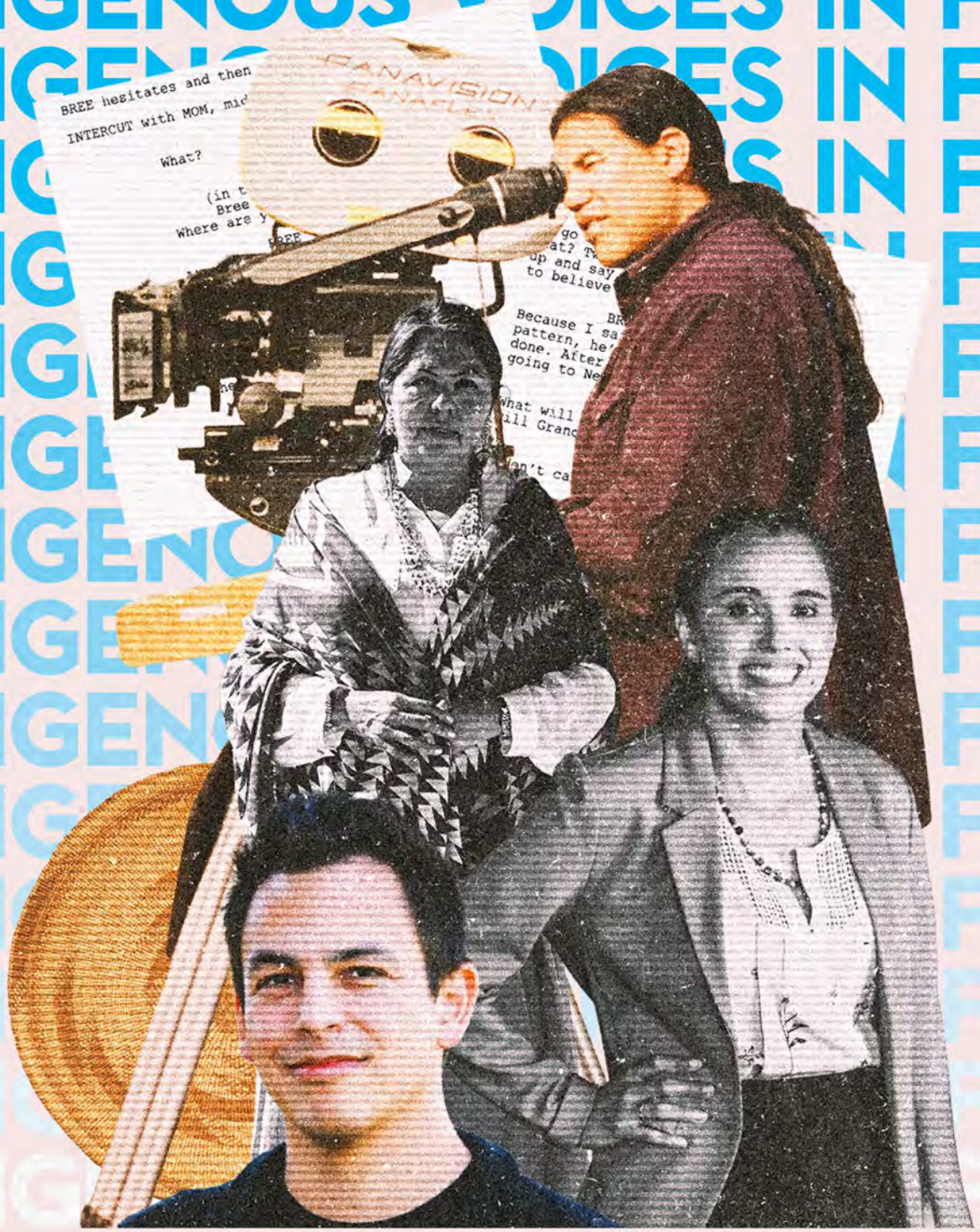
INDIGENOUS VOICES IN FILM



Acknowledgements

This project would not be possible without the tireless commitment of the Advisory Board, Crocker Art Museum staff, and the incredible filmmakers and film professionals whose work we had the joy of engaging with and discussing. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this project and to you, the audience, for showing up continuously throughout the project to support the work of talented arts professionals.

TERRA
FOUNDATION FOR AMERICAN ART

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Introduction

Essays

Biographies, Contributors & Programs

Welcome

Ambitious in scope and critically significant to current dialogues surrounding Native American filmmaking, the Crocker Art Museum's *Indigenous Voices in Film* represents what lofty, critically engaging, community-centered museum projects can look like in action. Conceived of as a multi-modal suite of programmatic offerings, this two-year endeavor was guided by an advisory panel and encompassed dynamic public programs, engaging film screenings, and incisive contributor essays. The project's breadth, diversity, and magnificent quality of offerings have been such a joy to experience first-hand and to see at the Museum.

Of course, this project would not have been possible without our community partners, our advisory panel, or the artists themselves. The fact that a project of such complexity and with so many partners came together so seamlessly speaks to the dynamism and passion of its contributors. *Indigenous Voices in Film* is rooted in the profoundly simple (yet all too often overlooked) belief that when Native artists spearhead conversations and creative content about their own lived experiences, the results are richer, more dynamic, and —let's be honest— all around more interesting.

As the essays in this collection demonstrate, the value of this project lies precisely in its imperative to demand critical thinking and to champion complexity and nuance in a media industry that oftentimes flattens, stereotypes, and harms Native communities. As Dr. Joely Proudfit writes in her essay, *"Indigenous Voice in Film and TV: The Audience Paradox"* global audiences "are increasingly seeking stories that reflect the rich diversity of American Indian experiences."

Much like the diversity and creativity found in contemporary Native filmmaking, this set of essays presents insightful and innovative scholarship around pressing issues facing Indigenous filmmakers today. The published essays ask charged, important and thorny questions: *How do mainstream American audiences and media appetites stymy Native filmmakers? How can film act as a means of cultural preservation? How might Native filmmakers circumnavigate Hollywood's entrenched colonial capitalism? How are contemporary Native filmmakers reasserting their creative autonomy in an industry that has traditionally presented Native communities through the use of tropes and stereotypes?* These authors provide illuminating insights into these questions and illustrate how resilience, creativity, and diversity of experience permeate contemporary Indigenous voices in film.

In addition to thanking all of our wonderful collaborators, the Museum would also like to thank the Terra Foundation, without whose generous financial support this project would not have been possible. I'd like to also thank Houghton Kinsman, Education Manager for his thoughtful oversite and stewardship of this project for the last two years. Finally, thank you to all Native artists and scholars past, present, and future— your work is valued, it is complex, and it is reshaping the foundations of the American narrative.

