



*Indigenous Screen*

*Cultures in Canada*

Edited by

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and Marian Bredin

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## INTRODUCTION

**MARIAN BREDIN AND SIGURJÓN BALDUR HAFSTEINSSON**

Communication is relational; it brings  
about relationships between people.

— *Eric Michaels*

### Theoretical Paradigms for Indigenous Media

In the sweep of global media markets, indigenous people around the world have increasing access to media technology such as print, radio, film, television, and the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous people participate in and compete for a place within the new international information order,<sup>2</sup> “negotiating with the settler nation”<sup>3</sup> and voicing their concerns with the help of media. Indigenous media are considered “a new dynamic” in social movements and help generate a critique of the “democratic deficits” of mainstream media.<sup>4</sup> Some media scholars suggest that indigenous people are now producing, using, and consuming media to trigger political, social, and cultural change, taking the initiative to represent themselves and address issues that mainstream media neglect.<sup>5</sup> The rise of indigenous media occurs in a larger global context where, as media theorists argue, developments in international communication place national sovereignty and nation states under new cultural and social pressures.<sup>6</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz first described these processes of cultural globalization in his analysis of how television has created communities with “no sense of place.”<sup>7</sup> According to these models, nation states are losing their power over domestic media and are faced with diminished ability to regulate the flow of ideas and information within their territories.

As a result, individuals may re-evaluate forms of political participation and take advantage of new opportunities of expression and models of citizenship “free” from authoritarian control of the state. Global transnational media are thus conceived of as facilitating the creation of new citizens who derive their identity from post-national modes of participation that “supersede territorially based citizenship.”<sup>8</sup> Within this theoretical framework, media scholars view indigenous media as products of declining government communications monopolies and as participants in a global information democracy. Indigenous media erode the power of the state to exercise its authority upon indigenous people while articulating concerns about government threats to indigenous cultural, social, economic, and political sovereignty. Other theorists take a less emancipatory view of indigenous media, seeing them as mere participants in a colonial and neo-liberal ruse to secure governmental control over information spaces without many additional benefits for the indigenous people.<sup>9</sup> The state’s grip on indigenous people and their media is nowhere more apparent than in its control of broadcast frequencies, and in the licensing and legal limitations it imposes upon media content and ownership. Indigenous media scholars have acknowledged these competing theoretical possibilities with such terms as “Faustian contract”<sup>10</sup> or “primitivist perplex.”<sup>11</sup>

Anthropologist Faye Ginsburg, a prolific scholar in the field of indigenous media, has constructed a key theoretical and interpretive paradigm for the field. She believes that indigenous media serve as self-conscious modes of cultural preservation and production, and as means of political mobilization. Ginsburg claims that this “cultural activism” permits people who have previously found themselves misrepresented by the instruments of the dominant culture to talk back to structures of power, using a range of media technologies.<sup>12</sup> Their goal is to use media for “internal and external communication, for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination.”<sup>13</sup> Ginsburg and others have argued that indigenous media may be defined as processes of “transformative action.” This definition helps us to see the emergence of “new social and cultural possibilities on a continuum, from the activities of daily life out of which consciousness and intentionality are constructed, to more dramatic forms of expressive culture (such as media or social protests).”<sup>14</sup> Ginsburg’s theoretical assertions have been widely accepted by scholars of indigenous media. Models of cultural activism or transformative action show how indigenous media both produce and reproduce discursive and material practices; these models also challenge dichotomous constructs such as resistance and power, or subordinate and dominant.



Theoretical paradigms of indigenous media raise concerns about indigenous people's unequal access to mainstream society and its institutions. They examine the consequences of indigenous people's absence or misrepresentation in mainstream media outlets and criticize institutional practices within mainstream media structures that reinforce hegemonic power. Critical indigenous media research addresses the lack of official attempts to integrate indigenous people economically and/or structurally into national and global systems of media production, thus undermining popular notions of "the global village."<sup>15</sup> Indigenous media scholars explore key questions about who has the power to narrate and the power to suppress indigenous narratives.<sup>16</sup> Are indigenous media representations themselves appropriate?<sup>17</sup> What is the role of indigenous media in striking a balance between external interests and local constituencies?<sup>18</sup> This book takes up these questions with respect to indigenous media in Canada and undertakes a critical examination of the role of media in Aboriginal communities.

