

Idea or Individual?
Indigenous self-representation and narrative:
Shannon Masters' *Empire of Dirt* as a Case Study

by

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ABSTRACT

This major research paper examined the film *Empire of Dirt* by Shannon Masters and the film's position when placed in three trajectories: Canadian filmmaking; documentary and ethnographic film; and the chick flick. My research has shown that *Empire of Dirt* is unique because of the film's portrayal of Indigenous women – portrayed as women who are like every other human being and not the product of stereotypes. As a result, *Empire of Dirt* is groundbreaking not only because of its representation of Indigenous women. Looking at an assortment of documentary, ethnographic, and cinematic films shows that *Empire of Dirt*'s tendency to defy clear classification can also be observed when considering a multitude of film genres.

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DEDICATION

To my family

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INTRODUCTION

I remember the evening well – sitting in the rush line at the TIFF Bell Lightbox. Third in line, I hoped I would get a seat to see *Empire of Dirt*, one of the most talked about films premiering at the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in October of 2013. The Festival is “committed to dispelling stereotypical notions of Indigenous peoples through diverse media presentations from within our communities, thereby contributing to a greater understanding by audiences of Indigenous artistic expression” (“Mission Statement”). I knew little about the film, only that it was about three Indigenous women (a grandmother, mother, and daughter) who were haunted by a repeating past and determined to stop that cycle of failure. I went into the theatre with an open mind. Would *Empire of Dirt* be informative, trying to teach the audience about Indigenous culture? Would it address the stereotypes that Indigenous people face? Would the film be overly “Native,” merely rehearsing those stereotypes to please people?

Throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies I became familiar with the historical representations of Indigenous people, specifically, how they are the constant source of stereotypes and misrepresentations. *Empire of Dirt* was directly defying these misconceptions, which was something that had not been done. I knew the film was exceptional because of this fact but it was not until I continued

my research that I discovered to what extent *Empire of Dirt* succeeds historically, artistically, and cinematically.

The moment the film ended I sat in my seat in a state of wonder. *Empire of Dirt* was special because it was different, mainly because the film depicts the Cree women as human beings and not as the product of Indigenous stereotypes. This uniquely positions the film within the trajectory of Indigenous filmmaking in Canada. The first of its kind, the film situates the women's Indigenous identities as a backdrop for the story, not at the forefront. *Empire of Dirt* presents Minnie (the grandmother), Lena (the mother), and Peekka (the daughter) as people who are like everybody else; a rarity in filmmaking. The film is a contemporary portrayal of Indigenous women who are resilient and tenacious, a contrast to the submissive and passive qualities Indigenous women are often given in film.

The uniqueness of *Empire of Dirt* can be demonstrated by comparing and contrasting elements of the film with a selection of works that came before it. *Nanook of the North*, *Kanehstatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, and *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* provide a framework for *Empire of Dirt* to be analyzed. These films assist in confirming the groundbreaking impact of *Empire of Dirt* and the film's successful extermination of Indigenous stereotypes.

CHAPTER ONE

INDIGENOUS FILMMAKING IN CANADA



Fig. 1. Lena comforts Peekka. Still from *Empire of Dirt*. Courtesy of Jennifer Podemski.

LENA. I feel like a failure. Like a fraud...you know...like I'm so far from having my own shit together.

DOUG. But you're our greatest success story.

LENA. (Laughs) Come on Doug. I've got like two hundred bucks to my name and my rent is overdue (*Empire of Dirt*).

This scene from *Empire of Dirt*, occurring some ten minutes into the film and at a juncture in the narrative, captures a moment of vulnerability and frustration, a feeling that everyone experiences in some form. Set in present day Ontario, the film tells the story of three women: Minnie (the grandmother), Lena (the mother), and Peekka (the daughter). Lena is a woman who struggles in life. She loses her job, raises her daughter alone, is estranged from her mother, and has lost her

father. The audience can empathize with Lena's situation on a variety of levels, and in that way her depiction differs from that of Indigenous women in earlier films, which show Indigenous women as quiet, submissive, and uncivilized beings whose sole purpose was to serve the white man. An examination of the precursors to *Empire of Dirt* will show this transformation.

Indigenous cinema is a global phenomenon that has grown extensively and gained significant attention since the year 2000. However, considering the worldwide film industry's long history, it is surprising that Indigenous filmmaking did not make an impact earlier. Westerners' naivety, along with their myths and misconceptions about Indigenous people, have contributed to the marginalization and suppression of Indigenous people in early cinematic forms since the early 1900's (Grussani 34). Representations in film reaffirmed white settlers' framing of Indigenous culture. Indigenous males were often portrayed as unintelligent, savages, barbarians, or willing sidekicks. According to Rita Keshena males were seen as "treacherous, vicious, cruel, lazy, stupid, dirty, speaking in ughs and grunts, and often quite drunk" (Marger 156). *The Lone Ranger's* sidekick Tonto, for example, is the epitome of the "good Indian". Calm and stoic, he nurses the Lone Ranger back to health and stays by his side as his faithful friend. In contrast, *Stagecoach* portrays the Indians in a negative light. Seen solely from the perspective of the white men, the Indians are seen as threatening savages who are going to attack just because they are "violent and

spiteful” (Straus, par. 1). The “film establishes [Indians] as violent savages through the fear they inspire in the white travelers” (Straus, par. 1).

Indigenous women occupied one of two roles. The first was to be angelic and obedient, to take care of the family and serve the white man. The second was to be promiscuous. In either case both men and women are reduced to either completely wild or completely domesticated, but anyway more animal than human. There is also a contrast in balance between the portrayal of Indigenous men and women. Men are more likely to be wild than tame, women the reverse. Thus from early on, Indigenous people and their culture were misrepresented. It took decades of effort by Indigenous people themselves to change this distortion (Marubbio 3-4).

Indeed, the potential of film as an educational or socializing vehicle — the medium’s ability to reach vast audiences — made it an important tool for Indigenous people to broadcast accurate portrayals of their cultures, perhaps dissolving the filmic stereotypes they have endured. Indigenous people in Canada wanted to tell their story. The integration of film as an artistic process became an outlet through which Indigenous people could creatively express themselves.

To understand how this process began, it is important to understand the context. A key example, on which this chapter will focus, is that of the Inuit people in the Arctic — specifically how the effects of trading formed the foundation for the emergence of video into the Inuit culture, and how this affected

Indigenous filmmaking in Canada. As Michael Robert Evans explains in *Isuma: Inuit Video Art*, “For thousands of years the Inuit and their predecessors have been mastering the challenges of drawing sustenance and life from the harsh northern environment, and they have used these challenges as opportunities for artistic expression” (“Reflections” 3). For example, women sewed caribou parkas not only for warmth but also because the parkas “possessed symbolic [and] practical importance” (Hessel 171). Objects had functional and expressive significance, and artistic expression was incorporated into everyday necessities (Hessel 171).

Around 1770, interactions between the Inuit, missionaries, and whalers altered Inuit art significantly (Hessel 21). The Inuit discovered the practicality of trading small sculptures for guns and pots. They began to create art solely for commercial use and trade (Hessel 27). Inuit art was no longer functional, perhaps taking on a new symbolic system that speaks more to their audience than to them.

From 1939 to 1963 the lives of the Inuit changed dramatically (Tester 3). A relocation effort by the Canadian government forced the Inuit to forfeit their nomadic lifestyle and adopt permanent settlements. “During the period in question, the major agent of change was the Canadian state, which was undergoing a structural shift as it entered a period of welfare state reform. That reform had grown out of the trauma of the depression, which has fuelled fears that the aftermath of the Second World War – like that of the First World War – would

be characterized by recession and unemployment” (Tester 3). Suddenly the Inuit relied on a cash economy where jobs were minimal and they were forced to survive on assistance from the government (Evans, “Reflections” 4).

During the 1940s the Inuit were still actively involved in the fur trade and living traditional lives. However, “the presence of the military, resource exploration, and missionary activity took its toll” (Tester 4). Medical problems such as polio and tuberculosis could no longer be ignored and as the value of furs declined, “family allowances became essential to survival” (Tester 4). The problems experienced by the Inuit were seen as a matter of overpopulation where there were few resources and too many people. “Thus the second wave of state involvement was characterized by relocation and renewed efforts to integrate Inuit within the norms and precepts of Canadian culture and society” (Tester 4).

The 1950s were characterized by an approach to “promote traditional economies because it was thought this would avoid the creation of dependency” (Tester 7). It was believed that the creation of these communities would allow the Inuit to continue their traditional way of living but under the surveillance of state officials. This policy led to a kind of strategic neglect of Inuit at a time when the fur trade was failing miserably. Jean Lesage, the Minister of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources announced a new policy in 1955 that would ensure that the Inuit “had the same rights, privileges, opportunities and responsibilities enjoyed by other Canadians” (Bonesteel, par. 14). During the

1960s large-scale government housing projects encouraged Inuit settlement. Traditional methods of subsistence were difficult due to lengthy travel distances as well as the “need to maintain a steady family income through wage employment” (Bonesteel, par. 14). “A slow shift took place in the minds of administrators...Instead of reservations, they wanted ‘northern suburbs’. They wanted Inuit citizens who would be self-reliant, but integrated into a broader Canadian social reality. They wanted a material infrastructure that could provide Inuit with a degree of material security and well-being that, they believed, had not existed previously...The state moved to integrate Inuit with Canadian society, believing that the old hunting and trapping economy could not support them. New settlements were created and older ones expanded” (Tester 7). “[The] dependence on welfare provided at least one impetus for the emerging Inuit art movement (Evans, “Reflections” 4). As it would turn out, this eighteenth-century change set the stage for a series of important steps in the twentieth century.

Dependence on government assistance gave momentum to the movement of marketing “Eskimo handicrafts,” which had commenced with the Canadian Handicrafts Guild in Montreal during the 1920s (Hessel 27). An exhibition of Inuit art held by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild gained attention, and by 1949 the Hudson’s Bay Company began buying art from Inuit artists to be marketed in Canada. In the late 1940s, the Inuit art movement was further popularized when James Houston, a Canadian artist and filmmaker, traveled to a small Inuit

community in northern Québec. The management of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild in Montréal was impressed with the art pieces Houston collected, so the Guild sent him back to Québec in 1949 to make sizeable purchases. In that same year, “[Houston] organized one of the first major exhibitions of Inuit art. He worked with the Canadian Guild of Crafts, the federal government and the Hudson's Bay Company to bring attention to the Inuit and their art forms...he formed the West Baffin Co-operative” (Stott, par. 1). James Houston helped establish Inuit printmaking and sculpture around the world that prized collectors wanted.

The success of Inuit sculpture and printmaking paved the way for the emergence of artistic video production (Evans, “Reflections” 5). Canadians became increasingly aware that images present on televisions came from sources outside of Canada and were “concerned that Canadian identity would be eroded by the constant presence of non-Canadian materials on the big and small screens” (Evans, “Reflections” 5). The phenomenon posed a similar and compounded threat to Inuit culture and language, as both American and southern Canadian broadcasts were a potential influence in their communities (Evans, “Reflections” 5). As a result, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) offered to give the Inuit more exposure in the media. The IBC’s involvement was central in making Inuit broadcasting public so they were not simply an extension of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Raboy 310). This movement, along with the arrival of

video technology and “fractures among Inuit groups regarding the role of Inuit programming led to the formation, ultimately, of Igloodik Isuma Productions” (Evans, “Reflections” 5-6). Co-founded by Zacharias Kunuk and Norman Cohn, Igloodik Isuma Productions’ goal is to “help films and filmmakers reach a wider audience; help audiences see themselves in their own languages; help communities connect around common concerns; and help worldwide viewers see indigenous reality from its own point of view” (“Isuma Productions”, par. 1). The pioneering of video camera technology by John Logie Baird (1888-1946) in the 1930s and its availability to the public in the 1980s in a compact and affordable form allowed storytelling to flourish in new ways (Pettinger, pars. 3-4). Recording the aspects of Inuit culture allowed the people to preserve their language, customs, practices, and heritage for future generations. Film gave Indigenous artists the opportunity to challenge ethnographic and stereotypical Hollywood representations – thus giving them a voice from within.

