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SOVEREIGN SCREENS

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SOVEREIGN SCREENS



ABORIGINAL MEDIA on the CANADIAN WEST COAST

KRISTIN L. DOWELL

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Set in Charis by Laura Wellington.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

For Vancouver's Aboriginal filmmakers who so generously shared their time, creativity, and spirit with me on this project.

And for my family, for everything.

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xix
List of Abbreviations	xxvii
Introduction: Vancouver's Aboriginal Media World	1
1. The Indigenous Media Arts Group	21
2. Canadian Cultural Policy and Aboriginal Media	50
3. Aboriginal Diversity On-Screen	76
4. Building Community Off-Screen	106
5. Cultural Protocol in Aboriginal Media	134
6. Visual Sovereignty in Aboriginal Experimental Media	154
Epilogue	173
Appendix: Filmmakers and Films	187
Notes	201
References	237
Index	253

Illustrations

1. Vancouver, British Columbia, skyline 5
2. Cease Wyss at a community garden in Vancouver 15
3. Kevin Lee Burton and Larry Grant 17
4. IMAG office staff prepare for the
IMAGeNation Film Festival 25
5. IMAG promotional brochure, 2004 28
6. The building where the IMAG office was
located from 1998 to 2004 31
7. Vera Wabegijig editing at IMAG 33
8. Aboriginal Friendship Centre, Vancouver, 2004 36
9. Opening night of the 2004 IMAGeNation
Aboriginal Film and Video Festival 45
10. APTN logo 80
11. Still from *Suckerfish* (2004) 97
12. Lisa Jackson in *Suckerfish* (2004) 99
13. Photo from the set of *Savage* (2009) 113
14. Vicky Bob and her son, Duane Gastant' Aucoin 114
15. Vera Wabegijig and her daughter, Storm
Standing on the Road 121
16. Cleo Reece and author at the IMAG office 124

17. grunt gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia 139
18. Still from *I Want to Know Why* (1994) 142
19. Production crew on set of *?E?Anx: The Cave* (2009) 155
20. Still from *Nikamowin (Song)* (2007) 159
21. Split screen film still from *Nikamowin (Song)* (2007) 163
22. Still from *?E?Anx: The Cave* (2009) 165
23. Spirit World woman film still from
?E?Anx: The Cave (2009) 169

MAP

First Nations reserves in Vancouver 7

Preface

AN “IMAGE” NATION—VANCOUVER,
COAST SALISH TERRITORY, 2004

One bright spring morning, I sit with Cleo Reece (Cree), filmmaker, activist, mother, grandmother, and Indigenous Media Arts Group (IMAG) founding member, sharing coffee at the bakery around the corner from the IMAG office. Our conversation meanders from talking about her filmmaking career to her long involvement in Aboriginal¹ activism to the latest update on her grandchildren. The IMAGenation Aboriginal Film and Video Festival finished a few weeks ago, and our conversation turns to the festival.

“How did you come up with the name *IMAGenation* for the festival?” I ask, remarking, “That’s a very powerful name.”

Cleo responds, “Well, we wanted to do something about our image. So we came up with ‘Image Nation’ because we call ourselves nations rather than tribes. The image is what’s important because that’s what video is.”

Cleo leans in close, our hands on our coffee mugs almost touching in the cramped space at the small table. Softly, but forcefully, she declares, “That’s what we’re trying to portray, our own image in our own way rather than somebody else’s take on us. We’re doing it ourselves! We’re producing our own images. And *nation* is a strong word, and we’re made up of nations. So why not an image nation?”

