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# “Inhabited by a Cry”: Representations of Music, Self-Expression and Survivance in Québécois Indigenous Film

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# “Inhabited by a Cry”: Representations of Music, Self-Expression and Survivance in Québécois Indigenous Film

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## Abstract

For Indigenous youth living in Québec, music is a key tool used for self-discovery and identification. As they listen to pre-recorded albums and make their own their music, they discover what cultural markers they possess in terms of national identities, gender boundaries, sexual preference, etc. This article assesses how recent Indigenous Québécois cinema depicts this process of self-discovery in relation to national markers, through the feature film *3 histoires d'Indiens* (dir. Robert Morin, 2014) and three short films from the Wapikoni Mobile project. It contemplates how successful these characters are in using music to discover their own identities, the intercultural encounters they have as they go about this process, and crucially, how Indigenous and settler directors represent this cultural journey in differing manners. Through this analysis, this article assesses the important role that music plays in self-discovery, and why the self-representation of Indigenous voices and musicality matters.

**Keywords:** Indigenous cinema, music in film, Indigenous sovereignty, sound studies, voice, representation of Indigenous peoples

## Music in Indigenous Québec

In *Jeunesses autochtones* (2009), young political activist Mona Belleau (Inuk) points out that Indigenous youth are faced with numerous challenges, one of them being the conciliation of a life inside and outside their community in the contemporary world. While they have to participate and get educated in today's social system, they also inherit the responsibility of keeping their own culture, traditions and language alive.<sup>1</sup> They also have to live with the consequences of colonialism—and of their long lasting eradication from history—on a daily basis, which often encourages them to use tools such as art and political activism to make their voices heard.<sup>2</sup> For Indigenous youth living in Québec, music provides a sense of community amongst individuals. While traditional music-making (such as drumming) and dancing are two important elements

to learning customs within Indigenous cultures, music also possesses a crucial social dimension for these youth as it connects them with a sense of cultural identity and with others in their community circles. As music scholar Byron Dueck writes, this connection extends beyond the realm of music-making: when Indigenous youth get together to make music or share the music they are listening to, “musical and social interactions can become the material of public culture [where] [c]irculating music and discourse not only constitute imaginaries but also distinguish them from one another.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, performing and listening to music allows them to take the physical musical materials of the settler nations (such as instruments or music players) and become empowered through developing their own interpretations of this music, effectively expressing their own Indigenous cultural identity, while these social interactions play an important role in distinguishing them from settler nations. Unanga’s sociologist Eve Tuck takes this position further, adding that, through cultural avenues like music-making, Indigenous youth obtain a sense of survivance, or “an active sense of [Indigenous] presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion [they are ensuring] the continuance of stories [...] however pertinent.”<sup>4</sup> As such, music-making does not only provide Indigenous youth with a community, but also has the potential to give them a voice against a colonialist system that often works against them.

There is ample scholarly literature on how musical instruments help Indigenous youth in Québec find their voices. Yet, there is little discussion on how this process of self-discovery and survivance through music is understood in academia. To perceive this process in its various forms, it is crucial to observe how it is portrayed and represented in cinema. In Indigenous and Québécois cinema, music is becoming increasingly prevalent as a means for young Indigenous characters to discover their identities. The multitude of musical experiences that Indigenous youth encounter—i.e. making and listening to music—leads to numerous questions: how does the representation of Indigenous music appear in recent Indigenous and Québécois films? How is survivance depicted sonically in these films, if at all? This paper observes both sides of this question and offers a new perspective on two different approaches to Indigenous survivance through voice, music listening and music-making in Québec cinema. It will first study *3 histoires d’Indiens* (2014), a film directed by the non-Indigenous, Québécois filmmaker Robert Morin. This film follows an Indigenous character, Shayne, using an iPod

to express himself and pays specific attention as to how music influences Shayne's ability to reflect on his world and communicate his thoughts with others. It will then look at other examples of how music assists Indigenous youth to narrativize their own experiences and find their voices as a community through a selection of autobiographical short films from the Wapikoni Mobile. In comparing these examples, we will be able to understand the various processes of survivance through music-making that are depicted in Indigenous and Québécois films, as well as question how Indigenous voices are represented in these films.

### **3 histoires d'Indiens**

As its title suggests, *3 histoires d'Indiens* is comprised of three overlapping plots. Each follows the story of different First Nations youth as they use the cultural materials around them to locate their own cultural identity and imagine a more enticing future for themselves in their communities. The three plots are as follows: Erik wants to build a television set so he may set up a station to instruct people in his community on traditional knowledge; a group of three unnamed girls follow the stories of a book that stereotypically displays the lives of Indigenous women; and Shayne, who, after his girlfriend leaves to get a job in a town far away from him, listens to classical music to cope with his loneliness and tries to find a way forward in what has become an empty life.

