





The space to tell stories

Did the Saskatchewan film tax credit benefit Indigenous women?

NEWS DISPATCH by [Mattias Graham](#) Oct 23, 2020 18 min read [Share](#)  

A still from ahkâmëyimo nitânis / Keep Going My Daughter (2019), by Candy Fox and Chris Ross. The documentary is “an Indigenous love story about Andrea Landry and Colby Tootoosis, who have left jobs where they fought for change inside colonial institutions to raise a family and revolutionize their community in hopes of creating a healthier future.”

The Saskatchewan Film Employment Tax Credit was back in the news this summer when a Sask filmmaker started a [petition](#) demanding it be brought back, and the provincial NDP have promised to [resurrect the program](#) if elected this month.

Since the Sask Party cut the long-running tax credit in 2012, a lot of ink has been spilled about the [film industry's decline](#). What these discussions miss is that the tax credit program never invested in independent filmmakers, and especially Indigenous filmmakers, telling their own stories. Do we risk re-entrenching inequities by bringing it back?

In the years after the tax credit's end, Woodland Cree filmmaker Janine Windolph, who hails from La Ronge, remembers people talking about how few stories were coming out of Saskatchewan – but at the same time, she recalls, Indigenous cinema in Treaty 4 and Treaty 6 territories was flourishing: “Suddenly there’s this strong circle of amazing female storytellers... that are sharing the stories of Indigenous experiences and educating on the diversity of each of our backgrounds to a larger community.”

How did this happen? What sparked the groundswell of Indigenous cinema post-2012, and what lessons can we learn about building a strong and just film industry?

Old models, old barriers

One of the first eye-opening moments for Windolph about the nature of the tax credit was when she was in film school in the mid-2000s, pregnant with her son. “I was basically told that by having children, I wasn’t going to be successful in the current model,” she says.

The tax credit model requires a producer to have funding up front, a set percentage of which the government

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credits back to the production later. Since it sidesteps the uncertainty of trying to win over the jury for a grant, it's an appealing system for producers who already have funding or personal capital. For example, in 2020 the Alberta government transitioned from a grant system (introduced by the NDP in 2017) to a **tax credit**, a move greeted with applause. But on their own, these programs don't translate into investments in local storytellers – particularly marginalized ones.



Janine Windolph

“The whole model, in order for me to access it, would require me to have a large savings or a large line of credit if I was to be a producer,” Windolph explains. “As an Indigenous single mom, we just don't have that means.”

The fact that Indigenous producers and crew were being shut out of the film industry was mentioned in reports from SaskFILM, the Crown corporation that administered the tax credit programs, and the Saskatchewan Motion Picture Industry Association (SMPA), who noted as early as 1999 “the need to address barriers to training and employment in the industry faced by Aboriginal people and women.” Sometimes these efforts backfired when Indigenous producers weren't leading them. Windolph recounts an experience of being tokenized as a director trainee, without receiving useful mentorship in return: “In the end, they basically used my name to say that that was an Indigenous film. And in those cases, it feels very problematic, because I didn't actually feel like I had meaningful engagement to that production.”

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That wasn't the case for every production – Windolph gives the example of her time at 291 Film Company (now based in Victoria, B.C.), a company that she says got mentorship right in the tax credit system. “They never called me a trainee, they called me a producer. They had me at every meeting. I walked away really understanding how to create a budget and where the money comes from.”

Indigenous filmmaking in the aughts

Windolph's early grounding in Indigenous filmmaking in the 2000s was the National Film Board's (NFB) First Stories program, created in part to address the gap in opportunity and put Indigenous filmmakers in lead roles. But she says the for-profit influence of the surrounding industry was tough to shake. Describing a pitch workshop, Windolph recalls it felt “like we were selling our stories.” Cultural ignorance was another barrier. “In my film *Life Givers* (2007), something as simple as referring to my grandmother as ‘kohkom’ was questioned, because the audience wasn't Indigenous,” she explains.

