

The State of the Nation at the 50th FNC, 2021

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Flowing east from the headwaters of Lake Ontario, *The Fleuve* moves mightily across Quebec and its storied shores. Modern metropolitans, provincial towns, pastoral villages, and bucolic fields all sit atop inlets, isles, and bays, hugging the riverbanks that house its inhabitation. Thickly wooded forests, grassy knolls, sandy dunes, rocky cliffs roll in to towering mountains forming the topography of its embankments. As the current moves east, the St. Lawrence becomes wider and wider until so wide that at the rocky bluffs of Gaspésie it lets into the North Atlantic sea.

At present day, these shores are claimed by the Quebecois, descendants of French settlers who “first discovered” terra infima nearly 500 years ago. After hard-fought battles atop the Plains of Abraham, the Franco-colony succumbed to British control. At one point known as the Province of Lower Canada, the colony, and its Anglo-counterparts folded into confederation— that was some 150 odd years ago. Well before confederation, questions of sovereignty for a culturally and linguistically distinct society arose. Today they remain unmoored: national insecurities cycle in and out just like these very tides at the mouth of *The Fleuve*: tongue-tied language laws, constitutional wars fought in parliamentary halls, xenophobic immigra-

tion laws, radical separatist militia, independent pensions and tax agencies, uni-culturalism over multi-culturalism, and two referendums whose seismic activities rocked the federation to its core. Hit by a Tsunami, the federation is still left flailing in its wake—national unity fragmented and dispersed into the floe.

Well before the “discovery” of Quebec and the founding of so-called “Canada,” the First Nations inhabited *The Fleuve*. Huron-wendat, Iroquois, Mohawk, Innu, Mi’kmaq and Beothuk— each culture with a distinct way of life systematically erased through state-sponsored genocide in collusion with the catholic church: The Indian Act, land dispossession, residential schools, ‘60s scoop, the child welfare system and more. Purposefully redacted from the record of official history, rightful quests towards Indigenous sovereignty have been viewed by settler powers as an existential threat to Quebec. Recently a new wave of separatist agenda has swept over the province, this time in fresh clothes: federalist-nationalism, a populist paranoia which has filled the ballot boxes of *The Fleuve*’s rural shores. The story is different for the progressive island of Montréal, one home to federalists, nationalists, and separatists alike. The metropolis is a bigger tent open to multi-culturalism and lacklustre

attempts towards Indigenous reconciliation. Modern Quebec is a society at odds with itself and what it wants to be, all the while part of a larger settler colonial project. This summary is of course a far too simplistic assessment of a complex history and not meant to be comprehensive, but one that reflects the legacies that the opening and closing films of the 50th Festival du Nouveau Cinema contend with.

Settler Stories on the Silver Screen

“Tu N’existe Pas, Tu n’existe pas”: this phrase is threatening to Quebec sovereigntists who work to assert Quebec’s nationhood and attempt independence on their so-called territory, and one repeated throughout Felix Dufor-Laperrière’s latest animated feature *Archipel* (2021). Chosen as the closing feature for the 50th FNC, *Archipel* is a delicate expression of national pride that romanticizes settler colonial history and a poetic love letter to the many islands in the stream.

A lush pastiche of animated styles, archival imagery, illustrations, and contemporary photographs, *Archipel* is a dreamy universe, that projects a vision of Quebec located somewhere between the imagined and the real. Narrated through a conversation between an unnamed man and a woman, the man who doubts the existence of Quebec’s history and perhaps its sovereignty, is invited by the woman to journey with her along the Saint Lawrence River. The narrator’s travelogue is loose and lyrical, a piece-meal construction of excerpted political speeches, letters, and recordings of Innu poet Josephine Bacon reading her work. The inclusion of Bacon attempts to pay homage to Innu culture, but with the

film overwhelmingly asserting settler history, the poetry sits uncomfortably out of place. Perhaps Bacon’s words are tokenized by the filmmaker to excuse any guilt for a romanticized colonial history, or to suggest that First Peoples and Quebecois have reached cultural harmony—something far from the truth. Despite its shortcomings, the romanticism is deeply seductive, something which this writer certainly fell for.

Although each of these styles, stories, and histories could exist on their own, they are brought together to form an ethereal cinematic archipelago. This film’s voyage is a survey of the culture and people who inhabit the St. Lawrence’s topography, suggesting that Quebec, its many regions, and distinct local cultures form an archipelago. The stylistic diversity and the archipelago metaphor are curious to consider when the film engages with an ideology that has typically promoted a uni-cultural society (Paquette and Beauregard, 2021). *Archipel*’s efforts to showcase Quebec’s “diversity” is simply an illustration of regional dissimilarity. Except for Montréal, these places are predominately white, francophone, and catholic. Save for Bacon’s brief cameo, the film does not focus on ethnic, racial, linguistic, or religious diversity. Despite these glaring flaws, *Archipel* does seem to ambiguously participate in a shift towards a more inclusive nationalist Quebecois ideology, which is also espoused by the festival’s curatorial frames.