The film was not solely written and directed by Morin. Its script was conceived through the assistance of the youth acting in the film, whom were recruited through Wapikoni Mobile's network of young Indigenous filmmakers.<sup>5</sup> While Morin received credit for directing and writing the final film, he nonetheless encouraged the young Indigenous actors to share their opinions. He wanted to focus on the oppression they were experiencing and represent their positions on issues that were important to them. In his review of the film, Christian Nadeau notes that this type of production design causes these three plots to be "extraordinary chronicles of ordinary life, essentially that of three people, with their faces, their eyes, their emotions and their worries. And these people talk about themselves, their loneliness, their isolation, or even friendship and love."<sup>6</sup> The aim of the film was to give Indigenous youth the opportunity to speak out about issues they deemed important and comment on how the settler cultural materials they grew up with was harmful to

them. While all three plots merit individual exploration—they each observe how different media (namely public television, digital music and teen novels) affect Indigenous identity and self-expression, this section will focus on Shayne’s arc as his reliance on music demonstrates how the appropriation of cultural materials of colonizing nations do not work for Indigenous youth. It will observe the representation of the Indigenous “voice” through underscoring how Morin, a non-Indigenous filmmaker, attempts to capture the relationship between Indigenous youth and their music while often silencing the Indigenous character whose voice he originally wanted to represent. In order to perform this study, this section will examine how music is used in key scenes of the film and will assess how Shayne attempts to use music to claim a sense of agency.

Shayne does not speak at any point in the film. He lives in a polluted Indigenous community in the province of Québec with his family and his only friend is his girlfriend. Instead of having regular dialogue with other characters, he relies on his music and iPod Nano to convey his feelings to them and to the audience. He also maintains his relationship with his girlfriend through sharing music with her. He gets so attached to his iPod as a way of understanding his environment that it becomes his way to “speak out” or claim agency over the spaces he exists within: in every scene, he indeed uses his iPod to fuel his imagination and change the landscapes of the places he sees. This form of attachment to the listening device is not rare. In his study of the iPod, sound scholar Michael Bull describes the reasons why individuals use them so regularly. He posits that musical devices offer users the ability to move “to the rhythm of their music rather [than] the rhythm of the street. In tune with their thoughts—their chosen music enables them to focus on their feelings, desires, and auditory memories.”<sup>7</sup> Bull goes on to suggest that the iPod’s mobility grants the listeners the ability to manage everyday life, especially in urban settings. Bull places emphasis on the users’ ability to “re-imagine their environments”, notably by changing a stressful urban setting into a more comfortable one.<sup>8</sup> Through constantly listening to his iPod, Shayne is able to feel like he is not alone, like he is in control of every part of his immediate environment. This is a key element in the design of the iPod, according to Bull, as he writes that “the greater the craving for solitariness the greater the fear of being socially isolated. This contradictory desire for privacy and fear of social isolation is resolved using [the personal music

player].”<sup>9</sup> The film shows that Shayne’s self-expression is resolved through the relationship he has with his music, as it helps him process and reflect on the world around him. His survivance is thus tied to his ability to tune into his music and ignore the stressful environment around him.

His plot begins as he and his girlfriend are listening to his iPod in a taxi. They each have one earbud in their ear as a calming classical violin ensemble is heard. It is the scene’s only soundtrack and the noises of the trucks passing in the other direction are completely muted. Throughout this scene, Shayne and his girlfriend remain still and quiet. However, based on the relaxed smiles they both express, they are clearly happy with this silence. The music they are both enjoying unites them; they are both able to experience it in a similar setting and intimately share the emotions they feel towards it. However, these relaxed emotions only last for so long, and they ultimately arrive at their destination. Shayne drops his girlfriend off at a nearby Walmart, where she is seen wearing an employee vest. The music from the previous scene bleeds into this new shot, even though neither of the characters are wearing their headphones. However, the original calm tone rapidly takes a dissonant turn. Based on this musical cue, the audience can assume that the worst is about to happen for Shayne, and the viewers’ suspicions are quickly confirmed: Shayne’s girlfriend has to leave him to go find a job and he now has to fend for himself. He silently hugs her goodbye and gazes at her as she walks away, the intensity of the song going into a crescendo and becoming louder, in a minor key that is difficult to listen to. When the girl eventually disappears into the building, the music slowly fades again. Shayne then looks down at the ground in dejection, but he ultimately looks up, connecting his earbuds to his iPod and putting them into his ears. Once he has chosen an album to listen to, the classical music fades to a silence. He then walks out of the frame with a new song in mind.

This sequence, which mainly serves to communicate Shayne’s thoughts to the audience, shows that he is only able to understand the world he lives in through the presence of music. As inferred by his shy and introverted manner, Shayne’s ability to communicate is limited, which makes him only able to develop relationships through chosen tracks. Once Shayne’s girlfriend leaves him to work, the cacophonous music indicates the stress of this separation for him, who is now left in a world where he has difficulty communicating with others. Feeling panicked when left on his own, he

immediately uses music as a coping mechanism. Only when he has found an album that he enjoys is he able to momentarily overcome the stress he feels after his girlfriend has left. As he wanders offscreen, he is not moving in any particular direction nor with any distinctive motivation. He is clearly lost, trying to find a new identity on his own. His use of music as a coping mechanism thus suggests that he can only combat stressful situations and feel as if he can go on in the world, locating a sense of survivance, through his favourite music.

