

Indigenous Women: Finding Sovereignty in Cinema in *Kuessipan*

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Abstract: Indigenous film is an up-and-coming genre, and indigenous women are making important contributions to it. This essay analyzes the 2019 film *Kuessipan* by Canadian filmmaker Myriam Verreault and Innu co-writer Naomi Fontaine and discusses the history of indigenous female representation in film. This essay also explains the concept of representation through polyphony (multivocality), which encourages viewers of this film to feel empathy for Native women. Using a humanist lens, this essay explores the depth of *Kuessipan*'s female protagonists and explains how the film could serve as a catalyst for change in the real world.

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Mikuan Vollant, the protagonist of *Kuessipan*, says in the film, “Pride is something you build. To stand up straight, you must believe in your legitimacy.” *Kuessipan* is a 2019 film by Québécoise director Myriam Verreault and Innu co-writer Naomi Fontaine. The film portrays two female protagonists, Mikuan and Shaniss, learning to have pride in their culture and femininity as Native women. While specifically celebrating Innu women, the film also speaks to a wider audience by appealing to the universal emotions of love, friendship, and loss. *Kuessipan* creates an intersection between indigenous cinema and cinema created by women from a female perspective (see Beadling, Medak-Salzman, Storfjell). While Native women have historically been portrayed as two-dimensional, *Kuessipan*’s exploration of the character Mikuan’s reactions to her difficult experiences adds a more complex female representation to indigenous cinema. While a well-established critical conversation about indigenous representation in film exists, there is limited discussion among scholars about Native women’s *involvement* in filmmaking. Such involvement is essential to the effort of challenging hegemonic representations of Native women in film.

This essay will summarize the critical conversations surrounding indigenous film, as well as define the concepts of visual sovereignty and polyphony. It will also discuss how women have been represented in indigenous media, both historically and recently, and provide a close reading of *Kuessipan* that examines how the filmmakers resisted hegemonic representations of women by creating deeply human protagonists and elevating their diverse voices. As a Native woman herself, Fontaine’s contributions to the story are especially meaningful. *Kuessipan*’s female protagonists speak up to share their unique life perspectives, empowering Native women everywhere to raise their voices and tell their own stories.

Indigenous Representation and Native Voices

Misrepresentation of Native women in film has its roots in the general cinematic misrepresentation of indigenous groups at large. Indigenous characters in film have often been flat and underdeveloped, usually functioning as dehumanized antagonists or “noble savages,” likely because they were written by filmmakers who did not belong to their culture (Stoddard et al. 9). While this problem is especially apparent in older movies, such as Westerns made in the U.S., misrepresentation of indigenous peoples in film has persisted into the present day (Young). In response to the continued misrepresentation of their people, many indigenous filmmakers are pushing back by creating films with stronger characters, striving to accurately portray indigenous customs. Whereas indigenous history and customs are often taught in the context of historical Western expansion (Young 9), film has the potential to demonstrate how the customs and cultures of indigenous groups persist and thrive in a modern context. Allowing indigenous filmmakers to direct these films gives them sovereignty over the creation of their own image.

While most people are familiar with indigenous peoples’ battle for political sovereignty, they may be unfamiliar with the term *visual sovereignty*, commonly used in film studies to describe a group’s control over their filmic representation. Kristin L. Dowell defines Aboriginal visual sovereignty as “the articulation of Aboriginal peoples’ distinctive cultural traditions, political status, and collective identities through aesthetic and cinematic means” (Dowell 2). Once indigenous people are allowed to tell their own stories through film, they will be able to dismantle false narratives about their peoples and cultures. In recent years, Aboriginal filmmakers have increasingly created media that is distinctly Aboriginal in terms of technique and narrative (Hearne, Dowell). Such an act of cultural autonomy places power into the hands of

Native peoples and allows them to push back against the hegemonic representations that have silenced their voices. Aboriginal visual sovereignty does more than correct a history told from the victors' perspective; it also gives Native individuals an opportunity to exercise self-determination by including accurate Aboriginal representations and putting Aboriginal filmmakers behind the camera (Dowell 19). Similarly, film and media production gives indigenous artists an opportunity to magnify their peoples' voices. In the film *Kuessipan*, main characters, Mikuan and Shaniss, are intentionally given space and time on screen to demonstrate their contribution to the world. This use of visual sovereignty reveals the way indigenous women actively create art and solve problems.