Historically, videography has evolved into a powerful medium of expression and is one that Indigenous artists have come to use as a way of self-critique and presentation. The way a culture expresses itself lies not only in the objects produced, but also in all aspects of the day-to-day lives of the people. Such factors as interpersonal relations, communication, food, housing, and transportation all convey the culture in which they are situated (Evans, “Reflections” 7-8). Although created objects like sculptures and paintings can

enrich our knowledge of a culture, video can portray culture in ways that objects cannot. These include the Inuit people's perspective through the videographer as well as through those involved in the production. As Evans powerfully notes "Aboriginal video does not thwart research; aboriginal video enhances it" ("Reflections" 10).

In this light Sol Worth's 1996 study of the Navajo Indians in the Southwestern United States shows that Indigenous men and women view their own cultural practices differently than the outsiders who were viewing them, therefore, capturing different experiences. This provided a new lens through which to view Indigenous culture – from an Indigenous viewpoint. Worth's research shows the impact of technology on Indigenous communities with no previous exposure or experience with filmmaking. Experienced in teaching youth the art of filmmaking in Philadelphia and New York, Worth was asked in the early 1960s how black youth with no experience in filmmaking could produce films with depth that powerfully expressed their point of view. Worth explained that young adults and black youth who could not talk or write about their experiences were more fervent to express themselves via the medium of film. "[Worth and his colleagues] reasoned that if a member of the culture being studied could be trained to use the medium so that with his hand on the camera and editing equipment he could choose what interested him, [they] would come closer to capturing *his* vision of *his* world" (Worth 14).

As part of a project, Worth received a grant from the National Science Foundation that enabled him to work with the Navajo Indians from the Pine Springs Reservation in Arizona in the art of filmmaking. He was interested in the cross-cultural communication between the Navajo and himself. Twentieth century anthropologist and ethnographer Bronisław Kasper Malinowski stated that, “the final goal of which an ethnographer should never lose sight...is, briefly, to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world” (Worth 12). Worth’s goal was to fulfill Malinowski’s idea.

Worth found that teaching the Navajo filming and editing techniques resulted in films that differed from what had been filmed in the past. The Navajo people differed in their interests, views of reality, and time; and held views on cultural taboos that were different from those of non-Indigenous cultures. Worth dedicated his last months with the Navajo to questioning the students about their finished works. The students made seven twenty-minute black and white films and five one to two minute films without audio, which the students believed was unnecessary in the context of their films (Worth 127). According to Worth and Adair the response to the films were positive because they conveyed information. One film showed how a shallow well was made. It was liked because it “teaches how to fix water so you can always have clean water to use” while another film *The Spirit of the Navajo* was enjoyed because “He [the medicine man] did not make any mistake. He performed the ceremony like he should” (Worth 130).

One such participant was Susie Benally, a Navajo woman, who made a twenty-minute film titled *Navajo Weaver*. Benally told the story of her mother and her weaving process of creating a Navajo rug. The film begins with her mother weaving at her loom. The film cuts to the timely process of the work that goes into preparing the materials including shearing wool, digging roots for soap to wash and dye the wool, and finally spinning the wool before weaving. Benally saw each of these activities as a vital process that went into the production of her mother's Navajo weaving. "The film only shows about three inches of a six-foot rug being actually woven, and only about 4 ½ minutes of actual weaving" (Worth 267). Benally's film shows the diverse ways that people and cultures view artistic processes, as well as certain aspects of their life like hunting, cooking, and religious practices. "The films concerned with crafts were highly valued because they were related to the economic welfare of the community" (Worth 129). All people and communities share such day-to-day tasks, but how diverse communities go about these tasks can vary substantially. "Comparisons among such specific, requested views would help us to understand and to present a more complete picture of man" (Worth 256). As more people are taught to use film as a medium, our knowledge of how people view the world differently will expand.

Perhaps more interestingly, the Navajo handled equipment differently and used processes unlike anything Worth had seen. The Navajo worked confidently and quickly. Worth thought they were splicing random pieces of film together, but

commented that the Navajo seemed to be better at splicing and editing than he. In fact, they had an astonishing ability to perceive individual shots. Proving gifted in the art of filmmaking, the work of the Navajo demonstrated that people and cultures view processes differently. Despite this difference, cultures have the ability to enrich “[the] store of knowledge about man which our culture traditionally calls art, and which clearly is part of the scientific study of the culture of man” (Worth 262). Art, science, and culture are not distinct entities; rather they are intertwined and influence one another.

Worth’s contribution to the introduction of filmmaking in Indigenous communities is significant because his research proves that complex methods of recording can be broken down and taught to anyone who has the passion and willingness to learn. In a relatively short time, Worth gave Indigenous people the opportunity to produce a visual statement of their own. Film is a powerful mode of representation. Giving Indigenous filmmakers the opportunity to create allows for a conceivably more accurate portrayal of Indigenous culture and their way of life because they have created the work themselves. It is important to incorporate that “other” perspective, especially given the stereotypes mentioned previously. However, terms such as *accuracy* and *authenticity* come with their own problems. A lack of awareness of the effects that unfamiliar technology would have on Indigenous communities brought skepticism. Evans believes that: “video offers an excellent example of the use of a relatively new technology to maintain and

revive relatively old facets of culture... Video should not be seen as a threat to a tradition of oral narrative; rather, it should be seen as the logical next step in an evolving process” (Evans “Reflections” 13). Indeed, the technology has been embraced, learned, and widely used in producing Indigenous films.

Established in 1968, the Indian Film Crew marked the beginning of Indigenous filmmaking in Canada. As part of the National Film Board of Canada, a government funded agency the origins of which date to 1938, the Indian Film Crew trained for five months in “various aspects of filmmaking and then worked on community development projects and research for future films” (Cardinal, par. 5). The Indian Film Crew evolved into the Indian Training program in 1971. The trainees spent their time in various areas of the Board’s operations gaining a broad understanding of film distribution and production. Indigenous filmmaking continued through the 1970s and 1980s, with an emphasis on Indigenous documentaries. In 1991 Studio One was established with one stipulation: “that only Aboriginal filmmakers would make Studio One films” (Cardinal, par. 10). Because the headquarters of Studio One were in Edmonton, Alberta, the Indigenous filmmaking community felt that it was not accessible to filmmakers in other areas. As a result, the Aboriginal Filmmaking Program (AFP) replaced Studio One in 1996 (Cardinal, par. 13). Not until the launch of the Aboriginal Peoples’ Television Network (APTN) in 1999 did Indigenous filmmakers “[gain] an unprecedented platform” for their artistic visions (Goulet 13).

Indigenous feature film production in Canada is relatively recent. Prior to the 1970s, Indigenous filmmakers focused primarily on creating documentary films. Shirlee Cheechoo's *Bearwalker* (later renamed *Backroads*) (2000), was the first dramatic feature film both written and directed by an Indigenous person (Goulet 13). In the same year, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) launched imagineNATIVE. "With a mandate to foster and promote the Aboriginal film and media sector, the organization has created the largest industry event for Aboriginal filmmakers at its annual festival at the TIFF Bell Lightbox in Toronto and is recognized globally as the leading presenter of Indigenous film and media content" (Goulet i).

Given film's long history why is Indigenous feature film production in Canada recent? One key factor is economic, the financing and funding of programs (Goulet 1-3). Beyond funding, though, several more barriers obstruct Indigenous people when trying to make feature films. In fact, Danis Goulet and Kerry Swanson describe four key barriers to Indigenous feature film production in Canada: (1) systematic barriers and cultural misconceptions; (2) access to industry partners and networks; (3) access to financing; and (4) access to distribution (Goulet 4-5).

Systematic barriers and cultural misconceptions spring from a complicated history. Barriers and misconceptions transpire in all areas, which include "education, employment, health and social mobility" (Goulet 4). Indigenous

people are often underrepresented or not represented at all as part of broadcasting agencies, institutional funding and “organizations responsible for the production and dissemination of Canadian cultural content” (Goulet 4). Underrepresentation of Indigenous people in the film industry has caused problems for Indigenous writers, directors and producers because it has created a “culture gap” between themselves and the larger industry. In addition, Indigenous filmmakers face pre-existing ideas of what an Indigenous film should be about and whether it could succeed in a wider context. Challenged by preconceived ideas about what an Indigenous film should be, Indigenous filmmakers cite a lack of understanding of Indigenous knowledge, culture, and processes in the larger industry as a reason for these barriers when developing content in the Indigenous filmmaking industry (Goulet 4).

Due to a lack of access, Indigenous people in the film industry face difficulty in establishing networks outside of their own. Indigenous people also face challenges around the ways that their communities approach their work and what can be personified as the film industry’s approach to production. Here what exists as cultural differences can adversely affect how Indigenous filmmakers produce and develop their work. As Danis Goulet and Kerry Swanson point out, “the requirement for Aboriginal writer/directors (and producers working in partnership) to sign away their story rights in order to access funding is a challenge” (4).

This challenge is evident in the American film *Smoke Signals* (1998), a screenplay based on the short story “This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” by Sherman Alexie. While the film draws loosely upon characters, elements, and incidents from Alexie’s narrative there exists some discrepancy between the character of the short story and the tenor of the film. The adaptation to the screen reveals the power of external influences in making the film commercially viable. For example, in these stories, Arnold is Victor’s uncle instead of his father and “incorporates ideas from Alexie’s later novel, *Reservation Blues*. It is in *Reservation Blues*, for example, that the image of a road trip to retrieve ashes appears. In *The Lone Ranger* the trip is precipitated by Victor’s desire to claim three hundred dollars from his deceased uncle’s savings account” (Wood 21).

Indeed, it is notable that Alexie’s stories tend to depict Indigenous people pessimistically while *Smoke Signals* portrays Indigenous people in a positive light. Alexie’s “Scene Notes” show that producers, actors, Miramax as well as audience responses at test screenings exerted pressures that encouraged the final cut of *Smoke Signals*. With the anticipated desires of commercial audiences in mind they wanted Victor, Thomas, and contemporary Indians to be presented as “warm-hearted survivors” (Wood 22). Alexie attributes this transformation to his own drinking. Though drinking heavily during the period he penned his novels, Alexie, by his own admission, was sober when he wrote *Smoke Signals*. Not

surprisingly, alcoholism as a theme is present in his novels. However, the role of alcohol differs between Alexie's stories and his screenplay. For example, in *The Lone Ranger*, Victor is an extreme alcoholic, the disease taking over almost every aspect of his life. In contrast, during a conversation between Victor and a police officer in the film, Victor tells him: "I've never had a drop of alcohol in my life, Officer. Not one drop" (*Smoke Signals*). The inconsistency between the stories and the film suggests that these changes were made due to commercial reasons and not biographical ones. Scott Rosenfelt and Larry Estes, two non-Indigenous producers, shaped *Smoke Signals* in an unlikely way. Had Alexie been given full control over the film's adaptation, the outcome would likely have been different.

Access to financing in the production of Indigenous feature filmmaking is challenging because with only minimal financing, film production cannot move forward. Since one of the key barriers is a lack of access to project financing, Indigenous production companies must seek funding by partnering with a production company that has successfully released a theatrical film within the last five years. This is problematic because partnering with a production company with such success has the power to compromise Indigenous filmmakers' cultural identity, the very thing they strive to convey. Other factors include the lack of Indigenous actors and actresses within the Indigenous film community, and transitioning from short films and television to the big screen where the requirements and funding differ (Goulet 5).

A good example of the difficulties in funding Indigenous films is Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), the second feature film made by an Indigenous filmmaker in Canada which thirteen years after its release, is still regarded as a milestone in filmmaking. Writer Paul Apak began the project in 1996. He wanted to create a screenplay completely in Inuktitut (Evans, "Video" 128). Apak and others involved in the project knew that the people at Isuma had the talent, experience, and the Igloolik community's support. All the community needed was \$2,000,000, a relatively small amount considering James Cameron made *Titanic* for \$200,000,000 in that same year (Weinraub, par.1). In order to begin production on *Atanarjuat*, Isuma applied to Telefilm for funding.