The next few scenes in Shayne's plot involve him walking around natural areas and observing the land around him. He walks on the highway accompanied by a new classical piece that is fast in pace and played in a minor key. The anxiety suggested by this track's composition indicates that Shayne is thinking about the fact he is alone in a stressful environment. His community is next to a loud highway and the only place he can go for a relaxing walk is alongside cars. The way Shayne walks in this scene is notable—his steps are timed up with the music's 4/4 time signature—following Bull's idea that music helps people feel in agency over the rhythm of their own body. However, the film asserts that he is not in complete control over his surroundings as he cannot ignore the negative condition he is living in—the sounds of the streets are too loud and he cannot ignore them.

Shayne's need to claim agency over space is present in a later scene, where he is seen walking around in a forest, reaching a hill. As he climbs it, exciting classical music plays in a loud manner, indicating his desire to feel heroic and in control of the space around him. This desire is also reflected in the film's visuals, as the scene frames Shayne as a hero, jumping over boulders and pushing trees aside. Through the confidence music provides him, he conquers over the land and the noise pollution he earlier experienced. However, once he reaches the top, he comes across a fence literally and metaphorically blocking his path to the victorious conclusion of the song he is listening to. Instead of reaching the top and standing over his community, he sees a construction site that destroys the natural landscape at the top of the hill. As the film shows Shayne's perspective on this destruction, the sounds of machinery and construction workers yelling at each other dominate the soundtrack and the flourishing violins of the classical song begin to fade out. His desire to claim agency over space is thus yet again interrupted, as he cannot connect with the music he enjoys.



This interruption of escapist fantasies is seen again in Shayne's narrative when he decides to relax and attend to his mental wellbeing. After making it back to the community, he sits in a Tim Hortons and enjoys a coffee by himself while listening to his music. He is using both the coffee and the music as a means of relaxation and escapism, as he shuts out his sense of sight by closing his eyes and focusses on his hearing and sense of taste. The film then cuts to the young man finishing his coffee when the music suddenly becomes distressing and frightening again. A loud minor chord is struck as a group of settler boys form outside the window where Shayne is sitting, and they all look at him with anger and aggression. At first, he ignores them and consumes the rest of his drink. The music continues to be frightening but played at a quiet volume as Shayne ignores their glances. But he soon exits the store, going in an opposite direction with his hood up and his earbuds in his ears, trying to use music to avoid them. The boys continue to taunt him and, while their voices are not initially heard over the music, they soon become loud and frightening for Shayne. When the group of boys eventually catches up to him, the music becomes even more alarming. The song's chord progressions increase in their speed and the minor tone comes to be jarring to listen to. The group then pushes and hits Shayne, eventually shoving him to the ground. They take turns kicking him as the film changes to Shayne's point of audition. The kicks are all out of synchronization, clashing with the beat of the song that Shayne was enjoying. The boys' taunts then begin to be heard on the film's soundtrack as the music becomes quieter. As the music fades, viewers can hear that the group teases Shayne's appearance in a racist manner. Eventually seeing a car go by, the assailants scatter through some alleyways, leaving him on the ground. The song changes again to a classical song that is more down tempo, but still played in a minor chord. Judging by the look of anguish on Shayne's face as he picks himself up and walks away, his music is not enough to help him through this episode of bullying. The camera focusses on his pain while the music remains faded, showing that his escapism—yet again—ceases to work in the way he wishes. Because Shayne cannot use his music to ignore his bullies, the film represents his voicelessness as inevitable, especially in the face of settlers set to hurt him.

After his encounter with the bullies, Shayne returns to his neighbourhood. He continues to listen to his music as he walks through the streets, polluted with trash and abandoned objects such as bicycles, containers and



cardboard boxes. The new orchestral track that Shayne is listening to is grave and rising in tone, reflecting his sense of a journey and his need to move forward from the bullying he experienced. A wide shot portrays him as a tiny speck in a large area filled with debris, trying to find a path where he is not running into any garbage. His motions indicate that he is trying to move in time with the music as he did in the previous sequence, but he is now struggling to do so in this extremely polluted and environmentally damaged area. The social impacts of colonialism are thus presented again by the film, not just in the physical debris scattered in his community, but through Shayne's laborious attempt to possess the space around him. As he parses through the physical debris, it makes noise as the clutter moves, effectively silencing his music. While the device Shayne is listening to is designed to help him escape, meant to give him the ability to synchronize his thoughts with his movements and ignore the outside noise, it no longer works as his space becomes so distracting that his music cannot help him escape. Thus, through this difference in music and space, it becomes evident that he cannot use his chosen music to re-imagine his space in the way that Michael Bull has previously described.<sup>10</sup>