Yours in Community,

Javier Plasencia
Diector of Education, Crocker Art Museum

Indigenous Voices at the Crocker

The *Indigenous Voices in Film* series was the first program series I encountered when I arrived at the Crocker in late 2019 from South Africa to become the Adult Education Coordinator. The three film series, which explored Indigenous filmmaking across the globe, was programmatic support to the exhibition, *When I Remember I See Red: American Indian Art and Activism in California* – an exhibition co-curated by the late Nomtipom-Wintu painter, printmaker, ethnographer, professor, ceremonial dancer, poet, and writer, Frank La Pena. As a new immigrant to the USA and California, this exhibition and everything that accompanied it, from this film series to the Visual Sovereignty symposium, had a profound impact on me as a person and emerging museum education professional.

Firstly, as a recent immigrant, the history, context, and contemporary experiences of Native Californians and Native Americans was something completely new to me and set me on a complex and transformative path of exploration and learning. Secondly, the artwork, layered discourse, and power of the exhibition was deeply inspiring and thought provoking – all of which still inform and challenge me personally and professionally and, thirdly, I met and made some of the most meaningful relationships during the run of the exhibition and its programming, that I continue to build on over six years later.

It's within this context that the seeds were planted for what has unfolded over the last two years, between 2023 and 2025, and that is on display here in this publication. The excitement and energy of the audience(s) for the screenings of *Drunktown's Finest* by Sydney Freeland, Merata: *How Mum Decolonised the Screen* directed by Heperi Mita, and *RUMBLE: The Indians Who Rocked the World* directed by Catherine Bainbridge and Alfonso Maiorana—those first three films all curated by Maya Austin—was undeniable and remains as strong in my recollection today as it was in 2019.

This was also the first time that I met and worked with Maya Austin. Her work as an advocate and supporter of Indigenous filmmakers is admirable and her love for community building are two qualities that made for a natural fit as a curator for that initial series and as co-coordinator for the longer project that morphed out of it. Without Austin, this project would not have been possible and would not have been as meaningful as it has turned out to be. So, thank you Maya for all that you have brought to Indigenous Voices in Film over the last six years.

As Maya and I discussed various formats in the three plus years between the initial series and the 2023 iteration, it became evident that forming an advisory group would be paramount to developing such a long and winding series with multiple components from film screenings to panel discussions and a series of essays culminating in this publication. It was also evident that establishing an advisory board would allow the Crocker to continue to build on existing relationships established in 2019 and make new relationships within the fields of filmmaking, media and video art.

We invited Terria Smith, Calvin Hedrick, Jack Kohler and Roberto Fatal, editor, community leader, and filmmakers respectively to help us design, build, and steer the project. Over the course of the project each of them served as advisors, connectors, resources builders and, often, as moderators or program participants.

One of the lessons I've learned as a museum educator, is that advisory boards and working groups do so much of the work behind-the-scenes, the "invisible work" and we consciously tried to make as much of their contributions visible to the public. To Terria, Calvin, Jack, and Rob, I'm incredibly grateful for your generosity and for all your commitment to this project. It's a lot to commit to helping steer an 18-month project and I cherish(ed) the time spent chatting with all, getting to know your work, and to learning more about your thoughts on this project. Much like with the relationships established during the run of *When I Remember I See Red*, I look forward to continuing to follow your work and collaborate wherever we can in the future.

If Maya and the advisory board helped set the tone and programmatic framework for this project, the program participants, essayists, and guest editor are the ones who brought it to life. Firstly, a big thank you to filmmakers Tazbah Rose Chavez (*Your Name Isn't English, 2018*), Rayka Zehtabchi and Shaandiin Tome (*Long Line of Ladies, 2022*), and Erica Tremblay (*Fancy Dance, 2023*), who generously shared their films with us for screening. To filmmaker Jody Stillwater, who generously shared his short film *The Wind Telephone (2016*) for us to screen, as well as participating as a panelist and serving as a moderator—thank you for your contributions and your ongoing collaboration. To Adam Piron, Colleen Thurston, and Anpa'o Locke, all of whom are film curators, scholars, and aficionados doing such inspiring work, thank you for your contributions as panelists and collaborators. I am in awe of your work and truly feel privileged to have been able to work with you all.

As you read through these pages, you can revisit some of these conversations (or if you weren't able to attend, enjoy them for the first time). Just click on the link listed in the accompanying essay and it will take you directly to the program recording listed on the Crocker's Youtube page.

Lastly, and most appropriately for what follows after this note, is a big thank you to guest editor, Emily Clarke and all the essayists that have expanded the discourse set in motion in each public program here in this e-publication. Emily, it's been an honor to work with you to source such a diverse, insightful, and nuanced set of essays. Your commitment to your craft is admirable and this publication is testament to that.

What follows is a wonderful collection that includes Pamela Peter's critique of Native stereotypes in the Western genre, Chris Hoshnic's essay on the importance of Indigenous languages on screen, Carly Kohler's poetic personal narrative about the complexities of her father's artistic legacy and Dr Joely Proudfit's incisive analysis of the challenges inherent in making or approaching Indigenous film. This collection of writing is a thought-provoking companion for anyone who is interested in Native film.

To wrap up, without the support of the Terra Foundation for American Art, we would not have been able to embark on this journey to explore artmaking practices of Indigenous peoples in the Sacramento and Northern California regions through the lens of film, video, and media arts. Two years, five public programs, six film screenings, six essays, eight program participants later and this is just the beginning.

As *Indigenous Voices in Film* continues to grow, we invite audiences—locally and beyond—to engage with these powerful stories and join the Crocker in honoring the creativity of Native filmmakers. And remember, programming like Indigenous Voices in Film is only as strong as the program participants and the audiences that support it therefore, I hope that you will write to us, email me, or find a time to sit down with me and share your thoughts on where you would like to see this project grow.

Houghton Kinsman
Education Manager, Crocker Art Museum

Design Notes

Indigenous Voices in Film

Publication Design & Visual Framework

This publication was designed with the intention of treating *Indigenous Voices in Film* not simply as a catalog or program, but as a material artifact—something closer to a book, record, or archive that rewards slow engagement. The visual approach draws inspiration from conceptual music album cover art, particularly from the pre-digital era when printed design played a central role in shaping cultural memory. Album covers once functioned as gateways into sound, context, and identity; similarly, this publication aims to operate as a tactile entry point into Indigenous filmmaking, authorship, and creative labor.