Festival and Folklore, Islands in the Stream?

As the closing film proposes Quebec as a geographical, social, and cul-

tural archipelago, how might FNC reflect this national folklore and how does it take shape? Consider *this* festival as body of water, one whose pool is home to a series of islands: events, screenings, talks, and parties, occurring in multiple locations—sometimes online, sometimes in person, with festival programming grouping them together, floating in the same stream.

In typical years, these islands may be grouped together by an environmental, political, or social theme, but for the 50th edition those concerns were put aside to instead shine a light on FNC's cultural achievements and impact on Quebec, Canada, and the world.¹ This curatorial angle is in keeping with Festival du Nouveau Cinema's identity as a generalist event dedicated to showcasing independent auteur cinema, art film, experimental work, and new media always through a Quebecois lens—making it a central figure in the local and national scene.

This year's edition did not shy away from its typical formula, with selections including buzz-worthy indie darlings such as *The Power of the Dog* (Jane Campion, 2021), Berlin Golden Bear Winner *Bad Luck Banging or Loo-ny Porn* (Radu Jude, 2021), and several local short and feature films by Quebecois filmmakers, along with an array of contemporary Canadian releases. Like the closer, the opening film was homegrown, featuring the Indigenous French language production *Bootlegger* (Caroline Monnet, 2021). *Bootlegger*, directed by Algonquin and Montreal based artist and filmmaker Caroline Monnet, tells the story of an urban Indigenous law student, Mani, who travels back to her family's northern reserve and unexpectedly becomes a

political actor caught in a thorny public debate—something I will touch more upon later.

With COVID under control (at least at the time), the 2021 edition hosted in-person screenings over the course of 11-days between October 6th–17th. I was fortunate to attend some and noticed that the return to near-normal created a palpable excitement. Due to its popularity and convenience as a newly established format, FNC also screened many of its feature and short films on a tailored online platform where titles were made available up until the end of October. The experience of an online festival still leaves much to be desired; it is hollow, isolated, and devoid of human life. There were also issues around certain distribution rights for titles such as Almodovar's anticipated *Parallel Mothers* (2021) or Danis Goulet's dystopian Indigenous allegory *Night Raiders* (2021) which were only screened in-person. Despite the tradeoffs, the opportunity to watch a newly released festival film from home was worth it.

Although the festival was marketed as a hybrid event, the *FNC: Forum* was still online. Festival du Nouveau Cinema is a small isle, lacking notoriety to host large film markets like Berlin, Cannes, or Toronto, FNC instead focuses its commercial interests on professional development for Quebec and Canadian filmmakers. This year, equity and inclusion were a central concern for *The FNC Forum*, running events specifically for BIPOC and gender diverse filmmakers, as well as below-the-line crewmembers and technicians. Some such highlights include: Indigenous Pitch Sessions, Intellectual Property that centres equity and diver-

sity, and a female film technicians networking event. Although *The Forum's* activities are framed around neo-liberal filmmaking activities, which have systemically harmed these groups, the EDI focus attempts to challenge the status quo. In the grand scheme of things, when the current Premier denies the existence of systemic racism in Quebec yet often falsely equates criticism of Quebec as the same, *The Forum's* imperfect efforts holds weight.

Glaring, yet confusing signs of FNC's stance on nationality were seen in *The Forum's* co-production focus which extended beyond Quebec's imagined borders. During this year's edition, the festival launched their first ever international treaty co-productions panel which informed filmmakers about a Pan-Canadian industrial framework that has been a cornerstone in Canadian independent filmmaking, casting national industry into the global sea (Wagman 2019). This specific co-production event acknowledges the economic reliance that Quebec's national industry has on Canada, which could also mean that FNC does not see Quebec as separate.

Quebec or Canada? Canada or Quebec? Quebec and Canada?

Another island in the stream with complicated national underpinnings is FNC's *National Competition* program, whose curatorial framing is marred by contradictions. *The National Competition* program is comprised of film selections from across Canada, and up until 2019, it was called *Focus Quebec/Canada*. When known as *Focus Quebec/Canada*, the festival literature and program name implied a difference between the two national cinemas.

However, the relatively new name, *National Competition* suggests less distinctions than its predecessor. In the 2021 programming press-release, the overview of festival history repeated FNC's contributions to Canadian cinema. The release also described specific screenings and experiences at 2021 festival edition as unique to Canada.² Yet in other parts of the release, such as the description of *The National Competition*, it states that the program is comprised of both Quebecois and Canadian films.³ The differentiation is also noticeable on the website write-up for *Marché du Nouveau Cinema*, as it refers to Quebecois and Canadian producers. In these instances, FNC creates a confusing binary: at times they collapse distinctions between Quebec and Canada, at others asserting Quebec's distinct place. The festival takes a position that wades into murky waters.