These scenes highlight how musical technologies do not provide endless enjoyment and escapism for Indigenous youth, as they are not able to have complete control over the soundscapes they are listening to. As the film progresses, Shayne moves less and less in synchronization with the beat of his music, showing that he no longer feels like he is in control of his soundscape. Sound scholars like Shuhei Hosokawa insist personal music players were designed to make the listener become a "*musica mobilis*," a body that moves with the beat of their music in a mechanic, predictable fashion.<sup>11</sup> Yet this feeling of embodiment does not happen for Shayne as he is constantly reminded of the fact that the damage done by colonialism is quite severe, so much so that he cannot achieve the same type of escapism that scholars like Bull and Hosokawa describe. His means of reflecting on the world and expressing himself are always silenced by the modern (settler) world around him, and his music does not grant him the ability to resolve his stresses.

This segment of *3 histoires d'Indiens* culminates when Shayne returns to the Walmart where his girlfriend works. In this scene, he is standing still, listening to his iPod, with his earbuds in his ears and his backpack on. The tone of the classical song playing is victorious and romantic, suggesting a possible

reunion between him and his girlfriend. After a few seconds of staring at the Walmart, Shayne advances towards the store in a confident and assertive manner. The music then builds and gets louder. Shayne eventually enters the building, while the shot remains on the initial wide shot from the parking lot. As Shayne moves into the crowded store, it becomes difficult to make out where he is; the audience must then rely on the musical cues to indicate where Shayne is and what he is going to do. As the music builds in a major key, the violins and harps (instruments traditionally associated with romance) becoming increasingly louder, it seems likely that Shayne will reunite with his girlfriend. However, five seconds later, people begin to leave the store in panic, and the number of panicked people increase as their screams of terror gradually replaces the classical song in the film's soundtrack. Large explosions are seen and heard within the store while these noises, too, begin to blend into the film's soundtrack. The song again fades as attention is taken away from the store and from the consequences of the explosion. After a few seconds, sirens are heard in an increasingly loud manner, hinting that police and ambulances have arrived at the scene. The shot goes black and the film's soundtrack fades to a complete silence. While this scene begins by promising a reunion between two close people who use music to communicate, it ends as Shayne commits a dramatic act of violence that demonstrates that he cannot use music to escape in the way he desires and that he does not know how to regain the feelings of agency he once had.

As this scene plays out, it becomes clear that Shayne's actions were an act of protest against the company that took away his only companion, and perhaps also a gesture of violence in opposition to a tool of settler culture and the damage caused by its colonization and racism. Morin himself has stated that this was his intention for the final version of the screenplay—to critique and comment on the type of “poverty” that Indigenous youth experience in terms of the artistic sources they receive, and how they turn to violence as a means of protest: “[In the end of Shayne's plot] he loses his temper. But the problem is poverty. [His Indigenous community] got more ‘screwed’ than [settler Québécois people] [...]. I find this kind of racist and deeply unfair. These are [...] the conditions of life on a reserve that should be compared to refugee camps.”<sup>12</sup>

Morin's film echoes the writings of philosopher Ronald Neizen, who explains how Indigenous peoples want to fight back against symbols of

colonialism. When talking about how contemporary Indigenous identity is imagined, Neizen posits that an “internal colonialism” exists within Indigenous peoples as they not only deal with the hatred of traditional cultures, but also face “the unwanted reach of state power and extractive industries to distinct peoples in the margins of states.”<sup>13</sup> While Neizen’s analysis focusses on the role of capital in the creation of Indigenous identity, his argument adds a valuable comment to this discussion. He indeed believes that Indigenous people must constantly accept that, even though they live on Indigenous lands, they will always be aware of the presence of their colonizing nations, either through political authorities or the presence of supermarkets and other capitalist venues. Shayne’s decision to take action against a Walmart demonstrates he is fed up with the cultural control the settler state has taken.

The Walmart location in Shayne’s community could therefore symbolize how capitalism and settler-made companies disenfranchise and disrupt the traditional culture of the Indigenous community through their capitalist values, expansive use of space and large noise pollution as their trucks deliver products to and from the stores. In order to escape this and cope with an enormous amount of stress, Shayne must use the culture that is immediately available to him—an iPod. Yet, he only achieves a temporary sense of agency through listening to music as other noises bleed through his listening experience.