The emphasis that Cleo Reece placed on the capacity of Aboriginal media to express self-determination illustrates the central concept of this book—Aboriginal visual sovereignty.² As an ethnographer I was profoundly struck by this idea of an “image nation,” and throughout my fieldwork I was interested in the ways in which a discourse of “reclaiming the screen” (Ginsburg 2002) was a significant aspect of the narratives of the Aboriginal filmmakers, artists, and activists with whom I worked in Vancouver.³ *Sovereign Screens* explores the idea of Aboriginal visual sovereignty by examining the role of media production in shaping community practices and cultural identity among intertribal, urban Aboriginal filmmakers in Vancouver, Coast Salish territory, British Columbia. I use the frame of Aboriginal visual sovereignty to address the ways in which Aboriginal media makers seek to “decolonize the screen” (Columpar 2010; Singer 2001; Raheja 2011) as I analyze aspects of on-screen Aboriginal media aesthetics. However, as an anthropologist of media I focus on the off-screen, behind-the-scenes, social processes of Aboriginal media production. In this book I argue that Aboriginal media production simultaneously alters the visual landscape of Canadian media by representing Aboriginal stories on-screen and serves as a vital off-screen practice through which new forms of Aboriginal sociality and community are created and negotiated. In other words Aboriginal media are more than merely expressive of Aboriginal narratives and cultural traditions; they are also constitutive of Aboriginal social relationships.

Canada has been at the forefront of the global indigenous media movement through its pioneering legacy of state support for indigenous media production for over forty years. From the 1969 Challenge for Change Program of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) to the 1999 launch of the groundbreaking Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), the Canadian government, in response to pressure from Aboriginal activists, has offered support for Aboriginal filmmakers through institutional

funds, training programs, and access to media resources. This longevity of state support has helped to sustain a vibrant, diverse, and multigenerational group of Aboriginal filmmakers.

Vancouver is home to an Aboriginal media world that has made numerous contributions to the field of Aboriginal media production in Canada and to the global indigenous media movement. Vancouver is an incredibly productive center for the production, distribution, and circulation of Aboriginal media. There are dozens of individuals working in various capacities in the media industry, several Aboriginal-owned production companies, Canada's premier Aboriginal media training program (Capilano University Indigenous Independent Digital Filmmaking Program), an APTN production office, several APTN television shows in production each season, a National Film Board of Canada office, and artist-run centers (grunt gallery, Video In/Video Out [VIVO], and the Western Front)—all contributing to a vibrant Aboriginal media world.

As a visual anthropologist I have had the privilege to work in this dynamic, cutting-edge media world where Aboriginal media makers create innovative media works ranging from documentaries and community media to television shows and feature films to experimental video and new media. These media makers interrogate colonial histories, articulate Aboriginal narratives, and reclaim the screen for purposes of cultural documentation, language preservation, and inventive digital storytelling. Through the stories and voices of the Vancouver filmmakers with whom I have worked, I aim to give the reader an on-the-ground ethnographic sense of the challenges and accomplishments of these filmmakers who actively invest media technology with Aboriginal cultural protocols, stories, and aesthetics, creating new cinematic visions in the process.

Researching Aboriginal Media in Vancouver

I became interested in Vancouver's Aboriginal media world after working as an intern in the Smithsonian's National Museum of

the American Indian Film and Video Center while a graduate student in 2000.⁴ As an intern I assisted with the cataloguing of videotape festival submissions for the 2000 Native American Film and Video Festival. While viewing these submissions, I noticed that there were a large number from Canada, a significant portion of which were submitted from Vancouver in a wide range of genres. Filmmakers in Vancouver were not just making documentaries but appeared just as likely to be creating experimental video, feature films, and short narrative films. I was intrigued by the creative output of Aboriginal filmmakers in Vancouver, and I was curious about how Vancouver became a center for Aboriginal media in Canada.

After several short “pre-fieldwork” visits to Vancouver in 2002, I learned that Vancouver was home to IMAGeNation—an annual Aboriginal Film and Video Festival—three Aboriginal media training programs, a National Film Board of Canada office, art galleries exhibiting contemporary Aboriginal art, and a nonprofit Aboriginal media resource center named the Indigenous Media Arts Group. There is an infrastructure in place for the production, exhibition, distribution, and reception of Aboriginal media in Vancouver. IMAG was a key site in this infrastructure, and it was at IMAG where I found a home base in Vancouver as a volunteer while getting to know many people in Vancouver’s Aboriginal media world.

