The Creative Film Practices of Amanda Strong and Rhayne Vermette
Proposing a Theoretical Framework for Considering Métis Film

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Abstract

As a Michif filmmaker, I seek to become more focused and pointed in my creative practice and research. My family story has particular socio-cultural linkages in the broader landscape of Métis history in the prairies, and it is these linkages that I am interested in exploring, both in reality-based and imagined filmic worlds, in an effort to contribute to the growing canon of works by Métis creators. The work that we put out into the world matters and will influence how people see and understand us. While I do not consider my creative work to be educational in a didactic sense, I believe this work is an important contribution to the growing canon of historically informed, culturally connected viewpoints in Métis Studies. It is my intention that this work may serve to inform the broader public about Métis peoples.

It is equally important for me as a Métis academic to examine and consider the work of other Métis artists in generative ways in order to contribute to critical discourse in the developing field of Métis studies. My interests lie in broadly working within the methodology of Indigenous Storywork, with a focus on the specificities of Métis Storywork, imagining the potential of Métis Storywork methodology in film. Storywork is, broadly, a methodology of working with narrative-based information as a form of research. I draw from this framework illustrative analyses of the films Four Faces of the Moon by Amanda Strong and Ste. Anne by Rhayne Vermette. I apply Indigenous Storywork principles as they relate to Métis Storywork and identify Métis-specific approaches to storytelling. In the final section of this essay, I enact some of the principles of Métis Storywork outlined herein by considering linkages between my own practice as a Michif filmmaker and both Strong and Vermette's works.

Key words: Indigenous Storywork, Métis Storytelling, Film, Video

Introduction

"Narratives are, in all their forms, language communication which requires a teller (speaker) and an addressee. Narratives are interactions, where the story is specifically molded and delivered with the addressee, or audience, in mind."[1]

Chantale Cenerini, Métis

"Stories are medicine, they are our connection to the sacred power that is in all things. The making of images is a way of expressing this complex reality, of recognizing, and participating in it."[2]

Marjorie Beaucage, Métis

Put another way, Jo-Ann Archibald (Stó:lō) explains that "people keep the spirit of a story alive by telling it to others and by interacting through and with the story."[3] In her book on Indigenous methodologies, Margaret Kovach (Cree) notes her "preference to hear stories and gain insight from words."[4] Kovach explains that while making meaning from story is not unique to Indigenous peoples, it is "the way that a culture employs story [that] differs"[5] from other cultural groups. Given the primacy of story for Indigenous peoples of diverse nations, as noted by Cenerini, Beaucage, Archibald, and Kovach, I am drawn to a methodology of story through which I can explore the works of filmmakers Strong and Vermette and lay the groundwork to critically engage with Métis filmmaking practices more broadly. It is imperative at this time to present diverse creative works by Métis peoples, addressing the lack of public understanding of Métis peoples that has allowed for the proliferation of ill-informed, and occasionally fictitious or fraudulent, cultural narratives about Métis "identity." Jean Teillet reiterates this point in *Indigenous Identity Fraud: A Report for the University of Saskatchewan*. Teillet asserts that the solution for this type of fraud is "readily apparent" in the form of "education about Indigenous peoples."[6] I consider both the enjoyment and public dissemination of creative work by Métis artists, as well as the critical study of such works, to be essential to advancing the field of Métis Studies more broadly.

Indigenous Storywork (ISW) methodology, as developed by Jo-Ann Archibald in an academic context, involves "cultural understandings [that] are formed through learning relationships with Elders and challenged by experiential story wanderings."[7] Of key importance

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[1] Chantale Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling" (Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 2022), https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/210c6072-bc5a-4486-89c8-641447525b6d/content.

[2] Marjorie Beaucage, "Aboriginal Voices : Entitlement Through Storytelling," in *Transference, Tradition, Technology: native new media exploring visual and digital culture*, ed. D. Claxton M. A. Townsend, S. Loft, (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 2005), 139.

[3] Jo-ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Vancouver: Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 149.

