

Biidaaban

(Amanda Strong, 2018)

Film Review by

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Biidaaban is a short stop-motion film about a young androgynous character on a mission to revive an indigenous traditional ritual. The eponymous protagonist is an Ashinaabane descendent who strolls through the suburbs of Ontario with Sabe, a 10,000-year-old shapeshifter, in search of the tree sap their ancestors have been harvesting for thousands of years. Land that was once primarily inhabited by the Anishinaabe and various animal species native to Ontario has now been commercialized and gentrified into wealthy neighborhoods, displacing First Nations and wildlife from their own land. Michif artist Amanda Strong created this short film with the intention of showcasing the struggles that indigenous communities have to endure in what is currently known as Canada.

Based on the poem *Four Faces of the Moon*, the film depicts the consequences of the environmental impact left by colonization and urban expansion. The animated depictions of the Ghost Caribou and Ghost Wolf and of the suburban lands that *Biidaaban* encounters allude to ecological problems being experienced in Canada, where the caribou and the wolf that once roamed that area have been pushed out of their homes due to land development. These also act as a metaphor for how Indigenous people have been treated: displaced to the point where their culture at risk of becoming extinct as well.

Urban development is an issue worldwide, with many people being forced out of their own homes, unable to afford rising property values due to gentrification of existing neighborhoods. Indigenous people around the world find themselves to be the first ones displaced when settler governments issue threats and policies that force them to give up their rightful property and land. The Anishinaabe, *Biidaaban*'s ancestors, inhabited and hunted within the region of southern Ontario for thousands of years before British colonizers established their colony. As more and more settlers came, the indigenous population was pushed out of their own land, forced to move to less resourceful lands or live among the settlers.

The film likewise shows the depletion of the wildlife population. While *Biidaaban* is following the path that their ancestors once took to collect tree sap, they keep catching glances of the phantoms of a caribou and a wolf. They are there to remind *Biidaaban*, and the audience, of the histories of the land and the spirits that still haunt it. The mesmerizing stop-motion animation of the film comes to life when these two glowing creatures appear onscreen. The devastating fact that these creatures have been forcibly removed from their land, perhaps extinguished forever, is what makes the scene so powerful. Including these glowing figures conveys that the spirits' presence is still there. The dreamlike aesthetic of this scene is representative of the film's style and themes as a whole. Most importantly, it emphasizes the enduring cultural significance of these two animals who were once integral to the land.

Another notable scene in this film is the one in which Biidaaban is attacked by the red fencing that surrounds a tree. This scene represents the concept of “behind fences,” which is when Indigenous people are constantly shut out of land and resources. It alludes to the fact that native land is now covered by intensified urban development. Throughout the film, Biidaaban and Sabe are being watched by an unknown antagonist. In this scene, it is clear that the neighborhood itself is trying to stop the main characters from obtaining what once belonged to them (the tree sap) by coming to life and physically attacking Biidaaban. The film’s stop-motion animation allows for the creation of these dreamlike scenarios. Ultimately, this scene is meaningful because it shows how Indigenous people are seen as intruders and forcefully kept out of land that once belonged to them. However, with the help of the animal spirits, the main characters are able to overcome the obstacles and bring generational healing by preserving their culture through the revival of old traditions.

Biidaaban shows the modern-day consequences of the centuries-long processes of colonization. In the context of the film, the suburban milieu, where everything is uniform and modern, leaves no room for traditions that are considered “other,” or not properly Westernized. The suburban “imagined community,” constructed by people who perceive themselves as a part of a homogeneous group, excludes the main character Biidaaban and people from Indigenous ancestry. This aspect is further explored in the film by not having people but modern inventions, like motion sensor lights or a garden hose, engaging in human-like actions such as being vigilant and trying to entrap someone. The tools are presented as the antagonist and root obstacle to the main character’s goals. Acting as an antagonizing force, these objects demonstrate that even physical things related to suburbia serve as reminder to the minority that they are not welcomed. The artistic choice also adds to the film’s contemporary self-awareness. Having a modern look and setting fuels the main plight of the film, which is trying to preserve one’s culture and environment through the revival of old traditions while living in an industrialized place. With this contemporary twist, the film’s call to action is all the more applicable to our current time period.

The film also emphasizes fences as the antagonists of this story. Whether it is the little chain that ensnares the tree or the fences surrounding the neighborhood the trees are located in, these barriers are intentionally placed to show how the indigenous people are shut out, making it difficult to obtain something that they once depended on, such as the trees and the tree sap. This film does not shy away from depicting the opposition and exclusion one will face from our Western society when trying to preserve one’s culture through revival of old traditions. Regardless of the opposition, the main character is able to follow through with their tree sap harvesting and reawaken their ancestors. Through this revival of a lost tradition, they were able to bring generational healing. Thus, the call to action to revive one’s traditions regardless of the backlash is solidified in the film’s ending.

Biidaaban has a modern style mixed with an indigenous aesthetic. This artistic choice communicates to the audience that they can see through multiple dimensions while existing and moving in their present time and space. The fact that Biidaaban can see the ghost animals while still dressed in modern clothing reveals that although tradition and modernity are two conflicting forces, they can in fact interact in the world. This is also seen in the use of the beautiful phone-like objects that Biidaaban and Sabe use to communicate. The devices create a sort of “naturalistic” technology within the film which again combines traditional with modern. Finally, the protagonist Biidaaban sports a specific modern look and presents as non-binary, which means they don’t identify as either gender. This is significant because it foregrounds gender-fluid characters as the protagonists of empowering stories.

The short stop-motion film *Biidaaban* serves to bring awareness to an indigenous tradition by following a narrative that references a largely forgotten First Nation’s culture. The contemporary self-awareness of restoring past culture in an otherwise modern setting lets viewers relate more to the film and is one of its most powerful aspects. The notion of an indigenous youth trying to bring generational healing in an opposing industrial area boosts the main message of the film and creates a convincing and empathic view on the culture in question. This film can be seen as a call to action, encouraging indigenous audiences to prevent their culture from becoming extinct in an era of modernity and to fight against urban development by reclaiming their land and its rich history. Amanda Strong has created a powerful piece with the important message of honoring the ancestors and wildlife that once inhabited the world around us.