These discrepancies beg the question: does FNC's unclear stance on Quebec identity represent a fractured organization? Can Quebecois national identity work in harmony with Canada while remaining culturally separate? Or is it one that is a part of Canadian culture and at times chooses to be different? Perhaps FNC's image of Nationalism is dualistic or even multi-faceted, suggesting there is less of a binary between Canada and Quebec. Are spotlights on diversity and inclusion in deliberate opposition to dominant Quebecois ideology, or simply opportunistic and merely for the sake of good optics?

Bootlegger: The Undoing of Canada and Quebec

Festival du Nouveau Cinema's attempt towards diversity and inclusion

coupled with an expanded vision of national cinema is evident in the selection of the opener and *National Competition* film: *Bootlegger*. This selection signifies the festival's desire to honour Indigenous cultures, stories, and identities—yet fails to fully realize this as it is programmed within colonial constructs. Although *Bootlegger* is technically a “Canadian” film, and FNC providing Indigenous cinema this platform is a further step towards reconciliation, the way it is programmed with colonial methods elides over larger questions of Indigenous sovereignty. This programming blunder is a disservice to *Bootlegger*'s decolonial narrative and speaks to the unclear stance that Festival du Nouveau Cinema has with regard to questions of nationality.

During the final winter of her graduate degree, Mani, an Indigenous law student living in Montréal, returns to her family reserve in northern Quebec for the first time since childhood. Mani journeys home to complete dissertation research on how the Indian Act impacts substance abuse among Indigenous communities. Upon arrival, Mani's presence is met with mixed emotions—in part because of a past departure under dubious circumstances, and her colonial education. After a happy reunion with her grandparents, Mani's grandmother asks her to attend a band-council meeting on the family's behalf. At the gathering, Mani witnesses a fierce debate about the reserve's prohibition law and band-council corruption which inspires her to join a public debate to untangle antiquated prohibition laws.

Despite it being “dry,” substance abuse in the community runs amok due to the efforts of a well-connected

white bootlegger who works round-the-clock to smuggle past police controls. After putting the pieces of the puzzle together and with her research in mind, Mani begins a public campaign to repeal the prohibition law in the hopes of providing Indigenous people the right to choose how they want to consume. Mani's quest is met with public outcry due to long-standing taboos, fears of widespread alcohol abuse (despite ongoing underground consumption), and loss of economic prosperity for the bootleggers who collude with the reserve's governance structure. This battle is fought all the while Mani reconciles with her own traumatic family history. *Bootlegger* stars Mohawk actor Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs, legendary Quebec actress Pascal Bussiers and celebrated poet Josephine Bacon—who was lucky enough to have appearances in both this film and through her poetry in *Archipel*.

Bootlegger arguably depicts tropes of on-reserve life for Indigenous people: a corrupt society riddled with drug abuse, crime, and lost culture. These age-old stereotypes have long been the sole and reductive representation of Indigenous peoples in Canadian and Quebecois moving-image media. However, in *Bootlegger* their function is subversive, especially because the film is told through the lens of an Indigenous director. In an interview published by FNC, Monnet explained how *Bootlegger* is an example of why an Indigenous filmmaker should tell a story on their own terms. In Monnet's case, when she started writing the film, she wanted to interrogate settler-colonial constructs that many Indigenous people live with. To do so, Monnet and her

co-writer Daniel Watchorn, started their process by researching the Indian Act and interweaving it with Monnet's own experiences which directly influenced the film's characters and the places.

One such example is seen through Mani. Mani's arc, as a young Indigenous person interrogating the harmful impacts of settler-colonialism, positions her as a symbol of self-determined decolonization—and a creative way for Monnet to present research and personal-knowledge. Although she is working within colonial institutions, something which she recognizes, Mani aims to dismantle systems and laws from within. Her research on the Indian Act gives Mani the tools to identify the issues on her reserve and the ways to resolve them, which allows the film to perform a critical commentary on the violent conditions the Indian Act creates. Mani foils the false and racist notion that Indigenous people have themselves to blame for substance abuse, rather rightfully placing blame on the system and its impacts on her people. Instead of Mani succumbing to these conditions, she is depicted with intense strength and will for her people's self-determination, something Monnet deliberately does to "break the cycle of victimization" (Monnet, 29).

Monnet also brings personal knowledge towards her characterization of the land. As described by Monnet, the land is a background figure whose role shapes *Bootlegger's* characters while grounding them in their community and identity. Monnet achieves this through stunning drone shots that fly slowly over densely wooded forests filled with snowcapped trees

and low-lying frozen rivers. Depictions of the land are hauntingly beautiful: at times welcoming, magical, and homely, and at others isolated and inhospitable—perhaps to reflect Mani's interiority. Although she states that she shot the film on Algonquin territory, Monnet mentions that *Bootlegger's* reserve is an imagined place that could resemble any reserve in northern Quebec, acting as an entry point to tackle larger questions of colonization.