Telefilm Canada describes itself as "a team of some 200 enthusiasts of Canadian cinema. Dedicated to the cultural, commercial and industrial success of Canada's audiovisual industry, Telefilm, through its various funding and promotion programs, supports dynamic companies and creative talent here at home and around the world" ("About Telefilm", par. 2). "From its creation in 1967 until 1983, Telefilm Canada's budget was limited...It was not until 1986, when Telefilm's Feature Film Fund was allocated over \$30 million, that it was given the resources necessary to make any meaningful impact on the feature film industry" ("Written Submission" 6). Since then there has been little contribution to Indigenous feature films. For example, between 2008 and 2012 Telefilm funded the production of 310 feature films. Of this total, only five movies were

made by Indigenous filmmakers. In that same time span, the Ontario Media Development Corporation supported the production of 115 feature films with only one movie made by an Indigenous filmmaker (Goulet 2).

Telefilm garners more than \$200,000,000 in the support and creation of Canadian filmmaking. The Canadian Television Fund (CTF) receives half of the available funds. Therefore, of the \$200,000,000, \$100,000,000 goes to the CTF. Each half is divided again so \$50,000,000 goes to support private projects while the other \$50,000,000 goes to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Isuma falls into the private sector of that division so the filmmaker could apply for a portion of that \$50,000,000. Unfortunately, the four \$50,000,000 allocations are divided again. The money is split so sixty-five percent of the funds are given to programs in English while the other thirty-five percent is given to programs in French (Evans, "Video" 129). Because *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* was completely in Inuktitut the film was not eligible for funding. To address this issue both Telefilm and the Canadian Television Fund each set aside an extra \$1,000,000 for Indigenous film production. The discrepancy between the Indigenous fund versus the English and French fund is enormous. Indeed, Isuma believes that this structural bias undermines Indigenous filmmaking. The seeming institutional assumptions are that Indigenous filmmakers are less professional than Anglophone or Francophone filmmakers and therefore do not need comparable levels of funding. English and French projects can receive up to

\$1,000,000 while Indigenous filmmakers can only request a mere \$100,000 (Evans, “Video” 129). While this sum is arguably a substantial amount of money for many filmmakers, a study collected from the Sundance submissions showed that “the average budget for an independent film was found to be \$750,000 per movie, a number that was rounded down to be conservative” (Renée, par. 3). Given the complexity of Isuma’s project, *The Fast Runner* required additional funds to accommodate the cast, costume production, set building, and other aspects to ensure it had the highest standard (Evans, “Video” 129-130).

Isuma applied for the \$1,000,000 funding pot but because the film was not classified as either English or French, Telefilm would only grant \$100,000 for production of the film. Even though the funding was small compared to the \$2,000,000 needed, any funding was important. Canadian Inuk producer and director Zacharias Kunuk and his colleague Norman Cohn, “Isuma’s most vigorous voice on political matters,” wrote to Telefilm expressing their concerns about the language categorization (Evans “Video” 124). The resulting disadvantage would always plague their work and “it would doom them to producing only small, low-budget programs, while producers who made English – and French – language movies would have access to much larger funds” (Evans, “Video” 124, 130). Kunuk and Cohn wanted the opportunity to compete with other major Canadian producers for larger funds.

Isuma endured many obstacles throughout this process. One obstacle was a broadcast commitment from a network. After securing a commitment with the CBC the value of the broadcast was “not *allowed* to be counted [in] the [film’s] budget that Telefilm required of Isuma” (Evans, “Video” 130). After countless letters, arguments, and attempts to try and find other sources of funding, Kunuk, Cohn, and Telefilm drew up a way of sourcing money that would make *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* a promising and successful endeavor (Evans, “Video” 130). Production of the film began in the spring of 1998 but by May of that year, Telefilm had exhausted all of its funding before it issued Isuma the rest. Production halted and, according to Telefilm, Isuma had failed to submit applications on time, which knocked the Isuma requests out of the running to be shown at the inauguration of the Nunavut territory on April 1, 1999. “Kunuk and Cohn...feel that the underlying problem is a racist funding system that tries to use the ideas of affirmative action to keep professional aboriginal producers permanently locked into a small-scale funding system” (Evans, “Video” 131).

The Telefilm public-relations department explained that funding for *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* had not been suspended and there was no funding agreement in place. Outstanding advances totaled “\$119,770” (Evans, “Video” 132). In the production proposal, Isuma asked Telefilm to invest \$1,000,000 but the agency did not deliver. Telefilm had approximately \$500,000 allocated to the film. Eventually Kunuk and Cohn started the funding process again. The second

time around, The National Film Board of Canada gave the producers the money to put towards making of the film and the process moved forward. Taping finally resumed in the spring of 1999 and the film premiered in 2001 (Evans, “Video” 133). Securing funding for *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* was a milestone for Kunuk and Cohn. Despite their success they still faced adversity in finding distribution for their film.

The final barrier that Goulet and Swanson identify as inhibitors of feature film production in Canada is access to distribution. One of the financial challenges Isuma faces is that most of their income goes to the production of videos, not the sale and distribution. *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* is an exception in this case. Once a video is made it is directly available for sale. The limited funding Isuma received for projects is used for “salaries, buy[ing] equipment, and keep[ing] the organization intact until the next project swings into action” (Evans, “Video” 136). There is little done to disseminate or distribute work. Access to distribution is challenging in the production of Indigenous films because the films are often self-distributed within Indigenous communities. However, Evans says that for the people of Isuma trying to increase the use of tapes is not worthwhile because sizeable sales amounts to a small sum of money (Evans, “Video” 136). Danis Goulet and Kerry Swanson illustrate how these barriers have impeded the evolutionary trajectory of Indigenous film. However, it is clear that the film *Empire of Dirt* marks the beginning of a new generation in this regard. For

example, the film's position is unclear because it is situated between a multitude of genres: ethnography, documentary, and cinematic filmmaking, which exemplify the film's versatility. *Empire of Dirt*'s positioning aligns it with more than one genre; but defies each of them by deviating from the typical formulas.

Thus, it is clear that *Empire of Dirt* marks a significant accomplishment in Canadian independent film. Set in Northern Ontario, *Empire of Dirt* explores the journey of three generations of women struggling to confront a haunted past. The narrative addresses addiction, young motherhood, residential school, and acknowledging past mistakes in order to forgive and move forward in the present. Cara Gee, who plays Lena, says that often in film Indigenous people are “represented as being a problem” (Mehta, par. 8). Therefore, the film surpasses the expectation of what might be expected of a film that focuses on Indigenous characters. Jennifer Podemski, who plays Minnie and is a producer of the film, says that we rarely see “Native people reflected in cinema as three dimensional characters. There is a history of skewing the truth and misrepresentation...[the women] can't be lumped together with any other women, they're just themselves. That's how you conquer stereotypes” (Mehta, pars. 11-13).

The ambiguity of *Empire of Dirt*'s position in cinema and its ability to cross over genres lies in the setting and predominately in the portrayal of the film's characters. Minnie, Lena, and Peeka's Indigenous background is only a partial reason for the struggles they experience as a family and as women. The

women are portrayed as human beings; people like everyone else. Indigenous cultural references are present but do not dominate the film in a way that makes the film feel educational. The film communicates knowledge through simplicity whereas the message of the film is not lost if the Indigenous references are not understood. The film positions itself outside of the margins of documentary and ethnographic filmmaking making *Empire of Dirt* a groundbreaking cinematic art form.

CHAPTER TWO

DOCUMENTARY AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS



Figure 2. Nanook listens to a gramophone. Still from *Nanook of the North*. Public domain.

MINNIE. So you're thirteen. Getting to be that time when you should be heading out for your vision quest.
PEEKA. What's that?
MINNIE. It's when you head out to the bush for a few days, don't eat anything, start hallucinating.
PEEKA. Pfft yeah right!
MINNIE. It's true. And then after...after a few days your spirit animal comes...comes to you in a dream.
PEEKA. Spirit animal?
MINNIE. Yep. Everyone has one. Could be eagle, coyote, prairie mouse.
PEEKA. I already know my spirit animal.
MINNIE. Oh yeah? You know your animal?
PEEKA. Yeah, Mahigan...are wolves. Did you do your vision quest thing?
MINNIE. Hell no! I ain't starvin' for nothing.
PEEKA. (Laughs) Yeah 'cause we're wolves (*Empire of Dirt*).

As a centrally important conversation in *Empire of Dirt*, the exchange between Minnie and Peekka is defined by its casual tone and by the fact that the two women talk while going for a walk. The discussion of Indigenous religious beliefs of spirit animals and vision quests – complex, sacred, and very personal experiences in Indigenous culture – this scene exemplifies *Empire of Dirt*'s strength in providing its audience with detailed cultural information in accessible and comprehensible ways. Rather, the information is given in a light-hearted and humorous manner, enabling viewers to understand a vision quest without having in-depth knowledge of the cultural practice. Indigenous viewers can connect with the practice on a deeper level because of their understanding. Not understanding the cultural reference or practice does not make the film less meaningful. The core message of *Empire of Dirt* remains. Structuring the film in this way foregrounds the ambivalence of the audience that is influenced by the writer's interpretation toward Indigenous culture. This scene also shows the complexity of classifying films into certain genres, for example, documentary and ethnography. *Empire of Dirt* asserts itself as a work of cinematic fiction but its informative nature gives the film both documentary and ethnographic qualities. By looking at earlier films that claim to be documentary and/or ethnographic it is possible to understand why the boundary separating the two genres is unclear. Examining existing Indigenous films that have documentary, ethnographic, and cinematic qualities such as Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, Alanis Obomsawin's *Kanehsatake: 270 Years*

of Resistance, and Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, Empire of Dirt* can be more clearly situated by drawing comparisons and contrasts to each.

Nanook of the North (1922) is considered to be one of the first ethnographic films (Van Dongen 3). The film documents the lives of Nanook and his family as they live, hunt, and survive in the Arctic. Considered to be a cinematic milestone for its time, *Nanook of the North* continues to be a relevant film because of the discussion it encourages surrounding modern day ethnographic and documentary filmmaking.

The release of Flaherty's later film *Moana* (1926), a docu-fiction style film, earned him the title "Father of the Documentary Film," (Van Dongen 3) and the term 'documentary' was coined to describe "the dramatization of the everyday life of ordinary people" (*Moana*; Marsh, par. 2). Flaherty set out into the sub-Arctic eastern coast of Hudson Bay to film *Nanook of the North*, intending to create a film portraying the everyday lives of the Inuk people. To look at *Nanook of the North* objectively, it is important to examine what distinguishes ethnographic films from documentary. Unlike documentaries, an ethnographic film should be entirely factual. An entirely factual account of events is regarded as anthropological: one that advances scientific research and records a culture solely for preservation purposes. Anthropologists see film as a medium that assists in their research; a part of the larger whole. If a film becomes too artful or edited it is possible that the viewer will lose sight of the content, once again

rendering the film non-ethnographic. One of the problems with filmmakers producing ethnographic films instead of anthropologists is that an anthropologist's intention is different than a filmmaker's (Jarvie 196). The filmmakers' intention is to tell the whole and have it form a story. Despite these ideas it is important to acknowledge variances in perspective and subjectivity. In addition, once a camera is introduced, it has potential to automatically disrupt the integrity of the film by influencing the behavior of the subjects regardless of the filmmaker's intention (Jarvie 197). Recording itself is subjective, so what is considered important will vary among filmmakers with different visions. By looking at *Nanook of the North* and its position in documentary and ethnography it becomes clearer why the discussion surrounding the film remains significant today. The intention of Flaherty's expedition to film *Nanook* as an explorer and not a scholar should exclude the film from ethnography. The film shows specific aspects of culture that appear to be staged, and does not attempt to preserve the anthropological record (Jarvie 196). In reference to Flaherty's work, Helen van Dongen states "[he] approximated reality, emphasized what would enhance his world, molded facts and transposed time until they would fit into the world of his own creation, omitting what would interfere" (Jarvie 196). Several instances demonstrate why the film should not be considered ethnographic.

