

FILM REVIEW ESSAY

čəsnaɔəm: the city before the city

2017 | Canada | 75 min |

In English and hənqəmínəm with English subtitles

A documentary film by Elle-Máíja Tailfeathers,
Musqueam First Nation, and Museum of Anthropology
curatorial team

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The newcomers have only been here for a very short period of time, which is less than 200 years. That's only a blink of an eye in comparison to the 9000 years that we've been here.

– Howard E. Grant

C'əsnaɔəm: *the city before the city* tells the nine thousand-plus-year history of the Musqueam Nation in their own words. The unceded and traditional territory of Musqueam includes most of the “lower” Fraser River delta and connecting lands – that is, it stretches west from where the Coquitlam River flows into the Fraser, encompassing all of Vancouver, Richmond, New Westminster, and parts of Ladner, Delta, and the North Shore (some of this territory overlaps with that of other Nations). Of course, in seventy-five minutes, such a long and rich history cannot be told in full, so the film centres itself around one central area that links Musqueam's ancient past to its present: the village of čəsnaɔəm, also known as the Marpole Midden. Located along the Fraser River, under the Arthur Laing Bridge in South Vancouver, čəsnaɔəm was a Musqueam village site and burial ground. Over the past two hundred years this site has been the focus of both Musqueam and settler narratives concerning “who lived here before contact.” During this time, settlers constructing roads and buildings, or “collecting” artifacts for anthropological study or just out of “curiosity,” have removed many human remains and belongings from the site.¹ However, much more

¹ The long history of settlers “digging up” the site, and of various interpretations of its contents, is also detailed in Susan Roy's *These Mysterious People: Shaping History and Archaeology in a Northwest Coast Community* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 2016.

recently, the site was the centre of a 2012 dispute between Musqueam and developers when construction was planned to develop the site into condos. The developers had unearthed ancestral remains during preliminary work on the site, prompting Musqueam community members to hold a 120-day vigil over *čəsnaxəm*, preventing further desecration until the development could be halted completely. For Vancouverites who remember the vigil (which culminated with Musqueam and their allies blocking access to the Arthur Laing Bridge to demand action from the provincial government) but quite likely do not understand why Musqueam occupied *čəsnaxəm* for so long – enduring showers of rain and racism along the way – this film offers a deep and compassionate history of their fight to preserve their ancestral and unceded territory, and a glimpse into their living culture.

čəsnaxəm: the city before the city is an essential documentary in our current cultural and political climate. For settler Vancouverites in particular – and Canadians more generally – who are beginning to ask more honest questions about the history of colonization, it speaks to the relatively unknown pre-colonized past of the unceded territory now known as Greater Vancouver, British Columbia. *čəsnaxəm* is also extremely important for anthropologists, historians, and educators working in or on the Pacific Northwest as it exemplifies what many are now striving for: the production of a collaborative work that amplifies the voices and foregrounds the goals of Indigenous communities in balance with other authorial voices (outsider and/or non-Indigenous) while providing crucial insights into historico-cultural aspects of Indigenous life. But, more importantly, the film has deep, multi-layered value for the Musqueam First Nation as a deliberately crafted act of telling their own story and reflecting their values.

The film was created by Elle-Máíjá Tailfeathers (Blackfoot from the Kanai First Nation/Sámi) in collaboration with Musqueam and the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) curatorial team, and it builds on interviews that Tailfeathers filmed in collaboration with MOA curators as part of a series of distinct museum exhibits of the same name, which opened in 2015 at the Musqueam Cultural Centre, MOA, and the Museum of Vancouver.² The film's lengthy byline is unconventional for mainstream film audiences, yet it is a crucial statement by the filmmakers about shared authorship and ethical collaboration. All parties involved (Tailfeathers, Musqueam, and the MOA curators) engaged in a reciprocal relationship throughout the filming and editing process – a

² The exhibition at the Museum of Vancouver is still open, and it runs until January 2020.

process that reframes some of the fundamental questions that drive “traditional” documentary practices by centring the voice and interests of the documentary “subjects” rather than simply reporting a story or documenting events.

