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'Certain Native chiefs are creating certain illusions for the Native people. The Gaspé Peninsula, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, et cetera – it belongs to us,' pronounces Lucien Lessard, the former Minister of Recreation, Hunting and Fishing for Québec, during an interview with the indigenous Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin in *Incident at Restigouche* (1984). It was Lessard who oversaw the violent raids on the Mi'kmaq fishing town of Restigouche (now Listuguj) in 1981, memorialised in Obomsawin's 45-minute documentary three years later. In the interview, the former state functionary cuts an imperious figure in a wide-lapelled safari suit. He is unflappable and resolute in his belief that French-Canadians have a rightful territorial claim over that of the indigenous First Nations.

In June 1981, almost 400 Sûreté du Québec (provincial police) descended upon Restigouche with rubber bullets, batons and teargas, with the decidedly punitive aim of destroying and confiscating local fishermen's salmon nets. They were enforcing recently issued regulations from the Québécois government directing the local indigenous population to restrict their already-negligible levels of subsistence fishing, which accounted for less than half a percent of commercial fishing in the area. By the time Obomsawin arrived at the beleaguered reserve, armed forces had already launched a second raid. She had missed the opportunity to document the first episode of state violence because of the byzantine administration at the National Film Board of Canada, the same organisation with whom she has made around 50 films in as many years. 'My history at the board has not been easy,' she once acknowledged, rather euphemistically. 'It's been a long walk.'¹

Obomsawin insisted that had she been able to arrive earlier, in time to record the earliest stirrings of unrest, 'the film would have been very different.'² She was rightfully 'irritated at what she had missed' because she had missed part of something historic: an event she described as 'the biggest and most violent action in Canada versus Indians in 50 years.'³ It is tempting to think of the film Obomsawin might have made with less bureaucratic, more responsive institutional backing – a film with less repurposed footage from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, perhaps, or something less reliant on images from *L'Aviron*, the local newspaper in the nearby town of Campbellton, New Brunswick. Yet what she did create is a testament to her perspicacity as a documentarian.

Incident at Restigouche is a film replete with archival photographs, illustrations and first-person accounts. Anecdotes from children and elders alike are mixed with local fishermen's harrowing testimonies of slashed and confiscated nets, and of beatings and arrests at the hands of provincial police. Obomsawin occasionally lightens her record of this otherwise tragic set of events by including, for example, an account of a local who pulls down his pants, mooning the police in an act of childish defiance. Footage of salmon leaping upstream, a child floating joyfully on a large inflatable toy, and another laughing and rolling over in a verdant field complement the violence with an air of pastoral whimsy, making the film something more than a record of indigenous misfortune.

Soon after the second raid at Restigouche, and after Obomsawin had already conducted several interviews for the film, the National Film Board of Canada refused

to grant Obomsawin permission to speak to Lessard – or anyone white, for that matter – on camera. As Randolph Lewis puts it in his monograph on Obomsawin, the first dedicated to any indigenous filmmaker, her response was 'savvy': without protest, she left the NFB offices 'and proceeded to do exactly what she wanted, conducting the interviews she needed,' including one with Lessard a few years after the raids.⁴ There had been many instances of white filmmakers interviewing indigenous people in NFB films, but the converse rarely took place. For Obomsawin, it was imperative that she interview Lessard – not with the sangfroid of one who can afford to assume a detached position, but with the emotional investment of an indigenous woman thrust by circumstance into the role, at once privileged and burdensome, of amplifying the voices of the many fellow indigenous peoples with whom she came into contact.

Close to the film's 30-minute mark, Obomsawin appears on screen for the first time. She sits across from Lessard in 1984, pointing at the former minister as she takes him to task for an odious statement made to the Listuguj chief in which he blithely dismissed indigenous rights to self-determination. 'You cannot ask for sovereignty because to have sovereignty one must have one's own culture, language and land,' Lessard is said to have pronounced in a fit of illogic consistent with so much of settler-colonial justification. Notwithstanding the absurdity of indigenous peoples having to ask for sovereignty, Lessard's idea of their being without 'culture, language and land' is a patent untruth that reveals more an unfulfilled colonial desire than a lived reality. The camera moves a little more restlessly than usual, occasionally coming in and out of focus. It zooms out in time to catch Obomsawin's vigorous hand gestures as she explains emphatically to an incredulous Lessard that all of Canada belongs to indigenous peoples. 'The history of Québec does not begin with the French-Canadians,' she exclaims, giving that part of their exchange a suitably pithy denouement.

It is only against the backdrop of colonisation's baleful machinations that can we fully appreciate Obomsawin's titular 'incident', however paltry or euphemistic the term itself may seem. As much as history can so often look and feel like an interminable cycle of aggressions, dispossessions and power grabs, there have also always been acts of solidarity and pan-tribal resistance, reclamations of what has been expropriated and revolt in the name of what is just. In unambiguously counterposing state-sanctioned violence and indigenous self-preservation, *Incident at Restigouche* was a turning point in Obomsawin's practice, marking the advent of a new mode of activist-filmmaking that would inform her later films – such as the celebrated *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), widely considered to be a foundational work of indigenous cinema, in which the filmmaker tells the story of Kanien'kéhaka (Mohawk) resistance to a proposed golf course on their lands. With *Incident at Restigouche*, we witness a momentous stirring of indigenous filmmaking's crucible, an augur of what was to come for Obomsawin and the many for whom her work has been a vital exemplar.

1. Randolph Lewis, *Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), page 49.

2. *Ibid.*, page 48.

3. *Ibid.*, page 48.

4. *Ibid.*, page 49.