The film opens with a series of slides that tell "a story of life and love in the actual arctic" (*Nanook of the North*). Although the arctic scenery is actual,

other aspects are not. As film critic Roger Ebert noted in a review, the role of Nanook was cast by hunting reputation, further emphasizing the staging of the film. In addition, “Nanook” is a pseudonym; the actor’s real name is Allakariallak. In the film, he has wives and children who are not actually his (Ebert, par. 5). Every scene is carefully composed in such a way that the intention for a story to be told is obvious. Scenes were carefully chosen to show special activity, and embellished descriptions of the story enhance the film’s dramatic effect between scenes. The Inuit people are described as “the most cheerful people in the world – the fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Eskimo[s]” (*Nanook of the North*). The music that accompanies the film is highly cinematic, heightening anticipation in exciting and dramatic moments. For example, Nanook’s struggle to pull the seal up from under the ice without falling under himself is accompanied by highly climactic music. Once the seal is pulled from the water the music resumes its mellow nature as if to announce the successful end to Nanook’s battle. In addition, the frames of the film were sped up in a later version to accompany the fast-paced soundtrack and enhance the films climactic moments. The film was previously accompanied by a simpler and mellower arrangement, which made the film appear less theatrical. Flaherty’s conscious cinematic decisions detract from the authenticity or anthropological framework, demonstrating the discrepancy between ethnographic, documentary, and cinematic films. An anthropological film that seeks to record information would

not seek to tell a story as *Nanook of the North* does. In one of the first notable scenes in *Nanook of the North*, a trader introduces Nanook to a gramophone, a device for recording and playing sound. Nanook holds and looks puzzlingly at the record in a childlike way as if he has never seen one before. He tries to bite the record, looks at the trader and smiles. Finally, he looks directly into the camera and smiles at Flaherty, suggesting his acknowledgment of being on camera. Would he have been childlike had the camera not been present?

In a manuscript from Columbia University, the following account took place between Flaherty and Allakariallak while discussing a walrus hunt. Flaherty told Allakariallak that he might have to give up a kill if it interfered with his film. Allakariallak replied, “Yes, yes, the aggie (movie) will come first...Not a man will stir, not a harpoon will be thrown until you give the sign. It is my word” (Ruby 431). This conversation shows Flaherty’s commitment to shaping his artistic vision and confirms that the film does not depict social existence realistically.

Another scene in the film shows Nanook and his family building an igloo. Flaherty had Nanook build the igloo with only three sides so cameras could record what was going on inside (Schexnayder, par. 3). Scholars confirm that Flaherty asked Nanook to build a larger igloo to accommodate his camera. Later, the film shows Nanook building a window in the top of the igloo. Apparently Flaherty had to insert additional holes in the roof for sufficient camera lighting

(Jarvie 197). From an anthropologic view an ethnographer would not have filmed the igloo the same way that Flaherty did. An ethnographer would want to capture the natural process of building an igloo while Flaherty purposely altered the structure of the igloo in order to capture a specific process that would work within the limitations of his filming. Although the hunting skills and the building process of the igloo may be real, the circumstances under which they were filmed are not. “Reality” is subjective. It may be defined differently according to each filmmaker’s perspective and intent, and what he or she deems important to convey to the audience. Cinematic films that accurately depict the practices of a culture have merit; however, since they do not depict the full reality of the events they portray, they should not be classified as “ethnographic.” Therefore, *Nanook of the North* possesses ethnographic qualities but should not be considered ethnographic because of its inaccuracies and untruths. These fallacies override the truths that lie in Nanook’s skill and processes. The comparison and contrast between *Nanook of the North* and *Empire of Dirt* is extensive. Although both films claim to record an accurate account of Indigenous people, they do so in different ways. For example, Flaherty staged much of his filming in order to produce certain results, which happens to enhance the stereotypical representations of Indigenous people. Similarly, *Empire of Dirt* is staged and cinematic. However, the portrayal of Indigenous women in Masters’ film provides a seemingly more accurate depiction than Flaherty’s ethnographic account. The

film is successful in this regard and also dispels the misrepresentations of Indigenous people. While Flaherty's film assists in the enhancing of stereotypes and clearly shows how filmic images of Indigenous peoples created in a Eurocentric mindset are explicable, *Empire of Dirt* represents a different type of depiction that reinforces the eradication of Indigenous stereotypes present in film. The discrepancies and correlations between *Nanook of the North* and *Empire of Dirt* further complicate how film is labeled and separated into genres.

The terms "documentary" and "ethnography" are controversial. I believe that documentary resides in the artistic realm – one that strives to construct a story and narrative while ethnography's roots are anthropological – to further the scientific understanding of cultures where artistic rendering is unnecessary. I am concerned with how Indigenous films – films originating in and characteristic of a particular region or country, sit within the trajectory of documentary and ethnographic filmmaking and how they blur that line. Looking at perspectives of scholars helps provide insight when distinguishing documentary and ethnographic films. The critic Susan Sontag explains that in roughly the year 1895 two modes of cinema emerged, "cinema as the transcription of real unstaged life and cinema as invention, artifice, illusion, [and] fantasy" (par. 3). The above dichotomy complements the view of scholar Lynn Fels. As part of her doctoral studies, Fels explored the effects of combining storytelling with science. She says filmmaking is "a research methodology that uses the arts as a process or medium

of research” (8). Documentary films involve artistic rendering but that should not be a concern for ethnographic films since their purpose is scientific, not entertainment. For years, cinema was categorized as either fantasy or truth until a multitude of genres emerged. According to Michael Cox it was in the final decades of the twentieth century when the line separating documentary “blurred to such an extent that a crisis developed” (par. 3). Issues with documentaries arise because they cannot be separated from the maker’s agenda. All filmmakers have their own political views, biases, and curiosities, and they may try to fulfill goals of the commissioned organization for which they are making the film. In documentary filmmaking there is a desire to show what is or was. The filmmaker is responsible for how the subjects and events are presented. Events and subjects may be presented in humorous or sympathetic ways, shown with balanced or unbalanced viewpoints or with a combination of factors. Cox says that “documentaries have been informing – and misleading – us for the last one hundred [and] fifteen years” (par. 6).¹ To better understand how films mislead us Cox proposed an interesting experiment where he would

¹An example of a misleading film is Hollywood’s *Argo*, which is based on the true story of the CIA’s plan to rescue six endangered American embassy escapees during the Iranian Revolution in the 1970s. Although the film’s opening minutes feel like a documentary, the film portrays that the CIA was responsible for the Americans’ rescue but according to President Jimmy Carter, Canada was responsible for 90 percent of the operation. The misrepresentation of true events caused backlash toward director Ben Affleck at a Toronto screening (Rio), which demonstrates that we view film with certain expectations. If a film is labeled as non-fiction but contains untruths, the audience feels deceived.

Present a ten-minute domestic scene to an audience divided into three groups, in three separate showings. Those in *Theatre A* would be told they were watching an unedited rough cut of a drama; those in *Theatre B* would be told they were watching unedited footage of a documentary, and those in *Theatre C* would not be given any prior information about the scene (par. 76).

In particular, Cox was concerned with how audience responses would differ based on their prior information. He believes that “we approach cinema (and theatre, and literature) with a prejudicial expectation, and tailor our responses to fit the expectation” (par. 76). Our beliefs about films affect the way we experience them. Ethnographers have a responsibility to inform their viewers of the circumstances under which the film is shot. Certain compromises come with making documentaries. Brian Winston notes that a viewer has to be open to the idea that these films are “objective evidence of the subjective experience of the filmmaker” (164). Cox suggests that we learn to use the term “docu-fiction” more openly. Having the word “fiction” as part of the word “documentary” makes us approach the work “with more caution, a more critical response (which we should be doing anyway), and [we have] the expectation that reality cannot be captured simply, accurately, and objectively” (par. 108).

Ethnography is often regarded as a product of anthropological study. Ethnographic films reveal information about primitive cultures, cultural patterning, and people. One of the problems with trying to define ethnography is that people often assume the term to mean “having to do with people” which

encompasses every film in some way whether it involves people being on camera or behind the camera (Ruby 106). Therefore, all films “say something about the culture of the individuals who made them and who use them” (Heider 4). Thus, anyone is capable of producing ethnography regardless of qualifications or intent. The problem with this argument is that architecture, writing, music, and drawing all involve people in some way. Ethnography studies people in a specific context that differs from how scientists or painters interact with people. Ethnography is the study of culture, which happens to involve people. *Nanook of the North* continues to have a controversial reputation and this is largely in part due to Flaherty labeling the film as ethnographic combined with the contradictions that his film exert (Huhndorf, “Nanook and His Contemporaries” 128).



Figure 3. Warrior and Canadian Soldier at Kanehsatake. Still from *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada. All rights reserved.

The film *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* is powerful because it is not a re-telling or reenactment of events, but a depiction of an actual stand-off during a land dispute between the Mohawk people and the Canadian government. Filmed by journalists who smuggled a video camera onto the site, *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* blurs the line between documentary and ethnographic film because it is a real life account of events told from an artistic point of view. The film raises emotionally powerful issues that resonate with people in various ways. Although the directing and editing are sympathetic to the Mohawk people, it is still admirably honest in its portrayal. The documentary depicts the army as foolish. For example, two journalists put a small video camera in a box and crawled through the forest in broad daylight, sneaking past the army. When questioned by the media about how two journalists were able to get past them Major Alain Tremblay says, “Very good question. They were very agile” (*Kanehsatake*). When the press question Major Remy Landry about the journalists his response is “That’s *your* story. As far as we’re concerned, nobody got through our lines. We think they’ve probably been in there all the time” (*Kanehsatake*). At a later point in the film we see the army putting razor wire in the water to which one Mohawk responds, “Just the idea of putting razor wire in the water, come on guys...get real! I don’t think they really clued into the idea that we’re not going anywhere. It’s probably a concept they just can’t understand” (*Kanehsatake*). The documentary also shows unflattering footage of the Mohawk

people behaving immaturely, and a series of racially motivated attacks occur on both sides through shouting matches and physical violence.

The contrast of cinematic styles present in *Nanook of the North* and *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* is thought provoking. *Nanook of the North* claims to be authentic, portraying real events and people, while evidence suggests these claims are untrue. *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* claims to do the same but the footage is real. Yet, both films are considered documentaries despite the contrast in accuracy of the footage they present. Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* has an unusual position in this trajectory because it is shot in a documentary-like style and strives to show an authentic culture, people, and story. The film does not claim to show a real account of events, people, and/or culture but because it was filmed using a technique that gives it a documentary feel, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* blurs the boundary between documentary and fiction.

The film opens by invoking oral tradition with a voice-over that says, "I can only say this story to someone who understands it" (*Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*). This suggests that the film has special meaning for viewers who are Inuit. Subtitles throughout the film are alienating to audiences who are unfamiliar with the language. Huhndorf says the "subtitles...do not fully account for the action that unfolds on the screen and they frequently fade into the visual imagery" ("Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner" 825). She emphasizes that the lack of complete

translation automatically separates the insiders from the cultural outsiders. Despite this, the film is a transformative medium that allows people the opportunity to experience an unfamiliar culture. *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* is praised for its universal and ethnographic qualities and “translates a foreign, exotic culture for ‘us’” (Krupat 617).



Figure 4. *Atanarjuat*. Still from *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Courtesy of IsumaTV.

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner has a similar narrative and aesthetic as *Nanook of the North*. Although both films document, by re-enacting, ways of life that seem to be perpetually in danger of disappearing, the portrayals are drastically different. *Nanook of the North* conveys the people and culture in a stereotypical and romanticized way, and shows practices of questionable accuracy. This variation can be attributed to the fact that *Nanook of the North* was filmed by an American filmmaker, while *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* was filmed

by an Inuit filmmaker. Because it was filmed from the perspective of a cultural insider, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* has a more accurate feel. Parallels in narrative and aesthetic between these two films are important because they indicate evolution in film. Filmmakers cannot help but be influenced by the films they watch. As a result, the filmmaker may consciously or unconsciously incorporate such influences into the creation of their work. *Nanook of the North* was groundbreaking because it was the first attempt at an ethnographic depiction of the Inuit. Its creation was invaluable in inspiring the making of other Indigenous films.