### Indigenous Media Scholarship in Canada

In Canada, studies of Aboriginal and First Peoples' media have emerged from within communication and media studies. The earliest studies of Native broadcasting were carried out by communication scholars with an interest in the cultural impact of radio and television in Native communities. The research literature on indigenous media and Aboriginal broadcasting in Canada contains examples from a number of disciplinary and theoretical fields. These might be loosely organized into five categories: television "effects" surveys drawing upon social psychological notions of identity and assimilation; social historical approaches focusing on the political importance of indigenous media; sociological models of "development communication"; media studies using anthropological concepts of culture and ethnographic methods; and, finally, textual analyses using methods of media content analysis and concepts in film theory.

From within the fields of cultural anthropology and social psychology, researchers in the 1970s and '80s examined the influence of introduced media on individual and group behaviour, values, perceptions, and sense of identity in indigenous communities. At the same time, within the field of communication studies, researchers attempted to measure media effects on individuals and groups, seeking to establish links between consumption of certain kinds of programming and changes in norms and behaviour. These approaches were often ahistorical, paying inadequate attention to the social and cultural contexts within which media consumption took place. Nonetheless, they

are important for their emphasis on subjective and collective locations of identity and culture. "Effects" research conducted in Inuit communities immediately after the introduction of television to the North examined the tensions created by extensive exposure to non-Inuit programming, in the absence of Inuktitut programs reflecting Inuit cultural knowledge. From this perspective, the effects of television can be seen as part of a broader colonial relationship that, alongside the introduction of English schools, government institutions, and wage labour, contributed to the disruption of traditional Inuit cultural knowledge and social organization.<sup>19</sup> However, this research also reveals that the consumption of southern television is not simply a unilateral process of passive assimilation, but an active transformation of introduced images and ideas in the contexts of Inuit norms and values. Further, an unintended effect of introduced television, at least in Inuit communities, was to trigger the demand for indigenous production.

Cultural anthropologists have conducted similar research on the impact of introduced media on Aboriginal cultures, but with less emphasis on measuring individual responses and behavioural changes, and more concern with the negotiation of meaning of electronic texts and the situation of the new medium within existing patterns of social organization and communication. This approach is useful for illuminating both the processes of consumption of externally produced media and the more recent appropriation of media technologies for internally generated production. In either case, the emphasis is on cultural differences in the interpretation and creation of texts. An early Canadian example of this approach was Gary Granzberg and Jack Steinbring's 1980 study of the introduction of mainstream television programming to three Manitoba Cree communities. Granzberg and Steinbring were concerned with the effects of television over a period of several years, and they employed standard social psychological survey instruments, "focus group" discussions, and participant observation in order to measure these effects.<sup>20</sup> While in this present volume we are primarily interested in the Aboriginal production of media content, some understanding of responses to externally produced media is necessary in order to establish the contexts from within which Aboriginal audiences interpret the programs produced by their own and the mainstream media.

The underlying assumption of "cultural impact" studies is that some or all of the various perceptual, discursive, or structural components of culture will be altered by a new medium of communication. The weakness inherent in such an approach is its tendency to view culture, especially the culture of non-Western Others, as a set of fixed perceptions, norms, discourses, or behaviours to which an objective measure of "change" can be applied. The

connotations of “change” in this case are often those of “loss”—new media are associated with a degradation of the integrity and coherence of cultural knowledge. At the same time, the impact of electronic media on indigenous culture and social organization is often considered to be qualitatively different from the impact, for instance, of computer networks and information technologies on mainstream North American culture and society, even though there may in fact be important similarities between the two cases. Anthropological models of culture do provide considerable insight into the shifts in everyday habits, patterns of social interaction, and generation of meaning precipitated by the introduction of a medium like television. For example, Granzberg, Steinbring and Hamer argued that in the period of initial exposure, Manitoba Cree communities incorporated mainstream television into their existing conceptions of communication. Understood in relation to the traditional significance given to dreams and visions, television and radio were referred to by the same term used for the shamanic “shaking tent” ceremony.<sup>21</sup>