After the program, Windolph wondered how she could do things differently. “How do you really empower Indigenous filmmakers not to feel like we're selling our stories, but to be able to advocate and choose stories that could be shared? ... That was kind of how I [started] my journey into being a producer. Because I realized that's where a lot of the decisions were being made.”

Moccasin Flats was a notable exception in this era. An Indigenous-produced drama series that ran from 2003-2006, it brought together talent from coast to coast – including Tantoo Cardinal and Gordon Tootoosis – to film in Regina's North Central neighbourhood. “To see something going on like that in my hometown, and have all these people that I know from my community being

killing Indigenous people



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able to work on that show as well and take part in this professional film set, and all this action going on in North Central, right ... it was fascinating. So I just wanted to take it all in,” says Candy Fox, a Cree actor from Piapot First Nation who landed her debut role on the show. It was during that time that Fox realized her desire to do filmmaking. “I would always hang out on set and just watch the crew and watch directors do their work,” she explains. “[One of the directors] Stacy Stewart Curtis would always talk to me about what she was doing next, or how she was planning for the next scene or talking about shots with me.”



Candy Fox

“I would stick around all the time. I don’t know if people got sick of me or not,” she laughs.

Windolph doesn’t think the system was biased against all Indigenous people. “A lot of Indigenous men were easily able to thrive in the tax system, right? Because they were men, to be honest... the system was more supportive to men and people were more likely to take risks on them.”

An important exception to the rule, Cree filmmaker Tasha Hubbard had her start during this time, directing *Two Worlds Colliding* (2004) with the NFB. In 2019, she would go on to direct *nipawistamâsowin: We Will Stand Up*, an award-winning reflection on the killing of Colten Boushie. Windolph was 17 when she first met Hubbard; their kids grew up together, and Hubbard was an inspiration. “She was doing casting for Big Bear, right?” recalls Windolph. “So suddenly she’s [directing], she’s creating a path that even I will hopefully follow one day... she was really leading a way for Trudy [Stewart] and I.”

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Despite Hubbard’s trailblazing, Indigenous women were still shut out of Saskatchewan’s film industry. Fox says that though she had the opportunity to work with Indigenous directors like Gil Cardinal on *Moccasin Flats*, working as a director herself still felt “far off and unattainable.” Even Big Soul Productions, which produced *Moccasin Flats*, was based out of Toronto. “It sort of seemed like nobody really was doing that in Saskatchewan, and you had to move away,” Fox says.

After the show ended in 2006, Fox decided to pursue her own path as a filmmaker and enrolled in the filmmaking program at the University of Regina. As for Windolph and her colleague Trudy Stewart, a ‘60s scoop survivor from Flying Dust First Nation “we both, as single mothers, were very clear that we just could not benefit from the way the model was created at that time,” Windolph says.

Few could have predicted what happened next.

That’s a wrap

On March 21, 2012, the Saskatchewan Film Employment Tax Credit was terminated. All levels of the film and television industry were shocked. Discussions and consultations with industry stakeholders had been in play since 2010, but the decision to cut the program was a surprise. The Sask Party said they could no longer afford it, even though by 2012 the credit had brought in \$623 million in total production volume for the \$100 million the government spent on it since 1998. Following protests, the government agreed to extend the final deadline for the program by three months, but Premier Brad Wall was adamant that if the province funded the film industry again, it would be through a different model. The tax credit years were over.

But the apocalyptic feeling in the film community was something Windolph didn't quite share. "We understood the issue, we supported our colleagues, but we just had trouble connecting in the same way, because we never really benefited in the same way," she explains. The filmmakers who left Saskatchewan post-2012, Windolph says, were those who had conformed to the system. Still, she felt the loss of her peer group, many of whom moved to Manitoba, Alberta, or Ontario, places where provincial tax credits were still alive. "To have the company that I was with move to Victoria, it was hard not to notice the impact of cutting the tax credit," she recalls.

The Sask Party said they could no longer afford it, even though by 2012 the credit had brought in \$623 million in total production volume for the \$100 million the government spent on it since 1998.