It is clear that Kunuk's film is a work of cinematic fiction while Flaherty's is presented as an ethnographic account (Crosbie 135). In contrast to Flaherty's film, the end credits of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* are accompanied by film footage confirming that the story is fiction. For example, there are several shots of the film and sound crew. There is also a cut showing one of the actors during a nude scene. He has a blanket wrapped around him and dances around trying to keep warm between takes (*Atanarjuat*). The film does not claim to be documentary or ethnographic like Flaherty's does. Huhndorf says reviewers' interpretations of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* are problematic because "the narrative elements of love, jealousy, revenge, and struggles for power" as well as the mythic nature is like other fictional and literary classics such as *Macbeth* and *The Odyssey* ("Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner" 822). Despite this viewpoint,

Huhndorf says others choose to focus on the film's authenticity and attention to cultural practices, which enhance its documentary qualities. Straddling the boundary between documentary, fiction, and ethnography, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* should not be considered ethnographic because it "leaves cultural practices unexplained" which traditional ethnography would not ("Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner" 825). Kunuk further explained during a lecture that altering the story did not make the film less accurate. In fact, Apak changed the end of the story because "we are in the modern age and because killing doesn't solve anything" (Brown C01). When asked if he had made any changes to the original legend of *Atanarjuat*, he replied:

Paul Apak talked and we all changed the ending. In the original story when they are fighting inside the ice igloo, he [Atanarjuat] smashed his head. Paul felt that that doesn't make any sense. That is going to go on and on and on. We also knew that they used to just send people away instead of killing them and that was a better ending so we chose that. [Paul] even asked the elders, is it all right to change the end? I remember one of the elders answering him, "We are storytellers" (Kunuk, "Transcript" par. 38).

This comment shows that one person's truth may not necessarily be that of someone else. The story of *Atanarjuat* is part of an oral tradition where changes can be made and the story's core will remain intact. Kunuk wanted to get beneath the stereotype of the Inuit as "all-innocent, all-good, all-smiling people who eat raw meat" (Brown C01). Kunuk emphasizes that "All of these stories [the oral traditions] are lectures. They have reference to how...you want to lead your life"

(Brown C01). The success of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* set the precedent for the production of other Indigenous films with ambitions to cross cultures. An example of a successful crossing of cultures in a modern day setting is depicted in *Empire of Dirt*.

Empire of Dirt is a commercial film that addresses contemporary Indigenous subjects in an unaggressive manner and presents them in a human and real way. Unlike documentaries and ethnographic films, *Empire of Dirt's* goal is not to “educate” viewers formally; it does so in a subtle and non-confrontational way. Made for an array of viewers, *Empire of Dirt* appeals to people from different cultural backgrounds. Those who identify as Indigenous will find the cultural symbolism and references meaningful. Strengths of the film are its dialogue and direction. They reassure the audience that if the Indigenous references are not understood, the film’s message is not lost. There are four notable scenes in *Empire of Dirt* where references to Indigenous culture, practices, and stereotypes are addressed in an unconventional way. The references are especially meaningful to those who connect with Indigenous culture, yet do not undermine the uninitiated viewers.

Empire of Dirt is a film about three generations of Indigenous women: a grandmother, mother, and daughter. Lena is a strong thirty-year-old mother who works as a maid. Lena’s mother, Minnie, kicked her out of the house when she became pregnant at an early age. She moved to the city, where she had to fend for

herself and the baby. Lena's daughter, Peekka, is on the same destructive path that Lena was as a teen. She is involved with a bad crowd, is defiant, and is hospitalized after inhaling spray paint. After Peekka's hospitalization, Lena decides it is best for them to leave town. So, they travel to northern Ontario to reunite with Lena's estranged mother, Minnie, who runs a successful bait & tackle shop.



Figure 5. Lena and Peekka play pool at the local bar. Still from *Empire of Dirt*. Courtesy of Jennifer Podemski.

The first notable reference to Indigenous culture occurs in a conversation between Peekka and Minnie. Minnie produces a small wooden box and asks Peekka if she wants to see it. Peekka asks what it is.

MINNIE. Photos and stuff.

PEEKKA. You know you don't look old enough to be a grandmother.

MINNIE. Well thank god for that. (She pulls out a photo) That's your Mom...that's your *Mushoom*.²

PEEKA. *Mushoom* means grandfather?

MINNIE. Mmhhh. Ben, Cree boy from the Prairies. Beautiful Ben. He loved your mother. He loved you too.

PEEKA. Are we Cree?

MINNIE. You're Cree and Ojibwe and a little bit of this a little bit of that. You're family and that's what's important.

PEEKA. He shot himself?

MINNIE. Yeah. Residential school.

PEEKA. What's residential school? (*Empire of Dirt*)

Minnie takes a deep breath as if to prepare herself for what she knows will be a long explanation. Seeing the pain in her grandmother's face, Peekka changes the subject. This scene is important because even without further explanation the viewer can see from Minnie's response that residential schools are a difficult topic. The experience of being placed in a residential school was traumatic for generations of Indigenous youth and their families and left wounds that have not been healed despite official efforts to right society's past wrongs. In an interview with Jian Ghomeshi, a Canadian broadcaster, Jennifer Podemski says that part of the importance of the film is "the legacy story of what happens to people...how people become broken because of certain legacies, in this case residential school" (Podemski). The experience of residential school drove Peekka's grandfather to suicide; an indication of the pain it caused him. Other scenes depict how the pain

² Mushoom – I came across several spellings of this term and chose this particular version having seen it more than once.

of the experience has spread to his loved ones, and continues to affect them long after his death.

Distracted by her grief for her father, Lena is struck by a truck and lies in the hospital. Upset over her mother's accident, Peekka sits on the grass smoking a cigarette as Minnie approaches from behind. Peekka quickly tosses her cigarette to the ground hoping Minnie did not see her smoking. She sits down beside Peekka.

MINNIE. Hey! Drop something?

PEEKKA. You really want to give me shit now?

Minnie sighs and begins rolling the cigarette. She rolls the cigarette to release the tobacco, closes her eyes, and offers the tobacco to the earth.

MINNIE. You know...tobacco opens a door to the Creator.

PEEKKA. So.

MINNIE. So...you say a prayer and you offer it to the earth...to say thanks. Here...give me your hand. Make it count.

Minnie places some tobacco into Peekka's hand and she too makes an offering to the earth.

PEEKKA. Do you think anyone's listening?

MINNIE. Well I prayed for you. Here you are (*Empire of Dirt*).

This scene shows an important practice in Indigenous culture. Minnie does not go into great detail about all the uses of tobacco. She says that it is a sign of respect, used to heal, and gives spiritual protection. In the scene's context it is unnecessary to go into detail. It is clear that Minnie and Peekka are praying for Lena's recovery and well-being after her accident. The importance of herbs in Indigenous culture

manifests in a later scene when Lena is in the hospital with Charmaine, a family relative. With no dialogue, Charmaine lights a stick of herbs (most likely sage) and circles the smoke around Lena's head. Lena takes in the smoke then closes her eyes. She brings her hands together and the smoke towards her face. Viewers who are familiar with the practice would know that a smudging ceremony is often carried out for the purpose of clearing negative energy. The ceremony is an invitation of harmony into one's life and to ease challenging situations. The practice can be as simple as the one shown in the film but can involve more time and devotion depending on the situation ("Health", par 3). Perhaps the ceremony is an invitation for those who do not recognize the practice to look into the meaning. Ultimately, Podemski wanted to make a film that "resonated with a global audience," which *Empire of Dirt*'s does ("Jennifer Podemski Interview").

What makes *Empire of Dirt* distinctive is the film's perspective. The film situates itself close to the boundaries that define specific genres but always remains outside of them. In an interview, Podemski explains that Indigenous voices are few and far between and the films that are produced tend to be issue-driven ("Jennifer Podemski Interview"). Defying images of the Indian princess and the noble savage, *Empire of Dirt* moves away from being a culturally specific piece of work. *Empire of Dirt* has a unique perspective. In light of the tensions and differences in filmic depiction, it is clear why *Empire of Dirt* intentionally blurs the line between documentary and ethnography. For example, ethnic identity

in the film reflects a sense of lost identity amongst some members of Indigenous communities.

Not only is *Empire of Dirt* cinematic, as well as artistically written and directed, it is also informative but not in the same capacity as a documentary. *Empire of Dirt* arguably has documentary-like qualities due to its informative nature in addition to its accurate portrayal of Indigenous women. However, if Masters wanted *Empire of Dirt* to be more documentary-like, she would have gone into more detail to explain the Indigenous references and practices she purposely made light of and brushed off. *Empire of Dirt* is a pinnacle film in Indigenous cinematography because it is unlike anything that has been done before.

Empire of Dirt sits within Indigenous filmmaking in Canada in a complex way. Cara Gee says that the film tells a “really human story in a really human way and it’s authentic because these women happen to be Native” (Podemski). The film challenges the stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous women and presents Minnie, Lena, and Peekka in a non-stereotypical and honest way. Classified as a family drama, the film blurs the boundary between documentary and fiction. Despite the fact that the film is cinematic, *Empire of Dirt*’s portrayal of Indigenous women is more accurate and truthful than any earlier representations of Indigenous women in both documentary and cinematic films. *Empire of Dirt*’s tendency to defy clear classification can also be observed when considering other

film genres. For example, when situated in the genre of the “chick flick” why is it that the trailer for *Empire of Dirt* sets up expectations that the film is a “chick flick” when the film is not? Why not frame it as an Indigenous film when it is? I am concerned with the trajectory of Indigenous filmmaking in Canada and what context gives *Empire of Dirt* meaning within this trajectory. This can be better understood by looking at characteristics of the film that both defy and conform to each trajectory and what happens when they intersect.

CHAPTER THREE

CHICK FLICKS



Figure 6. Minnie, Lena, and Peekka in a warm embrace. Still from *Empire of Dirt*. Courtesy of Jennifer Podemski.

LENA. Peekka?

RUSSELL. What about her?

LENA. Oh! What about her?!

RUSSELL. Woah woah hey hey wait! Wait! What? Okay...okay
okay okay okaaay. Listen. Listen...listen...if she's mine...

LENA. IF she's yours?! Are you serious?

RUSSELL. Well I...how do I know...I can't...how am I...she
doesn't...she's like...she's darker than...you!

LENA. (Interrupting) Oh for fuck sake! Are you serious?

Russell...back then...uhh...

RUSSELL. What?

LENA. You were the only one. What? I know, it's crazy right?!

Slutty little Lena. She actually liked you.

RUSSELL. Lena. Hey. Hey. Hey...I had no idea.

LENA. Would it have made a difference?

RUSSELL. ...yeah (*Empire of Dirt*).

This scene from *Empire of Dirt*, occurring in the middle of the narrative, portrays the heightened drama of an imperfect world. The scene conveys a very real situation and is an example of how people—women, in particular—can similarly relate to intense relationship conflict. The attraction here is that of the chick flick: a chance to escape reality for an hour or two by immersing oneself in the drama, emotions, and life lessons of these female characters.

Empire of Dirt conforms to the formula of a chick flick in several ways. Specifically, Lena is a strong woman who faces and overcomes adversity, including the loss of loved ones. Like a typical chick flick, there is a relationship between the amount of responsibilities she has, and her level of unhappiness. An Indigenous filmmaker using the “chick flick” as a genre shows the strides that have been made in the representation of Indigenous women in film and attempts to push past the boundaries of the genres trivial canopy. By portraying Indigenous women as passionate, powerful, and independent, *Empire of Dirt* transforms this particular genre in an unlikely way, similar to how *Thelma & Louise* was a remarkable turning point for women's roles in society.

