2023 | *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 13 (3): 721–729

FILM SYMPOSIUM

Fifty years of resistance on film

First Nations media and a cinema of sovereignty

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Comment on *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. 1993. Alanis Obomsawin, director. National Film Board of Canada.

Over the last fifty years, First Nations media-makers in North America have been mobilizing to gain broader coverage of their concerns by creating their own media representing Indigenous actions protecting their land and sovereignty. Blockades, often paired with occupations, have proved a particularly effective mode of resistance for Indigenous peoples to counter ongoing settler-colonial pressures, in particular extractive infrastructure and real estate projects that violate Indigenous protocols around sacred sites, land, and traditions as well as treaty rights. However, during these actions that impede the flow of commerce and capital across settler-colonial infrastructures, Indigenous communities have not always been able to represent their motives in these struggles directly. Mainstream news broadcasts rarely include the necessary explanation and historical foregrounding of settler-colonial land grabs, destruction of lifeways and cultural practices, and the policies regulating Native lives when these actions occur. The interventions of Indigenous media-makers have offered important alternatives to hegemonic projects of Indigenous erasure.

This contribution to the film symposium examines three films by First Nations filmmakers chronicling Indigenous blockades over the last half century. These projects traverse the United States and Canadian borders. Anchoring the history of Indigenous documentary cinema and providing a frame for this analysis are Kanien'kéhaka (Mohawk) leader Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell's 1969 film *You Are on Indian Land*; the quartet of films on the 1990 Oka crisis by the well-known Abenaki documentarian Alanis Obomsawin beginning in 1993 with the epic *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance;* and Ho-Chunk experimental filmmaker Sky Hopinka's 2017 *Dislocation Blues* on the experiences of some of the protesters who were part of the No Dakota Access Pipeline (NODAPL) camp at Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. Together, these works map fifty years of Indigenous media documenting and amplifying the use of blockades as a powerful mode of Indigenous resistance.

The films offer counternarratives for what we might see as traditional hegemonic infrastructural sites such as bridges, roads, and pipelines which are frequently disruptive of "critical Indigenous infrastructures" seen in the ontologically based reciprocal relations to land and waterways, the plant and animal inhabitants and spiritual connections to these places and beings (Diver et al. 2019; Kovach 2009; L. Simpson 2017; Spice 2018). These works, I suggest, are an expansion of what I recognize as Indigenous counter-infrastructures and are powerful documents in and of themselves and in their counter-public networks of circulation.

Anthropologist Brian Larkin makes the case for infrastructure as crucial sites of analysis; he defines

 https://doi.org/10.1086/728981

infrastructure as the "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space . . . that enable the movement of other matter . . . they are things and also the relations between things" (Larkin 2013: 328–29). The "matter" and "things" that Larkin highlights are not the plants and animals necessary for Indigenous worlds but rather are commodities and resources that are regulated and moved through infrastructures (Spice 2018). By contrast, Tlingit scholar Anne Spice points to critical Indigenous infrastructures as "a set of relations and things between relations. These are relations that require caretaking, which Indigenous peoples are accountable to. And they are relations that are built through the agency of not only humans but also other-than-human kin" (Spice 2018: 42).

Spice's work explores blockades of oil and gas pipelines of the Wet'suwet'en people in Unist'ot'en *yintah* (territory) in Northern British Columbia. Her term "critical Indigenous infrastructures" highlights the difference between what is defined as critical for Indigenous peoples as opposed to the Canadian state (Spice 2018). While critical Indigenous infrastructures are relational and not necessarily material, we can also look to the adoption of counter-infrastructures: "those that people develop and/or repurpose to avoid, resist, or subvert structures of power and authority" (Stewart, Gokee, and De León 2021: 469). Scholars Muna Dajani and Michael Mason further explain that "[c]ounter-infrastructure combines material and symbolic resources to advance a space of autonomous action" (Dajani and Mason 2018: 138). The films I discuss here both chronicle and extend such Indigenous counter-infrastructures, maintaining critical Indigenous infrastructures threatened by invasive pipelines, land grabs, and treaty violations (Stewart, Gokee, and De León 2021).