Fox was in film school at the time, and the line between the mainstream and independent filmmaking worlds became clear. She recalls a moment where, after hearing the news, one of her colleagues said that was the last film class they would be taking. "I didn't understand why people would drop out," she says, "if they were really, actually interested in doing something that they love, you know?"

Prominent film companies moving out of the province also meant there was more room for voices like Windolph and Stewart's to shine. "We felt that there was a place for us to grow," Windolph says. Some artist-run institutions weathered the industry storm, and Windolph credits her work with the [Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative](#) and the film festival [mispon: A Celebration of Indigenous Filmmaking](#) for giving her and Stewart the recognition they'd long sought as filmmakers.



A still from Stories Are In Our Bones (2019), a short film in which Windolph "takes her young sons fishing with their kokum (grandmother), a residential school survivor who retains a deep knowledge and memory of the land."

Surviving off storytelling

The same year the tax credit ended, the city of Regina committed to building a new stadium for the Saskatchewan Roughriders football team, with the province's support. "It really showed me where the priorities of where I was living were," says Windolph.

It led her to pursue new avenues of funding, including applying to grants from the Sask Arts Board, the Canada Council for the Arts, and Sask Culture through partnering with non-profits, like mispon and the Filmpool, and founding new ones. Her goal was to "try to create something grounded in a worldview that built on kind of more Indigenous perspectives, like how we see each other as equals, how we work as a team."

The RIIS Media Project, which documented and shared stories about the then-unmarked cemetery at the Regina Indian Industrial School site, was one of the major projects using this model that Windolph joined as a founding member. As producers, Windolph and Stewart could influence the team and approach, Windolph explains, making "the process more grounded in kind of a grassroots style, and the nature of that project needed that."

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Training and education were still priorities, and being outside the system also meant being able to set their own rates. “We wanted to pay everybody in a way that acknowledges we may have one job this month. And that may be my only job that month,” Windolph says. “We actually just really went and built a brand-new model that had everybody [being] paid the same amount using CARFAC [Canadian Artist Representation] rates, which I was told was a communist model,” she laughs. The result was a project where the team and participants could gain experience without sacrificing their livelihoods. For the first time, Windolph says, “we were able to survive off of storytelling.”

Still, there were limitations and challenges in a settler funding culture. Windolph found even something as simple as purchasing tobacco for an Elder caused scrutiny when mispou went through financial reviews. “I swear, I got accused twice of just supporting my smoking habit, [but] I don’t smoke,” she says.

Artistic collaboration between settlers and Indigenous people was important for Windolph, but situations like this crossed a line. “This was something that we just couldn’t continue adapting to without losing the values of who we were and what we were trying to do,” she says.

Commercializing creativity

The year after the demise of the tax credit, Creative Saskatchewan was founded as a Crown corporation to assist in the “commercialization” of the work of Saskatchewan culture makers – including film and television creators. Instead of reinstating the tax credit, Creative Saskatchewan uses a grant model to support film and television productions, based on how much money the production spends on local crew and expenses. The catch is that the program is only unlocked after you have other production funding confirmed (i.e. private capital, or federal support from the NFB or Telefilm). This is a low-risk approach for the government, putting the burden of entrepreneurship entirely on the applicants; it favours established production houses instead of new voices; and it has not brought external capital into the province the way the tax credit did – Saskatchewan’s film industry revenues halved from \$42.2 million in 2007 to \$21 million in 2017. And as far as supporting local productions, the results are dismal for Indigenous filmmakers. Over seven years of operation and out of \$7 million in support for feature films, only \$169,000 – or 2 per cent of total dollars spent – has been awarded to Indigenous-directed feature films.

Windolph is one of the two recipients. The funding was unlocked after she received the Telefilm Micro-Budget (now Talent To Watch) grant, and she used the money to create her co-directed feature-length drama *The Land of Rock And Gold* (2016). At the time of the film’s production, the Regina Soundstage was underutilized and Windolph says she was pressured by members of the Saskatchewan film community to film there – but it was clear for her she needed to film back home in La Ronge for a more authentic portrayal of Woodland Cree culture.