[4] Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous methodologies: characteristics, conversations and contexts*, ed. Library Canadian Electronic and Portal Scholars (Toronto [Ont.]: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 123.

[5] Kovach, *Indigenous methodologies: characteristics, conversations and contexts*, 96.

[6] Jean Teillet, *Indigenous Identity Fraud: A Report for the University of Saskatchewan*, University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, October 17 2022), 12, https://leadership.usask.ca/documents/about/reporting/jean-teillet-report.pdf.

[7] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, 1-2

in Archibald's methodology are the "seven operating principles" meant to guide ISW that she defines as "respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy."[8] Archibald's stated principles stem from her Stó:lō background and relate to storytelling in that context. They are not meant to "generalize this storywork theory to all Indigenous peoples."[9] As such, this article aims to explore and define principles of ISW from a Métis-specific worldview to develop a Nation-specific practice and to fulfill Teillet's stated goal of educating the public about Indigenous peoples. I draw from Sara Florence Davidson's (Haida/Settler) process of working with Archibald's principles of ISW by "operationalizing" each principle as a lived reality in Davidson's Haida and settler-informed world.[10] Davidson starts ISW as laid out by Archibald, then works with community members to interpret ISW from within her cultural context through a story shared with her by her Haida father.

Davidson's instructive engagement with Archibald's principles of ISW serves as a point of departure from which to begin to define Métis Storywork. It is not my goal in this essay to present prescriptive definitions of each of Archibald's principles of ISW. Rather, I consider their relevance in a preliminary exploration of ISW principles in Métis Storywork. In so doing, I hope to acknowledge the contextually specific and often fluid nature of story in Métis film and video work. Considering that storytellers sometimes alter the recounting of their narratives over time "to reflect the evolution of the tellers themselves," this is an interesting example.[11]

While film and video are excellent formats for storytelling, the differing mode of sharing story is no less subject to the ethical guidance of ISW principles than spoken or written words, as Archibald shares:

> Even though the latter [television, video, and digital technology] may allow for use of visual images and the sounds of the storyteller, the same questions that confront the relationship between orality and literacy apply. How can the story be portrayed so that its power to make one think, feel, and reflect on one's actions is not lost? Can the cultural context be sufficiently developed so that the listener/viewer can make story meaning?[12]

Is Archibald skeptical about the capacity of visual media to convey authentic "cultural context"? Or is "sufficiently developed cultural context" more about the storyteller's approach? I understand Archibald's statement to underscore the importance of responsibly adapting stories to the filmic medium. Telling a story in film/video does not absolve the maker from **responsible** portrayals of the narrative, whether it is to a family, community, or Nation.

Responsibility includes ensuring permissions for storytelling are sought out and protocols are followed in a respectful manner, as well as ensuring the authentic and accurate

[8] Archibald, 33 in Dorothy Christian, "Indigenous Visual Storywork for Indigenous Film Aesthetics," in *Decolonizing research : indigenous storywork as methodology*, ed. Jo-Ann Archibald et al. (London: ZED Books Ltd, 2019), 41
[9] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, 140.
[10] Sara Florence Davidson, "Following the Song of K'Aad 'Aww: Using Indigenous Principles to Guide Ethical Practices in Research," in *Decolonizing research : indigenous storywork as methodology*, ed. Jo-Ann Archibald et al. (London: ZED Books Ltd, 2019), 37
[11] Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling," 14.
[12] Archibald, 2008, 81 in Christian, "Indigenous Visual Storywork for Indigenous Film Aesthetics," 41

portrayal of the story.[13] **Respect** is held for the storytellers "who owned or shared stories as an ethical guide" according to the "cultural knowledge embedded in the stories."[14] The principles of respect and responsibility apply equally to all stories, not just stories containing, for example, ceremonial knowledge. Marjorie Beaucage underlines the responsibility of, and, indeed the sacred importance of, storytelling in film video, stating that "the Grandmothers of light must be invited to teach their songs and movements so that new works can dance across the screen with this Power."[15] Beaucage further emphasizes the storytelling capacities of film and video in calling the mediums "writing with light."[16] Beaucage and Archibald's words import the power, and, therefore, the responsibility of filmmakers Strong and Vermette, to undertake their creative work in a conscientious way.

