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Cheenama the Trail Maker: An Indian Idyll of Old Ontario Indigenous Ethnographic Films of the 20th Century

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Cheenama the Trail Maker: An Indian Idyll of Old Ontario

Indigenous Ethnographic Films of the 20th Century

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Before the 1920s, most Indigenous anthropological projects focused exclusively on the populations of the Canadian Arctic.¹ However, industrialization, immigration, and shifting perspectives on race, science, and evolution led to the desire for the preservation of Indigeneity across Canada, through what is commonly referred to as salvage ethnography. This practice, based on the belief that Indigenous peoples represent a previous step in the evolutionary progression of humanity, involves the transference of supposedly vanishing Indigenous cultures into the museum or archival space through texts, photography, and – growing in popularity through the early twentieth century – film.² As well, this is often linked to assimilation efforts of the state, as the Indigenous populations were allowed to move forward into the settler world and assimilate freely without worry of their now-officially-documented culture disappearing.³ This ideological practice was foregrounded in Canada at the National Museum – now the Canadian Museum of History – in the first half of the twentieth century, specifically by two board members: Diamond Jenness and Harlan I. Smith.

Diamond Jenness, the famed New-Zealander-turned-Canadian-anthropologist, served as the second ever Chief Anthropologist for the National Museum for over two decades, from 1926 to 1948.⁴ Throughout his career, he promoted the presentation of Indigeneity in the museum space and produced numerous benchmark ethnographies of Canadian Indigenous populations, including *The Life of the Copper Eskimos* published in 1922, *The Indians of Canada* published in 1932, and *Dawn in Arctic Alaska* published in 1957.⁵ These were only a part of his larger body of

¹ Ann Marie Murnaghan and Tyler McCreary, “Projections of Race, Nature, and Ethnographic Childhood in Early Educational Cinema at the National Museum of Canada,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 98, no. 1 (2016): 37.

² *Ibid*, 40.

³ *Ibid*, 40.

⁴ Barnett Richling, *In Twilight and in Dawn*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012, xv-xiv.

⁵ *Ibid*, 94.

Diamond Jenness, *The Indians of Canada*. First ed. Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1932.

work, of which expedition journals, films, and anthropological and archaeological discoveries also constitute a significant portion.

Harlan Ingersoll Smith was a researcher, photographer, and filmmaker who worked in several noteworthy museums and institutions – including acting as the head of the Archaeology division of the Geological Survey of Canada in 1911 – before spending a 27-year career at the National Museum of Canada.⁶ He produced a total of 29 films for the museum’s collection that focus on various Indigenous cultures across Canada. Smith made these films to be shown during the museum’s programming colloquially known as *The Children’s University*, which ran on Saturday mornings from 1921 to 1964 and focused on educating children on other cultures in Canada through film, lectures, and other performance activities.⁷ Unfortunately, a large number of his works have been lost due to a fire at the National Film Board in 1991, but some of the extant films include *The Carrier Indians of British Columbia* from 1927, *The Stoney Indians of Alberta* from 1928, and his final film, which he made in collaboration with Diamond Jenness, *Cheenama the Trail Maker: An Indian Idyll of Old Ontario* from 1935.⁸ This final film will be the focus of this paper.

Joining the museum within months of one another and working in the same department, Jenness and Smith produced many works in tandem, including research for expedition locations, expeditions themselves, and anthropological publications.⁹ *Cheenama the Trail Maker* is a stand-

Richling, *In Twilight and in Dawn*, 74.

⁶ Murnaghan and McCreary, “Projections of Race, Nature, and Ethnographic Childhood,” 37.

⁷ *Ibid*, 38.

⁸ Zak Markan, “Former National Film Board Building on Barrington St. to Be Redeveloped,” CBCnews (CBC/Radio Canada, May 2, 2016), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/barrington-street-building-restoration-1.3562051>)

Murnaghan and McCreary, “Projections of Race, Nature, and Ethnographic Childhood,” 50.