The design foregrounds materiality and process. Layered textures, halftone treatments, and collage techniques reference print traditions while resisting a polished, purely digital aesthetic. This approach reflects filmmaking itself as a constructed, collaborative practice—one that involves scripting, direction, equipment, and collective effort. By incorporating visual references to film production alongside portraits of Indigenous filmmakers, writers, and cultural practitioners, the publication emphasizes Indigenous presence not as subject matter, but as authorship and agency.

Typography plays a central conceptual role. The repeated title treatment—*Indigenous Voices in Film*—draws from advocacy posters, music flyers, and cultural movement graphics, using repetition as a form of insistence rather than decoration. The multiplicity of the title reinforces the idea that Indigenous cinema is not singular or monolithic, but comprised of many voices, positions, and lived experiences. At the same time, the typographic restraint and scale reference museum and contemporary art publishing, deliberately pushing against the notion of a fixed or recognizable "Native look."

Cultural specificity is embedded through contextual imagery rather than symbolic shorthand. The inclusion of regional material culture—such as the traditional Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk basket—serves not as ornamentation, but as grounding, acknowledging place, lineage, and knowledge systems that inform Indigenous storytelling. These elements operate alongside contemporary portraits and production imagery to reflect continuity rather than contrast between tradition and modern creative practice.

Throughout the project, design decisions were guided by the belief that art, culture, and design are inherently intersectional. Rather than separating visual aesthetics from cultural responsibility, the publication treats design as a form of contextual storytelling—one that respects Indigenous complexity, avoids visual essentialism, and affirms that Indigenous creative work belongs fully within contemporary art, film, and institutional spaces.

The publication was produced using Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign, with an emphasis on print-ready composition, tactile visual language, and long-term archival relevance. The goal was to create a publication that feels contemporary yet durable—capable of living both within the museum context and beyond it, as a lasting record of Indigenous voices in film.

Ray Rivera
Publication Designer
Los Angeles, CA

Editor's Letter

Because my artistic practice is rooted in poetry, I entered this project with both caution and curiosity. I was drawn to the ways film, like poetry, holds space for layered storytelling—something Indigenous artists have done for generations. Growing up on the Cahuilla Reservation in Southern California, creativity was a way of life. I remember listening to stories told around a fire, falling asleep to traditional Bird Songs outside my window, and watching my dad paint depictions of yucca and agave. So, in navigating this publication, I felt the need to showcase these Indigenous creatives in a way that felt genuine and intentional. To give them the freedom to explore their own creative practices, their artistic fascinations, and to offer thoughts on filmmaking that may be unexpected or genre-bending.

In working with the following five authors, I was fortunate to experience Indigenous filmmaking through a multitude of lenses. I now pass these lenses to you, the reader, in the hope that they not only deepen your understanding of Indigenous film but also help you notice new details in the world around you. In the following essays, Carly Kohler explores intergenerational storytelling through song and cinema. Joely Proudfit examines audience expectations within Indigenous film. Chris Hoshnic reflects on Native language and the power of translation. Pamela Peters investigates the intersections of Indigenous film, television, and poetry. Finally, Adam Piron looks at the history of American cinema and considers the future possibilities for Indigenous filmmaking. This publication views film as a living practice, a continuation of Indigenous creative tradition, and a gateway to a boundless future—one that forges new paths while honoring the old.

As editor, navigating this project offered a glimmer of joy in a world that can often feel heavy. A poet diving into the world of cinema, I found myself learning from fellow Indigenous artists, and our collaboration not only deepened my understanding of the film world but also inspired my creative practice and voice. I am deeply grateful to the Indigenous authors and filmmakers who shared their illuminating work, and to my friends at the Crocker, who made both this beautiful publication and its accompanying programming possible. I am also grateful to you, the readers, who I hope will allow this publication to inspire, educate, and motivate. As you move through these essays, I urge you to learn something new, to consider your creative perspective, and to continue the conversation forward.

Emily Clarke
Guest Editor

Advisory Board

This project would not have been possible without the tireless dedication, insights, and creativity of the advisory board. The Crocker is deeply appreciative of the contributions to this project by co-coordinator Maya Austin and advisory board members Roberto Fatal, Calvin Hedrick, Jack Kohler, and Terria Smith.

For more information on the advisory board see their biographies below.

Maya Austin

Maya Austin (Pascua Yaqui/Blackfeet) is co-coordinator of the Indigenous Voices in Film project. Her focus is to identify and support emerging Indigenous filmmakers and content creators across the US and globally. She's served previously as Senior Manager for the Native American and Indigenous Program at Sundance Institute, as the Vice-Chair for Vision Maker Media, which empowers and engages Native Peoples to tell their stories for public television, as well as Grants Manager for the National NAGPRA Program, the Southern Ute Cultural Center & Museum, the Academy Film Archive, and the UCLA Cataloging and Metadata Center. She is a graduate of the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) with degrees in History, Film and Moving Image Archive Studies.

Roberto Fatal

Roberto Fatal [they/them/ellos] is a Meztize Chicana filmmaker and storyteller. They come from Rarámuri, Tewa Pueblo, Ute, and Spanish ancestry. Their Queer, gender fluid, Mestize/Mixed identity informs the sci-fi, films they make. Their work centers on humans who sit at the intersections of time, space and culture. From this unique vantage point, these characters can bridge divides, see all sides, find new paths forward and recall multiple histories long forgotten. The mixed people of Fatal's stories can connect us deeply to an undercurrent of humanity that we often overlook in a world that is increasingly divided. Survival, intersectional identity, perseverance, love, empathy, community, connection and creation are at the heart of their characters and films. Fatal is a Sundance Film Institute Native Film Lab Fellow Alum and an Imagine Native Director's Lab feature film fellow alum.

Calvin Hedrick

Calvin Hedrick (Mountain Maidu) is from Northeastern California and currently serves as Organizing Director for the California Native Vote Project (CNVP). He is also the Director of *The 5th Direction*, a program dedicated to supporting Native youth and communities throughout Northern California.

With more than 25 years of experience working with American Indian communities statewide, Calvin brings deep expertise in youth leadership development and suicide prevention. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Native American Studies from Humboldt State University and completed graduate studies at UCLA. He has taught American Indian Literature at CSU Chico and is a published poet and writer who leads book clubs and writing workshops in tribal communities.

A traditional Maidu dancer with extensive knowledge of Native games, Calvin has also coordinated major statewide cultural and youth-centered events. He lives in Carmichael, California, with his wife and their five children.