The concept of visual sovereignty concerning indigenous representation is thoroughly discussed by scholars (Dowell, Estrada, Santoro), and plays an important part in elevating diverse voices. In 1994, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam published a foundational article on postcolonial studies entitled "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle Over Representation." In this article, they define the term stereotype and discuss both negative and positive image studies. Most scholars who have studied hegemonic representations of underrepresented groups in film have focused on the way that the image reveals hierarchical power relations between the dominant group and the group being misrepresented. However, Shohat and Stam posit, "A more nuanced discussion of race and ethnicity in the cinema would emphasize less a one-to-one mimetic adequacy to sociological or historical truth than the interplay of voices, discourses, and perspectives" (Shohat and Stam 214). Therefore, mimesis and correcting historical wrongs, while important to image studies, are less important to the voice/sound approach than allowing voices to be heard with their "full force" without apologizing for cultural differences (Shohat and Stam 215). Shohat and Stam refer to this multivocality as "polyphony," and claim that this approach to

representation studies would “cultivate and even heighten cultural difference while abolishing socially-generated inequalities” (Shohat and Stam 215). While image studies and visual sovereignty are key to understanding indigenous representation, polyphony is a lesser-known aspect of representation studies that should be applied when analyzing films made by Native women because of their efforts to amplify and diversify Native female voices in film.

Historically, both women and Native Americans have been silenced and flattened as on-screen characters, and Native women have been disadvantaged on both counts. For instance, Indigenous women have often been stereotyped in North American film as Indian princesses, such as Pocohontas, who “decides to stray from her family to assist the heroic Europeans in their civilizing project” (“Indigenous Representation in Film”) and “sexualized squaws” (Beadling 133). Rather than portraying accurate indigenous female voices in film, these stereotypes “manifest white directors’ and audience’s fears and desires” (Beadling 133). In other words, voices within the film, even in the subtext, express desires to control or exploit Native women, who may seem mysterious and foreign to these dominant groups; instead of being unique, autonomous individuals, these synthetic female characters are manifestations of hegemonic anxieties. Though recent scholarly attention has focused on correcting hegemonic representations of Indigenous peoples and their general customs, greater effort is necessary to explore films by indigenous female filmmakers which diversify female representation in indigenous cinema. Recent films, such as Tracey Deer’s *Beans*, Elle-Máíja Tailfeathers’s and Kathleen Hepburn’s *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open*, and Verreault and Fontaine’s *Kuessipan* explore indigenous female experiences and call attention to the real dangers and challenges they constantly face. *Kuessipan* powerfully pulls indigenous women to the forefront and gives their voices dominion over the images on the screen. By combining Fontaine's unique perspective as

an Innu woman with Verreault's filmic vision as a female director, these filmmakers give Native women unprecedented visual sovereignty over the screen and allow their voices to be heard.

***Kuessipan* in the Canadian Indigenous Mediascape**

The aforementioned films by Deer, Máijá-Tailfeathers, Hepburn, Verreault, and Fontaine are all Canadian-Indigenous films released in either 2019 or 2020. Indigenous (also known as Aboriginal) media is an up-and-coming genre in the Canadian mediascape. In a report on Canadian-Indigenous feature films, researchers Danis Goulet and Kerry Swanson found that, while Aboriginal cinema in Canada is generally considered one of the “pillars” of indigenous film worldwide, the growing recognition of Aboriginal filmmakers’ success has yet to be translated into sustained production of feature films (Goulet and Swanson 2). Most of the indigenous films produced in Canada are documentaries, so films like *Kuessipan* that tell fictionalized indigenous stories are relatively rare. These films, in an attempt to honestly represent indigenous lives, are bridging a gap between documentary and dramatic feature films. By casting nonprofessional actors and filming in the spaces these people inhabit, filmmakers like Verreault create realistic narratives which function like collaborative, rather than evasive, ethnographies.

Verreault’s choice to train nonprofessional Innu actors for *Kuessipan* allows the newly trained actors to infuse their performances with a background of lived experience. Verreault said in an interview that she didn’t want to cast trained actors who were not Innu because the film and the story should ultimately belong to the Innu people (Verreault). This collaboration contributed to the success of the film for both European-Canadian and Innu audiences. At the premiere, there were equal numbers of Innu and Quebecers in the theater. While the Innu understood more of the jokes and cultural references, both the Quebecers and the Innu cried at the same points in the

film because the emotions were universal (Verreault). Collaboration between the filmmakers and the cast also allowed for a meaningful connection between the audience, despite the viewers' cultural differences.