During thirteen months of fieldwork between August 2003 and September 2004, I conducted research primarily at the Indigenous Media Arts Group, the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and the National Film Board of Canada. I worked most closely with IMAG and spent most days during the week hanging out at the IMAG office helping out in any way that I could. I lived in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood, a residential neighborhood with a sizeable percentage of Aboriginal artists and filmmakers as well as being home to many artist-run centers, including IMAG, the grunt gallery, and the Western Front. While working as a

volunteer at IMAG, I organized their video library into a computer database, assisted students with editing their videos, made VHS dubs of videos for filmmakers to submit to film festivals, helped to organize fundraising events, assisted with publicity for IMAG screenings, and attended IMAG staff meetings.⁵ During the 2004 IMAGeNation Aboriginal Film and Video Festival hosted by IMAG, I served on the programming committee and helped in the organization of the film festival as well as doing numerous behind-the-scenes tasks to keep the festival running smoothly.⁶ My deep engagement with the activities of the IMAG office provides the material for chapter 1, which conveys an ethnographic portrait of daily life in this lively grassroots media organization.

Having access to the daily office activities at IMAG was invaluable because I learned firsthand the ways in which it served as a community center and a focal point for Aboriginal filmmakers in Vancouver. Numerous filmmakers, artists, and community members stopped by the IMAG office, and it was during countless hours of participant-observation through “hanging out” at IMAG that I came to know key members of Vancouver’s Aboriginal media world. My relationships with filmmakers established through IMAG, particularly those with the film festival staff, became strong friendships, and I spent many hours with filmmakers in their homes sharing meals, helping to care for their children, attending family nights at the Friendship Centre, attending art openings at the grunt gallery, and sharing many conversations over endless cups of coffee. These friendships enabled me to see the ways in which the networks mobilized for media production were deeply embedded in the social fabric of the Aboriginal community in Vancouver, as explored in depth in chapter 4. In attending Aboriginal hip-hop events, activist gatherings, Redwire Native Youth Media events, powwows, poetry readings, Aboriginal performance art events, art exhibits, and music performances, I was able to see the ways in which Aboriginal media production is connected to a distinctive world

of Aboriginal cultural and artistic production in Vancouver, as discussed extensively in chapters 5 and 6.

In addition to participant observation carried out in the IMAG office and at numerous sites of Aboriginal media production and exhibition in Vancouver, I have conducted in-depth audio-recorded interviews with Aboriginal filmmakers from a range of generations, tribal backgrounds, and levels of experience in the media industry.⁷ I saw at least three generations of Aboriginal filmmakers working in Vancouver. I returned twice to Vancouver in 2005 and conducted additional interviews during my summer 2009 fieldwork stint: some of these were follow-up interviews, and several were interviews with new participants to my project. These interviews form the basis of chapter 3, which examines the impact of APTN and the representation of Aboriginal diversity on-screen within Aboriginal media.

During fieldwork I also conducted archival research at the National Film Board of Canada's headquarters in Montreal. This archival research provided much of the data for chapter 2 about Canadian cultural policy and NFB initiatives supporting Aboriginal filmmakers throughout the last forty years. Additionally, I had access to the archives at the grunt gallery, where I obtained documentation about every Aboriginal art exhibit and performance art event curated at the grunt gallery since it changed its mandate to include contemporary First Nations art in the early 1990s. The archival material from the NFB and grunt gallery along with filmmaker interviews, participation in screenings, oral histories with "older generation" filmmakers, and documentation of local Aboriginal community events provided a framework for understanding the emergence of Vancouver as a center for Aboriginal media production as well as the ways in which this world is embedded in the urban Aboriginal community and larger arts world in Vancouver.