Jack Kohler

Jack Kohler is Hoopa, Yurok, and Karuk. He earned an engineering degree from Stanford, but his right brain wanted to create, so he became a filmmaker. He established *On Native Ground*, a Hoopa Tribal non-profit film/media organization, in 2006 out of a need for Indigenous voices to tell their own stories and history. *On Native Groun*d has received a multitude of film awards.

River of Renewal was Jack's first feature documentary, funded by Native American Public Telecommunications, which screened over 2,000 times on PBS stations across the nation. It shed light on the four dams of the Klamath River that are now in the process of being removed. The film garnered Best Documentary from the American Indian Film Festival.

He was also the co-producer of *California's Lost Tribes*, another Native American Public Communications film, which was part of the *California and the American Dream series* on PBS. It was the first documentary to go behind the glitz and glamour of Native American casinos to reveal the current conflicts over Indian gaming, explore the historical underpinnings of tribal sovereignty, and examine the evolution of tribal gaming.

He also created a 13-part television series titled *On Native Ground Reports* for the FNX station, which has won many awards and stars young Native news reporters. He recently wrote *Gift of Fear* with his daughter, Carly, and co-directed and edited the film, which has won 27 awards and began streaming on Amazon on July 9, 2024. The film addresses true stories involving missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Jack has been writing about the MMIW crisis since 2010, including *K'ina kil: The Slaver's Son*, his first award-winning film, which aired on FNX. The *Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women* music video—produced for RISE and starring Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland—won a Human Rights Award in 2021.

Recently, Jack was selected by the Arts Council of Placer County as one of 40 Icons who have made a difference in the arts over the past 40 years. *Something Inside Is Broken*, Jack's Native American rock opera, has won 24 awards to date, including a Native American Music Award for Best Rock Album, and is currently available on PBS.org.

Terria Smith

Terria Smith is a tribal member of the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians and a proud original Californian. She is the editor of *News from Native California* magazine and director of the Berkeley Roundhouse, Heyday's California Indian publishing program. Smith is also the editor of the 2023 anthology *Know We Are Here: Voices of Native California Resistance*. She received her undergraduate degree at Cal Poly Humboldt (formerly Humboldt State University) and earned her master's degree at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. She lives on her ancestral homelands in the Coachella Valley with her puppy Havana.

Essays

Dr. Joely Proudfit	Indigenous Voices in Film and TV: The Audience Paradox
Carly Kohler	Something Inside Is Determined
Chris Hoshnic	Safety in Numbers: Bringing Community to the Screen Through Language
Pamela J. Peters	Native Narratives can change a person's perspective of a culture
Adam Piron	The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle His Picture House

Image courtesy of Chris Eyre (with permission).

Indigenous Voices in Film and TV: The Audience Paradox

*By **Dr. Joely Proudfit***

As an American Indian scholar who has taught Indigenous film and media for nearly three decades, I have witnessed firsthand the evolution of Native American representation in cinema. My active involvement in shaping how the entertainment industry portrays Native Americans, as well as my collaborations with both Native and non-Native filmmakers, have provided me with unique insights into the complex relationship between Indigenous filmmakers, their art, and their diverse audiences. For the purposes of this essay, I focus primarily on American Indian filmmakers because Indigenous storytelling is deeply rooted in place, and audiences are increasingly seeking stories that reflect the rich diversity of American Indian experiences.

This essay explores the multifaceted dynamics at play when Native creators bring their stories to the screen. It examines the expectations placed upon them, the influence of audience participation on content, and the strategies employed to navigate the broader film industry. The essay also explores how both Native and non-Native audiences engage with Indigenous media and how Indigenous filmmakers manage these often-competing expectations.

Navigating Expectations: What People Want from Native Filmmakers

Native filmmakers face the challenge of balancing artistic expression with the expectations of both Native and non-Native audiences. These expectations can simultaneously serve as an impetus for powerful storytelling and act as constraints that limit creative freedom.

Pictured: Joely; director Jeff Barnaby
Image courtesy of California's American Indian and Indigenous Film Festival (CAIIFF).

- **Cultural Ambassadors:** Native filmmakers are often seen as representatives of entire cultures, tasked with educating non-Native audiences about Indigenous histories, traditions, and contemporary issues. This ambassadorial role, while valuable in terms of promoting cultural awareness, can be limiting, overshadowing the filmmaker's personal vision or artistic goals. The burden of representation can weigh heavily on Native filmmakers, who may feel compelled to ensure that their work reflects the complexity and diversity of Indigenous cultures, even when their focus is on a single narrative.
- **Authenticity and Tradition:** There's a persistent expectation that Native films should focus on traditional practices, historical events, or life in rural settings. This narrow view often overlooks the complexity of contemporary Indigenous experiences, especially those of Native people living in urban environments. The expectation of authenticity tied to historical or traditional portrayals can make it difficult for Native filmmakers to tell stories about the modern, multifaceted realities of Indigenous life. The diversity of American Indian experiences is vast, yet the lens through which many non-Native audiences view Native cultures is often outdated and limited.
- **Political and Social Commentary**: Non-Native viewers may expect Native films to tackle politically charged themes such as colonialism, land rights, and social justice. While these themes are undoubtedly important to Indigenous communities, they are not the only stories worth telling. This expectation can pigeonhole Native filmmakers into a narrow thematic range, preventing them from exploring broader storytelling possibilities. Native artists should have the freedom to create lighthearted comedies, thrillers, romances, and other genres without the constant expectation that their work will focus on the trauma and struggle of Indigenous people.
- **Spiritual and Mystical Elements:** Stereotypes about Native spirituality often lead non-Native audiences to expect mystical or spiritual elements in Indigenous films. This can result in the exoticization of Native cultures, placing undue pressure on filmmakers to include elements that reinforce preconceived notions of what it means to be Native. The inclusion of spiritual or mystical themes may appeal to certain audiences, but it can also perpetuate harmful tropes about Native peoples as being inextricably tied to nature or mysticism, thereby overshadowing their complex identities.
- **Reconciliation and Healing:** There is a widespread expectation, particularly from non-Native audiences, that Native films should promote healing or reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. While some films do engage with these themes, this

expectation places an unfair burden on Native filmmakers to offer solutions to complex historical and social issues. Indigenous filmmakers are often called upon to do the emotional and intellectual labor of providing pathways to reconciliation, despite the fact that this is a shared responsibility, not something that should be expected solely from Native creators.