While Morin uses Shayne’s plot to correctly highlight the issues of cultural colonialism, the film represents only one understanding of how Indigenous peoples use music in their daily lives. Morin’s choice to frame Shayne’s plot around the damages of cultural colonialism shows he accurately assumes the differences between how a settler user might interact with an iPod and how an Indigenous user does. But this damage-centric perspective of Indigenous peoples often plays for a settler audience. Furthermore, this type of damage-centered filmmaking by settlers is no longer useful, as Unangan̄ sociologist Eve Tuck argues. She recommends that settler cultures move away from these “damage centered” models of media representation, which perpetuate the image of Indigenous communities, neighborhoods, and tribes as “defeated and broken” and in need of settler groups to revise their mindsets and provide them with support.<sup>14</sup> Tuck’s argument suggests that narratives like Shayne’s present Indigenous characters as unable to take

care of themselves and in need of the settlers' support. The ending of Morin's film follows this idea, as it proposes that Shayne cannot use music to find a meaningful connection with his thoughts and desires and pursue his goals of escaping the damages of colonialism: he can only resort to violence upon the settler's institution and, crucially, himself.

This type of upsetting social representation are frequent in the ending of Morin's films, which tend to viscerally present the oppressions faced by various people in Québec. In *Quiconque meurt, meurt à douleur* (1994), the ramifications of drug laws and addiction are observed through the deaths of the characters, while in *Le nèg'* (2004), racist violence is depicted severely on screen. *3 histoires d'Indiens* is no exception to this trend, as it portrays Shayne committing an act of violence as his final resort, as well as the three unnamed girls committing suicide as the characters do in their book. While Morin's discussion of oppression in Indigenous communities within the film is valuable, it often ignores their sense of community and individual connection with their own knowledge and tradition. Morin's understanding of the oppression that Indigenous people face is further underserved by the opinions he has on the community he worked in. In a review for *Films du Québec*, Morin discusses his relationship with the Indigenous people he worked with in the making of the film:

I have had a cabin for 30 years near Maniwaki, at the entrance to Parc La Vérendrye. So I get to know these people a lot. I also hunt caribou with Cree Indians in James Bay, I go fishing with them... I deal with these people, unlike many people who live there. I don't know why, but I'm hooked on them. I have always admired them in their dramas. They are very supportive, although they also have a self-destructive side. In fact, there is no difference between an aboriginal background and a poor one. They are like a poor environment in a forest environment. They have the same problems and the same qualities as the poor of Saint-Henri, Côte-Saint-Paul or Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. They are trashy, they destroy themselves, but they have a sense of mutual aid which is greater than that of privileged circles.<sup>15</sup>

Here, Morin articulates a problematic understanding of the Indigenous people within his own film, describing them just as Tuck suggests, as responsible for their own undoing. As Nadeau notes, Morin's desire to include his own

stance on Indigenous political issues affects the overall social impact of his work and the way Indigenous youth are represented: “[Morin represents] the life, that of these Indians, mine, yours too, provided you accept him. We [referring to settler audiences] are no different from the Indians of Robert Morin. We simply have less courage, light, rage, strength, more money, means, freedoms.”<sup>16</sup> Nadeau posits that we need not accept this stereotypical and one-sided interpretation of Indigenous political issues. If we are to accept that cultural colonialism is damaging, but reject Morin’s interpretation of Indigenous youth and their relationship with music, what other cinematic versions exist of Indigenous youth’s sense of musicality? If we interpret this filmmaking cultural encounter as a failure, how can one be successful? Tuck offers a solution to this problem through the idea of survivance, as she urges academics and researchers to pursue Gerald Vizenor’s ideology of survivance when exploring Indigenous narratives. Survivance appears through many art forms that celebrate continued Indigenous presence in a settler-dominated world. Thus, it is also important to analyze cinematic representations of how actual Indigenous voices are expressed through music-making. While Morin’s attempt to capture how Indigenous youth interact with music is problematic and damage-focused, the films of the Wapikoni Mobile showcase how using one’s literal voice and musical tools can create an act of survivance.

### **The Musicality of the Wapikoni Mobile**

The Wapikoni Mobile is a mobile film and music studio that provides Indigenous people with the ability and equipment needed to create their own works. The volunteers visit and connect with Indigenous communities, provide filmmaking and music video workshops and lend equipment to the filmmakers. Once completed, the films are screened in the communities and uploaded online for easier access. The filmmakers have complete control over their films and tend to explore many different genres. One theme that appears across these genres is the omnipresence of musicality in the filmmakers’ daily lives. Karine Bertrand previously wrote on the poetry within the short films of the Wapikoni Mobile, noting that “[i]t is precisely [a poetic interpretation of the real world] that come[s] to mind when entering the world put forward by the young Wapikoni filmmakers in their short films, where everyday struggles, hopes for the future and legitimate claims are articulated with candor, mindfulness.”<sup>17</sup> This poetry is often interpreted in terms of musicality, since

young people use musical instruments, sing songs or practice drumming in order to express their thoughts. There are several music videos within the Wapikoni Mobile's output, but there are also autobiographical works in which musical instruments and voices are highlighted, especially as a means to locate one's own cultural identity.<sup>18</sup> In order to explore this topic, I will examine the presence of music within three of these autobiographical films, paying specific attention to the way music assists the Indigenous characters portrayed in the films with accomplishing survivance.

