

EXHIBITION, FILM, AND NEW MEDIA REVIEWS

Crackdown

Garth Mullins, host and
executive producer

Cited Media Productions, 2020.
<https://crackdownpod.com>

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BRITISH COLUMBIA is in year four of a provincial public health emergency declared in response to devastating rates of drug overdose deaths resulting from a toxic, illicit drug supply. As of July 2020, COVID-19 had led to the highest rates of overdose deaths British Columbia has seen since the public health emergency was declared in 2016 due to changes to the drug supply and access to harm reduction services.

In the face of the overdose crisis, a group of activists and drug users created the podcast *Crackdown*. The *Crackdown* team refer to themselves as war correspondents reporting from the war zone resulting from drug policies and the overdose crisis. An award-winning production, *Crackdown* describes its subject matter as: “drugs, drug policy and the drug war led by drug user activists and supported by research. Each episode

will tell the story of a community fighting for their lives. It’s also about solutions, justice for those we have lost, and saving lives.”

At the time of writing, seventeen episodes of *Crackdown* have gone live on issues that include: policing; Indigenous approaches to harm reduction; access to a safe drug supply during the pandemic; drug policy in other countries, like Portugal; housing; and many others. Content ranges from informal, personal conversations to hard-hitting interviews that challenge people in positions of power. Perhaps the most widely recognized episodes of *Crackdown*, “Change Intolerance” and subsequent follow-ups, investigate a 2014 change in British Columbia’s methadone formulation that had catastrophic effects on the people relying on the methadone maintenance program. In doing so, the podcast documents that what policy makers and health practitioners assumed would be a simple drug formulation change turned out to be anything but. Instead, *Crackdown* highlights how changes plunged users into serious and unexpected health consequences. These included not only the brutality of withdrawal symptoms but also, in an attempt to alleviate them, the necessary return to dangerous illicit

drug use. When the people relying on the methadone maintenance program reported this to those who had the power to fix the problem, the change was neither reversed nor remedied. The formulation change and its resulting impacts are now the subject of a class action lawsuit that has not yet gone to trial.

Crackdown is led by an editorial board comprising drug-user activists Laura Shaver, Dean Wilson, Greg Fess, Jeff Loudon, Dave Murray (RIP), Cherece Keewatin (RIP), Al Fowler, Samona Marsh, and Shelda Kastor. Garth Mullins is the host and executive producer, backed with production and scientific support. The necessity of grassroots activists and those with experiential knowledge is not a new idea, and in fact grassroots advocacy on the part of Vancouver drug users has led to some of the most progressive drug policy changes in Canada (*Fighting for Space, Raise Shit*). Certainly, the leadership of people with lived and living experience of the issues covered on *Crackdown* helps challenge entrenched ideas regarding expertise by illustrating that members of communities affected by issues are themselves experts in causes and solutions. But it does more than that.

The lived experiences and personal stories reported on *Crackdown* humanize people who use drugs and make real the impacts of the overdose crisis and the structural systems that have caused it. The resistance and resilience of the *Crackdown* team and the people featured on the podcast lay bare the real impacts of drug policy in Canada in a manner that cannot be ignored. As a podcast, a medium that creates a perception of intimacy, *Crackdown* unapologetically and viscerally conveys the grief, pain, rage, and frustration of drug users as they lose countless friends and live with the fear of an ongoing overdose crisis. It also conveys solidarity, struggle, and

community, all of which are aimed at changing the systems that can alleviate that crisis. For anyone who feels a sense of responsibility towards understanding the root causes and impacts of the current overdose crisis that is devastating communities across British Columbia, *Crackdown* is a moving and enlightening tool of activism and engagement.