IMAG officially disbanded in 2007 and now no longer exists as an active organization. However, that does not diminish its legacy or the tremendous impact it made while it was active

in Vancouver. While in operation IMAG screened over 450 Aboriginal and international indigenous films and videos at eight IMAGeNation Aboriginal Film and Video Festivals. IMAG trained dozens of Aboriginal youth and adults in their beginning and advanced media training programs and hosted numerous workshops on Aboriginal media. They honored key figures in Canadian Aboriginal media industry, including Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki), Shirley Cheechoo (Cree), Loretta Todd (Cree/Métis), and Dana Claxton (Hunkpapa Lakota),⁸ and offered video equipment and editing facilities for local Aboriginal filmmakers while participating in activist events and collaborating on Aboriginal art exhibits with various artist-run centers. There is no doubt that IMAG and its dedicated board members, staff, and volunteers made a lasting difference in raising visibility for Aboriginal media in Vancouver.

This book is, in part, an homage to the significant impact a grassroots community media organization such as IMAG can have on Aboriginal media production and on the cultural and community needs of Vancouver's urban Aboriginal community. As an anthropologist I found it disconcerting to see a key organization with which I have worked dissolve. After all, despite the postmodern turn in anthropology and the deconstruction of the culture concept whereby anthropologists have rejected the notion of culture as static, timeless, and bounded in a turn toward highlighting change, heterogeneity, tension, and disagreement (Abu-Lughod 1991), change can still be unsettling, both for the anthropologist and for the people with whom anthropologists work. But the reality is that cultures do change, people move on, and organizations disband for a whole host of reasons. Change and flux are particularly characteristic of grassroots indigenous media and arts organizations where there are limited resources, unstable funding and a heavy reliance on a few key individuals who put in long hours often with little compensation and with the risk of burnout. The dissolution of IMAG should not be seen as a failure, but instead as an indicator of the shorter lifespan

of some arts organizations that nonetheless make a significant impact while in existence.⁹ That IMAG no longer exists does not mean that Aboriginal media production has ceased in Vancouver. On the contrary, as discussed in the epilogue, there are new and inventive ways in which Aboriginal filmmakers continue to make media on the Canadian West Coast.

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This book has been many years in the making and represents the culmination of a long journey to get here. There are many people to thank. I extend my deepest gratitude to all the filmmakers with whom I worked in Vancouver. It is a tremendous honor for me to be able to work within Vancouver's Aboriginal media world. I thank you all for your encouragement and friendship throughout the research process. Your dedication to telling Aboriginal stories and commitment to using this technology to build community remain an inspiration.

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will be donated to the Vancouver Indigenous Media Arts Festival (VIMAF) as long as that organization is in existence. In the event that VIMAF is not viable in the future, then I will donate the proceeds to another organization that supports Aboriginal media production in Vancouver.

This book has been influenced by those thanked here as well as others; however, any inaccuracies or misinterpretations in the book are, as always, solely my own.

Abbreviations

AFP	Aboriginal Filmmaking Program
AFTP	Aboriginal Film and Television Program (Capilano College)
AIM	American Indian Movement
APTN	Aboriginal Peoples Television Network
BBM	Bureau of Broadcast Management
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CFDC	Canadian Film Development Corporation
CGMPB	Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau
CRTC	Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
CTV	Canadian Television
CYC	Company of Young Canadians
DIA	Department of Indian Affairs
DTES	Downtown Eastside
FNAP	First Nations Access Program
IFC	Indian Film Crew
IFTP	Indian Film Training Program
IIDFP	Independent Indigenous Digital Filmmaking Program (Capilano)

	University—formerly Capilano College)
IMAG	Indigenous Media Arts Group
INAC	Department of Indian and Northern Affairs
KAYA	Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Advocates
MOA	Museum of Anthropology (University of British Columbia)
NARP	Native Alliance for Red Power
NFB	National Film Board of Canada
NMAI	National Museum of the American Indian
PANE	Protest Alliance Against Native Extermination
SAR	School of Advanced Research
SFU	Simon Fraser University
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UBC	University of British Columbia
UBCIC	Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs
UNYA	Urban Native Youth Association
VIMAF	Vancouver Indigenous Media Arts Festival
VIVO	Video In/Video Out