Thelma & Louise celebrates the story of two women who start out frustrated but discover their power. Thelma is a housewife trapped in an abusive marriage. Louise, a waitress in a coffee shop, is dating a musician who is not ready to settle down. Frustrated with their lives, the two best friends decide to take a road trip. Not a curl out of place and their makeup perfectly done, Thelma and Louise begin

the adventure of a lifetime. Thelma and Louise's first stop is at a bar where they meet a charming, handsome cowboy who spends the evening dancing with Thelma. When he attempts to rape her, Louise comes to the rescue and kills him. Convinced that no one will believe their story because of the patriarchal prejudice against women, Thelma and Louise run. On their journey they meet J.D., a charismatic cowboy who exploits Thelma's vulnerability and sexual desire. Several times Thelma and Louise encounter a rugged and sadistic truck driver who continually makes inappropriate advances towards them. They ignore him at first. Fed up with his advances, at the end they symbolically castrate him by blowing up his semi truck. Thelma and Louise encounter several males throughout the film, mostly jerks. The only male who is sympathetic towards them and their situation is Hal, the head police officer who is trailing them. In a way he embodies both sexes. He possesses masculine qualities but is also empathetic towards Thelma and Louise.

The ending shows Thelma and Louise being chased by several cop cars. Barricaded by the police on one side and the Grand Canyon in front of them, they face a choice.

THELMA. Okay, then listen...let's not get caught.

LOUISE. What are you talking about?

THELMA. Let's keep going!

LOUISE. What do you mean?

THELMA. Go!

LOUISE. You sure?

THELMA. Yeah! Hit it (*Thelma & Louise*).

Louise grabs Thelma and gives her a kiss. They grab each other's hands. Louise steps on the gas and they fly off the cliff together. The catharsis shot is a freeze frame of Thelma and Louise in mid-air as they fly off into the Grand Canyon, symbolizing their continued freedom. Thelma and Louise prefer death to being caught and living a life where they had no freedom in the first place.

By placing *Empire of Dirt* in a trajectory starting from *Thelma & Louise* and continuing through *Sex and the City*, we can see different types of feminist perspectives and their incorporation into film, as well as how feminist ideologies have evolved over time. To better understand this evolution it is important to look at a brief history of the "chick flick" and the gradual shift in its connotation.

"Chick flick" is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as: "A film [that] appeals to young women" ("Chick Flick"). Historically, the term "chick" held a negative connotation. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young say "At the height of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, the word "chick" was considered an insult, a demeaning diminutive, casting independent young women as delicate, fluffy creatures" ("Chicks, Girls and Choice" 87). Previously known as "women's pictures," in the 1950s and 1960s, these films evolved into a specific genre.

"Chick flick" entered the public vocabulary in the 1980s and 1990s, when movies targeted at women were released in abundance. Meant to connect with women, chick flicks address issues specifically of interest to women. However, these

issues are usually superficial, including topics like men, relationships, shoes, and shopping.

Through viewing “chick flicks”³ over approximately fifteen years, I have noticed some common themes. The characteristics and themes of chick flicks are generally romance-driven and involve a privileged, white, heterosexual female who is beautiful or in desperate need of a makeover, and is interested in materialism and substandard men.⁴ She does not realize the man with quality and depth in her life is whom she is meant to be with until the end. The female lead has a strong support system, which consists of a close-knit group of girlfriends or a gay male. Chick flicks support the belief that women are vulnerable, co-dependent, and insecure, which *Empire of Dirt* defies. When situated within the trajectory of “chick flicks” the film’s classification is complex and enigmatic as a result of how the film conforms to characteristics of “chick flicks” but most often

³ Originating in Middle English as “chike” – a variation of chicken, the term refers to the hatchling of a bird (“Chick” Oxford Dictionary). “Chick” was first reported in black slang in 1927, meaning “young woman” (“Chick” Online Etymology Dictionary). By the late 1930s and 1940s, classy women were referred to as “slick chicks” (Ammer 34). Often used as a term of endearment, “chick” suggests a certain delicateness and weakness. Besides the inference as a form of flattery and youth, the term poses women as “property of men, as children and, worse, as animals, like the far more pejorative *bitch*” (Ammer 91). The meaning of “chick” has changed over time. “Originally it was perceived as insulting because of the perception that it infantilized women. Now the word has been embraced by some women as a positive term of self-reference and an expression of camaraderie. When used as a modifier, as in *chick flick* and *chick lit*, its meaning is not restricted to young women and its use is not offensive” (“Chick” Dictionary).

⁴ For example, in *The Princess Diaries*, when quirky, clumsy Mia finds out that her family is royalty she is given lessons on how to be a princess and a dramatic aesthetic makeover. With her curly hair straightened, eyebrows plucked, and glasses replaced by contact lenses, her whole appearance is altered so she is deemed more beautiful and fit for the role of a princess. In addition, unattractive women are seen as undeserving of love, yet a man can be obese and unattractive and still win the heart of the most beautiful woman in the world.

defies them.

The female lead in “chick flicks” is a strong figure who currently faces or has triumphed over hardships at some point in her life. One hurdle is either the death or absence of someone important in her life. Generally the mother or father figure is present, but not both – a common theme. The more responsibility a woman has, the less happy she is. Even the strongest women have a drive towards self-destruction.

One of the biggest problems with chick flicks is that they try to illustrate what women aspire to be, yet end up setting derogatory examples and suggesting that all women aspire to the same Hollywood fantasy, which tend to be unrealistic.

The chick flick genre has evolved immensely. It has come to encompass a range of genres yet these films are still unrealistic in their portrayal of women and their aspirations. Therefore, “Instead of dwelling on our frustrations with chick flicks, we need to focus our attention on the movies Hollywood isn’t making, the movies that actually deal with our daily lives” (Thompson 45). *Empire of Dirt* does exactly this. The film does not feel like fantasy and takes real people, problems, and situations that matter and connects them to their audience. Mainstream chick flicks often lack this aspect. This film’s veracity makes it distinctive.

The film opens with a black screen and the sounds of harsh scrubbing. Lena

appears, wearing a maid's uniform while scrubbing away at a toilet. After she rushes off to pick up Peekka, who is expelled from school for smoking, they return to the house. Lena's client fires her for reasons unexplained. At several points in the film, we see Lena helping out at a youth centre for street kids. In one scene, Lena is telling a teenage boy that it took her a really long time and that he cannot beat himself up about it, referring to his drug use. At this point the viewer realizes that Lena used to be a drug user. The center is a sanctuary for Lena because it allows her to escape from her problems and help youth with similar struggles as she once had. When Peekka is hospitalized for inhaling spray paint, Lena fears the negative influences that abound so she takes Peekka to her estranged mother's house in northern Ontario in order to escape her problems and social services.

When Lena and Peekka arrive at Minnie's house, they greet each other awkwardly. From this interaction, the audience learns that Minnie has been absent from Lena's life, and that their relationship is hostile and tense. Soon, the audience learns of another significant loss that Lena has suffered. Her father committed suicide when she was a small child, a result of residential school. The death of Lena's father is a driving force of the film and the extent to which his suicide affects Lena is not clear until the end when she visits his grave. Inebriated, Lena looks down and says, "I thought we'd be better off without you. That life would be better off without you. You're probably right" (*Empire of*

Dirt). This scene is powerful because it reveals the true impact of Lena's father's death and how his absence has affected every aspect of her life. This is a reflection of the social conditions of Indigenous people and how those conditions are largely shaped by cultural factors. For example, "culture is crucial for learning and maintaining a strong ethnic identity" (Sawchuk, par. 36). Joe Sawchuk says

The well-being of all people is determined by a combination of social conditions including health, income, social support, education, employment, community, history and culture. Dispossession of cultural traditions, social inequities, prejudice and discrimination have all contributed to the challenges faced by [Indigenous] people in Canada. Many communities are implementing community-based strategies stressing the importance of history and culture; governance, culture and spirituality; unique qualities and values; the link between self-government and economic development; and the role and importance of traditional economies (par. 37).

This is key to improving the social conditions for Indigenous people in Canada.

Empire of Dirt's commentary on these underlying issues is significant because the film is a vehicle for commentary about such contemporary and pressing matters that continue to exist today as a result of a complicated history.

A pinnacle moment in the film is when Lena drives away from her father's grave. Inebriated, she takes a bend around a dirt road and comes face to face with a wolf. Surprised, she pulls over and slowly exits the truck. There is complete silence while Lena leisurely walks towards the wolf and crouches down before it. At the sudden sound of beating drums, the wolf darts away. Lena backs away towards the truck. She kneels and breaks down crying as if truly realizing for the

first time the impact of her choices and mistakes. As she stands up, Lena is struck by an approaching vehicle, which lands her in the hospital. This scene echoes a previous scene in the film when Peeka and Minnie are discussing animal spirit guides. It is not clear whether Lena's vision of the wolf is physical, spiritual, or the result of her inebriation.

The conversation that takes place between Minnie and Lena at the hospital shows them finally opening up to one another and willing to take responsibility for their actions. As Lena wakes up in the hospital, the first thing she says is:

LENA. I've been so stupid.

MINNIE. Welcome to the club. I've been a member since way back.

LENA. You and Peeka are good together. She's happy here. I don't want to hold her back.

MINNIE. That's a bunch of bullshit! She's happy here 'cause you're happy here. The important thing is that you're back. Bag of shit and bones but you're back. Gives me a chance...gives me a chance to make it right (*Empire of Dirt*).

The final scene is held in Minnie's backyard as family and friends gather for a barbecue. Guests are conversing outside when Lena shows up. Minnie gets up and calls Peeka over. Peeka runs into her mother's arms and Minnie envelops them both in a loving embrace and kisses her. Minnie hugs Lena and tells her that, "[she] missed [her] so much." Lena replies, "I love you mom" as she squeezes her even tighter (*Empire of Dirt*). This scene is the first display of affection between Minnie and Lena and suggests their relationship has taken a turn for the better.

Their conversation shows Minnie and Lena owning their past mistakes in a loving

way, as opposed to the avoidance of the issue and hostility toward one another throughout the majority of the film.

Like the common female qualities in chick flicks, male roles are usually stereotypical. For example, the female lead's love interest is usually a tall, dark and handsome bad boy who is in a relationship with the mean girl. The woman's best male friend is sweet and caring, yet she fails to see that he is the one for her until the end. Russell, the male character with the bad boy persona, has the most presence in *Empire of Dirt*. He convinces Lena that he is responsible and wants to get to know Peekka. On a picnic Lena becomes suspicious of Russell and finds out that he has gotten another woman pregnant with twins. Feeling betrayed, Lena ends things with Russell. Ultimately, he is more damaging in his presence than in his absence, which becomes apparent in his cycle of cheating and lying.

However, in contrast to Russell, *Empire of Dirt* is riddled with strong and powerful male characters that are also sympathetic, kind, and compassionate (arguably unusual traits for male characters). *Empire of Dirt* adheres to several common themes and characteristics that are present in chick flicks; however, the film strongly defies many of the stereotypical trajectories that situate *Empire of Dirt* in a new realm.

The most obvious characteristic that *Empire of Dirt* defies when compared to chick flicks is that Lena, Peekka, and Minnie are not white, privileged, or materialistic. None of the women in the film get a makeover. Their looks are

neither essential to the storyline, nor a measurement of their worth as it is for women in other chick flicks. While living in the city, Lena had modeled for a catalogue. Models are generally known for their physical beauty, and in chick flicks, physical beauty is usually associated with love and happiness. However, at the time of her modeling job, Lena was unhappy and struggling with drugs. Also, Lena's family comments that when they saw her in the catalogue, she looked "skinny," and do not explicitly associate the term with "beautiful." The inference here links to a fairly active critique of the modeling world, namely that adherence to the modeling world's standards of beauty are often a function of poor health and drug use. As such, Lena is no longer viable as a model precisely because she is physically and mentally healthy, and drug free. Here, beauty is positioned in a way that inverts how it is normally positioned in movies about female friendships and relationships.