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Windolph doesn’t like to dwell on this, but bringing a crew from Regina to La Ronge – a town surrounded by several First Nations reserves – stigmatized Indigenous La Ronge community members. She says the settler crew didn’t know how to interact with locals, and didn’t understand the context of intergenerational trauma. Her mother helped bridge these gaps, but Windolph explains, “At the end of the day, I’m accountable to my community.” She’ll now always have cultural training on her films, and remain aware that even she herself is relearning her own culture.

With RIIS and the film festival mispon, Windolph and Stewart did education and mentorship work for at least eight years, consulting with Elders for events, engaging them in productions, and “putting the tools of the camera, the microphones, and even up to editing into the hands of the youth,” Windolph explains. This labour – traveling to communities for screenings, mentoring, and often volunteering despite their efforts to secure funding – is above and beyond what most filmmakers do. But Windolph feels the process helped bring more “authentic storytelling out to Saskatchewan communities [and] into the film circuit in general.”



A still from *Stories Are In Our Bones* (2019).

New successes

After years of work building up these models, new successes began to emerge. Windolph views the mispon screenings of Candy Fox’s early films like *Backroads* (2014) as one of her highlights. For Fox, mispon was her first introduction to an Indigenous film festival and those screenings made her realize that her films had an audience. “It just made me feel like my work belonged somewhere.” Fox later curated for mispon, and travelled with the festival’s International Two-Spirit Film Project, which brought her to Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Ottawa to collaborate with other Two-Spirit filmmakers.

Backroads, which confronts the stigma of sexual abuse within a family, was honoured as a Top Ten Student Film at TIFF in 2015 and helped establish Fox as a director, not just an actor. Fox’s latest film, *ahkâméyimo nitânis* (2019), which she created with help from the NSI IndigiDocs program in Winnipeg, premiered at Hot Docs in Toronto, the largest documentary film festival in North America, and Fox is currently working as a director on the APTN series *The Other Side*. (Thanks to APTN, Creative Saskatchewan gives a much larger proportion of funds to Indigenous-led television productions as compared to Indigenous-led feature films. Over seven years, at least 33 per cent of total TV funds were awarded to Indigenous-led television productions).

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Louise BigEagle is another recent success story. Through the RIIS Media Project, Windolph and Stewart helped produce BigEagle’s first film *I Am a Boy* (2015), a documentary about Thomas Moore Keesick. BigEagle’s filmmaking journey later led her to direct a short with the NFB, *To Wake Up the Nakota Language* (2017).

Tasha Hubbard’s successes with *Birth of a Family* (2017), and *nîpawistamâsowin: We Will Stand Up* (2019) are another point of inspiration. Despite *nîpawistamâsowin*’s success, which includes a Canadian Screen Award for best feature documentary, Windolph explains people don’t always appreciate what Hubbard went through to tell the story: “She had to deal with a lot of racism, trolls on social media.” Despite the obstacles, Hubbard’s work is now educating people across the world and advocating for Colten Boushie’s family. “The power of storytelling is it’s also supporting social change. And for me, that’s really key in terms of where I see the power in filmmaking, and what I’m personally proud of,” Windolph adds.

The social change Windolph talks about isn’t hypothetical – the RIIS Media Project succeeded in having the Regina Indian Industrial School Cemetery designated a municipal and provincial heritage site in 2017 and to have the land [transferred](#) to the newly founded RIIS Commemorative Association. Trudy Stewart’s career also took off

during this time. Her film *From Up North* (2017) won the International Indigenous Film Award at the Wairoa Māori Film Festival in 2018, and she became a programmer with the ImagineNATIVE film festival in Toronto. Windolph praises Stewart's growth – from starting out volunteering with mispon, to directing her own production and moderating talks at the largest Indigenous film festival in the world. Before Stewart [passed away in 2019](#), the University of Regina honoured Windolph and Stewart as distinguished alumni, and Stewart's legacy is commemorated through a dedicated fund in her name for Indigenous filmmakers at the Sask Filmpool.