To better engage diverse audiences, this film blends traditional Hollywood narrative conventions with Native storytelling structures. The story focuses on experiences unique to the Innu, but wider audiences can engage with messages that are broadly applicable to the human experience (see Hearne). Speaking on universality in the film, Verreault said, "We all have a childhood friendship that breaks up due to different values or life choices, but that friendship still leaves a mark on us" (Verreault). A complicated lifelong friendship is central to the plot of the film, and the universality of such a relationship augments audience identification and empathy.

Kuessipan is the story of two young women, Mikuan Vollant and Shaniss Jourdain, who live in Sept-Îles, Quebec, Canada, and whose bond of friendship stands the test of time and distance. Mikuan is intelligent, sensible, and high-achieving, with hopes of leaving the reservation to go to college. Her family is supportive and happy—although, like all families, they have their points of conflict. In contrast to Mikuan, Shaniss is a high school dropout with a baby and an abusive boyfriend. As a child, she lived with her parents until an act of domestic violence against her mother caused authorities to relocate Shaniss to live with her aunt. Though their life circumstances are different, Mikuan and Shaniss stay close until their senior year of high school when Mikuan begins dating a White Quebecer named Francis. The two primary turning points of the narrative happen first when Mikuan decides that her life goals no longer involve Shaniss or the reservation, and then later when a tragic death in Mikuan's family causes her to question those goals. Growing up, these young women witness and experience abuse, alcoholism, and death. As they approach adulthood, they must decide which parts of their culture they want to

participate in, which they want to internalize, and how they are going to seek better opportunities, either on or off the reservation. The contrasting characters of Mikuan and Shaniss provide polyphony, which demonstrates diversity within the Innu community.

Close Reading

Narratology and Character Studies: A Humanist Approach to Character in Kuessipan

Character in *Kuessipan* functions as a medium through which the filmmakers promote indigenous female sovereignty because Mikuan and Shaniss are active participants in writing and telling their own stories. Scholars of narratology approach character in a variety of ways. Some narratologists, such as A. J. Greimas and Christopher Vogler, suggest that there are always characters that fit into functional or mythological roles within a story (Brown 68). *Kuessipan*, however, does not easily fit into an archplot with subjects that are on a quest for liberty, justice, or buried treasure. The humanist approach to character, which was originally created by John Frow, is better suited to *Kuessipan*'s complicated protagonists. This type of reading interprets characters as an author's iterations of human experience and emotion, as opposed to functional aspects of a plot. In a humanist reading, characters are autonomous beings who make decisions that are motivated by their own thoughts and emotions (Brown 71). A humanist approach works well for an analysis focused on the sovereignty characters have over their stories in *Kuessipan* because it specifically highlights the characters' capacity to make and follow through on goals and to exist beyond the story world, both of which are integral to the character development of Mikuan and Shaniss. A humanist reading of the two protagonists highlights the way that Verreault and Fontaine combine their unique skills, as a filmmaker and author respectively, to create complex, dynamic female characters. By doing so, these female filmmakers suggest that indigenous women should be able to tell their own stories fearlessly in film and in life.

Autonomy

One of the key assumptions of a humanist approach to character is that the character is a mimetic individual who seems autonomous enough to move and act independently, even though the audience is well aware that the character is being controlled by the filmmaker (Brown 71, Frow 228). Autonomy is one way that Mikuan and Shaniss's characters demonstrate their sovereignty as indigenous women. When a young Mikuan finds out that Shaniss has moved to the other side of the reservation, she climbs out her bedroom window and walks many miles to arrive at Shaniss's new home. Although she was surely punished by her parents for walking so far—alone and in the dark—the film omits any consequences to her actions and only shows her determination to reunite with her friend as she trudges across the frigid landscape; she even falls down once, only to get back up, brush the dirt off her battered hands, and push forward. Mikuan continues to be an active agent in several instances throughout her young adult life, such as when she kisses Francis at the bar, when she chooses to join a creative writing club off the reservation, and when she argues with her parents about their decision to financially support her brother Metshu in college while leaving her to fend for herself.