⁹ Richling, *In Twilight and in Dawn*, 116.

out of their collaborative work as it is the last of Smith's filmic works, one of only few of his films set in Ontario, and the only film on which he collaborated with Jenness.¹⁰ The end goal of this film, in true salvage ethnographic nature, was to reproduce the cultural practices and day-to-day lives of Algonquin peoples in pre-contact North America.¹¹ The finished product was a 35-minute silent film which starred Matthew Bernard – an Algonquin elder, master canoe-builder, and ex-chief of the Pikwakanagan Algonquin reservation in Eastern Ontario – as Cheenama, a rugged, well-versed traditional Indigenous outdoorsman.¹² The film shows different scenarios in which the characters – Cheenama, Penni played by Matthew's wife Christianne, Oka played by their son Michael, and Blue Jay played by their infant grandchild Fern – gather food, hunt, and construct shelter, tools, and traditional crafts.¹³

Of these, the most noteworthy portion according to Jenness, is a ten-minute scene in which Cheenama and Penni gather the materials for and construct by hand a birchbark canoe. It garnered strong attention from audiences and caused an influx of purchases of handmade canoes from Pikwakanagan and other Algonquin reservations across the province.¹⁴ Bernard alongside his brother, Michael, were also commissioned by the National Museum in 1957 to build the world's largest Algonquin-style birchbark canoe. This nearly 38-foot vessel was completed in early fall of the same year and remained on display at the museum for over half a century, occasionally making trips across the country for celebrations like Expo '86 in Vancouver, and

¹⁰ Murnaghan and McCreary, "Projections of Race, Nature, and Ethnographic Childhood," 50.

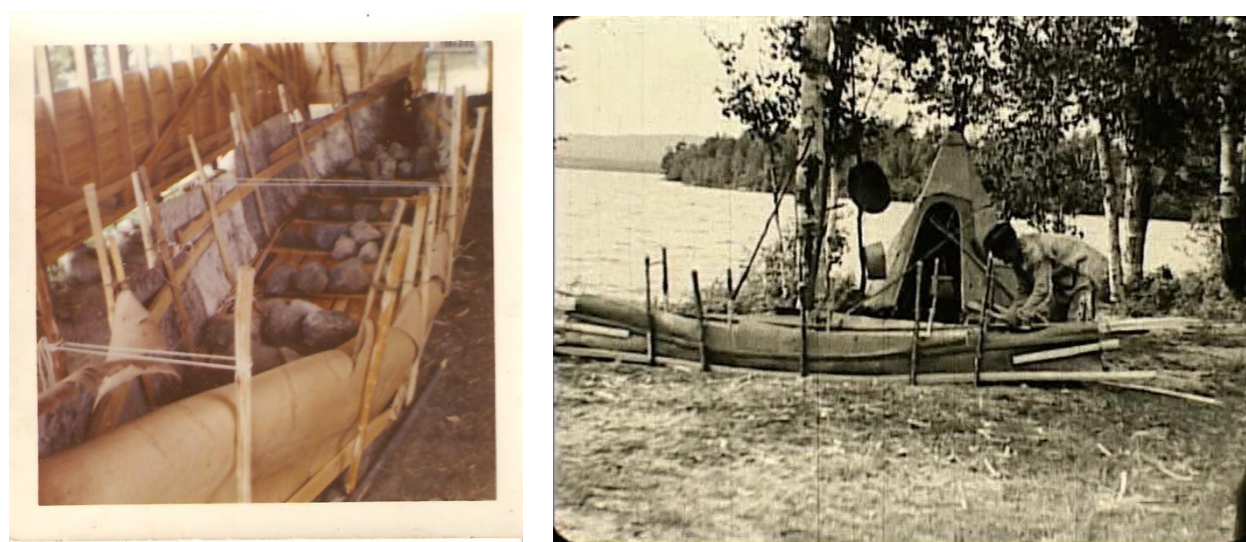
¹¹ Harlan I. Smith, and Diamond Jenness, "275. Cheenama the Trailmaker, a Film of Algonkin Indian Life in Old Ottawa." *Man* 36 (1936): 211.

¹² Harlan I Smith and Diamond Jenness, "Upenn-f16-2090 Cheenama the Trailmaker," upenn (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology Films, December 20, 2008), https://archive.org/details/upenn-f16-2090_cheonama_the_trailmaker.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Smith, and Jenness, "275. Cheenama the Trailmaker," 211.

was eventually gifted back to the community in 2011.¹⁵ The photographs that exist from this project bear strong similarities to the construction processes shown in the film.¹⁶



Left: An image of Matthew and Michael Bernard's canoe from 1957, seen here in their workshop, weighted and stretched in the wooden post frame.¹⁷ Right: Still from *Cheenama the Trail Maker*, depicting Matthew Bernard placing and stretching sections of birchbark inside the wooden post frame.¹⁸

As well, records from the Pikwakanagan cultural centre explaining canoe building describe similar processes as shown in *Cheenama the Trail Maker*, including shaping the bark using a wooden frame, sewing the seams with spruce roots, and spacing and securing the white cedar ribs.¹⁹ The accuracy of this depiction of Algonquin traditions brings into question the level

¹⁵ "Worlds Largest Birch Bark Canoe," Beaverbarkcanoes, last modified January 29, 2012, <https://beaverbarkcanoes.wordpress.com/2012/01/29/worlds-largest-canoe/>.