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Fox says this has been an amazing time for Indigenous filmmakers to take back narrative sovereignty across the world. “Filmmakers are leading that change, by being vocal and by taking ownership and not allowing other people to control their films.” She cites film festivals like ImagineNATIVE that are making the world smaller by bringing together Indigenous filmmakers, and Ojibwe broadcaster Jesse Wente's appointment to the Indigenous Screen Office changing the scope of opportunity. “I'm so happy that I stuck with what I was doing in university... because it did seem very dire when I did get into the film program, and it's changed so much.”

When asked why Indigenous women have been the ones to lead this period of storytelling, Windolph explains that women have always been leaders: “Grassroots movements have been largely led by women, like Idle No More.” Increasingly, she explains, “that strength and resilience that ... Indigenous women offered to their community, I think we're being invited to share and to have that voice in a larger audience. So now Saskatchewan is now having more access to kind of more authentic, grounded stories.”



Fox with fellow crew members of *ahkâmêyimo nitânis* / *Keep Going My Daughter* (2019).

Storyboarding the future

Windolph's experience making her latest film, *Stories Are in Our Bones* (2019), an NFB production shot in La Ronge, was a world of difference from her early experiences. “I actually truly felt empowered on that production, which was different from people just using my name to create an Indigenous film. ... This one I was helping determine the path.” She explains that producer Jon Montes supported her vision and asked what she needed rather than imposing his own. The cultural training she committed to after Rock and Gold also made for better relationships between guides and the crew on *Stories*, and she's planning the same process for her next film, *Waswanapi*.

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using my name to create an Indigenous film. ... This one I was helping determine the path."

Creative Saskatchewan partially funds the NSI IndigiDocs program in Winnipeg, which supported both Fox and Stewart's short films, but to date has not created an equivalent program in Saskatchewan to take on the initial funding risk for Indigenous-led short films and feature films. Windolph thinks it's important for funders to move away from a "starving artist" mentality and to create dedicated programs for films by and for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour), doing the groundwork to connect with those communities.

"If you build it, they will come' isn't always true," Windolph says. "You'll have to do a little work to get people to come to you."

When asked if major funders could take a more active role in supporting Indigenous filmmakers in the province, Fox laughs in agreement. "I feel like it would just create an amazing community." She explains dedicated funding would encourage talented youth to seriously consider filmmaking as a career path. "I've taught at some film camps for the Saskatoon Tribal Council and there's an interest but ... where's the support?" She feels her own path would have been different without *Moccasin Flats* and the support of mispon and filmmakers like Stewart. "I feel like I would have seen more Indigenous content creators... if there were these funding models in place a long time ago."

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Windolph sees a role for the tax credit to come back if it were grounded in ideas of transparency, accessibility, community, and also training: "Mentorship is key, and is an Indigenous value," she explains. She points out that provincial programs can also be limiting for Indigenous filmmakers. "My identity doesn't fit within a border. ... Something that's a little bit more like the Jay Treaty, where you can move across borders, would be nice if somehow our storytelling doesn't have to fit within the border system, but that's just a larger goal," she laughs.

Her other dream is to see the creation of another film festival like mispon. mispon had its final year in 2016, after years of declining funding due to the culture sector's focus on supporting festivals that bring in tourists. "That's still the dream. And I think it can also go across different treaties. There's so much to highlight here in Saskatchewan, but I also think there's so much beauty that I see in Treaty 7 and Treaty 6 as well."

While Fox has opportunities in television to make a living while developing her next project, Windolph wasn't able to thrive off her filmmaking full time. She's transitioned to working as associate director of Indigenous Arts at the Banff Centre in Alberta. "I found a way to continue supporting artists, and to me, that's the main thing," she says. "Because artists, filmmakers, whatever word you use to me, we're all storytellers. And we're just using the mediums that are gifts to continue sharing stories, and that in itself is Indigenous values. And that's how we kind of cement and share ... who we are as people."

Mattias Graham is a settler filmmaker from Regina, Saskatchewan, now based in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. His work focuses on Prairie stories, and he is a member of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative.

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