Mikuan's autonomy is instrumental in giving her power to raise her voice; she harnesses language in voiceovers and in her creative writing to control viewers' perceptions of the images on the screen. Mikuan speaks freely, uninterrupted by dominant voices. At the end of the film, Mikuan stands on stage and tells an audience of Quebecers and Innu about how the word *freedom* does not exist in the Innu language; instead, she says that the closest Innu word to freedom would be *nutshimit* (the land). She stands on the stage in low-key lighting, looking out at the crowd and expressing to them how the concept of "nutshimit," which is not so much a place as it is the freedom of nature to exist and move on its own, is fundamentally opposed to the

limiting concept of reservations. In front of a diverse crowd of people, literally and figuratively in the dark, Mikuan redefines pride in who you are as “something you build,” which allows you to conceive of freedom even when you are told you must live a life of “limited ambition.” She reclaims her identity as something that she is building rather than something that others dictate to her. More than anything else Mikuan does in the film, her words are her key to sovereignty, and the film demonstrates this by having her speak to various audiences, both diegetic and nondiegetic.

Humanist Approach to Character: The Pursuit of Goals

While both protagonists in *Kuessipan* make and pursue goals, Mikuan and Shaniss have varying levels of success with those goals, and both learn that they are often powerless against things that are outside of their control. Along with her creative writing, Mikuan pursues a relationship with Francis, makes plans to attend university in Quebec, and eventually publishes a book. However, despite her driven nature, she discovers that no matter how much she wants to control every aspect of her life, there are certain things that are outside of her control. After her brother’s funeral, Mikuan reflects, “I just wonder, is it worth pushing yourself to do things if everything is predetermined and you can’t change anything?” Here Mikuan struggles to understand how much control she has over the outcomes of her life when so much of her life seems predetermined. This line of thought is directly related to the idea of sovereignty for indigenous peoples as so much about their life situations have historically been determined for them.

Like Mikuan, Shaniss’s ability to pursue goals is impacted by factors outside of her control. However, her goals are different from Mikuan’s, and they are often not as obvious. As a high school dropout with a child and an abusive boyfriend, Shaniss has goals that are more about

survival than pursuing a future career. Above all, Shaniss desires independence and freedom to live her life without being micromanaged by family members or friends. An example of this happens when Mikuan helps Shaniss move into a home for abuse survivors. Sitting side by side in a two shot, discussing what Shaniss will do about her abusive boyfriend, an argument escalates; Mikuan wants Shaniss to get out of the cycle of abuse to start a new life, and Shaniss wants to make her own decisions. As they argue, Shaniss stands up and moves across the small room to yell at Mikuan. As she does so, she creates a visual separation between them which implies their emotional separation. She criticizes Mikuan for changing and wanting to escape the reservation by going to college. This argument demonstrates how their goals conflict with each other and damage their friendship. This contradiction allows for polyphony in the film and diversifies the representation of indigenous women; it demonstrates that indigenous women can be different from one another and that individuals themselves can embody contradictions. This polyphony humanizes the women by emphasizing their differences and shattering the blanket stereotypes that are so often the focus of image studies.

In addition to Shaniss's desire for independence, she constantly makes decisions in an attempt to help her family members. This starts at an early age, demonstrated in the scene when Shaniss courageously asks Mikuan to help her drag her unconscious mother to her bed after an incident of domestic violence. With somber expressions, the two small girls stand above the woman in the dull green fluorescent light of the kitchen, gauging how much strength they will need in order to pull her across the floor and into her bed. This moment illustrates Shaniss's concern for the wellbeing of her mother, and even though she is dependent on Mikuan to help her, it is her own determination and deliberate actions that ultimately aid her mother.

Later, as a young adult, Shaniss must confront continued challenges as a teenage mom; Shaniss takes it upon herself to become a responsible parent, but her boyfriend Greg does little more than provide financially for his family. Early on in the film, Mikuan walks in on Shaniss arguing with Greg because he forgot to tell her that the health clinic called about the baby's vaccinations. Mikuan takes the baby from Greg, brings her closer to the camera, and the two women form a barrier between Greg and the baby as they change her diaper, bringing the audience into an intimate moment of caregiving performed by the women. With Mikuan's help, Shaniss tries earnestly to care for her daughter.

Greg is eventually arrested for participating in a brawl at a bar. He is later released on parole, which reminds him of his parental duties and prompts him to attend the clinic with Shaniss and their daughter after his release. Shaniss holds the baby on her lap while the nurse injects the vaccine, and Greg sits off to the side, only touching the child's foot. This image of Shaniss holding their baby during her doctor's visit indicates that she is the one who feels most responsible for the child's well-being. The shot that follows of Shaniss walking alone to the store, laden with the baby in one hand and various bags in the other, emphasizes her isolation as a young parent even when Greg is not in jail, as well as her determination to create and maintain a strong family despite her history.