Rhayne Vermette

Rhayne Vermette is a Métis filmmaker whose father comes from the Métis community of Ste. Anne, while Vermette herself grew up in Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes (both communities are in Manitoba), where her mother's family resides. Vermette has taken a self-described circuitous route into filmmaking that started with some attempted film theory courses in university, which she found to be entirely filled with "white-dude films" that held little interest for her.[17] Following this failed foray into film study, Vermette followed the trajectory of English literature to fine arts to architecture, wherein she had the opportunity to return "to filmmaking as an animator" for a class project.[18] Vermette's aesthetic in her visual art practice is one of collage and layering of diverse imagery that "centralizes photography."[19] Similarly, Vermette's career path resembles a collage of experiences and interests, ultimately leading to her current filmmaking practice.

Ste. Anne

Ste. Anne is Vermette's first feature-length film. The film was shot over two years during the COVID-19 pandemic on the land of family and friends. Shot on 16mm film, the film has a dated aesthetic that suggests a 1970s-era film setting. The film follows the story of the family of sister and brother, Renée and Modeste, as they navigate Renée's sudden return after several years of unexplained absence. During this time, Modeste and his wife Elenore have been raising Renée's daughter Athène. Renée's return, and her silence as to where she has been, creates tension amongst members of the family, with Elenore fearing that she has returned to "steal back her daughter."[20] At another point in the film, Athène channels the confusion of the adults around her when she states to her friends by the river that she has "two mothers."[21] Renée mostly slides back into the pattern of her life within the community by helping out with chores. Her

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[13] Davidson, "Following the Song of K'Aad 'Aww: Using Indigenous Principles to Guide Ethical Practices in Research," 27-28.

[14] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, 36.

[15] Beaucage, "Aboriginal Voices : Entitlement Through Storytelling," 142

[16] Beaucage, "Aboriginal Voices : Entitlement Through Storytelling," 142

[17] Joshua Minsoo Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"," Notebook Interview (December 2, 2021 2021). https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/an-impossible-being-rhayne-vermette-discusses-ste-anne.

[18] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."

[19] Jerry White, "Communities on the Edge," *Dalhousie Review* 101, no. 3 (2021): 425

[20] Pac Pobric, "Rhayne Vermette's Ste. Anne," *The Brooklyn Rail* (2022).

[21] Rhayne Vermette, "Ste. Anne," (Canada, 2021), 16mm film.

reintroduction to Ste. Anne inexplicably includes the return of her longtime paranoia about staying in the area, which her brother admonishes her for when he states, "your fearmongering is really upsetting."[22]

Due in part to the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, Vermette created *Ste. Anne* with a core group of family and filmmaking colleagues in all the roles. Vermette notes that her team broke a lot of filmmaking "rules," including having five cinematographers (all women) for the film, breaking down the filmic hierarchy by paying everyone the same amount, and using the Arri SR3 16mm camera, which, apparently, "only men have been allowed to use…in Winnipeg."[23] Vermette herself plays the main character of Renée, while family, including her parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and a niece and nephew, play all of the additional characters in the film.[24] I posit that this close work with friends and family helps Vermette to tell her story responsibly, in a respectful manner that is, nonetheless still true to her creative vision. It is of great importance that filmmakers demonstrate respect and reverence for their communities while also fulfilling their creative vision. **Holism** encompasses all these considerations through the "interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual…, emotional, and physical…realms to form a whole healthy person…[which] extends to and is mutually influenced by one's family, community, band, and nation."[25] There is a delicate balance to be found in being true to oneself and one's community at the same time.