In his short film *The Music in Me* (2016), director Emilio Wawatie (Anishinaabe) explores his own relationship to music and music-making. This first example places music as its key theme, as musicality is depicted both in a literal and metaphorical sense in the film. The film opens with several shots of Wawatie looking at various pieces of musical instrumentation, such as sheet music and an electric guitar. Over these shots, the filmmaker provides a voiceover explaining that "it's easy enough to learn and practice piece of music already composed by someone, but creating your own music is one of the most challenging yet rewarding feelings ever." Wawatie then posits that in order to find his musical inspiration, he has to go "out in the world," where he believes his creativity will be influenced. The following shots are of Wawatie going for a walk in the forest, finding inspiration in the nature surrounding him. The soundtrack of these shots begins with Wawatie's footsteps and sounds of twigs snapping against the ground, which set a beat for the rest of the film. Wawatie then begins a short slam poem following said beat: "I see the landscapes of the forests like texts and colours/the songs of the animals, the earth and the sky/like motifs, melodies and orchestras/one giant symphony." After he finishes, he slaps a tree stump, adding another layer to the beat while sounds of him skipping stones against the water add a melody to the tune. An electric guitar then comes into the track, continuing the melody set by the sounds of skipping stones. After one and a half minute of this song, the sounds fade. Wawatie then says, in a voiceover: "There is inspiration in all our surroundings, both in the natural and man-made world." In the film's conclusion, he admits: "I'll always put my heart and soul into music 'cause the music has always been there—in me."

Wawatie's film establishes an unbreakable relationship between the body of the Indigenous person and the music. The title of the film itself suggests that musicality will always exist in Wawatie, as long as he goes and looks for



it. While this film is autobiographical, it sends a message to other Indigenous youth, showing that music does not exist solely in the instruments and sheet music, but also in their heads and in the nature surrounding them. Unlike Shayne in *3 histoires d'Indiens*, Wawatie uses music as a way to give himself a voice when he is experiencing a creative block. When he cannot speak out to express himself, he turns to music. He re-appropriates the settler's tools of music through his use of the electric guitar. He also sets aside the sheet music (a way settler cultures create music) and finds more inspiration in the sounds of nature around him. While Shayne embraces the settler tool and music wholeheartedly in *3 histoires d'Indiens*, Wawatie decides to combine the settler tools of music making with those of his natural surroundings—appropriating settler music by providing an Indigenous twist. Thus, through music-making, this film provides a positive example of an Indigenous youth's connection with the land and shows how they can develop their own voices as they discover the natural and cultural materials available to them. Wawatie demonstrates his pride in his music at the end of the film by walking away, guitar in hand, saying “the music is in me” as the shot focuses on how the guitar looks like a natural extension of his body. As the film highlights Wawatie's embodied connection with the musicality he finds both in the natural and modern worlds, it mostly emphasizes on the fact that it is the music in the natural world that allows him to find his own voice as a musician. It also calls attention to the way Indigenous youth can have a positive and agency-building experience through this connection with music, saying that music is “in all of [them].”

Another take on musicality as survivance within the Wapikoni Mobile's short film collection is evident in Craig Commanda's (Anishinaabe) *Call and Response* (2014). This film opens with Commanda tuning his electric guitar in the middle of a forest at night. He then plays a guitar solo while fog starts to set in beneath him, in a *mise-en-scène* that is almost reminiscent of a rock star playing a solo at a concert. As he plays, another man in full customary regalia appears behind him with a drum and sits beside him. Commanda stops and looks at the man. Then, in a voiceover, he confesses: “I've always been around music, but not the music of my culture. I've always heard, but never really listened. I seem to be missing something.” The man then stands and looks at Commanda, beginning to play his drum and throat sing. While he plays and sings, the shots get closer and closer in frame, focussing on the man's technique. After a minute, the musician stops, as Commanda admits

that he does not know the songs of his own community and feels “caught between two worlds.” He then plays guitar again, with the shots focussing on his movements around the fretboard. While he plays, he notes that the space between his knowledge of contemporary musical techniques and his lack of knowledge of traditional songs is large, and the “silence [between them] [...] deafening.” He then plays two notes over and over on his guitar as the man begins to drum and sing along. After they play together for thirty seconds, the man then moves over to Commanda and says: “only when you are ready,” referring to the filmmaker’s desire to learn traditional music. The man then walks away into the forest, still singing. Commanda plays a final two-note guitar riff while he admits, in a voiceover, “maybe if I listen, I can hear what it has to say.” Thus, the film ends on the note of Commanda learning how to blend his two cultures through the music he plays and listens to.