These expectations illustrate the intricate landscape that Native filmmakers must navigate. Mi'kmaq filmmaker Jeff Barnaby, known for his films *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013) and *Blood Quantum* (2019), once remarked, "There's this idea that Native filmmaking has to be gentle or that it has to educate a white audience. Fuck that. I'm not here to educate anybody. I'm here to express myself as an artist."
Barnaby's defiant stance underscores a critical tension—Indigenous filmmakers seek the freedom to tell stories on their own terms, unburdened by the weight of representation or the need to cater to mainstream audiences' comfort zones.

For American Indian filmmakers, the challenge is often one of asserting the right to creative freedom while simultaneously pushing back against the external pressures to conform to specific cultural or political narratives. In doing so, they affirm that Indigenous stories deserve the same creative diversity as any other culture's stories.

Shaping Content: How Audience Expectations Influence Filmmaking

Native films and TV shows are shaped by a complex interplay between filmmaker intent and audience expectations. Filmmakers must walk a fine line, navigating reactions from both Native and non-Native viewers, while making decisions about how much of their work should be tailored to educate, entertain, or reflect Indigenous life.

California's American Indian and Indigenous Film Festival (CAIIFF), 2022.

- **Balancing Acts:** Native filmmakers must find a delicate balance between speaking authentically to Indigenous audiences and making their stories accessible to non-Native viewers. This often involves including historical or cultural context to help non-Native viewers understand the significance of certain cultural references or plot points. However, this need to provide context can disrupt narrative flow or artistic experimentation, sometimes detracting from the storytelling experience for Native viewers who are already familiar with the cultural background being portrayed.

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- **Language Choices:** Decisions regarding the use of Indigenous languages are often driven by concerns about audience accessibility. For instance, some filmmakers may prioritize the use of Native languages in order to reclaim and revitalize those languages, even if it means relying on subtitles for non-Native audiences. On the other hand, some filmmakers choose to create primarily English-language content in order to reach a wider audience. This choice can be a point of contention within Indigenous communities, where language reclamation is a crucial aspect of cultural survival.
- **Cultural Specificity vs. Universality:** Native filmmakers are often caught in the dilemma of whether to tell culturally specific stories that resonate strongly with Indigenous viewers or create more universal narratives that appeal to a broader, non-Native audience. Striking a balance between these two approaches can be difficult. For example, a filmmaker may want to highlight a specific tribal tradition that may not be well known outside of that community, but doing so might alienate viewers unfamiliar with the cultural context. On the other hand, opting for a more universal story might dilute the cultural specificity that makes Indigenous storytelling so unique.
- **Funding and Distribution Pressures:** Financial considerations also play a significant role in shaping Native content. Filmmakers often face pressure from funders or distributors to make content that appeals to mainstream or international audiences, which can result in the dilution of cultural specificity. For instance, a studio may require changes to a script to make it more "marketable" to non-Native audiences, even if those changes compromise the filmmaker's original vision.

Chris Eyre, the Cheyenne-Arapaho filmmaker known for directing Smoke Signals (1998), captures this dual challenge: "I'm not interested in preaching to the converted. I want to make films that speak to everyone, but from an Indigenous perspective." Eyre's perspective reflects the ongoing challenge of creating culturally authentic films while striving for universal appeal. Films like Smoke Signals demonstrate that it is possible to create stories that resonate with a wide audience without compromising the integrity of Indigenous storytelling. This film, often hailed as the first feature film written, directed, and acted by Native Americans, broke barriers by showcasing Native life in a relatable, humorous, and heartfelt way that appealed to both Native and non-Native viewers alike. For nearly two decades, this film held the distinction of being the sole Native-produced work to achieve national distribution.

California's American Indian and Indigenous Film Festival (CAIIFF), 2022.

Reception Divide: Native vs. Non-Native Audiences

The way Native films and TV shows are received often varies significantly depending on the cultural background of the audience. For Native viewers, these productions offer a reflection of their lived experiences, while for non-Native viewers, they may serve as windows into unfamiliar worlds. This divide can shape how a film is interpreted and appreciated.

- **Cultural Resonance:** Native audiences are likely to pick up on cultural references, humor, and subtleties that non-Native viewers might miss. These nuances are essential for building a sense of cultural recognition and solidarity among Native communities. For example, Native viewers might appreciate the subtle use of tribal humor or recognize the significance of specific clothing, hairstyles, or ceremonies depicted in a film, while non-Native viewers may focus on the broader narrative or themes
- **Emotional Impact:** For Native audiences, the emotional stakes of Indigenous films and TV shows are often heightened, especially when they address themes of colonialism, trauma, and resilience. Many Native viewers see their personal and communal histories reflected on the screen, which can create deeply emotional viewing experiences. A film that deals with the aftermath of government boarding schools, for example, might resonate on a visceral level for Native viewers who have direct or ancestral connections to that history.
- **Critical Lens:** Native viewers may apply a more critical lens to films and shows representing their cultures, scrutinizing details for accuracy and authenticity. They may also hold filmmakers accountable for how they portray sensitive cultural practices or historical events. In contrast, non-Native audiences may be more forgiving of inaccuracies or culturally simplistic portrayals, as they might lack the cultural knowledge needed to recognize these shortcomings.
- **Educational Perspective:** Non-Native audiences often approach Indigenous films as educational opportunities, looking to learn about Native cultures and histories. This can create an uneven viewing experience, as Native audiences may be more focused on the artistic merits of a film, rather than its potential to teach. This difference in reception highlights the fact that Native filmmakers are often expected to educate, even when their primary goal is to entertain or tell a personal story.

Jeff Barnaby's observation — "There's a disconnect between what Native people want to see about themselves on screen and what non-Native people want to see about Native people on screen" — highlights the divergent expectations that shape how Indigenous films and TV shows are received. Native filmmakers must grapple with these competing demands, striving to create work that is meaningful to their communities while still reaching a broader audience.

Native Filmmakers in the Broader Entertainment Industry

Despite the progress Native filmmakers have made in gaining recognition, their work is still often perceived as niche in the larger entertainment landscape. Indigenous productions face several challenges in gaining mainstream acceptance and recognition, even as they achieve critical success.