Throughout the film, a creeping uneasiness is felt in the long shots of the land surrounding the family home. These shots are accompanied by the eerie sound design of the film that is difficult to discern from background noises that might be heard while watching the film in a theatre.[26] For the soundscape of *Ste. Anne*, Vermette uses "a lot of off-camera sounds" in an effort to capture the sounds of home, such as "vacuuming sounds."[27] The sonic uneasiness contributes to the "fearmongering" brought on by Renée's return to the area. Another significant aspect of *Ste. Anne* is the language of the film, which demonstrates the principle of **synergy**, described by Archibald as a dynamic "interaction between storyteller, listener and story"[28] with a potential for transformative action. *Ste. Anne* is shot entirely in French. As film reviewer and critic Jerry White explains, "no, not all Francophones above the 49th identify as French-Canadian… no, not all Indigenous people basically speak English."[29] Vermette's use of the language challenges the viewer to consider that a community of Indigenous peoples outside of Eastern Canada might continue to use French in an English-dominant area.

Amanda Strong

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[22] Pobric, "Rhayne Vermette's Ste. Anne."
[23] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."
[24] Pobric, "Rhayne Vermette's Ste. Anne."
[25] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, 11.
[26] Pobric, "Rhayne Vermette's Ste. Anne."
[27] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."
[28] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit,* 33.
[29] White, "Communities on the Edge," 426.

Amanda Strong is, as described on the Spotted Fawn Productions website, "a Michif (Metis) interdisciplinary artist with a focus on filmmaking, stop motion animations and media art."[30] Strong uses her interdisciplinary practice to explore "common themes" of interest, including "reclamation of Indigenous histories, lineage, language and culture,"[31] all of which are evident in her 2016 stop-motion documentary *Four Faces of the Moon*. Since the inception of her Spotted Fawn Productions studio in 2010, Strong has worked as the "Owner, Director and Executive Producer since 2014" to create a highly collaborative and diverse team of "Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQI+ talent."[32] All of Strong's work is highly collaborative and involves paid training for up-and-coming animators, filmmakers, and artists. Like Vermette's process, Strong works closely with those who share their stories with her and takes steps to ensure the stories are respectfully conveyed while still maintaining her unique creative vision for the work.

Four Faces of the Moon

"We begin this story in a dream — which rapidly transforms into a nightmare."[33]

Four Faces of the Moon is described by Strong as a "hybrid documentary," sitting somewhere between fact and fantasy.[34] While Strong admits to blurring the lines between facts and fantasy, she also asserts that "the subject matter is not fiction. It's not an actual story that happened, per se, but to me, all the pieces are very relevant and very, in a way, fact-based."[35] In fact (not in fantasy), Strong spent four years researching the stories she portrays in *Four Faces* by means of "genealogical sleuthing," especially with her grandmother Olivine Bousquet,[36] visiting archives to locate items such as Northwest Halfbreed Scrip that was received by an ancestor and which features in the film. Many of Strong's films include a fluid, often non-linear narrative that hovers somewhere between the world of waking and dreams. Strong's films convey narratives to which she has a connection, through family and cultural ties, friendships/kinships, or other relationships of import, such as with the animal beings that Strong frequently portrays in her work.

Four Faces of the Moon is no different, being a fantastical exploration of Strong's Métis family history over the past six generations "to renew intergeneration Michif cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and ecological memory."[37] Strong figures prominently in the short film, which runs 13 minutes and 40 seconds, both as a stop-motion puppet version of herself and as a stop-motion puppet version of herself as a "spotted fawn," or *Gidagakoons*, a name that was gifted to the

[30] "Team," Spotted Fawn Productions, 2021, accessed April 12, 2023, https://www.spottedfawnproductions.com/team/ (Biographies of all team members at Spotted Fawn Production Studio).

[31] Productions, "Team." Spotted Fawn Productions.

[32] Productions, "Team." Spotted Fawn Productions.

[33] CBC Short Docs, "Four Faces of the Moon: An Untold Story of Colonization," (n.d.). https://www.cbc.ca/shortdocs/features/four-faces-of-the-moon-an-untold-story-of-colonization.