At the film’s premiere at the Vancouver International Film Festival in October 2017, *Tailfeathers* was joined on stage by close to twenty Musqueam community members to present the film, continuing to give space and a platform to those whose story was being told. Musqueam band councillor and cultural leader Howard E. Grant, who carries the name qiyəplənəxʷ (anglicized as Capilano), spoke about how this film – and the previous museum exhibits – represents a historic moment for Musqueam in which they have chosen to share *their* history with the world. Having a culture of protocol concerning public and private knowledge, as well as living and growing alongside one of Canada’s largest cities, Grant spoke of how Musqueam had learned the hard way that sharing their history and culture with settler society had to be carefully managed. And this guardedness is well founded. Over the past two hundred-plus years, settlers have time and again proven to be poor neighbours. It has taken this long for settlers to start to listen; however, if the premiere and reception of this film are any indication, there is a genuine hope that they are now ready to do so.

I spoke with *Tailfeathers* to get some insights into how she approached the process of crafting the story of the film while balancing her relationship of trust with Musqueam. She said that it was important for her to approach the work with Musqueam as an outsider (albeit one with several community connections), which meant that she made a deliberate point of foregrounding the voices of Musqueam throughout the process. And this comes through in the film: *c̓əsnaɔəm: the city before the city* is narrated entirely by Musqueam voices – past and present – something that community members expressed was crucial to the project. *Tailfeathers* told me that she was in a unique and fortunate position because the interview material was so rich and had already gone through a rigorous community consultation process (for the MOA exhibit) by the time she sat down to edit the film. The MOA curators had crafted the interview questions in consultation with Musqueam and were able to tailor them for each interviewee so as to ensure that they were appropriate and respectful. She also used the exhibits as a guide to what Musqueam believed was essential to express to the public. *Tailfeathers* then screened a rough cut of the film for community members followed by a lengthy discussion about how the narrative was being presented. The result of this was that

community members wanted more of their ancestors' voices to be present in the film, and so Tailfeathers decided to include archival texts (e.g., transcriptions from the 1913 McKenna-McBride Commission, the 1892 BC Fisheries Commission, etc.), which are some of the very few texts that include Musqueam voices directly.

By coming to the project in a grounded way, and making space throughout the process of crafting the film, Tailfeathers was able to craft, along with Musqueam and the MOA curators, a story that amplifies the voice of the community rather than a story *on* or *about* the community. And it is the voice, the spirit, of the community that shines through in *č̓əsnaɫəm*. The film shifts the perspective of what documentary audiences might expect – from the mainstream “Western” historical gaze to that of the Musqueam Nation itself. This shift is important: it underscores that our shared history does not exist within a neat narrative of settler colonization, that it cannot be expressed by a single voice.

č̓əsnaɫəm: the city before the city ends with community members discussing their hopes and vision for the future of the site: a park that pays tribute to their ancestors resting at *č̓əsnaɫəm* and that displays information about the site and its history. And it is this vision of a familiar landscape transformed to reflect and honour its Indigenous past that stuck with me as I left the screening in October, reflecting not only on *č̓əsnaɫəm*'s rich past but also on a future we can build together – if we can learn to listen. A large part of this proposed process of “reconciliation” is about acknowledging historical truths and about including multiple perspectives when we write and teach our history. Yet so often the harsh and sordid details of history are easily glossed over as belonging to “another time,” and the contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples are ignored. *č̓əsnaɫəm: the city before the city* is an indispensable film because it doesn't allow this to happen. It draws a clear connection between our colonial past and the ongoing efforts of Musqueam to have their culture and way of life known and respected. It responds to the questions that settlers have about how they ought to respond to the provocation of reconciliation, not just by apologizing for the past but also by acting in the present.