REFERENCES

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RAVEN (De)Briefs Podcast: Indigenous Law in Action

RAVEN

(Respecting Aboriginal Values and Environmental Needs), 2020.
<https://raventrust.com/raven-briefings-a-podcast/>

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SEASON ONE of the RAVEN (De) Briefs podcast series is a refreshing Indigenization of the traditional podcast format in that it evokes everyday kitchen table conversations among relatives, combined with sonic, Indigenous documentary. Exploring contemporary environmental struggles, such as the Coastal GasLink pipeline, the *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* landmark court cases, and grassroots Indigenous resistance movements like the Wet'suwet'en land defenders,

RAVEN (De)Briefs skilfully illustrates Indigenous law in action. RAVEN stands for Respecting Aboriginal Values and Environmental Needs – an apt description of this series as a whole. Based on Lekwungen-speaking territories (present-day Greater Victoria region), RAVEN supports Indigenous communities in taking legal action through funding and awareness campaigns. The series is hosted by RAVEN co-founder and executive director Susan Smitten in a manner clearly demonstrating her filmmaker background. Her approach is reminiscent of that of renowned Indigenous filmmakers Christine Welsh and Alanis Obomsawin in that she introduces listeners to speakers, musicians, and new concepts in an accessible manner, yet allows the content to speak for itself. She braids together the impassioned words of guests such as Dr. John Borrows and Nikki Iyolo Sanchez, sound clips from frontline warriors, and the innovative music of artists like Jeremy Dutcher and Digging Roots, creating an Indigenous montage that entertains, fascinates, and informs the listener.

In the tradition of Indigenous scholarly ethics of self-location (Kovach 2009, 109–20), I introduce myself as an *otepimisikwew* (Cree-Métis woman) with settler and immigrant ancestry. I am also a lifelong guest on Coast Salish territories and research Indigenous approaches to audiovisual research methodology at the University of Victoria, and therefore I am very pleased to be invited to write this review. The content of the series, primarily set in the context of British Columbia, pays particular attention to current solidarity actions such as the Wet'suwet'en land defenders and the recent Indigenous youth occupation of the Legislative Assembly, doing so in a way that is accessible to those who are not

familiar with these regions, disputes, or events. Further, the content engages the listener by deeply exploring the themes of politics and activism as they relate to the law. I did find, as an outsider to the discipline of law, that the concepts were accessible but also complex, demanding great attention from both the mind and the heart – this may not be the podcast to listen to while doing errands!

In Episode 2, guest Saul Brown states: “We don’t need to look outside for the answers to the outside world anymore ... what we have is the ability to look inward, back to the brilliance of our ancestors, to the brilliance of those teachings, and say ‘Yes, these can be utilized and they do have value to address contemporary issues’” (13:00). This podcast does just that. It refreshingly invites listeners to “look inward” to the “brilliance” of our Indigenous leaders and educators in attempting to understand these issues rather than engaging in the more tiresome endeavour of filtering through often incomplete or biased news reports. As a critical listener, I must share that I felt the need for a greater emphasis on including the voices of Elders. Having said this, I have only had the opportunity to review the first seven episodes in the series, and future releases may indeed have more emphasis on Elders’ input. Overall, I would recommend this podcast as a great example of public knowledge mobilization that opens a door to the work of RAVEN and provides insight into Indigenous law, resurgence, and sovereignty for Indigenous and non-Indigenous listeners alike.

WORK CITED

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Now Is the Time

Christopher Auchter, director

16 minutes. National Film Board
of Canada, 2019.

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IN THE extraordinary short film *Now Is the Time*, Haida filmmaker Christopher Auchter brings to the screen a moving story of renewal through the restoration and re-editing of footage from the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) film *This Was the Time* (1970), documenting the first raising of a totem pole in the village of Old Massett on Haida Gwaii in over one hundred years. On the fiftieth anniversary of this monumental event, internationally renowned Haida artist Robert Davidson, who carved the pole when he was only twenty-two years old, reflects on the profound impact that this event had on Elders and community members, sparking a resurgence in Haida artistic and ceremonial practice that remains vibrant and strong today. This film is a remix of restored archival footage alongside interviews with Robert Davidson and his brother, Reg Davidson, who assisted in the carving of the pole, as well as animation sequences which cleverly represent ancestral spirits looking down upon with approval as Robert Davidson carves in his studio.