[34] "'Live action could never have created these worlds': Amanda Strong on her latest film, Biidaaban," CBC Arts, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019, accessed Apr 10, 2023, https://www.cbc.ca/arts/live-action-could-never-have-created-these-worlds-amanda-strong-on-her-latest-film-biidaaban-1.4821934.

[35] Collins, "'Live action could never have created these worlds': Amanda Strong on her latest film, Biidaaban."

[36] "This Indigenous filmmaker is being championed by a Canadian icon, and here's why," CBC Arts, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2016, accessed Apr 10, 2023, https://www.cbc.ca/arts/this-indigenous-filmmaker-is-being-championed-by-a-canadian-icon-and-here-s-why-1.3932477.

[37] Brenda Vellino, "Intervening in Settler Colonial Genocide: Restoring Métis Buffalo Kinship Memory in Amanda Strong's Four Faces of the Moon," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 32, no. 3 (2020): 150.

artist.[38] Similar to Vermette's film, the entirety of Four Faces takes place in several non-English languages, including Michif, Anishinaabemowin, and French, thus expanding the understanding of the linguistic diversity of Métis peoples. The film is divided into four parts, corresponding to the four phases of the moon cycle. Gidagakoons/Strong is present throughout, although sometimes she sits at a distance and observes various scenes, while other times she actively engages with ancestors. At one point during the second phase of the moon, Napoleon Bousquet (Olivine's grandfather and Strong's great-great-grandfather) is seen planting seeds in the ground. A voice-over states in Michif, "we plant with the moon, in the ground that once shook with thunder," in reference to the end of the buffalo hunt era and the efforts of the Canadian government to force the Métis to settle and farm.[39] In the third and fourth phases, we see the resistance at Batoche from behind Métis lines and the ultimate decimation of the buffalo herds, with various settlers and prospectors shooting indiscriminately at the remaining herds out of a moving train.[40]

Analyses

The films by Strong and Vermette fit well within the framework of *lii zistwer*, as defined by Chantale Cenerini. Cenerini states that within Michif/Métis storytelling practices, there are two key storytelling forms, those of *lii contes*, which include folklore and "spiritual histories" that are similar to the Cree form of *âtayôhkêwina*,[41] and lii zistwer, or life stories "transmitted through the generations."[42] Lii contes include tales of the supernatural or important mythic figures, such as the *Roogaroo*, or werewolf/shapeshifter being. Lii zistwer include life stories told by the experiencer, or by someone with permission from the experiencer to re-tell the story, both of which reflect the principle of respect. Both types of storytelling demonstrate **interrelatedness** as they function to "reflect as a community's perspective and how they see the world."[43] Interrelatedness is demonstrated through the relationship between "story, story-telling, and listener"[44] with a broad view toward those in relation to all culturally relevant beings, such as plants, animals, environmental beings (i.e., rivers, rocks, the moon), as well as humans—what Archibald terms "all my relations."[45] Cenerini elaborates on this function in the "life story" narratives that were the focus of her doctoral studies: "by telling our life story, we engage with others to share with them our sense of self and to affirm our belonging to a certain social group, and the values of said social group permeate the narrative."[46] She goes on to note the shifting nature of lii zistwer as "tellers choose moments of their life stories…that…surface to memory, or that best suit the particular setting and the specific audience."[47] Cenerini's explanation of lii zistwer and lii contes demonstrate synergy, in addition to interrelatedness, especially considering the potential for change within the teller, the listener, and the story itself.

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[38] Vellino, "Intervening in Settler Colonial Genocide: Restoring Métis Buffalo Kinship Memory in Amanda Strong's Four Faces of the Moon," 150.

[39] Amanda Strong and Bracken Hanuse Corlett, *Four Faces of the Moon* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2016).

[40] Strong and Hanuse Corlett, *Four Faces of the Moon*.

[41] McLeod, 2007 in Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling," 18.

[42] Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling," 18-19.