- **Niche Categorization:** Native films and TV shows are frequently marginalized as "special interest" or "niche" content, which can limit their distribution and marketing potential. This marginalization can also affect the perception of their artistic and cinematic value, as films that are seen as "niche" are often overlooked in major industry awards and festivals that cater to mainstream tastes.
- **Festival Circuit Success:** Many Native films find success on the festival circuit, particularly at festivals dedicated to Indigenous or minority filmmakers. However, breaking into mainstream distribution remains a significant hurdle. Films that perform well at festivals may struggle to find wider audiences, due to limited distribution or marketing budgets.
- **Industry Representation:** The underrepresentation of Indigenous professionals in key decision-making roles within the entertainment industry—such as producers, executives, and distributors—affects how Native content is funded, marketed, and distributed. This lack of representation limits the scope of Indigenous stories that reach the screen and reinforces the idea that Native films are a niche market rather than part of the broader entertainment landscape.
- **Tokenism and Diversity Initiatives:** While diversity initiatives have opened some doors for Indigenous filmmakers and TV creators, there is still a risk of tokenism or superficial inclusion. The real challenge lies in fostering meaningful representation at all levels of the industry, from writers and directors to producers and executives.
- Without Indigenous voices in decision-making positions, the risk remains that Native stories will be commodified or co-opted for diversity's sake, rather than being given the respect and resources they deserve.

Chris Eyre, reflecting on the progress made since Smoke Signals, noted, "There's definitely more opportunity now, more Native filmmakers getting their stories out there. But we're still fighting for resources, for distribution, for the chance to tell our stories on our own terms." Eyre's observations point to the ongoing struggles Native content creators face, even as opportunities expand.

Pictured: Evan Adams and Chris Eyre.
Image courtesy of Chris Eyre.

The Streaming Revolution: Opportunities and Challenges

The rise of streaming platforms has significantly impacted the landscape for Indigenous content, offering new opportunities for Native filmmakers to reach global audiences. However, streaming also presents unique challenges.

- **Diversity of Shows and Creators:** Streaming platforms have opened doors for a wide range of Native-created content, including AMC's *Dark Winds*, Netflix's *Spirit Rangers*, and FX's *Reservation Dogs*. These shows, which span different genres, demonstrate the increasing visibility of Native stories in mainstream media. Dark Winds, a riveting crime drama, has particularly resonated with audiences, earning a perfect Rotten Tomatoes score and securing a spot in Netflix's top 10. Its success demonstrates how culturally authentic storytelling can captivate both Native and non-Native viewers alike, proving that specificity in narrative can lead to universal appeal. This trend signals a promising shift towards greater representation and diversity in mainstream media, where Native stories are not just included, but celebrated.
- **Platform Diversity:** The multitude of streaming platforms has created more spaces for Native content to find homes and audiences. However, this diversity can also lead to fragmentation, making it challenging for audiences to discover shows on less prominent or subscription-based platforms.
- **Collaborations and New Voices:** Streaming has facilitated collaborations between seasoned professionals and emerging talents. It has also provided opportunities for new Native writers and showrunners to bring fresh perspectives to the screen. *Reservation Dogs*, which featured an all-Native writing room, is an example of how Indigenous creatives can work together to produce authentic and entertaining representations of Native life.

Pictured (L to R): Joely Proudfit; Tantoo Cardinal; Wes Studi; Chris Eyre. Image courtesy of California's American Indian and Indigenous Film Festival (CAIIFF).

- **Audience Reach and Discoverability:** While streaming platforms offer the potential for global reach, the sheer volume of content can make it difficult for Native shows to stand out. The challenge of discoverability on crowded platforms remains a significant hurdle for Indigenous content creators. Many shows may never reach their full audience potential simply because they are buried among other content in the algorithm-driven landscape of streaming platforms.
- **Creative Freedom vs. Algorithm-Driven Content:** Streaming platforms often offer more creative freedom than traditional networks, allowing filmmakers to experiment with different genres, formats, and storytelling techniques. However, these platforms are also driven by viewer data and algorithms, which can sometimes result in a focus on familiar formulas rather than innovative storytelling. This tension between creative freedom and algorithm-driven content can limit the types of stories that are greenlit by streaming platforms.
- **Representation Behind the Scenes:** The streaming era has highlighted the importance of Native representation not just on screen, but in writers' rooms, production teams, and executive positions. Shows like *Reservation Dogs* and *Spirit Rangers* demonstrate the impact of having Indigenous creatives at all levels of production, from concept to execution. Representation behind the scenes is crucial to ensuring that Indigenous stories are told with authenticity and care.

The streaming revolution has undoubtedly expanded opportunities for Native content creators, but it also presents new challenges in terms of audience fragmentation and discoverability. As Sierra Teller Ornelas, co-creator of Rutherford Falls, once said,

"There's never been a Native sitcom before. So we're literally building the plane as we're flying it."

Her words encapsulate both the excitement and the challenges of creating groundbreaking Native content in the streaming era.

Pictured (L to R): Michael Greyeyes; Saginaw Grant; Forest Goodluck; Kiowa Gordon. Image courtesy of California's American Indian and Indigenous Film Festival (CAIIFF).

Moving Forward: A Bright Future for Native Cinema and TV

As we look ahead, the future of Native filmmaking appears bright. Native filmmakers are poised to reshape the entertainment industry by offering fresh, authentic perspectives that resonate with audiences worldwide. The challenge now lies not with audience readiness but with industry gatekeepers who need to invest in these creators. Native stories not only enrich the cultural landscape but are also commercially viable, as the success of *Reservation Dogs*, *Dark Wind*s, and *Spirit Rangers* demonstrates.