¹⁶ "Canoe Builders of Pikwakanagan," Virtual Museum, Accessed December 1, 2019, http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_stories/pm_v2.php?id=exhibit_home&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000384

"MONTREAL CANOE," Civilization.ca - The Canoe - Montreal canoe, page 1, Accessed December 2, 2019, <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/canoe/can01eng.html>

¹⁷ [Archival image from Pikwakanagan online collection], 1957, digital image, accessed December 1, 2019, http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_stories/pm_v2.php?id=exhibit_home&fl=0&lg=English&ex=00000384

¹⁸ Diamond Jenness and Harlan I. Smith, *Cheenama the Trail Maker: An Indian Idyll of Old Ontario*, 1935, 16mm film, accessed December 1, 2019, <http://www.screenculture.org/cesif/film/cheenama-trailmaker-indian-idyll-old-ontario>

¹⁹ "Birch Bark Canoe," Algonquins of Pikwakanagan, Accessed November 30, 2019, http://algonquinsofpikwakanagan.com/legacy/culture_birch_bark_canoe.php

of collaboration, consideration, and interference with which Jenness and Smith approached this film and its subjects. As with nearly every depiction of Indigenous bodies in visual or textual records from the colonial perspective, the common assumption is that significant amounts of staging, scripting, and editing were used to silence the Indigenous perspectives and project their existence into a synthesized history of savageness and incompetency. This juxtaposition of assumption and perceived reality warranted further exploration into the film, its reception, and the ideologies with which it was created.

Firstly, Smith's decision to show this, and his other films, to primarily children at *The Children's University* brings into question the motivations behind the films themselves, as they were created almost exclusively for this demographic. Many scholars, such as Ann Marie Murnaghan and Tyler McCreary, theorize that Indigenous ethnographic films were purposefully geared towards children as they present the primitive, underdeveloped Indigenous populations as relatable to the audience.²⁰ This is an echoing of the common trend at this time to present Indigenous peoples as immature and separate, while essential to the foundations of Canadian identity and heritage, thus creating a duality of representation for these subjects; that of desirability through ownership and revulsion due to Othering.²¹ Emerging at this time as well, was the popular conceptualization of children as the future of national identity. This positioned the education of children as paramount for the preservation of the past national knowledges, ideological beliefs, and physical materials for the future, which served to bolster the success of Smith's films.²²

²⁰ Murnaghan and McCreary, "Projections of Race, Nature, and Ethnographic Childhood," 38.

²¹ Ibid, 39.

Ibid, 38.

²² Ibid, 42.

Aside from *The Children's University* showings, the film was shown twice elsewhere in its first year: at the meeting of the British Association for American Studies in Blackpool, England in September and again at the meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland on November 3rd, both in 1936. After this second showing, Jenness was quoted in an explanatory note, stating:

“The Indians of eastern Canada have been in close contact with Europeans for over 300 years, and to-day they preserve but few traces of their earlier culture and mode of life. They live in houses of European type, they dress as Europeans, and to the casual view they're indistinguishable from the Europeans who live all around them. Consequently, some of the properties used in this film had to be made especially for the occasion [...] The greatest care was taken, however, to introduce nothing that was alien to the ancient Indian culture of the area; in this regard the Indian actors were as critical as the officials of the Museum.”²³

Considering the time at which this was written, it presents itself as relatively progressive for a white male in the context of the Indigenous discourse of the past 100 years. Jenness was well-known for advocating seemingly positive changes for Indigenous peoples in Canada, using his ethnographies and anthropological projects as proof of his sincerity. He felt that it was his “task [...] to study the Indians and the Eskimos of the Dominion of Canada, their history, their manners, their religion, and so on.”²⁴ However, looking further into his work in this area, his motivations do not seem so noble.