[43] Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling," 11.

[44] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, 32

[45] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, 42

[46] Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling," 13.

[47] Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling," 14.

As Vermette explains, she pays homage to the presence of beings from Métis folklore, or lii contes, through the visual representation of specific animals of significance to her, including a bull and a wolf.[48] Similarly, Strong repeats images of buffalo and her namesake, the spotted fawn, and acknowledges the importance of the moon. The cultural/spiritual significance of the stories is not made explicit but is suggested through their inclusion in the film. Each being (buffalo, spotted fawn, and the moon) has traditional stories (lii contes) associated with it. Still, Strong's inclusion of these beings aligns more closely with lii zistwer, or an experiential life story. Here, I would see Vermette and Strong's inclusion of these powerful symbols as illustrative of **interrelatedness** and **reverence** in their stories. **Reverence** includes the consideration of spiritual life, or "prayer, songs, and the ethical ways that they approached the work,"[49] and the impact of these important beings in their lives and the lives of their ancestors before them.

Each filmmaker shares a life story narrative, with varying levels of fictionalized elements that nevertheless feature both Strong and Vermette, respectively, as the focal point of their films. Strong appears as herself; Vermette as a fictional character. Both convey deeply personal elements of connection in telling their respective stories. Strong reimagines scenes of actual historical events to which her ancestors were connected. She implicates herself through the presence of her grandmother, first as a child and later as an Elder. Strong accompanies her throughout her filmic journey, picking bottles, going to a church-run school (and witnessing the associated shame), and, lastly, standing together in a field holding hands as buffalo walk through the frame.[50]

As Pac Pobric notes, "a lot of Vermette's life is in the film," including her actual family, and the titular community of Ste. Anne from which her Métis father comes.[51] Other aspects of Vermette's inclusion of *lii zistwer* are more subtle, but nevertheless present. She was interested in abandoning the typical "three-point narrative" of colonial storytelling,[52] characterized by a linear beginning, middle, and end point to the story. Vermette had been reading a number of "Métis folktales" around the time she started work on Ste. Anne, which she found to be "really quick, jokey, and to-the-point," an aspect that "helped set the pace" of the film.[53] Furthermore, Vermette was interested in circular narratives, where "things intersect, and [you] see how you can build a story that way."[54] The idea of overlapping/intersecting circular narratives is not dissimilar to Vermette's creative interest in collage, or her circuitous path into filmmaking from architecture, demonstrating a synergy and interrelatedness with her storytelling practice and her life.

An essential aspect of the work of Métis filmmakers is the importance of educating the public about Métis peoples as an act of reciprocity, which is essentially the act of "giving back" in a useful and considerate way.[55] This is not to say that any Métis filmmaker must (or could)

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[48] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."
[49] Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*, 126.
[50] Strong and Hanuse Corlett, *Four Faces of the Moon*.
[51] Pobric, "Rhayne Vermette's Ste. Anne."
[52] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."
[53] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."
[54] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."
[55] Davidson, "Following the Song of *K'Aad 'Aww*: Using Indigenous Principles to Guide Ethical Practices in Research," 31.

represent all Métis points of view, or that they cannot delve into the realms of fantasy. Métis filmmakers must, however, acknowledge the contemporary context within which we make our work and the potential for misuse of our stories. Adam Gaudry (Métis) demonstrates such intentional misuse in the conflation of the term *métissage* with Métis people in a contemporary Canadian literary context. Two Canadian authors, John Ralston Saul and Jennifer Reid, each use the concept of *métissage* as a marker of Canadian hybridity in order to co-opt Métis histories to create a unique Canadian national narrative, which becomes a sort of "Canadian Indigeneity, or Métis-izing Canada."[56] A Métis-ized political context that is decontextualized from actual Métis people can and is being used to replace political engagement in Canada with *actual* Indigenous peoples (i.e., First Nations, Inuit, and Métis).