Researchers with a background in social history, sociology, or social theory tend to view the conjuncture of new communication technologies and Aboriginal cultures as part of macro-processes of contact and change. Gail Valaskakis’s early research on historical shifts in communication patterns in the eastern Arctic, for example, was influenced by the social-historical methods and communication theories of Harold Innis. Valaskakis’s work focused on the links between communication and control, between Euro-Canadian monopolies of knowledge and other modes of neo-colonial domination.<sup>22</sup> In a contemporaneous study of communication and political development in northwestern Ontario, Heather Hudson took a similar perspective. She applied models from the sociology of development to media use by Aboriginal leaders in the region.<sup>23</sup> Hudson and Valaskakis shared a similar concern with the influence of communication upon social interaction between groups and its role in historical relations of dependency and control between centre and margin. These researchers examined the initial links between Native-controlled media and indigenous self-determination movements of the 1970s and 1980s in Canada. As initially applied to Third World societies, development communication models proposed by Wilbur Lang Schramm, Daniel Lerner, and others viewed the exposure to mainstream modes of mass communication as a necessary component of “modernization,” economic growth, and social development.<sup>24</sup> By situating the introduction of mass media to the North in the historical contexts of colonialism, Valaskakis and Hudson rejected this dominant theoretical paradigm in development communications. The most recent research adopting a social historical

approach to indigenous media includes the work of Valerie Alia and Lorna Roth, who trace the history of First Peoples' news media and locate the origins of contemporary networks like Television Northern Canada (TVNC) and Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN).<sup>25</sup> Roth is particularly concerned with the activist role of Aboriginal groups and indigenous media practitioners in their struggle to assert greater control over broadcasting infrastructures, policies, and program content.

Much recent Canadian indigenous media research is concerned with the productive output of Aboriginal-controlled print, radio, television, film, and digital media. Aboriginal media content can clearly be treated as a corpus of texts, interpreted using the methods of discourse analysis or film criticism. However, the search for an inherent "visual language" or for distinct formal properties and narrative structures derived from "authentic" indigenous cultural codes is sometimes problematic. Sol Worth and Eric Michaels<sup>26</sup> provided some early evidence that Aboriginal film and video texts diverge in significant ways from the cultural norms of Anglo-American or European visual communication. Indigenous media research in the Canadian context pursues this approach in a number of ways. In her analysis of Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) programs, Kate Madden argues that Inuit television resists the passive positioning of the viewer and rejects the construction of reporters and anchors as expert and omniscient authorities, both of which are common to dominant codes of news production.<sup>27</sup> She proposes that the rejection of these conventions is linked to Inuit cultural values of individual autonomy, decentralized leadership, and consensual decision making, and to its emphasis on cooperation and non-confrontational behaviour. Madden locates formal and substantive expressions of each of these values in IBC programs. Avi Santo takes a similar perspective in his analysis of the Igloolik Isuma television series *Nunavut* as a means of mobilizing Inuit cultural citizenship. He examines two specific episodes in the series, highlighting their televisual and narrative mechanisms of inscribing Inuit identity as examples of what Ginsburg refers to as "embedded aesthetics."<sup>28</sup> Michael Evans makes use of a related set of theoretical tools in his analysis of Inuit video as folklore.<sup>29</sup> Tracing intersections with other oral and material expressions of folklore, he explores Igloolik-based videomakers' distinctive use of symbols and stories and describes the local cultural significance of video production. In another form of textual analysis, Lisa Philips Valentine undertakes a discursive analysis of OjiCree community radio in her larger study of Severn Ojibwe oral discourses in northwestern Ontario. She is primarily interested in the multiplication of discursive strategies occasioned by the emergence of indigenous media, but the model of culture and the

understanding of negotiated cultural change that she employs converge with Granzberg's.<sup>30</sup> Kathleen Buddle considers potential forms of Aboriginal cultural-capital creation in the context of urban Native community radio.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Valentine, she is not dealing exclusively with indigenous language use in a relatively remote community, but she explores relations of production in Aboriginal urban and off-reserve radio programming in southern Ontario. Buddle argues that Aboriginal-community radio programming and Native media activism in general ought to be read as forms of "cultural action, rather than as 'representations' that can be abstracted and analyzed apart from their authors."<sup>32</sup>

As this brief review of current research suggests, the "differences" associated with indigenous media production in Canada might be located in a variety of places: in the interpretations of the anthropologist/analyst who has a vested interest in seeing communal values or cultural practices as traces in the text, in the social organization of indigenous media production and the outcomes of collective decision making, or in the deliberate refusal and accidental transgression of the dominant conventions of mass media and their commercial or aesthetic production codes and values. In most cases, researchers conclude that textual analyses of indigenous media have minimal relevance without a concomitant understanding of the practical conditions of media production. Canadian research is remarkably consistent in recognizing this necessity, and in this respect it conforms to Ginsburg's view of indigenous media as embodying processes of transformative action. The contributors to this book likewise situate their readings of Aboriginal film and television texts within specific social historical and cultural contexts.