On March 25th, 1947, Jenness testified to a government committee about the state of the “Indian problem” in Canada; a committee that would later review and revise the *Indian Act of Canada*.²⁵ Though this is only one instance of many in which he testified on the topic of Indigenous populations to government officials, there are several points raised that reflect his

²³ Smith, and Jenness, "275. Cheenama the Trailmaker," 210-11.

²⁴ Peter Kulchyski, “Anthropology in the Service of the State: Diamond Jenness and Canadian Indian Policy.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1993): 28.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 29.

larger ideological positioning. In his introduction, he openly compared the reservation system to WWII internment camps, citing the Indigenous peoples' supposed lack of self-reliance and disproportionately high health issues as symptoms of this segregationist practice.²⁶ Using this comparison as evidence and justification, Jenness suggested the benefits of “[e]ducating and training them for citizenship”; a phrase that would be adapted and repeated in later government reports as the cornerstone of their argument for assimilation processes.²⁷ He then presented his plan to rectify this issue; a plan which had not been shown to, written with, or critiqued by any Indigenous peoples. He himself presented it as somewhat outdated and in need of improvement, calling it “just propaganda on behalf of the Indians,” but insisted that it still had merit and would contribute to better lives for the Indigenous peoples of Canada.²⁸ A pillar of this plan was the removal of the residential school system, the motivation behind which was the complete assimilation of Indigenous peoples through the elimination of segregated schools and cultural spaces.

On the surface, Jenness was advocating for the abolishment of restrictive, colonialist systems and for the freedom of Indigenous peoples in Canada. However, looking closer, the contradictory statements made and the phrasing with which they were expressed shows his alignment with the paternalistic, imperialistic ideals of the state.²⁹ Therefore, this question remains: how do Smith and Jenness' ideological leanings and cultural understandings translate into the film that they created?

²⁶ Ibid, 28.

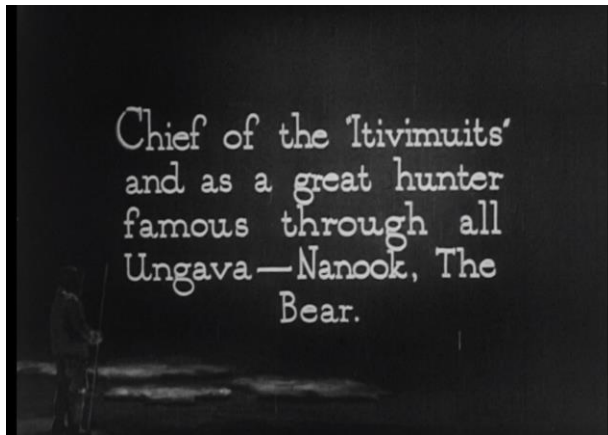
²⁷ Ibid, 28.

²⁸ Ibid, 29.

²⁹ Ibid, 28-29.

Speaking specifically of the modes of presentation in *Cheenama the Trail Maker*, there are many attributes of note. These include the questionable costume choices, lack of traditional ceremonies – which were always popular amongst anthropological researchers and spectators – and the ambiguous locations at which it was shot. Mainly, however, is the fact that the presentation of this film walks the line between fiction and non-fiction, an ambiguity that is detrimental to expressing the perspectives and related histories of the Indigenous people involved. Comparing *Cheenama the Trail Maker* to potentially the most famous example of Indigenous ethnographic film, Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* from 1922, this active silencing of Indigenous perspectives on Smith and Jenness' part becomes starkly clear.³⁰

Flaherty's film begins with a preface about the process of creating the film, explaining the development of the character of Nanook and its reception. Immediately, this film is situated as a fiction, introducing the characters one by one with explanatory title cards and associated footage, as seen below, left.



Stills from *Nanook of the North* ³¹

³⁰ Robert J. Flaherty, "Nanook of the North," Kanopy, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://uwo.kanopy.com/video/nanook-north-0>

³¹ Robert J. Flaherty, "Nanook of the North", 1922, film, accessed December 1, 2019, <https://uwo.kanopy.com/video/nanook-north-0>

Of course, the film is still paternalistic towards the characters, speaking for the Indigenous perspectives rather than supporting them, and using terms like “simple,” “happy-go-lucky,” and “primitive.”³² Regardless of the negativity and exclusionary nature of this representation, when placed next to Smith and Jenness’ film several attributes become clear.