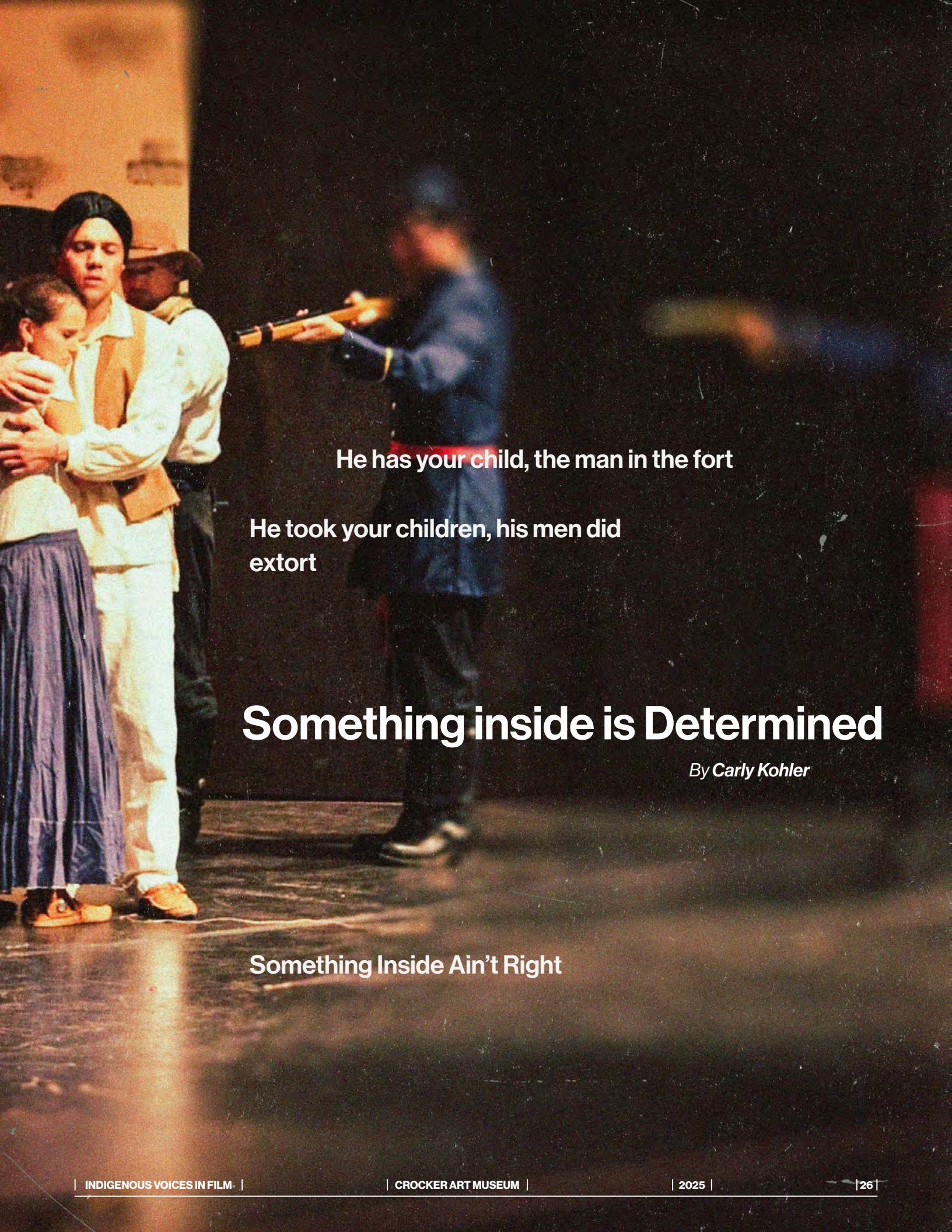
The ultimate power of Native cinema and television lies in its ability to tell universal human stories through the lens of Indigenous experiences. As Native creators continue to break boundaries, they contribute not only to the visibility of Indigenous cultures but to the richness and diversity of global entertainment.

In the words of Chris Eyre, "Native filmmakers can tell any kind of story they want. We're not limited to just 'Native stories'—we can tell universal stories through our unique lens. That's real progress." As Indigenous filmmakers and TV creators push forward, their voices are not simply important for Indigenous visibility but for the broader landscape of storytelling.

The landscape of Native cinema is evolving rapidly, with Indigenous-made films increasingly captivating audiences and securing national distribution. A prime example is Seneca-Cayuga filmmaker Erica Tremblay's work, featuring the talented Lily Gladstone. Tremblay's storytelling, rooted in her Indigenous perspective, has garnered critical acclaim and broader recognition. This trend extends beyond individual successes, signaling a shift in the industry's recognition of Native talent and stories. Films like Sterlin Harjo's Mekko and Taika Waititi's Boy have paved the way for a new generation of Indigenous filmmakers to reach wider audiences. As these Native-made films continue to resonate with viewers across the country, they not only showcase the rich storytelling traditions of Indigenous cultures but also contribute to a more diverse and inclusive cinematic landscape. The increasing national distribution of these films marks a significant step forward in amplifying diverse Native voices and perspectives in mainstream media.

The entertainment industry must empower Native voices, providing the resources and platforms necessary to share their unique stories with the world. Native filmmakers have already proven that their stories can captivate audiences across cultural boundaries, and the time has come for industry executives to recognize the immense potential of Indigenous storytelling. By providing substantial funding and wide distribution channels to Indigenous filmmakers and showrunners, the industry can tap into a wealth of untold stories and perspectives. The future of Indigenous cinema and television is bright, filled with potential for groundbreaking narratives that can entertain, educate, and inspire. As these voices continue to rise, they will undoubtedly reshape the entertainment industry, offering audiences a more diverse, authentic, and compelling array of stories that reflect the full spectrum of human experience.

Native American Rock Opera: *Something Inside Is Broken.* Image courtesy of Carly Kohler.



Something inside is Determined

*By **Carly Kohler***

"Something Inside Is Broken" is a song my father, Jack Kohler, composed in 2015 for his Native rock opera by the same title. He wanted to create an interactive way of portraying the true history of the California Gold Rush and Johann Sutter from the Nissenan perspective. That song, like so many true history lessons that both my parents have taught me, reflects the Native struggle and Native strength. Even from a young age, the harsh reality of Indigenous people's genocide and oppression didn't break me down; on the contrary, my respect for my ancestors' resilience grew.

While I was fortunate to grow up without relying solely on simplistic renditions in the school history textbooks (complete with generic euphemisms to remove any blaming language of European colonialism), it took my father some time to arrive at the same conclusion. Jack Kohler is a member of the Hoopa Valley Tribe and he is Yurok and Karuk. My great-grandmother, Nancy Ker'ern Kohler, grew up as a child living in Weitchpec on the Hoopa Valley Reservation, but was sent to the Chemawa boarding school in Oregon and then moved to San Francisco.

As a child, my father was often mistaken for being Mexican and he dealt with racial profiling while at school or in the South San Francisco neighborhood. For the first four years of his life, my father lived with his grandparents. Jack's home life as a child was strained. His parents fought often and later separated. Jack's father was rarely involved, so Jack felt disconnected from his Native culture. Being the oldest, Jack often stepped into a parental role to care for his younger sisters. On Christmas Eve, Jack waited until his sisters fell asleep to build their bicycles from Santa and tied bells to his heels as he climbed the roof to help keep their belief in Santa alive. Jack's Native spirituality and intuitive awareness remained strong, however. He soaked up his

Pictured: Jack Kohler.
Image courtesy of Carly Kohler.

grandparents' nurturance and heeded their advice. He listened to the stories his father shared about his culture. Jack's grandfather suffered a stroke and could no longer speak in full sentences. **While watching a televised football game, his grandpa stood up and declared, "Jackie, one day you'll go to Stanford." Jack never forgot that, and a seed was planted.**

Jack courageously asked his high school counselor if he could apply to Stanford University but was informed that only the eight brightest students could apply; he should attend a community college. Jack, furious, called Stanford University and asked to be mailed his own application. Later, he was the only senior to receive an acceptance letter. His principal neglected to announce this during Jack's graduation. Jack was the first person in his family to graduate from a four-year college. Jack's time at Stanford was where he blossomed. He majored in civil engineering and met my mother, Megan Chesnut. She cajoled him into acting and singing in the student musical, *Working*. After graduating, he went into construction as a civil engineer and settled down with my mother, before having my sister and me and later adopting our older brother.