## Objectives and Outline of the Book

The contributions to this volume are located between the anthropological and the historical in the existing research literature. This collection is one of the first to deal specifically with contemporary programming practices and content emerging from Aboriginal media organizations. The authors combine a focus on the political economy of Aboriginal media in Canada with a close critical reading of its visual and textual content to explore the presence and importance of Aboriginal media in the changing domestic and global media environment. The volume includes contributions from within the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, film and media studies, and Native studies. Each chapter provides a concrete example of how mass media permit increasing cultural and social agency among indigenous groups and how Aboriginal media producers conceive of traditional knowledge,

languages, and practices as vehicles of modern culture. The primary objective of *Indigenous Media in Canada* is to understand each case presented in the following chapters as a local instance of cultural practice within global mediascapes, and at the same time as an example of contemporary indigenous cultural expression in Canada.

This book emerged from a panel chaired by Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies annual conference in Vancouver in March 2006. The original conference presentations focussed on programs, practices, and audiences at the APTN, and the resulting publication sustains that interest in the world's first national network operated by Aboriginal people with predominantly Aboriginal content. In collecting these essays here, we hope to highlight how APTN builds on an extensive history of Aboriginal media use and indigenous television production while generating rich new possibilities in broadcast, digital, and online media content. The focus on APTN was broadened to include chapters on the historical evolution of First Peoples' television, its place in the wider project of Aboriginal-language broadcasting, and comparative perspectives on the experience of indigenous film production and the creation of information infrastructures for Native cyber-communities. The chapters thus present wide-ranging analyses of three key aspects of Canadian indigenous media: their textual and discursive content, their use of technology and modes of production, and their audiences within and beyond Aboriginal communities. The book provides fresh insights from both established and emerging scholars of Canadian indigenous media studies.

The collection is divided into three parts, beginning with two essays that situate Aboriginal media in Canada within their cultural and social history. Lorna Roth's opening chapter, "First Peoples' Television in Canada's North: Origins of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network," provides a social, historical, and political framework for understanding what we might call the "conditions of possibility" for indigenous media in Canada. She traces the origins of APTN and its precursor, TVNC back to their roots in the policy interventions and broadcast "experiments" of the 1970s. Roth outlines six discrete phases in this history, each marked out by distinctive changes in representational practices and technological infrastructures, and a corresponding expansion of target audiences. Roth's comprehensive historical analysis of Aboriginal media policies and practices is widely cited in the literature on APTN and on Aboriginal media in Canada and around the world. In this chapter, she describes the trajectory of indigenous television, from early local satellite communication projects, to the creation of regional Native communications societies, to a pan-northern network, which led to

the creation of a national network carried on cable across the country. Roth provides valuable insight into the public perception of APTN, its popular support among viewers, and the initial resistance of other players in the Canadian television industry. This chapter lays important groundwork for readers unfamiliar with the history of Aboriginal broadcasting while guiding us skilfully through the field of Canadian broadcasting policy.

In her adaptation of a report originally commissioned by APTN, Jennifer David places the network within larger analyses of the role of Native broadcasting in sustaining Aboriginal language use. Her chapter, "Clear Signals: Learning and Maintaining Aboriginal Languages through Television," presents a survey of the state of Aboriginal language broadcasting. David describes the current availability of indigenous language content on federally funded northern Native radio and television production, on local community radio stations predominantly in southern Canada, and through independent film and video productions that provide language material for APTN. Her findings demonstrate that Aboriginal language content depends heavily on financial assistance, as a function of the relatively high costs of production in relation to a small audience. David highlights the importance of Aboriginal language use in media to its acquisition by children and youth. She argues convincingly for more substantive research into the role of media in creating employment opportunities for indigenous language speakers and in encouraging Aboriginal youth to maintain their language.

The four chapters in Part II narrow the focus from the broader historical and social terrain of Aboriginal media to develop case studies of media practice, televisual content, and audience consumption at APTN. As a cultural anthropologist, Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson moves from the terrain of policy analysis and media history to a detailed ethnographic study of news production at APTN during its first licence term (1999–2006). In his contribution, "Aboriginal Journalism Practices as Deep Democracy: *APTN National News*," he makes use of interview material to describe the creation of a news production team and weekly news programming at the network. This chapter explores the APTN news team's need for a careful balance that both addresses the general neglect of Aboriginal issues by most other Canadian news outlets and answers the demand for journalist independence from Aboriginal politicians and political organizations. Hafsteinsson traces the cultural specificity of news narrative and production practices at APTN, showing how the democratic principles underpinning the news department extend not only to relations of production among journalists, but also to specific practices of representation within APTN's news discourse.