Possessing Life Beyond the Text

Through their autonomy and goal-setting, Mikuan and Shaniss develop self-identities and live believable lives that seem to persist beyond the text; they remain "unfinished, open constructs" which expand past the confines of the storyworld (Brown 72). According to Brown, because humanist characters possess self-identities, viewers can predict the characters' future actions based on their past actions, values, and potential for growth—whether or not they take

those actions within the story (Brown 71). Because the protagonists are well established, it is logical to the viewer that, in the end, Mikuan would decide to attend college and Shaniss would want to stay with Greg and grow her family.

In the final scene, Shaniss reads from Mikuan's new book, and Mikuan's voiceover describes several challenges Shaniss has overcome, indicating that she experienced growth during the story's ellipsis and that she will continue to grow even after the story is over. Mikuan describes Shaniss as "the girl with the round belly," and says that she will be changing diapers all her life, but at age thirty she will get her first job, and at age thirty-five she will decide to finish her high school degree. She describes Shaniss's life path in the future tense, encouraging the viewer to think of her as living beyond the text. Mikuan goes on to say, "She wants only, like everyone else, to have children, a way of strengthening a race people tried so hard to destroy." Here, she emphasizes Shaniss's goal to have a family and preserve her race and culture, something she will continue to pursue after the story concludes. As she describes Shaniss's desire to have children, Mikuan seems to finally understand Shaniss's fight for independence and self-determination. By sharing this realization through her book, Mikuan invites readers to understand Shaniss in this way as well. Moreover, she invites readers to think of Shaniss as the independent woman and mother that Shaniss always wanted to be, encouraging them to imagine the positive trajectory of her life.

The concluding words of the voiceover in this final scene are brimming with a call for indigenous women to be given sovereignty over their own stories. Mikuan's words are accompanied by a close-up of Shaniss reading her own story in a bookstore. She says, "Do you see this gaze, blazing from inside? Indian women who've seen everything and are surprised they laugh so often." After a beat, Shaniss looks up from the book and breaks the fourth wall, looking

at the camera with a determined expression and a slight smile, before the image cuts to black. In this case, the gaze, a key component of feminist film theory, is turned back on the audience. Not only does this shot put the power of the gaze into Shaniss's hands, but the dialogue which refers to "Indian women" also connects her story to those of thousands of other indigenous women whose stories have yet to be told. Shaniss possesses life beyond the text because she is linked to real people, encouraging the audience to channel their identification with and empathy for her into their empathy for other "Indian women."

Conclusion and Implications

This humanist reading of the multi-layered characters in *Kuessipan* reveals the polyphony of the film, as well as the visual sovereignty it provides for the characters, because of its attention to indigenous women's voices and stories. The specificity of Mikuan and Shaniss's stories demonstrates that indigenous women don't fit into prescribed stereotypes; rather, they are humans with a rich cultural background who have unique contributions to offer to the world. Analyzing films like *Kuessipan* in terms of polyphony is important for representation studies because it connects the diverse voices in the films to the cultural diversity of real people who deserve sovereignty over their own stories.

As stated earlier, many of these films created by indigenous women call attention to the real dangers and challenges that these women face. As audiences witness women confront and overcome challenges, they may experience empathy that encourages them to learn more about the real-world situations of indigenous women. Recent statistics show that more than 80% of indigenous women have experienced violence in some form, and more than half of indigenous women have been physically abused by their partners ("Murdered"). Additionally, as of 2016, almost 6,000 indigenous women have been reported missing, and many of them are determined

to have been raped and murdered (“Murdered”). These disappearances have often been dismissed by governments or simply attributed to indigenous women’s common practice of hitchhiking (Morton); only recently have authorities started actively investigating these disappearances. Creating films which depict the effect of this violence towards indigenous women is one of the first steps in raising public awareness about this issue. While *Kuessipan* does not specifically address the disappearances and murders of indigenous women, it humanizes indigenous women in a way that speaks to diverse audiences, producing the empathy necessary for social change and political action on a larger scale. Furthermore, as female viewers watch Mikuan and Shaniss gain sovereignty over their own voices and culture, they can also build up a sense of pride in their “legitimacy” and encourage other women to do the same.

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