You Are on Indian Land was the first project of the National Film Board of Canada's (NFBC) short-lived but significant Indian Film Crew, launched with the creation of that film documenting a 1968 Mohawk protest. That action resulted in a blockade across the Cornwall-Massena International Bridge connecting the United States with Canada, running through the *Ahkwesáhsne/St. Regis Reserve* on Cornwall Island (see Figure 1). In anticipation of their action, Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell, a Mohawk leader, preemptively contacted George Stoney, American activist documentary filmmaker and director of the recently launched NFBC Challenge for Change program in nearby Montréal. Stoney was quickly able to put together a film crew in time for the planned action (Waugh, Baker, and Winton 2010). Mitchell understood the power of having sympathetic media present for the protest; he was expecting hostile Canadian authorities when meeting the blockade. The protest was catalyzed by a duty-tax that Mohawks were being forced to pay when they crossed between the United States and Canada, despite the 1794 Jay Treaty that guaranteed they would not have to pay such fees. The presence of the Challenge for Change camera crew helped diminish violence between protesters and police during the protest at the bridge. But Mitchell also wanted the events recorded from the community's point of view, establishing a counternarrative to the reports of Indigenous violence during the blockade. While news reports recorded the blockade as an isolated event, the film established this action as an ongoing response to the neglect of Mohawk treaty rights over two hundred years. Community member Ernie Benedict made this point clear after the blockade: "The TV coverage said, 'Here are people acting violently' and the film said, 'Yeah, there was some violence, and there was a direct confrontation, and here are the reasons for it, and here is how the people reacted that were involved in it'" (quoted in Moore 1987: 145).

Film scholar Michelle Stewart's work in the NFBC archives shows the anxieties generated when the 36-minute black-and-white film, *You Are on Indian Land*, was put into circulation. In the words of one critic, "It is perfectly clear that if Indians across Canada were to see it they would have much more confidence in their own ability to act instead of just sitting around and rotting" (quoted in M. Stewart 2007: 63). Those fears were in fact realized, as Stewart points out, when Akwesasne Mohawk Tom Porter, who was arrested during the blockade, toured with the film as part of the North American Unity Caravan (Stewart 2007). This was an Iroquois effort to unite Native Nations by traveling around the United States, promoting sovereignty, showcasing cultural practices, and holding meetings at educational institutions (Lawson 1969). Notably, *You Are on Indian Land* was screened for the Indians of All Tribes group occupying Alcatraz Island at the time (M. Stewart 2007). While Mitchell was able to harness the infrastructure of the emerging Challenge for Change program to provide immediate assistance in documenting the blockade, Porter moved the film beyond the established reach of the NFBC into an Indigenous network, an Indigenous counter-infrastructure emerging in the Red Power movement formed in 1968, enabling the work to quickly

Figure 1: Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell places notice on a car at a blockade. Film still from You Are on Indian Land.

circulate across the United States, helping mobilize a new wave of First Nations activism.

Just over twenty years later, the Mohawk community came clearly into focus again during the 1990 Oka Crisis, as represented by the epic feature documentary by Alanis Obomsawin, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. Led by the Mohawks of Kanehsatake and joined by kin from across the region, the standoff with the Sûreté du Québec (SQ), the Quebec police force, and the Canadian army at Oka near Montréal lasted seventy-eight days. The state actions mobilized the communities in joint solidarity to fight the expansion of a golf course and luxury housing development that would destroy the Pines, land which the neighboring Kanehsatake had long held as part of their traditional hunting and burial grounds, their land claims to British authorities dating back to 1781. These were originally part of a 1717 agreement with Seminary of St. Sulpice (Lackenbauer 2014: 169), demonstrating the 270 years of resistance and formally recognized connection to the area.

When she first heard word of the events unfolding in Oka, Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin—who had been working at the NFBC since 1971—immediately ceased production of a scheduled project, bringing a small NFBC film crew with her to document the actions of the Mohawk Warrior Society in the first few days of the occupation through to the resolution almost three months later (Lewis 2006). With so much footage recorded during the time spent with the Mohawk activists, the resulting film, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, even at 119 minutes could not contain the numerous events which took place. Obomsawin completed another three films on the Oka crisis in the following years with *My Name is Kahentiiosta* (1995), *Spudwrench: Kahnawake Man* (1997), and *Rocks at Whiskey Trench*(2000).