Another theme that separates *Empire of Dirt* from conventional chick flicks is that the storyline is not romance-driven. Although Peekka's father, Russell, makes an appearance, his presence does not drive the story. Lena's close friend, Warren, is the man she confides in. There is no indication that Lena and Warren have any romantic interest in one another, or that they are supposed to end up together. This relationship defies the chick flick because from the beginning Lena already knows that Warren is a great guy. He maintains the role of a strong and supportive friend throughout the film. *Empire of Dirt* directly

defies the romance theme because romance in no way drives the film nor does the relationship between Lena and any other male character. In fact, the film is in decided ways anti-romance. One gets the sense that being among family, where romance/sexuality is completely off the table is good for everyone. For example, Minnie misses her husband but seems better off without him. Lena is clearly better off without the lying deadbeat Russell. And Peekka ended up in the hospital trying to impress a guy by huffing paint. In fact, the most influential male character in the film is Lena's father who is not present at all in her life. He is the driving force, but in an unusual way that differentiates this film from any other. He is the ultimate good and bad guy who Lena blames for her problems and her family's downfall. Unlike other films in this genre, *Empire of Dirt's* focus is on the women's relationships with the other women in their lives. Although the men are important, the film's focus is not on relationships between men and women. The "romance" that is shown in *Empire of Dirt* is not in the conventional and over-the-top style of most chick flicks.

Lena's support system is another main factor that separates *Empire of Dirt* from following the trajectory of the typical female-centric narrative. For example, one of the key components of chick flicks is that the female lead often has a strong support system of girlfriends who have a lot in common. This is unseen in the film. Rather, Lena's support system lies mainly at the centre for street kids.

But she does not discuss men or shoes. Instead, in a conversation with a colleague she discusses significant issues:

LENA. I feel like a failure. Like a fraud...you know...like I'm so far from having my own shit together.

DOUG. But you're our greatest success story.

LENA. (Laughs) Come on Doug. I've got like two hundred bucks to my name and my rent is overdue.

DOUG. You need money?

LENA. No, no...that's not what I mean. I've got a line on something...it's not...

DOUG. And Peek-a?

LENA. Hates me. Everything's a fight.

DOUG. Well, we love you. These kids love you. When we hunt in packs we're stronger right!?

LENA. Yeah...I don't know (*Empire of Dirt*).

This scene shows Lena using the support system of the community centre as an outlet to talk about issues such as having no place to live, no job, and most importantly, wanting to be a good mother. Lena does have a support system at the centre through friends like Doug and Warren, but it does not resemble the typical friendship patterns of such films.

The film further eludes the chick flick genre in its ending. In a typical chick flick, the female lead ultimately finds happiness despite her hardships. However, *Empire of Dirt* ends ambiguously, so it is unknown whether or not the women live happily ever after and that is as optimistic as it gets. These examples from *Empire of Dirt* show how the film conforms to and defies the chick flick, situating it in a grey area in that trajectory.

Although chick flicks have a reputation for being insipid and sexist, they are

actually rich in feminist and post-feminist⁵ ideals. Women's presence in American culture and the media increased in the 1990s. Female roles grew in prominence, so their importance in contemporary culture heightened. Feminists of the time saw "chick" as an offensive term and a rejection of the word "chick" meant that women and men were on more even ground. In today's world, second-wave feminists⁶ see the revival of the term as a step backwards, diminishing the efforts that women have made for political and professional equality (Ferriss and Young, "Chick Flicks" par. 6). Post-feminists who believe in "a return to femininity" and do not harbor blame of the patriarchy have adopted a new view towards the term "chick," assigning it a positive connotation of strength immersed in girl power (Ferriss and Young, "Chick Flicks" par. 10).

Karen Hollinger argues that often, because women are marginalized in mainstream cinema, films that are *about* and *for* women assume feminist perspectives. She adds that some feminists believe feminism cannot be properly defined through film. As fictional constructs, films do not address the real problem for women. Hollinger says that these films essentially "[co-opt] feminist

⁵ "Coming after the feminism of the 1960s and subsequent decades, in particular moving beyond or rejecting some of the ideas of feminism as out of date" ("Post-feminist").

⁶ "Second-wave feminism was born of the recognition that in spite of the considerable advances of the retrospectively christened First Wave of feminism, women had still not achieved genuine equality with men in every facet of life. Its starting point, in the US, was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which argues that women are trapped in a system that denies them self-identity as women and demands they find fulfillment through their husbands and children. Later writers, particularly those identifying as radical feminists, would use the term patriarchy as a shorthand for this systemic subordination of women at the level of culture itself, rather than individual men" (Buchanan 426).

ideas in order to recuperate them for (the ruling) patriarchy by harnessing them to other discourses that in effect neutralize their progressive potential” (4). Feminists are open to the idea of deconstructing films on different ideological levels. By Hollywood standards, women who define themselves through their friendship with each other rather than through relationships with men or, more pessimistically, had to be killed off.

Calli Khouri, the writer of *Thelma & Louise* says, “It is such a rare thing to go to a movie and think, God, that was a really interesting female character. I feel that the roles generally available to women in Hollywood films are incredibly stereotypical: the girlfriend, the wife, the moll, the prostitute, the rape victim, [or] the woman dying of cancer. I wanted to do something outside these terms” (Francke 127). With that in mind, one can argue that *Thelma & Louise* has feminist elements but fails to be fully feminist. For example, the women do not target specific males but instead reject forms of patriarchal control. They take on male roles when they rob a convenience store and lock a police officer in the trunk of his car. The characters are challenging what it means to be female.

There are a number of different reactions to the film. Anti-feminists tend to believe the way the film “bashes men” and glorifies the women’s violence is how the women achieve equality (Hollinger 118). Khouri’s response was, “You can’t do a movie without villains. You have to have something for the heroines...to be up against, and I wasn’t going to contrive some monstrous female, but even if this

were the most men-bashing movie ever made...it wouldn't even begin to make up for the 99% of all movies where the women are there to be caricatured as bimbos or to be skinned and decapitated. If men feel uncomfortable in the audience it is because they are identifying with the wrong character" (Francke 129-130).

Thoughts from feminists about the film's feminism vary greatly. Some feel that *Thelma & Louise* is just like every other film that projects beautiful women and gives the story a unique slant by giving them male characteristics. Some say the film rejects the most basic principles of feminism: equality and responsibility.

Although conflicting opinions abound, *Thelma & Louise* has earned the praise of feminists. Karen Hollinger says the film is positive because the women only come into their own once they purge their feminine qualities (122). For example, as the movie progresses, Thelma and Louise both let their hair flow freely, no longer in the clasp of perfectly placed bobby pins. They wear progressively less makeup and jewelry. In one scene, Louise sees two older made-up women staring at her. She pulls out her red lipstick in an attempt to put her old face back on. Soon, she gives a "why should I bother" expression and throws the lipstick. She does not want to fit in any longer.

In his discussion of the rape scene, Peter Lehman explains that rapists in many films are unattractive so that male viewers cannot relate to the character. Viewers distance themselves because the male is old and grotesque. However, in *Thelma & Louise*, the rapist is young, handsome, and charming, which makes the

male audience uncomfortable because they can relate to the character more closely than they could if the man was repulsive (103, 117). The strength of the characters and events provides a core for the film's ending. Viewers are content and accept Thelma and Louise's fate.

The suicide of Thelma and Louise is not meant to be sorrowful but rather uplifting. With their kick-ass attitude, friendship, and unwillingness to compromise for any man, they leave this world with their heads held high. The beauty of the film lies in its ability to start a discussion around feminism and the powerful way in which women defy the conventional roles that society imposes on them. Even though the film is twenty-three years old, the issues that it presents continue to be relevant today. *Thelma & Louise* emphasizes that much work remains to be done for women.

Sex and the City (1998-2004) is a popular television series that prompted two films: *Sex and the City: The Movie* (2008) and *Sex and the City 2* (2010). The series follows four female friends in New York who have their own careers and make their own living. Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte live different lives but solidify their friendship through weekly brunches where they discuss their daily lives, fashion, cocktails, and their obsession with men; they speak openly about their sexual escapades no matter how tasteless. Although men play an important role in the series, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe say the men are referred to as impersonal classifications that blur the boundaries between man and

accessory (“Reading Sex and the City” 7). This is a simple inversion of gender roles, radical in its simplicity. The women do not rely solely on the men for their happiness. They have them to fill a void in their lives, which they sometimes replace with material possessions. All four women possess diverse personalities but the strength of their characters lies in their independence, individuality, and openness to talking about anything and everything in their lives and the fact that they challenge conventional gender roles.

The main characters of *Sex and the City* defy the typical chick flick persona by conveying more “masculine” qualities. Samantha is the head of her own agency and extremely promiscuous. Ultimately, she decides that a steady relationship is not for her. Miranda is a Harvard graduate and a high-powered lawyer with a cynical and resentful outlook towards men. She constantly struggles with work-life balance because she is strongly career-oriented. Charlotte, an art dealer, is the most traditional and conservative of the group. She is known for her fairytale outlook on love and her judgmental attitude.

Carrie, the protagonist, is a journalist for the *The New York Star*. Her high-end shoe addiction leads to a situation that makes a significant point about feminism. When Carrie attends a party for a friend, she is asked to remove her expensive shoes at the door. Before leaving she notices they are missing and confronts the hostess, Kyra, who offers to pay for them. The following conversation takes place.

KYRA. No offence Carrie but I really don't think that [my husband and I] should have to pay for your extravagant lifestyle. I mean it was your choice to buy shoes that expensive.

CARRIE. Yes, but it wasn't my choice to take them off.

KYRA. They're just shoes (Star, "A Woman's Right to Shoes").

Later, Carrie and Charlotte have the following conversation:

CARRIE. I've done a little mental addition and over the years I have bought Kyra an engagement gift, a wedding gift, then there was the trip to Maine for the wedding, three baby gifts, in total I have spent over \$2300 celebrating her choices and she is shaming me for spending a lousy \$485 on myself.

CHARLOTTE. But those were gifts and I mean if you got married or have a child she would spend the same on you.

CARRIE. And if I don't ever get married or have a baby...what? I get...Think about it. If you are single, after graduation there isn't one occasion people celebrate you.

CHARLOTTE. We have birthdays!

CARRIE. Oh no no no no no. We all have birthdays...I'm talking about the single gal. Hallmark doesn't make a 'Congratulations-you-didn't-marry-the-wrong-guy-card.' And where's the flatware for going on vacation alone (Star, "A Woman's Right to Shoes")?

This scene exemplifies society's perception of single women during that time and the idea that a "real life" includes finding a husband and raising children.

The television series premiered at a time when women's lives were defined in terms of romance and marriage. Even women who held university degrees went on to lead a life of domesticity because a woman's success was defined in terms of her raising a family and being a homemaker (Negra, par. 2). Diane Negra says that *Sex and the City*

avoids the choice and renunciation scenarios of recent romantic

comedy in which major characters choose to downgrade their careers and/or accept professional putdowns or are physically or socially humiliated by a man who represents their romantic destiny. In short, for this particular HBO series quality is embodied in its freedom from the past resolutions that tend to define the mainstream chick flick (par. 8).

However, this statement is contradicted by a scene in the movie in which Carrie is humiliated by her longtime love, Big, when he leaves her at the altar. The humiliation pitches Carrie into a deep depression. The cliché that women need men and things to be happy is one that women cannot seem to escape, according to postfeminists. The women are allowed to be as strong as men and are praised for it but are also shamed for it at times.

Despite its shortcomings, *Sex and the City* is revolutionary in its portrayal of women. *Sex and the City* is progressive because the show flaunted the women's sexual exploits in a public way. It highlights that women think about sex as often as men do, which does not have to be a bad thing, and emphasizes that women can survive on their own without a man. The women are with men because they *choose* to be, not because they *need* to be.