The works of Strong and Vermette challenge the practice of "Indigenizing" in name only by engaging with historically specific narratives stemming from each filmmaker's respectful practices and their interrelatedness to their respective communities. Strong and Vermette include families, communities, and historical research in their work. Both filmmakers provide "oral footnote[s]" to their work in some way, which is essentially a method of contextualizing how the teller is positioned in relation to the knowledge and the specific story, rather than dwelling in pan-Indigenous narratives.[57] In so doing, they respond to Archibald's call to provide an adequate cultural context when presenting their work, even if not every contextual cue will be understood by every viewer. It is the responsibility of Métis filmmakers to create work that is generative and critical, grounded in lived-Métis realities, past, present, and future, rather than contributing to nebulous and individually defined concepts such as métissage. Strong and Vermette fulfill this responsibility and present viewers with unique and culturally grounded perspectives of Métis ways and stories with their considered, creative representations of culturally relevant personal engagement.

Relating to Strong and Vermette

The positionality that Strong and Vermette demonstrate in *Four Faces of the Moon* and *Ste. Anne* are aspects of their practices that I relate to and have enacted in my own film practice. As a Métis filmmaker, I have also figured somewhat prominently in many of my films, depending on the story being told. When it is a film of personal relevance, it makes sense to ground myself, to some extent, within the film, whether it is a cameo or a number of passing references to specific experiences that have come to pass in my life. Whether or not a viewer would be able to pick up on these elements depends on their knowledge of me, my filmmaking practice in general, and the topics I discuss. The first film I ever created, entitled *Wake Up!*,[58] features me sitting in front of a camera and dressing myself as Louis Riel while I narrate a series of statements placed at strategic points throughout the performance. My presence in this film is obvious. My second film, *Sweet Night*,[59] follows the adventures of the main character, a young Métis woman named Andy, as she navigates a series of romantic encounters alongside quasi-cultural teachings from these would-be

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[56] Adam Gaudry, "The Métis-ization of Canada: The Process of Claiming Louis Riel, Métissage, and the Métis People as Canada's Mythical Origin," *Aboriginal Policy Studies (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada)* 2, no. 2 (2013): 81, https://doi.org/10.5663/aps.v2i2.17889.

[57] McLeod, 2007, 16 in Cenerini, "Li zistwer Michif: aspects of narrative structure in Michif storytelling," 20.

[58] Jessie Short, "Wake Up!," (Canada: Winnipeg Film Group, 2015), HD Video.

[59] Jessie Short, "Sweet Night," (Canada: Winnipeg Film Group, 2016), HD Video.

lovers. While the film is shot with actors and reads as a dramatic narrative short film, there are obvious clues as to my personal presence in the narrative. For instance, Andy says her dad is Métis but that neither her nor her father know about sweetgrass (which is true for me as well), and she later meets a young man from the Blood Reserve on a train in a big city (obviously Calgary for anyone who knows the area, the city that I grew up in).

At least part of the reason I tend toward including myself in my film narratives is because the stories I tell are relevant to me, thus, it would be disingenuous to present an "objective" story as though I had no vested interest in the subject. I also find that it is precisely my personal connection to a story that adds to the perceived richness of the subject matter. This does not mean that films and videos by Métis creators *must* include cameos of the director with identifiable parallels between the work and the creator's life story. It is to say, however, that this type of self-inclusion often shows up in film and video work by Métis creators, similar to an "oral footnote." Thus, the storytellers, in this case the writers/directors of said films implicate, either explicitly or implicitly, their family histories in relation to their community and cultural connections. Vermette and Strong's implication of their respective personal narratives is a holistic way to tell a story both responsibly and respectfully, especially considering the deep inclusion of family throughout the filmmaking process for each creator. Each filmmaker is essentially presenting aspects of themselves in the film, as an oral footnote, demonstrating a deep engagement with the material from their respective related, but unique, points of view.