Commanda’s film has similar themes as Wawatie’s. It sets the natural world as a type of concert stage that is already established as a musical location. However, it further develops the question of the relationship between the contemporary and the traditional in both Indigenous music and identity. Commanda exposes his own relationship with music and Indigenous identity by playing it out himself and listening to the traditional music of his Anishinaabe heritage. At first, both his contemporary self and the representation of his Indigenous heritage take turns playing, trying to understand each other. When they play together, the film sends the message that enjoying music and music-making for the twenty-first-century Indigenous youth involves blending the contemporary with the traditional, taking the time to listen to both sides and play out the “conversation” themselves. While *3 histoires d’Indiens* specifically observes the damage done to Indigenous youth when they use the musical devices within their reach to isolate, this short film (and Wawatie’s short film) portrays the duality of identity that Indigenous youth experience and uses music to examine how they navigate through both identities. More importantly, it focusses on how Indigenous youth can find their own voice through embracing traditions and playing out the two sides of their identity in a musical style. The film thus showcases music as a survivance tool, as Indigenous youth like Commanda can locate their voice through a musical process of self-discovery.

The final film I will examine from the Wapikoni Mobile’s collection is one that does not use settler’s musical instruments but rather uses traditional

music as a means to highlight the survivance of the Indigenous people. In her short film *Nous nous soulèverons (We Will Rise Up)* (2015), poet Natasha Kanapé Fontaine (Innu) delivers a slam poem about how Indigenous people have stayed alive through years of political, social and cultural colonialism. The film's visual opens with Kanapé Fontaine standing in a creek within a wooded area, observing the world around her. Throughout the entirety of the film, she wanders around the streets of downtown Montréal and the wooden paths of a forest, taking in these landscapes. Through these minimalist visuals, the film directs the viewers' focus onto the soundtrack. In order to properly represent how Indigenous peoples have survived cultural colonialism, Kanapé Fontaine's film focuses on the role of the filmmaker's voice and on how it can be a powerful tool against the settler noises. It layers several natural and musical soundtracks: a drumbeat carries the beat of the poem, rivers and wind sounds operate as chords, creating a tone to the poem while the poem's words, spoken in a voiceover, carry a melody. The lines of Kanapé Fontaine often focus on the voice of Indigenous peoples or on how they have been silenced. She comments that settler media often "discus[ses] [Indigenous peoples] without reciprocity." Later in the film, she asserts that "[t]hey will call us red-skin Quakers for we will quake to the sound of the drums and leaves dancing in the dawn wind." Over archival images of Indigenous communities protesting police, Kanapé Fontaine states that "after the legal and territorial battles, we can whisper to our grandparents' ears that we have won the long fight." Through the use of these archives, the film adds a critical political dimension to the voice: quaking becomes a political changing of authority over Indigenous culture. While both Wawatie and Commanda explore their personal discovery of Indigenous voice and musicality in their film, Kanapé Fontaine shows a political and collective sense of self-expression in hers. She believes that because they will win the fight, Indigenous communities will "fill the moor's open wounds with a new song of running ether: the cry of the untamed." This new song represents the rising voices of Indigenous peoples, finding a sense of collectivity that was previously hard to attain. The final lines of the film are particularly revealing in this aspect, as Kanapé Fontaine looks up to the sky while standing on a wooded path and says, directly to the camera: "Today, I am waking up so I can continue my long journey to hope [...]. I am reborn, inhabited by a cry. A single cry. The caribou is waiting for the wolf. The caribou is waiting for the Innu."

These lines emphasize that the voice is the ultimate tool for Indigenous peoples to fight back against systems of colonialism. While *3 histoires d'Indiens* develops a narrative in which the noise of settler and colonial forces are too overbearing for Indigenous youth to find their own strong voice, Kanapé Fontaine's film shows the power that an Indigenous voice possesses in the first place. Several shots of her poem focus on the tactile and visual senses in Indigenous protests of settler oppressions; yet the language of sounds and the voice are the ones that Kanapé Fontaine returns to most frequently in the lyrics of her poem. The film's final line shows that the greatest tool that Indigenous peoples will have in reclaiming their culture is to inhabit the cry they have inside and speak out against the colonial forces working against them.

All three films from the Wapikoni Mobile's collection shine light on the importance of the voice of their filmmakers. They all demonstrate and sonify the experience of their creator's musical self-discovery. The role of the sound in each of these works is empowering for their Indigenous creator, either in a personal or political sense. Music operates within the Wapikoni Mobile not only as a connection with traditional culture, but as a connection to the filmmakers' own identities as Indigenous people and with others within their communities. Because the voice that operates within these works is both individual and collective, it becomes a source of power that can operate against a settler system that desires to obliterate Indigenous cultures. While Wawatie and Commanda's works focus on the powerful experience of locating one's own voice and letting it speak through music, Kanapé Fontaine's demonstrates the positive sensations and events that can occur when Indigenous voices are heard in a public sphere. Survivance, which is "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; [an] active presence", is thus present in these three short films, as music becomes in each of them a key way to speak out against settler colonialism.<sup>19</sup>