Perhaps most importantly, *Sex and the City* gave women "permission to have female friendships that are more important than anything else. It has given respectability to something that previously was just gossip—something less than conversation" (Akass et al. "A Fond Farewell" par. 1). This point is demonstrated during a conversation between the women about soul mates. Charlotte exclaims,

“...maybe we could be each others’ soul mates? And then we could let men be just these great nice guys to have fun with?” To which Samantha replies, “Well, that sounds like a plan” (Star, “The Agony”). Although *Sex and the City* suggests that women still need to be rescued at times, it is not exclusively men who take charge. The women often rescue each other, which indicates great progress because, as Akass notes, “before feminism, women were told that they had to be wary of other women because they would steal your man” (Akass et al. “A Fond Farewell” par. 7). Similarly, Segal emphasizes that the show and movies are

at odds with how women’s lives have gone since feminism—their working lives have got longer, their opportunities to have children have got harder. All that disappears from the soft-focus post-feminism that *Sex and the City* embodies. The show reflects those issues that feminists discuss that in no way threaten the easy-going surface issues: increased liberalism, more tolerance from more people to allow a space for people to do what they want—for example, breastfeeding or lesbian relationships, so long as everyone’s rich and happy and enjoying themselves (Akass et al. “A Fond Farewell” par. 8).

An important issue here regarding *Sex and the City* as a type of tropic precursor to *Empire of Dirt* is that the feminism portrayed in *Sex and the City* very specifically applies to western culture. It incorporates the values and ideals of western culture and women’s place and progress within it. Because core values and ideals vary between cultures, western feminism is not representative of all cultures; and therefore should not be applied to all cultures. Indigenous culture is sufficiently dissimilar from western culture in its values and ideals that western feminism

cannot be effectively incorporated into Indigenous culture. Indigenous feminism needs its own culturally relevant definition and framework.

Demonstrating an awareness of distinction, *Empire of Dirt* goes beyond the borders of “western feminism” to portray Indigenous feminism. Controversial and complex, Indigenous feminism is multifaceted in its ideologies. Indigenous feminism serves as a framework in which the struggles of Indigenous women can be understood and used as a form of liberation all over the world (Smith, “Indigenous Feminism” par. 24). Andrea Smith, a feminist and activist, says that colonization, tribal rights, and sovereignty are at the heart of Indigenous feminism and that, “feminism is actually an Indigenous concept that has been co-opted by white women” (Smith, “Indigenous Feminism” par. 2). She adds that Indigenous feminists are challenging why white women get to define feminism.

By contrast, anthropologist Renya Ramirez questions whether Indigenous women can be feminists since the term “feminist” derives from a white context. She believes Indigenous women who identify as feminists have assimilated into the dominant white culture; they are adopting an ideology that is not theirs (25). She adds that it was not until the third wave of feminism that women of colour began to emerge and “[transformed] feminism into a multicultural movement” (25). Smith says that by positioning Indigenous women at a particular point in history, for example, when Indigenous women resisted colonization in 1492, it is evident that “multiple feminist histories [were] emerging from multiple

communities of colour which intersect at points and diverge in others. This would not negate the contributions made by white feminists, but would de-center them from our historicizing and analysis” (Smith, “Indigenous Feminism” par. 6). She notes that because we were not there before colonization, we have to piece together the history. What may be viewed through western eyes as tradition was likely to have been heavily influenced by Christian ideologies and traditions. Accordingly, the cultural and social forms depicted may be altered traditions. Under the heading De-Essentializing “Tradition” in Smith’s article “Against the Law: Indigenous Feminism and the Nation-State,” Lee Maracle questions who gets to define the idea of the “traditional”, and points out that tradition is a construct that ultimately cannot be sustained. She describes how her tribe had a system of slavery that was eventually abolished, raising the question of whether this means that her tribe’s tradition was slavery or the abolition of it. She emphasized that tribes were continuously adapting to changing circumstances prior to colonization.

White feminist history marginalizes Indigenous women by placing white history and experiences at the center, misrepresenting Indigenous beliefs. Indigenous women must center their exploration on their own issues in order to properly express Indigenous feminist thought and practice (Ramirez 33-34). For example, Smith states that Indigenous feminism considers colonization, tribal rights, and sovereignty. Furthermore, Indigenous sovereignty is understood

through responsibility and spirituality. As Cree lawyer Sharon Venne, further explains, “For [Indigenous people] absolute power is in the Creator and the natural order of all living things; not only in human beings...[Their] sovereignty is related to [their] connections to the earth and is inherent” (Smith, “Indigenous Feminism without Apology” par. 20). In contrast, western sovereignty is about absolute power and focused on heteropatriarchy – “the severe sex and gender bias [that is] prevalent among the elite ruling classes of nation-states” (“Heteropatriarchy”; Smith, “Indigenous Feminism” par. 20). The understanding of responsibility also differs between cultures; as western feminism in its original form emphasized women’s responsibility for improving their own lives (Billing, par. 3). Indigenous feminism goes beyond personal responsibility to include responsibility to communities and the land (Jacob 108; Smith, “Against the Law” par. 15).

The themes, events, and strong female characters of *Empire of Dirt*, combine to present a potent Indigenous feminist perspective about contemporary life. Placing the film in this particular context where Indigenous issues are at the core gives *Empire of Dirt* a stronger and cohesive feminist connotation. To analyze the film using a western feminist perspective is difficult because it marginalizes the characters, placing them in a white context. *Empire of Dirt* focuses on issues of colonization, tribal rights, and sovereignty understood through responsibility and spirituality. The film emphasizes and epitomizes these

very issues, which are at the heart of Indigenous feminism.

Indigenous feminism is portrayed through spirituality, which plays a significant role in *Empire of Dirt*. There are three scenes that make particularly strong references to spirituality. The first scene is when Minnie explains vision quests to Peeka. The second is when Minnie catches Peeka smoking and tells her about the power of tobacco as an opening to the Creator. The third scene depicts a smudging ceremony. The sense of community between the women and their intimate relationship to the land throughout each of the spiritual practices are important components of Indigenous feminism.

Responsibility is a theme throughout the film. The fleetingly present male characters provide moments of significance in which they openly express to the women that they need to take responsibility for their actions in order to move forward. After Lena and Peeka leave Minnie's house, they visit Lena's uncle Hank. As they are leaving, he begins to laugh. Lena responds with a stern "What?" He says, "Nothing...nothing...just had a strange feeling of déjà vu" (*Empire of Dirt*). This statement refers to the ongoing destructive life choices of the three women. Hank is the only one who forthrightly says something to Lena about the recurring cycle of failure. It is Hank's commentary that articulates and sets the tone for the narrative of the film and in a subsequent scene his words are even more profound. The following line marks the pinnacle moment of the film:

HANK. I was there when Minnie was pregnant with you. Yeah dad he screamed and he yelled, “Get outta here and don’t come back.” I saw it all. I also remember him begging her to come home. She never heard that side of it. And now you two, running away ‘cause you think it’s going to help things. What about it Peekka? You got that running bug too? It would be funny if it wasn’t so sad. You know what they call it today right? Intergenerational transference. That’s a lot of fancy words for pain running through the family bloodline. You know your Dad, bless him, he had it too. No matter which way you turned you’re going to run into this. At some point, somebody in this family has got to turn it around (*Empire of Dirt*).

Hank is articulating the importance of responsibility. Whether or not the women achieve their happy ending depends on their actions. Maybe they do not beat this legacy, but maybe they do.

Understanding the film within the framework of Indigenous feminism reveals its complexity and compelling character. *Empire of Dirt* presents in realistic and accessible ways the concerns that are at the core of Indigenous feminism. Colonization, tribal rights, sovereignty, responsibility, and spirituality are not core issues of western feminism. Therefore, analyzing and placing the film in a western feminist context that situates white history and experiences at the core automatically de-centers and marginalizes the film. In an effort to reposition women and promote a higher and equal status, Indigenous feminism is a framework within which to understand Indigenous women’s struggles as part of a global movement for liberation and hopes to employ its ideologies and forms of government as a basis that can be constructive for humankind (Smith,

“Indigenous Feminism” par. 24).

CONCLUSION

For problematic reasons, the portrayals of Indigenous women in film have not drastically changed over the years. Early representations were chosen to fit westerners’ visions of what Indigenous people were supposed to be. Portrayals were negative, stereotypical, and untruthful. Despite these damaging portrayals, progress has been made. Largely due to the emergence of Indigenous writers and filmmakers, Indigenous films give filmmakers the opportunity to portray themselves in a true way. Although film still has a long way to go in portraying positive and accurate images of Indigenous men and women, the industry is making strides despite the hardships that Indigenous filmmakers continue to face. For example, funding barriers contribute to the perpetuation of misconceptions because it is harder for Indigenous filmmakers to show their work. Yet, Indigenous filmmakers are proving they have what it takes to make influential films that will hopefully help weaken and eventually diminish the stereotypes. Giving Indigenous filmmakers a voice and a creative outlet allows them to mock and dispel the misleading images that they have long had to endure. My research examines the complexity of dismantling stereotypes that people have come to expect in film.

Although several Indigenous films preceded *Empire of Dirt*, Shannon Masters' portrayal of Indigenous women has affected me like no other Indigenous film. Masters' characters are not submissive or overtly emotional as females in films tend to be. Rather they are a cast of strong and powerful women. The women's Indigeneity is present but not the focus, showing them as individuals who are like everyone else.

Many of the preconceived ideas and notions about portrayals of Indigenous women have come from several documentaries and ethnographic films. Part of the confusion in these depictions comes from the discrepancies about what it means for something to be considered ethnographic and documentary. Robert Flaherty's film *Nanook of the North*, for example, is still considered one of the first ethnographic films. However, evidence suggests that Flaherty staged events and hired actors for his film. Therefore, his film lies not completely within ethnography but rather merges with documentary and cinema. Despite a film's classification as ethnographic or documentary, viewers of the film should take into account that although Flaherty did re-create some of his footage he gave viewers a glimpse into a world that was real on a certain level. Truth is subjective and Flaherty's film was his truth. He gave viewers a glimpse into a world that they otherwise may not have been able to experience. As my research unfolded, I found that the two terms "ethnographic" and "documentary," to a certain degree, are interchangeable. As soon as a camera is involved—

whether for ethnographic, documentary, or Hollywood's commercial agenda — there is interference. Capturing “truth” is relative and I believe the best way to dispel and disseminate Indigenous stereotypes is for Indigenous people to be able to represent themselves.

Looking at the progression of film and Hollywood's portrayal of women it is apparent that there is a formula for successful Hollywood films where the women play a certain part.⁷ They are white, beautiful, heterosexual, materialistic, and long to find the love of their life. *Thelma & Louise* and *Sex and the City* were revolutionary because they cast women in roles that differed from the norm. They were strong and independent, and did not need a man even though men and relationships were a constant topic of conversation. This research led me to further explore how *Empire of Dirt* both conformed to and defied the trajectory of the Hollywood chick flick. Logically, I then looked at “Western” feminism and Indigenous feminism and how it makes more sense to analyze *Empire of Dirt* on an Indigenous feminist platform rather than through a Western feminist perspective because the cores differ. I was curious how feminist ideologies have evolved. There have been strides in feminism but there is still a long way to go. Stereotypical images of Indigenous women and women in general never seem to go away and I do not think they will be going away any time soon. Sadly, these portrayals have come to be expected.

⁷ See Laura Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”.

I believe that simply being informed will make a powerful impression in helping to change these views of Indigenous people in film. According to Loretta Todd, “Neocolonialism lives, in the boardrooms, classrooms, art galleries, theatres, cinemas, and of course the museums, and public amusement parks” (Shelton, par. 15). Giving Indigenous filmmakers the opportunity to make films about themselves and change people’s views about them is an important step. Indigenous film has grown immensely in the past few decades. Astonishingly, though, it was only in the year 2000 that the first feature film was written and produced by an Indigenous person. My research for this paper shows that Indigenous filmmakers have made significant progress but there is still a long way to go. Through my research on the representation of Indigenous women in film I hope to contribute to the dismantling and dispelling of Indigenous stereotypes. If I can do that, even in a small way, or make someone think differently then I feel like I have made a mark in helping the bigger picture.

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