The fourth chapter shifts from a focus on the history, structure, and internal practices at APTN to a more sustained look at the network's audience. In "APTN and Its Audiences," Marian Bredin proposes a triangulated analysis of the ideal, active, and actual viewer of APTN programs. The ideal viewer emerges from interview accounts of how APTN producers and hosts imagine their audience; the active viewer can be understood by looking at informal feedback and dialogue generated by APTN's online forum and the call-in portion of its current affairs program, while the actual viewer (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) can be delineated through qualitative and quantitative audience research conducted by the network and commercial ratings services. Relying on theoretical perspectives on the audience drawn from media studies, this chapter attempts to locate APTN's audience within shifting relations between the three elements of text, reader, and community. In her chapter, "Aboriginal Media on the Move: An Outside Perspective on APTN," Kerstin Knopf focuses on program schedules, acquisition policies, and specific content at APTN to demonstrate how the network fosters new political and cultural perspectives shaped by Aboriginal cultural needs. Looking mainly at examples from its initial licence period, Knopf suggests that while APTN works toward the decolonization of Canadian airwaves, the shortage of good quality indigenous content sometimes results in program choices that contradict the decolonizing process. With a close reading of APTN's televisual texts, including news, documentary, drama, children's programs, and advertising, Knopf demonstrates how these programs produce and reproduce Aboriginal cultural discourses while also at times recirculating stereotypes from dominant discourses about Aboriginal people.

Christine Ramsay, a film scholar at the University of Regina, examines the local production of the APTN series *Moccasin Flats*. This landmark program was the first North American television drama series to be created, written, produced, and performed by Aboriginal people. In her critical reading of the show's first season (2003), Ramsay seeks to locate the series within global youth culture and the urban 'hood genre, while establishing how it speaks to the cultural experience of young Aboriginal people growing up in Canadian cities. Ramsay suggests that the program evokes North Central Regina as a "place image" in the Canadian national imagination and as both urban dystopia and utopia for its Native residents. This chapter, "Regina's *Moccasin Flats*: A Landmark in the Mapping of Urban Aboriginal Culture and Identity," gives a detailed account of how the series' creators, the young non-professional Aboriginal cast, and the narrative itself negotiate the cultural borderlands of race and class and the tensions between elders and youth.

Essays in the third part of the collection engage the transformation of screen technologies and changing circuits of media distribution by looking at film, Internet, and digital media in indigenous communities. In her contribution, “Co-producing First Nations’ Narratives: *Journals of Knud Rasmussen*,” Doris Baltruschat explores the community origins of indigenous media in her examination of the most recently released film from Igloodik Isuma Productions, an Inuit-controlled independent film and video production company. The company’s first film, *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner*, garnered international awards for its compelling adaptation of local Inuit stories of shamanic intrigue and family conflict. A co-production with a Danish film company, *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* follows the same community through the early period of European contact. Baltruschat considers the role of digital video technologies, the influence of co-production agreements, and the emphasis on key values of community-based media in this example of indigenous filmmaking.

The book’s final two chapters move from the terrain of what are now increasingly referred to as “traditional” media into the world of new digital media and online communication. In his chapter, “Wearing the White Man’s Shoes: Two Worlds in Cyberspace,” Mike Patterson demonstrates how the internet and online media are being used by Native peoples to overcome marginalization and resist colonization. He traces the emergence of Aboriginal communities in cyberspace, arguing that, as with earlier adaptations of European technology, indigenous people are using new media tools to occupy new cultural territory. In a series of case studies, from FrostysAmerindian and the Fighting Whites websites to the use of online media in Aboriginal education initiatives, Patterson explores the potential of the Internet as a virtual space both for indigenous community-building and for intercultural dialogue. He highlights the pressing need for improved local broadband access if Native people are to overcome the digital divide in Canada. In the final chapter, “Taking a Stance: Aboriginal Media Research as an Act of Empowerment,” Yvonne Poitras Pratt echoes this call in her participatory study of plans for information infrastructure in Aboriginal communities, while reiterating this book’s central focus on the social conditions within which media—new and old—are deployed. Poitras Pratt reminds readers that indigenous strategies of decolonization still face considerable social, political, and economic resistance from governments and within Canadian society at large. She explores the emerging paradigms of action research to show how indigenous scholars are making important new inroads into participatory and ethnographic research. Pratt describes how she was influenced by these models in her own research on the extension of