Though some records state that the film was originally produced using intertitles, credited to Smith, the available online versions consist only of the filmed footage with no titles or dialogue. This suggests that the inclusion of intertitles was either an afterthought, put in place exclusively for specific showings and audiences, or that they never existed in the first place, and contextual or explanatory materials were supplied only by Smith, Jenness, or other so-called experts who presented verbally at the film showings themselves.³³ This latter possibility can also be supported by Jenness’ need to include explanatory notes and information, as was the case after the showing at Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Regardless, this loss of contextual information creates an extreme disconnect between the contemporary viewer and the intended message, while making clear the lack of humanity and consideration with which Smith and Jenness conceived of the film. Viewing only the actions and expressions of the subjects, without the explanatory intertitles, is much the same as watching a music video with the sound turned off; the theatricality, disjointed movements, discomfort, and awkward pacing of the events becomes obscenely noticeable.

Cheenama the Trail Maker’s obvious staging, the lack of agency of the characters, and the isolated nature of its presentation – to almost exclusively white, middle or upper-middle class

³² Ibid.

³³ “Cheenama the Trailmaker : An Indian Idyll of Old Ontario,” Canadian Educational, Sponsored & Industrial Film Archive, January 1, 1970, <http://www.screenculture.org/cesif/film/cheenama-trailmaker-indian-idyll-old-ontario>

people in imperialist organizations – define it as a prime example of a destructive, propagandist colonial artifact. As has been the case since colonizers’ first contact, Indigenous artists’ and creators’ practices have included the integration, influences, and active reworking of culturally significant colonial artifacts. This has been useful, and at times essential, to Indigenous cultures in the realms of remediation, understanding, and especially activism. Considering the prevalence of film in the current Canadian cultural landscape, many Indigenous artists are utilizing films from the colonial record as inspiration to create artworks surrounding themes of dismantling, reworking, and repatriation. Some of these artists include Meagan Musseau, Kent Monkman, Jeffrey Thomas, Jennie Williams, Jessie Short, Caroline Monnet, and Michelle Latimer, as well as countless others.

Jeffrey Thomas, an Iroquoian photographer and filmmaker, takes inspiration and motivation from images like Edward Curtis’ ethnographic photographs of British Columbia Indigenous peoples from the turn of the century. His practice originates from wondering “what those indigenous people would have photographed if they had held the camera. What would the world have looked like seen through their eyes?”³⁴ This is explicitly addressed in his 1997 film, *Shooting Indians*, in which he works to unpack Edward Curtis’ films that centre around false narratives and stage depictions of traditional Indigenous dress, fake cultural hierarchy, and synthesized practices like singing, drumming, and dancing.³⁵ Through interviews, explanations of his own artistic process, and personal anecdotes, he paints a realistic, self-prescribed image of

³⁴ Jeffrey Thomas, “About Field Work.” Jeff Thomas Urban Iroquois. Accessed October 23, 2019. <https://jeff-thomas.ca/about-field-work/>.

³⁵ Ali Kazimi, “Shooting Indians – A Journey with Jeffery Thomas (1997),” Social Doc, Accessed November 30, 2019, <http://socialdoc.net/ali-kazimi/shooting-indians-a-journey-with-jeffery-thomas-1997/>

indigeneity in the modern world; one that has served as inspirational and motivational for many artists since.



Still from *Wake Up!*³⁶

Jessie Short is a Métis artist who employs film, among other artistic media, to explore the complexity and distinctiveness of Métis culture, along with the constant redefinition of cultural meanings in our current world. Her 2015 film *Wake Up!* examines the symbol of Louis Riel and his historical associations with Métis culture through a feminist, contemporary, Indigenous lens. Through film, she questions how these ideologies intersect and how they can be deconstructed and reworked for current Métis populations.³⁷ By using film to deconstruct and rework the

³⁶ Jessie Short, "Wake Up!" 2015, film, Accessed December 1, 2019, <https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/jessie-short>

³⁷ Jessie Short, "Jessie Short, Wake Up!" Resilience, Accessed December 1, 2019, <https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/jessie-short>

historical representation and essentialism of her culture, Short presents a uniquely engaging examination of history itself and its impacts on cultures today.

