

On and Under Ground

Julian Brave NoiseCat and Emily Kassie's *Sugarcane* highlights the mental strength of the indigenous community.

By George Vedder

There's a scene in *Sugarcane* where it seems that justice will finally be done for a history of abuse in Catholic mission schools for indigenous children. Former Williams Lake chief Rick Gilbert, a survivor of St. Joseph's Mission in British Columbia, travels to Vatican City to represent the Sugarcane Reserve in a meeting with Pope Francis. They are meant to discuss what can be done to make up for the trauma and pain suffered by all students above and below ground. Pope Francis recites a brief apology, blesses the crowd, and says, "thanks, bye bye."

Sugarcane opens with a series of title cards that lay the groundwork for the film and the history of catholic mission schools. In the nineteenth century, a web of boarding schools was established by the catholic church. These schools, designed to "get rid of the Indian problem," brought in groups of ingenious children and whipped them into Christian shape. Beyond just cultural distance, these attendees endured physical and sexual abuse from the clergymen in charge. St. Joseph's Mission in particular racked up deaths as students either ran away, committed suicide, or birthed a child, who would be taken by its father, usually an onsite priest, and discarded.

Even with a heavy load of statistics from a 2021 investigation into the unmarked graves near St. Joseph's Mission, directors Emily Kassie and Julian Brave NoiseCat avoid the typical journalistic tones of documentary. There is no talking head interview or expert commentary. Instead, Kassie and NoiseCat approach this sensitive topic with a gentle distance and focus on

the Sugarcane Reserve's journey toward healing from this generational trauma. Many mission school survivors featured in *Sugarcane* are reluctant to speak on their experiences, and the filmmakers don't force them to. The sorrow of the community is shown through the surfaces of their emotion. The directors let the willing people of the community do the telling, unlike other documentaries that NoiseCat claims force information and "frame the indigenous as unable to tell their own story."

Knee deep in this search for peace is NoiseCat's father, Ed Archie NoiseCat, who we quickly learn was not only born at St. Joseph's Mission but was fathered by a clergyman and miraculously kept alive. The Sugarcane Reserve grave investigation reunites NoiseCat with his father and we quickly see their relationship repair as "the spirits of their children begin to come home."

This theme of reunion and consolation is present in every strand of *Sugarcane's* narrative. The findings of the grave investigation become an afterthought as we focus closer on the acceptance these indigenous people must find while the Catholic church continues to show no regret. After his meeting with Pope Francis, former chief Rick Gilbert lets go of his complications in the Vatican and focuses on his own private church on the Sugarcane Reserve that lives, without hypocrisy, true of Christian values. The spearhead of the grave investigation ends up opening a school for indigenous children, and many of the investigation's participants use their newfound group of listeners to tell stories of their childhood at St. Joseph's mission. Each of these community members work into this multi-stranded narrative that NoiseCat calls "an intimate and epic cinematic portrait of my people."

Sugarcane is a rare film. It's a documentary that looks forward rather than back. Aside from a few found footage excerpts of the students at St. Joseph's mission, the shots mostly show

an ongoing growth in the reservation. There are shots of pow wows (one Julian Brave NoiseCat even participates in) that are overwhelmingly joyful depictions of close bonds. On a reservation home to a tragedy of human history is a cultural family crying together, dancing together, smoking weed together, making music together, all while journeying to hold the Catholic Church accountable.

What the people of the Sugarcane Reserve and the former students of St. Joseph's Mission search for is the world's action. *Sugarcane* is this action's call. The observations of Kassie and NoiseCat bring us near the hearts of their community and leave us with an infuriating yet empathetic yearning to help. Even as Native Americans struggle to find their peace, *Sugarcane* shows that indigenous culture carries an unbreakable bond of emotional strength that, in the end, brings people together.