At almost two hours, *Kanehsatake* provides space for the Indigenous voices of the filmmaker and those directly involved in the events to be center; at the time of crisis, there was no platform to explain the intricacies

of Mohawk history. During the siege at Oka, the Canadian military attempted to regulate the discursive scope of media coverage by controlling access and restricting journalists' movements. Through strategic repetition of messages like the need to "uphold the rule of law," the formal representation of Oka by the Ministry of Justice sought to separate issues of Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and criticisms of the Indian Act from the events taking place at Oka. They also suggested that the warriors' actions were inconsistent with the whole Mohawk community's desires (Williamson 1999). These tactics sought to erase the broader concerns of Indigenous communities as they erupted onto the national stage. *Kanehsatake* skillfully portrays how the blockades and reoccupations assert an Indigenous identity intimately tied to place, as these actions disrupt imposed boundaries constructed by settler-colonial space and law.

In *Kanehsatake*, we see the imbalance of power through dominant media coverage of the events, but also with the excessive military response that is constantly questioned in the film. Why the need for tanks, Chinook helicopters, roadblocks, and the restriction of movement for a relatively few Mohawk warriors defending their land? As one warrior explains to Obomsawin during an interview in the film,

> Maybe this is the decade that roadblocks are going to be throughout Canada because people are fed up and the only thing that the governments understand is right here [motions to assault rifle]. Fish is dying, the air is dying, the plants are dying, the animals are dying. We're not too far behind them as the Mohawk Nation. (*Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* 0:51:23). (See Figure 2.)

Prior to this interview, we hear from residents, both Native and non-Native, who were harassed, beaten, and arrested at the roadblocks formed by the army and the SQ. Immediately following the interview, we see the assault on the Kahnawake convoy fleeing their reservation; this disturbing visual imagery is used again in *Rocks at Whiskey Trench* (see Figure 3).

We then learn an agreement has been made to reopen the bridge and the blockade on the Mercier bridge

Figure 2: Alanis Obomsawin interviews a Mohawk warrior. Film still from Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance.

Figure 3: Convoy of cars from Kahnawake residents attacked with rocks. Film still from Rocks at Whiskey Trench.

is being taken down. We begin to understand the complexity in the warrior's words: roadblocks and blockades may be seen more frequently in the future as they are a tactic by both the Canadian authorities and First Nations, though with different objectives. The first uses them to police and coerce, and the other as an embodied and material form of Indigenous sovereignty constructed to obstruct the exercise of overwhelming State power and interrupt the flow of capital leaving Indigenous territories (Coulthard 2014) (see Figure 4). However, we also hear the warriors articulate the implicit connection between the threatened fish, air, plants and animals and the loss of the Mohawk Nation. Their comments echo Spice's argument for the network of relations between nonhuman kin and Indigenous people as the critical Indigenous infrastructure necessary for First Nations' lifeways to survive.

Rocks at Whiskey Trench brings the fifty-five-day Mercier bridge blockade into full view and the resulting Québécois violent backlash against the Mohawk residents for their allied actions in halting traffic between the Kahnawake reservation and Montréal. Much like *Kanehsatake*, this film, completed ten years after the events at Oka, brings together the personal narratives and reflections of the people who lived them. We hear firsthand from residents of Kahnawake of the threats and abuse they endured throughout the blockade and the assaults they experienced during the evacuation of elders, women, and children from Kahnawake when a military siege of the reservation seemed imminent. These films provide a model for Seneca scholar Michelle Raheja's concept of visual sovereignty "as a way of reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass media, but that do not rely solely on the texts and contexts of Western jurisprudence" (2007: 1163). American studies scholar Randolph Lewis also argues persuasively, in his biography of Obomsawin, that her work is a cinema of sovereignty, created through an "indigenous sovereign gaze, a practice of looking that

Figure 4: Mohawk warriors' blockade. Film still from Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance.

comes out of Native experience" providing a "language of equals, assuming a "nation-to-nation" relationship between historically unequal parties" (Lewis 2006: 182).

