mita's landmark *Patu!*, documenting the South African rugby team's controversial 1981 tour and the ensuing clashes between anti-apartheid protesters and the New Zealand police, and *Hotere*, on the life and art of Ralph Hotere, one of Aotearoa's most significant artists.

**Jason Ryle** is a producer, curator, story editor, and independent arts consultant based in Toronto. He is Anishinaabe from Lake St. Martin, Manitoba.

**Selected films from the exhibition can be viewed online at: [hkw.de/en/AnotherStory](http://hkw.de/en/AnotherStory)**

# Monograph

*Alanis Obomsawin: Lifework*

Editors: Richard William Hill, Hila Peleg, and  
Haus der Kulturen der Welt  
Prestel, 2022

English, hardcover, 272 pages, 25 × 31 cm,  
250 colour illustrations

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Price: 49€, at the HKW at a price of 36€

This comprehensive book reflects on Alanis Obomsawin's lifework by bringing together rigorous essayistic investigations with personal anecdote, conversation, and storytelling. It includes an interview with the artist, her own writing and etchings, archival material, and a vivid array of film stills and photographs.

Authors include Karmen Crey, Richard Fung, Monika Kin Gagnon, Richard William Hill, Jessica L. Horton, Ursula Johnson, Alexandra Juhasz, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Doreen Manuel, Joseph Naytowhow, Monique Nolett-Ille, Alanis Obomsawin, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Jason Ryle, Lisa Steele, Loretta Todd, Robert Verrall, and Jesse Wenthe.

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# Imprint

This booklet accompanies the exhibition  
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*Alanis Obomsawin*

February 12–April 18, 2022  
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Spring 2023  
Vancouver Art Gallery

Summer 2023  
Art Museum at the University of Toronto

*The Children Have to Hear Another Story—*  
*Alanis Obomsawin*

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[hkw.de/en/AnotherStory](http://hkw.de/en/AnotherStory)

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**Editors:** Richard William Hill, Hila Peleg  
**Managing Editor:** Martin Hager  
**Editorial Associates:** Laura Preston, Clemens Alban Ottenhausen  
**Coordination:** Clemens Alban Ottenhausen, Marleen Schröder  
**Assistant to Alanis Obomsawin:** Michael Shu  
**Image Research:** Susanna Gonzo  
**Proofreading:** Jaclyn Arndt  
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## Exhibition

**Curators:** Richard William Hill, Hila Peleg  
**Assistant to Alanis Obomsawin:** Michael Shu  
**Project Coordinator:** Marleen Schröder  
**Production Coordinator:** Dunja Sallan  
**Exhibition Associate:** Clemens Alban Ottenhausen  
**Research Assistants:** Susanna Gonzo (from Jan. 2021), Itamar Gov (until Dec. 2020)  
**Trainees:** Lisa Xenia Ness (from Nov. 2021), Ella Shechter (until Nov. 2021)  
**Interns:** Felix Fuchs, Josefin Granetoft, Friederike Kloss

## Exhibition Architecture and Setup

**Exhibition Architecture:** Kooperative für Darstellungspolitik, Berlin  
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