The film includes a beautiful restoration of the 35 mm and 16 mm film footage that was digitally transferred to 4K resolution. The result is a pristine and crisp film that lends rich detail to the meticulous carving process and the ceremonial activities surrounding the pole raising. As Auchter notes: “When they digitized it into 4K, it just looked beautiful. Some of it looks like it was shot yesterday – only the clothing, the vehicles, and some

of the styles give it away” (Auchter in Mullen 2019). I see the film as an act of recuperation in several ways. First, by re-editing the film footage from *This Was the Time*, Auchter reclaims this footage made by Eugene Boyko, a settler Canadian director, and his edit speaks to Haida self-determination and sovereignty. In this way his re-engagement of the archive unsettles dominant narratives often held in national archives that render Indigenous perspectives invisible. *Now Is the Time* fits neatly alongside an emerging genre of Indigenous films, such as *Mobilize* (2015), *Three Thousand* (2017), and *Caribou in the Archive* (2019), that contest and remix national and provincial moving image archives to assert visual sovereignty and recuperate Indigenous histories and cultural memory.

Now Is the Time also functions as a recuperative act through Auchter’s inclusion of footage shot by Haida filmmaker Barbara Wilson alongside a present-day interview with her about what it was like to film at and to witness this momentous day. This is especially significant in the landscape of Indigenous film history in Canada because Barbara Wilson was a member of the first cohort of Indigenous filmmakers to be trained under the NFB’s “Indian Film Crew” program from 1968 to 1970. The NFB supported the training of a second cohort of Indigenous filmmakers from 1971 to 1973 (Stewart 2007, 57). Barbara Wilson was the only woman in either cohort of these programs, and her role in this critical turn in Indigenous film history has often been elided by her male counterparts who directed and produced films emblematic of these programs, such as *The Ballad of Crowfoot* (1968) and *You Are on Indian Land* (1969). *Now Is the Time* not only recognizes the impact of her film and cultural work on Haida Gwaii but also re-centres her more broadly within the history of Indigenous cinema in Canada.

Now Is the Time is a powerful representation by a Haida filmmaker for his Haida community, made in tribute to a Haida master artist, Robert Davidson, and to Barbara Wilson, who opened so many doors for other Indigenous filmmakers. The film also explores the far-reaching and insidious impact of oppressive and assimilative policies under the *Indian Act*, which rendered the potlatch illegal from 1884 to 1951, punishable by fines and imprisonment. In the film we hear Haida Elders recall the pressures from missionaries and Indian agents to burn or give away their regalia and treasured belongings. Robert Davidson recalls having to visit museum collections to see Haida belongings of carved masks and totem poles because there were not many remaining within his community. The film reveals what was left in the wake of this racist set of settler-colonial policies that facilitated and sanctioned the removal of culturally and ceremonially significant belongings, which often ended up in museum collections. In one of the most poignant moments in the film Robert Davidson tears up recalling that the Elders in his village did not have their regalia to wear to the totem pole raising ceremony because of these extractive and repressive policies. But the spirit of his Elders could not be tamped down, and they showed up for the pole raising with their own headpieces made from cardboard, painted with the clan and crest designs that they would have had on their woven and carved regalia.

What did it mean to carve and raise a totem pole in Old Massett on Haida Gwaii in 1969? What we see in the film is that it was a monumental effort by Robert and Reg Davidson, with the support of their whole community, and that it stood as a defiant visual marker of resistance and self-determination. This moment became a spark that rippled out to inspire renewal and innovations within

Northwest Coast artistic practices not only within the Haida Nation but also among other First Nations on the West Coast. Christopher Aughter renders a cinematic tribute to the incredible force of Indigenous resilience and resurgence, a testimony to those who held on even in the depths of the darkest times to carry their customary practices forward. I encourage everyone to watch this film, to include it in your classrooms, film festivals, and community screenings. It should be required viewing for all. It is also a reminder for us now, in the midst of the dark and troubling times of a pandemic raging with its own inequalities, to challenge the systems of inequality, to persist, to fight, and to hold on for better days ahead.

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FILMS

- Caribou in the Archive*. 2019. 8 mins. Director: Jennifer Dysart. National Film Board of Canada.
- Mobilize*. 2015. 3 mins. Director: Caroline Monnet. National Film Board of Canada.
- Now Is the Time*. 2019. 16 mins. Director: Christopher Aughter. National Film Board of Canada.
- The Ballad of Crowfoot*. 1968. 10 mins. Director: Willie Dunn. National Film Board of Canada.
- Three Thousand*. 2017. 14 mins. Director: asinnajaq ᐱᓂᓴᓂᓂᓴ. National Film Board of Canada.
- You Are on Indian Land*. 1969. 36 mins. Director: Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell. National Film Board of Canada.