Of note as well are projects like the *Souvenir* series from the National Film Board of Canada, in which some of the aforementioned artists participated, including Kent Monkman, Caroline Monnet, and Michelle Latimer, as well as Mi'gmaq writer and director Jeff Barnaby. This project worked to present “films by First Nations filmmakers that address Indigenous identity and representation, reframing Canadian history through a contemporary lens.”³⁸

Caroline Monnet, an Algonquin-French artist and filmmaker contributed her film *Mobilize* to this 2015 project.³⁹ This work, comprised of segments of NFB films, mostly the 1965 documentary *High Steel*, and overlaid with Tanya Tagaq's *Uja* – a work of traditional Inuk throat singing – paints a vivid, energetic image of indigeneity in urban and wilderness settings. This juxtaposition creates striking tension across time, space, and cultural barriers.⁴⁰ This NFB project, alongside many other initiatives, projects, grants, and exhibitions, provide the space for Indigenous artists and filmmakers to express their identity, claim agency, and critique the destructive history to which their representation has been subjected.

A less artistically inclined example of this historical reworking can be seen in Bella Coola, a British Columbian community, which hosted Harlan Smith in the summers between 1920 and 1924. Here, Smith captured over 1300 photographs of the local populations, as well as hundreds of feet of film, which would later contribute to his films including *The Carrier Indians*

³⁸ National Film Board of Canada, “Mobilize,” National Film Board of Canada, Accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.nfb.ca/film/mobilize/>

³⁹ Jovana Jankovic, “Repurposing the Archive: 4 NFB Films by Contemporary Artists at the 2015 Aboriginal Pavilion,” NFB Blog, National Film Board of Canada, July 19, 2015, <https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2015/07/13/repurposing-archive-4-nfb-films-contemporary-artists-2015-aboriginal-pavilion/>

⁴⁰ “Mobilize,” Coco, August 2015, <https://carolinemonnet.ca/Mobilize>

of *British Columbia* and *The Bella Coola Indians of British Columbia*, both from 1927.⁴¹ These photographs, though consisting mainly of portraits, also include a large number of images of “everyday life and practices, landscapes, objects, dwellings, and ceremonial demonstrations.”⁴² These images have now been reoriented, repurposed, and used within the community in many ways, including “as fridge magnets, buttons, postage stamps, dangling objects on rearview mirrors, screened onto t-shirts, and sewn onto throw pillows.”⁴³ This active reworking functions in a similar fashion to the artists’ films listed above; it captures the false representations of Indigenous peoples across time and uses them to express the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the current discourse surrounding Indigeneity, while addressing and utilizing the potential humour and lightheartedness with which these images can be interpreted.

As this discourse spreads to younger generations, it has the potential to enter the classroom, leading many to theorize that Indigenous-made and Indigenous centred films will be a necessary addition to the secondary and post-secondary curriculum. These films meet the colonial educational films of the past century on their level, so to speak, within the same media and practice, and therefore directly combat the negative, essentialist, destructive tropes and themes that they present. However, awareness of the histories, creators, and motivations behind these films would be necessary before engaging with them in an academic or teaching setting.⁴⁴

Though echoing the colonialist tendency to misrepresent, manipulate, and control Indigenous bodies in Canada, the ethnographic films of the early twentieth century have received

⁴¹ Adam Solomonian, 2009, “Reclaiming the Gaze : Examining Contemporary Nuxalk Perspectives on Harlan I. Smith’s Fieldwork Photographs, 1920-1924,” *Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) 2008+*, T, University of British Columbia, 12-13.

⁴² *Ibid*, 14.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 24.

⁴⁴ Jeremy Stoddard, Alan Marcus, and David Hicks, “The Burden of Historical Representation: The Case Of/for Indigenous Film.” *The History Teacher* 48, no. 1 (2014): 31.

little attention from the academy. Aside from the texts used here, there are very few that focus on the position of Indigenous ethnographic film in relation to current visual and artistic practices. The bulk of research into this filmic genre has focused on commercial films like *Nanook of the North*, rather than educationally intended works like *Cheenama the Trail Maker*.⁴⁵ Therefore, these historic films have not received the level of critical examination, analysis, or associated significance that they deserve relative to their cultural impact. They persist within our collective subconscious and affect viewing practices and cinematic tropes. A critical intervention is needed to properly examine these films on the institutional, cultural, and personal level, as anyone and everyone who has interacted with filmic works has experienced their aftershocks. *Cheenama the Trail Maker* and its contemporaries have set a precedent of discrimination, dehumanization, and erasure, and need to be brought forward into the continually growing and ever-important discourse of Indigenous representation; a goal that this paper hopes to foreground.

⁴⁵ Murnaghan and McCreary, "Projections of Race, Nature, and Ethnographic Childhood," 39.

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