In Sky Hopinka's 2017 short experimental documentary, *Dislocation Blues*, filmed during the 2016–2017 Standing Rock/Dakota Access Pipeline protest camps in North Dakota, we see how the State responds to Indigenous blockades interrupting the extraction and flow of natural resources. Hopinka's film, which embraces an ethnopoetic form associated with his work more generally, does not focus on State violence, thus disrupting the expectations of the public. He refuses to acquiesce to what Audra Simpson (Mohawk) understands as, "'What should be' in the history of ethnographic film." She contends that "[the] settler public, a viewing public . . . wants certain things, certain narratives, certain optics, and the 'why' of this cultural difference satisfyingly accounted for" (A. Simpson 2018: 60). What we see instead in Hopinka's film is the process of building an "infrastructure of Indigenous resistance and caretaking of relations" (Estes 2019: 58) in the NODAPL camps. Hopinka's film does not trace a vivid history of colonial power as Obomsawin's work does and moves away from depicting any direct confrontations with authority, as we witness in the films by both Mitchell and Obomsawin. Instead, Hopinka opens with a Skype interview after the protest with his friend Cleo Kehana, who recalls their gender anxiety around traditional roles and body image until the Two-Spirit camp took them in. Kehana's thoughts later move into broader epistemological questioning, important for understanding the construction of documentary and ethnographic film, explaining,

> No one person is the authority on this because some events have been written down and shared and made their way into the collective consciousness and they're just not like, accurate . . . [and later in the film stating] . . . no one person is the authority on anything. It's a story that has to be told by everyone, by multiple people. (*Dislocation Blues* 08:43 and 13:38)

Hopinka's editing process favors fragmented glimpses of camp life, refusing to provide a unified image that

could be misconstrued as authoritative. A group of men leading a drum circle ceremony, large groups of people listening to speakers we cannot hear, and marches along the threatened Missouri River are woven together (see Figure 5). At one point, Terry Running Wild, the second activist featured in the film, relates that he is going to Oglala to sweat later that evening; these seemingly mundane moments of community-building hold our attention during the seventeen minutes of thoughtful reflection the film offers.

Through the work of Alanis Obomsawin, Mike Mitchell, and Sky Hopinka, we can trace Indigenous documentary filmmaking about blockades, works that also demonstrate the shifts in First Nations self-representation over fifty years as part of an evolving "cinema of sovereignty." Obomsawin's *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* is exemplary as a work of visual sovereignty as it celebrates its thirty-year anniversary. Mitchell's *You Are on Indian Land* is a predecessor of Obomsawin's films, receiving support, documentation, and editorial control over representation of the Mohawk blockade of the Cornwall-Massena International Bridge. The film offers an opportunity for the expression of an underrecognized account, explaining the grievances of the community, a defensive counternarrative to negative press, and a device for dialogue with State authorities. Hopinka's film on the Standing Rock protests offers a glimpse of contemporary portrayals of Indigenous resistance, self-aware and cautious of mechanisms of authority in documentary modes, offering a polyphonic range of Indigenous voices. *Dislocation Blues* carefully constructs a fluid, less concrete rendering of the NODAPL camps, defying viewers' expectations. In these films, we see what Kim Anderson (Cree/Métis) outlines as the "foundations to resistance" for being Indigenous, "strong families, grounding in community, connection to land, language, storytelling and spirituality" (quoted in Alfred and Corntassel 2005: 608). Blockades form a unifying element in the resistance to "the expansion and reproduction of settler colonial systems of value [that] are literally, physically, enabled by infrastructure" (LaDuke and Cowen 2020: 264). These actions in turn, build new kinds of Indigenous counter-infrastructures and a theory and method for Indigenous resistance through expressions of relationality, reciprocity, and responsibility (Gilio-Whitaker 2019: 13). Together, these works show the creation and sustainability

Figure 5: March along the Missouri River. Still with permission from Dislocation Blues.

of relationality during these historically urgent struggles fighting settler-colonial authority and making the case, once again, for Indigenous sovereignty.

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