

English 230 Worksheet for Tuesday, September 20th

Biidaaban (The Dawn Comes), by Amanda Strong and Leanne Simpson

Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vWjnYKyUB8>

This stop-motion animation from 2017 was produced by Amanda Strong and is based on "The Gift Is in the Making," "Caribou Ghosts and Untold Stories," and "Plight" by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Echoing her [website](#), "Amanda Strong is a Michif (Metis) interdisciplinary artist with a focus on filmmaking, stop motion animations, and media art. Currently based on unceded Coast Salish territories also known as Vancouver, BC, Canada." And, according to Simpson's [site](#), "Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a renowned Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist, who has been widely recognized as one of the most compelling Indigenous voices of her generation."

To engage this particular work, I feel it is most appropriate to begin with Strong's [description](#) rather than my own: "Since time immemorial, Indigenous people have harvested sap from trees to produce syrup, a practice that continues today. Biidaaban, a young Indigenous genderfluid person, and Sabe, a Sasquatch shape-shifter, set out to harvest sap from sugar maples in their urban environment. Biidaabaan can see traces of time, people, creatures and land. By harvesting syrup in this way, they are continuing the work of their ancestors. Ancestors and animals such as Ghost Caribou and Ghost Wolf are embedded within the landscape, but only Biidaaban can see them. These visuals reverberate throughout the work to draw from the past, but what we see is steadfast in the present." You can watch [Biidaaban \(The Dawn Comes\)](#) online in its entirety. I also recommend reading Strong's [2019 CBC interview](#) with Leah Collins as well as [another CBC interview](#) she conducted shortly thereafter with Jeff Hume. These interviews speak to the motivations for the animation, how it was made, and several of its key messages.

For the purposes of this course on media and fiction, I will foreground six aspects of *Biidaaban*. These are merely selections: ways to approach and engage Strong and Simpson's work while recognizing it is much more complex than what I (as a settler teaching this course material) am listing here.

- **Expansive sense of "character":** As Strong tells Collins, the antagonist in this story is the neighbourhood itself. Here, we have a compelling reminder that characters in media and fiction are not always human or nonhuman animals, and *Biidaaban*'s use of moving images and audio brings the neighbourhood to life, if you will. Consider, for instance, how the neighbourhood watches Biidaaban as they attempt to harvest syrup.
- **Perspective in the plot:** Strong's construction of perspective through the camera gives it tremendous agency in the plot. She describes it this way to Collins: "We never actually see another person, but it's meant to feel like someone's always watching." The perspective generates suspense and, by extension, conflict in the narrative, namely the conflict between residents of the neighbourhood and those, including Biidaaban and Sabe, who are committed to the old growth trees and the land. At times, the perspective suggests we may be watching through a surveillance camera, and Biidaaban is addressed or seen by that camera.
- **Adaptation and remediation:** Simpson's poem, "Caribou Ghosts and Untold Stories," frames or bookends the animation. We might say that Strong adapted that poem and other stories by Simpson and remediated them for 3D sets and the screen. Such a comparative approach, where we can interpret the poem and animation together, helps us to better grasp media's various roles in storytelling and, in this case, to understand how several stories are entwined. One

consequence of this approach is that Strong and Simpson keep the past present. Strong tells Collins: "Every sort of nation, they have different oral stories around these characters [including Sabe], and Leanne writes about them in a very contemporary way—they're 10,000 years old and they're texting! I think it's a very important, contemporary idea, the idea that we are still living today. It's not just about the past." There are also aspects of futurism or sci fi in *Biidaaban*.

- **What isn't fiction:** *Biidaaban* reminds people why it's important not to treat all stories as fictions. Although Strong shares with Collins that, "Live action could never have created these personas or these worlds," she also notes that the "subject matter is not fiction," adding that, "Land development is an issue. It's a real thing. The animals who have been removed from the land—that's a real thing. People who are disconnected from our culture, it's a real thing. Our oral stories of characters such as Sabe, those are real things." And, of course, the animation models an actual neighbourhood, based on a location in Peterborough. All to say, stories can be real, and experienced as real—part of actuality—even as they use media to craft personas and worlds (media as magic and mirror, as you may recall).
- **Not only digital:** Strong produced a stop-motion animation that relies heavily on handmade assets. She explains part of the process to Hume: "The opening sequence is built in 3D space with a 3D camera move. As we pan down into the neighborhood we begin to see houses, telephone poles and maple trees. All of these assets were built by hand and further modelled and rendered in 3D in order to fill out a larger streetscape." Even though we may access the animation online, it would be reductive to describe this work, its content, and its themes as purely "digital." A lot of the media, and much of the labour involved, is analog and tactile.
- **Time to feel:** In her poem, part of which she reads at the beginning and end of *Biidaaban*, Simpson says, "We are hyped up on aesthetics, and tripped up by real life. We don't have time to feel these feelings, so we file that for another day." These words speak to the contradictions of crafting stories *with* media while also being inundated or overwhelmed *by* them. That crafting process demands a tremendous amount of time and labour (such as the two years it took Strong to produce *Biidaaban*) to not only think but also feel. Both thinking and feeling are important for creative and critical practice, and—as Strong (Michif) and Simpson (Nishnaabeg) demonstrate quite clearly as artists facing countless expectations in Canada—feelings are political, too. Art takes time, and this animation and its story are not just metaphors. They are not only figurative material. They are physical and tactile; they are actions; they are lived experiences.

As you watch *Biidaaban*, I encourage you to consider the following questions:

- Strong said, "Live action could never have created these personas or these worlds." How would you describe the physical characteristics or materials of *Biidaaban*? What is its "texture"?
- Is it fair to say *Biidaaban* (the character) is "silent protagonist"? Why or why not? What other silent protagonists (from other stories) come to mind here?
- How would you describe the soundscape (like the ambient music or background sound) and lighting of *Biidaaban*? What is the overall mood? How did it make you feel?
- What would you say is an important message in *Biidaaban*? Who is the message's intended audience? Consider, for instance, messages about settler colonialism, decolonization, policing / surveillance, reciprocity, and respect for the land.
- *Biidaaban* is only about 18 minutes long, but it's narrative (how it tells a story) is incredibly complex. What's an important trope or plot device that you noticed in the animation?
- How would you talk about *Biidaaban* in terms of genre? Does it appear to "fit" any one genre?