Settler Cinema and Stolen Land

Land is a central focal point of the opening and closing film's programming, which Festival du Nouveau Cinema frames as a shared quality between *Archipel* and *Bootlegger*. The programming around the theme of land is expressed in the interview I have been referencing, which is in fact a conversation between Monnet and Dufor-Laprie. When Monnet asks Dufor-Laprie about land and place, he admits that some of the islands featured in *Archipel* sprouted from his imagination. Yet unlike Monnet, Dufor-Laprie is a settler, projecting his idea of Quebec that is inherently a vision of a settler-colonial nation, and one that perpetuates the ideology of a colonial project. Much like Monnet, Dufor-Laprie uses land to create his cinematic universe, the key difference here is that Dufor-Laprie is a settler creating a vision of a nation on a stolen land, while Monnet creates a vision of a society Indigenous to its land.

In the interview between the two directors, Festival Du Nouveau Cinema states that *Bootlegger* and *Archipel* were part of a series of selections that were "rich, bold reflections on our identities, memory and territories."

Yes, it is true that they both reflect “Quebec” and “its” “territories,” yet the perspectives on them are different not the same. Indeed, placing the two opening and closing films in dialogue with one another could present rich critical tensions, yet this programming choice misses the opportunity to be generative. The lack of critique around the power structures and dynamics that inform these films fails to acknowledge how romanticized land ownership and Quebecois society in *Archipel* came to be through violent dispossession and settler-governments, a legacy that *Bootlegger* actively fights against. Moreover, throughout the entirety of the interview, *Archipel* and its settler-colonial entanglements are not acknowledged. Why is it that the festival is acknowledging the identity of non-white and non-settler filmmakers, yet not applying the same qualifiers to those that hold dominant place in society? Without this acknowledgement, the festival positions white settler culture as the default and overriding culture in Quebec, meaning that the tent is not fully open to non-dominant groups and diluting FNC’s efforts towards diversity and inclusion.

I’m not suggesting that *Archipel* cannot reflect on Quebec, but that the way it is programmed should reflect the conditions and perspectives in which it emerged from. This could be done by simply contextualizing its settler undertones in the program notes, posing interview questions that more clearly probe this, or even hosting events that unpack settler positionality in Quebecois cinema and its depiction of landscape. These curatorial suggestions are not meant to imply that the film should not have been screened, it

is a stunningly beautiful work of local cinema—a feat within itself certainly deserving of the silver screen. Instead, I am suggesting that *Archipel* and similar titles require an interrogation of their un-questioned ideology and place in dominant society, especially when so called marginalized voices are brought into the fold.

What I suggest cannot be resolved overnight, finding appropriate remedies take time and I’d be weary as to how open mainstream Quebecois audiences would be towards interrogating their dominance in society. Despite this, the festival’s undertaking at expanding national frames, promotion of Indigenous work, and 50 years of championing Quebec cinema is deserving of applause. Indeed, this year’s festival did present a unique vision of Quebec, one that was at times complicated and unsure of its place within Canada, but also one open to supporting underrepresented voices. The festival made attempts to do away with paternalistic ideas of language and uni-culturalism and to present ethno-cultural debates. This is, more than anything, a testament to the existence of a multi-faceted archipelago, an ambivalent ecosystem attempting to be many things to many peoples. Perhaps in the next 50 years these will be better teased out, and there will be more meaningful steps towards reconciliation and decolonization. I am certain there will be much more to critique, but hopefully also much more to celebrate. Let’s see how this plays out.

Notes

1. Executive Director Nicolas Girard Deltruc and Programming director Zoé Protat both reference the aims

- of the 2021 festival as a celebration of the event and its place within Quebec and international cinema in their official festival statements: <https://nouveaucinema.ca/en/50th-edition/a-word-from-the-direction>
2. In the article “Unveiling of the Program,” the National Competition is described as one that is comprised of both Quebecois and Canadian Films: <https://nouveaucinema.ca/en/articles/unveiling-of-the-program-and-opening-of-the-ticketing>.
 3. See media release for 14/09/2020 Quebec/Canada Titles Premiering at the FNC: <https://nouveaucinema.ca/en/50th-edition/medias>.

References

- Beauregard, Devin and Jonathan Paquette. 2021. *Canadian Cultural Policy in Translation*. Routledge.
- Wagman, Ira. 2019. “Three Canadian Policy Frameworks.” In *The Oxford Handbook for Canadian Cinema*, edited by Janine Marchessault and Will Straw. Oxford Press.