John Manzo writes that for Indigenous peoples, the art of music-making and music sharing is a form of "oppositional resistance" or "a cultural form that is consciously raising, politically progressive, and liberating."<sup>20</sup> While *3 histoires d'Indiens* does portray the potential damages of using modern technology to escape from a noisy and polluted world dictated by settlers, it becomes problematic when considering Morin's perspective and how Indigenous characters are silenced throughout his film. Cinematic

interpretations of Indigenous youth creating their own music and finding the powers in their own voices, such as the three Wapikoni Mobile's works that I have studied here, permit us to hear Indigenous music and voice in a much more progressive lens. They become ways to express one's thoughts (as in Wawatie's film) or discover one's own cultural identity (as in Commanda's film), as well as they form a political tool (as in Kanapé Fontaine's film). Through making music and speaking poetry, Indigenous youth are provided with the ability to raise their voices in terms of their art-making and find a means to fight against colonial systems that forbid them from seeking their own agency in self-expression.

### **Author Biography**

**Claire Gray** is a PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh. Her research surrounds the role of sound and music in contemporary cinema and how they represent national and political shifts, such as the questions over Québécois identity or the Brexit movement. She has previously presented her research at conferences such as the Film Studies Association of Canada, the British Association of Film, Television and Screen Studies, and the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States. She has also previously worked on projects relating to Indigenous cinema across the Americas, such as the creation of a database of Indigenous women filmmakers and the remediation of the Arnaït Video Productions archive. She is currently co-writing a chapter on the Arnaït project, to be published in the *Archive/Counter Archive* anthology next year. She is also currently co-editing an anthology on diverse and everyday heroisms in contemporary cinema.

### **Notes**

1. Mona Belleau, "Mona Belleau," in *Jeunesses Autochtones*, Natasha Gagné and Laurent Jérôme, eds. (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval-Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 9.
2. Karine Bertrand, *Le cinéma des Premières Nations du Québec et des Inuits du Nunavut: réappropriation culturelle et esthétique du sacré*, PhD dissertation (Montréal: Université de Montréal, 2013), 181.
3. Byron Dueck, *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries. Aboriginal Music and Dance in Public Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.
4. Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79.3 (2009): 409. The concept of survivance was previously described by Gerald Vizenor, who posited that "[s]urvivance is an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" and that "[t]he practices of survivance create an active

- presence, more than the instincts of survival, function, or subsistence.” See Gerald Vizenor, *Native Liberty* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 88.
5. The project was set up by Québécois filmmaker Manon Barbeau in 2004. It aims to help break through the isolation that young Aboriginals can experience, enabling them to develop their creativity and acquire new skills relating to cinematography. Trained filmmakers teach Indigenous youth the skills to create films; then loan them the equipment required to make their own short films. See “Wapikoni mobile,” <https://www.comminit.com/content/wapikoni-mobile> (consulted on 22 January 2022).
  6. Christian Nadeau, “L’universel et le singulier: 3 histoires d’Indiens de Robert Morin, Québec, 2014, 70m.” *Ciné-Bulles* 32.3 (2014): 37, translated by the author.
  7. Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.
  8. Bull, *Sound Moves*, 129.
  9. Bull, *Sound Moves*, 129.
  10. Bull, *Sound Moves*, 3.
  11. Shuhei Hosokawa, “The Walkman Effect,” *Popular Music* 4.1 (1984): 171.
  12. Ismaël Houdassine, “3 histoires d’Indiens: Robert Morin bouscule les préjugés,” *Huffington Post* (4 June 2014), [https://www.huffpost.com/archive/qc/entry/3-histoires-dindiens-robert-morin-bouscule-les-prejuges\\_n\\_5100288](https://www.huffpost.com/archive/qc/entry/3-histoires-dindiens-robert-morin-bouscule-les-prejuges_n_5100288) (consulted on 26 July 2021), translated by the author.
  13. Ronald Niezen, *The Rediscovered Self Indigenous Identity and Cultural Justice* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), 9.
  14. Tuck, “Suspending Damage,” 409.
  15. Robert Morin, cited in “3 histoires d’Indiens – Film de Robert Morin,” Charles-Henri Ramond, ed., *Films du Québec* (8 April 2014), <https://www.filmsquebec.com/films/3-histoires-indiens-robert-morin/> (consulted on 26 July 2021).
  16. Nadeau, “L’universel et le singulier,” 39.
  17. Karine Bertrand, “The Wapikoni Mobile and the Birth of a New Indigenous Cinema in Québec,” *The American Review of Canadian Studies* 42.2 (2013): 284.
  18. See the music videos *I’m Still Falling* (Melissa Girvan, 2013), *Hand Drums* (Louis-Philippe Moar, 2014) or *Iame* (Anna-Sheila Bellefleur, 2015).
  19. Vizenor, *Native Liberty*, 39.
  20. John Manzo, “Rez Style: Themes of Resistance in Canadian Aboriginal RAP Music,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 33.1 (2013): 174.