I found it intriguing that both artists draw from the work of philosopher and political leader Howard Adams (Métis), whose book *Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native Point of View* "thrust him into the national and international limelight."[60] At the end of *Four Faces of the Moon*, Strong includes a poignant quote from Adams as a pointed closing note:

> It is well known that the United States, its army, and its government deliberately exterminated the buffalo in order to exterminate the Indians who lived on them…By 1885, when the railroad was completed across Canada, the Buffalo was virtually extinct and the Indians and Metis who had depended on it were starving. The Sudden and systemic slaughter of the buffalo certainly helped to serve Ottawa's plan.[61]

Vermette notes that she had also been very interested in the work of Adams and that reading the book "was a monumental moment in my life…because it gave me language and understanding of what happened in Canada."[62] I recall the first time I picked up *Prison of Grass* over a decade ago during my Master's degree and felt equally enthralled and dismayed by the stories contained therein. There is a common story here that Strong, Vermette, and I can all relate to from our respective, and interrelated, family histories. Our mutual interest in Adams's work, and the understanding of our respective histories, demonstrate principles of **interrelatedness**, **synergy**, and **holism** in the work that we are each doing.

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[60] "Adams, Howard (1921-2001)," Indigenous Saskatchewan Encyclopedia, University of Saskatchewan, n.d., accessed July 18, 2023, https://teaching.usask.ca/indigenoussk/import/adams_howard_1921-2001.php

[61] Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass : Canada from a Native Point of View*, 1980 ed., Trent Native Series No. 1, (Toronto, ON: General Publishing, 1975), 65.

[62] Kim, "An Impossible Being: Rhayne Vermette Discusses "Ste. Anne"."

As stated early on in this essay, my goal is more an exploration in Métis Storywork methodologies rather than a prescriptive application of Archibald's seven principles of Indigenous Storywork through a Métis lens. Archibald's own work on ISW principles is similarly not based on the discrete categorization of terms, and many of her illustrative passages include overlapping examples of one to several principles at a time. Similarly, I take my cues from others who have engaged with Indigenous Storywork from their culturally relevant perspectives, such as Davidson, who uses a very specific Haida story, along with personal experiences as a Haida and settler person, to illustrate her interpretation of ISW methodology. In engaging with the films *Four Faces of the Moon* and *Ste. Anne*, by Strong and Vermette respectively, and briefly considering my film practice as a Métis filmmaker, I have explored some of the Storywork principles as I understand them. It is a starting point in my studies of Métis film and video practice that I will continue to expand upon with the goal of creating a more fulsome framework for Métis Storywork methodology that is culturally engaged and informed.

Finally, in exploring and engaging with the work of Strong and Vermette, I find one aspect that remains unaccounted for in considering a framework for Métis Storywork, and even for Indigenous Storywork more broadly. I think the basic definitions of ISW so far demonstrate, perhaps for filmmakers as storytellers, the need to add the concept of balance to storywork. In my mind, balance includes walking the line between reverence, responsibility, and respect, telling stories in the manner in which they are meant to be conveyed, while also maintaining these same ideals for the storyteller/filmmaker's creative vision, which is unique to each person. An important aspect of filmmaking is the way in which the filmmaker visually and sonically creates the story so as to make the story engaging and meaningful. Métis filmmakers must find the balance of respectfully and responsibly interpreting their personal vision while in service of family, community, and cultural goals for storytelling.

Biography

Jessie Ray Short is a filmmaker and independent curator of Métis, Ukrainian, and German descent. Short's practice involves uncovering connections between a myriad of topics that interest her, including, but not limited to, space and time, Indigenous and settler histories, Métis visual culture, personal narratives, spiritual and scientific belief systems, parallel universes, electricity, and aliens and non-human being(s). She has been invited to show her work nationally and internationally, including at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, La Chambre Blanche in Québec City, Art Mûr Berlin (a satellite exhibition of the Contemporary Native Art Biennial/BACA) in Germany, and the Wairoa Maori Film Festival in New Zealand. They are deeply grateful to be based in *oskana kâ-asastêki* or Pile of Bones (also known as Regina) in Treaty 4 territory.

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