My parents were passionate about ensuring that we knew our culture growing up. My family brought me to many ceremonies like gatherings at Bloody Island, where I will never forget an older Pomo man who stood up and raised his fist holding a black cannonball with a faded small rope poking out of it. It was one of the cannonballs the U.S. cavalry shot and used to massacre almost all of his people. His great-grandmother survived as a child by breathing out of the tule reeds in the water and hiding until the soldiers left.

Later, my father would write

"Message Live on. Message Don't fight,"

as lyrics for his song "Something Inside Is Broken." Once a year, on Native American Day, my family would go to the Sonoma Square and read off of the giant headstone all of the names of the 400 Pomo and Miwok people who died building the Sonoma Mission. We would sing healing songs that had been taught to my father for those spirits with unmarked graves.

Jack branched out of his comfort zone when he brought his family with him to Chillicothe, Ohio, and acted for five summers in the outdoor theatrical production of *Tecumseh*. The show was about a Shawnee leader who united 13 tribes, around 50 thousand Natives, to fight the British in 1812. I acted alongside him as a Native village girl. This acting experience marked a change in Jack's career trajectory. He abandoned his engineering degree and contractor work, but held onto his efficiency, creativity and ingenuity.

Thus began Jack's career in filmmaking, but it was also Jack's journey into learning more about his people, his cultural traditions, and his connection to his Native heritage. He connected with Stephen Most and together they began working on *River of Renewal*, a documentary about the dam on the Klamath and Trinity Rivers that impacts the Hoopa, Yurok, and Karuk tribes, as well as the wildlife. Salmon were dying due to all the water being diverted from the dam for farming. While making the documentary, Jack was invited and strongly encouraged to dance in a Warrior's Dance ceremony at Ishi Pishi. It was the first time he danced with his people. My sister and I met our welcoming relative, Pam Risling, who later invited us to be a part of our ceremonies as well.

There is an important Yurok story about the inland whale. A boy, a bastard child, whose mother is of high upper class and his father a lowly carver, is not allowed to dance at the brush dance because he was born out of wedlock. As his mother cries, he crosses the river after an epic flood on the back of a white bastard whale who is now stuck inland and can't get out to sea. The inland whale commiserates with the boy and reminds him to be proud of who he is and all he will become. The whale gives the boy his strength and that boy goes on to become the best carver in the tribe and eventually marries the chief's daughter, becoming a part of the very high upper class.

Jack went on to create his own film company, On Native Ground.

In 2014, when Jack dreamed about a Native slave boy named Tintah, he wrote a script, *Kina K'il*. He received a grant to produce the film, but only if he used a non-Native lead actor. Jack refused. He cast Martin Seinsmeir, the now-famed Native actor, in the short film that he produced on his own. He partnered with Alan Wallace, who transcribed the script into Nisenan. My father was aware of my continued acting classes from my schooling. I felt proud and nervous when he asked me to play the Native slave girl, Quinella.

Image courtesy of Carly Kohler, 14th Native Women in Film Festival (NWIFTV).

Later, Alan Wallace asked Jack to write a script about the Nisenan people's story and their horrific encounters with Johann Sutter in today's Sacramento area. Jack visited the Bancroft Library to obtain copies of portfolios that were omitted from common historical accounts, read the journal of Sutter's foreman, Leinhard, and spent time with Alan, whose great-grandmother was one of Sutter's favorite Native slave girls, before writing the rock opera, My father and Alan gave me the role of the Nisenan slave girl, Maj Kyle. I enjoyed the challenge of learning Nisenan phrases and songs. It was a privilege to represent the Native great-grandmas who survived traumatizing events while being enslaved to colonizers such as Sutter.

Image courtesy of Carly Kohler, 14th Native Women in Film Festival (NWIFTV).

During the question-and-answer part of the show at the end of the rock opera, the audience often expressed outrage or disbelief that the white settlers could have been that brutal. People working at Sutter's Fort adamantly claimed that it must be fictional because there was no way Sutter was that cruel. There was no shame on Jack's part; he was standing up for his Native relatives and their sacrifice and speaking their truth. There was absolute pride in telling this Nisenan story. The show demanded change in the dominant narrative of American history. Far too often, high school history texts summarize entries involving Native people in two paragraphs (while they can designate a page for President Roosevelt's scottie dog named Fala). School textbooks frequently have a heavy emphasis on the traditional living styles of Native people such as teepees or birch bark houses while skipping over their systematic genocide. Although it's a brutal history, denying its existence is even more painful, so by bringing California's true history to light, many Native people expressed gratitude with therapeutic tears.

He's like a monster devouring the land. His little empire is not so grand. He's only human... But he scares me.

Both my father and I share a passion for raising awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) and People. In 2021, during Covid, my father asked me to be a producer for a MMIW documentary. I had six years of experience as a Child Protective Services social worker and my Master of Social Work at this point. I asked the interview questions and responded empathetically to the families' grief. After being honored by the families who shared their vulnerability and overwhelming sadness with us, we knew we wanted to do more to raise awareness about the issue. However, we wanted to approach the epidemic from a different perspective and draw the audience in. My father's friend, Dr. April Lea Go Forth, the director of RISE, encouraged us to write a script about MMIW. We had the opportunity to interview Kola Shippentower-Thompson while at her wrestling meet in Boise, Idaho, and we learned about her life and how she uplifts MMIW as an MMA fighter. When our flight home was delayed, I started writing a narrative script with my dad about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and teen sex trafficking from a Native foster youth perspective. We modeled our tough, Native, female jiu jitsu coach after Kola. We worked together to produce the film, Gift of Fear, six months later.

When someone hears that we collaborated, the first question is usually, "How was that? Working with your dad?"

The answer is an easy one: "Awesome! We had the best time. When one of us was fired up with inspiration, it would be contagious and soon we'd be brainstorming again." When piecing our scripts together, they intermixed easily.

I would leave blank spaces in a few of my sections covering the foster care experiences. "What's the space for?" my dad would ask.

I would answer with a smile. "Oh, I left you some space to complete the dialogue of Mili [lead teen]," he would nod.

I drew upon my experience of working with strong Native foster youth and channeled their witty resilience for those scenes. As a producer, I employed my social work skills in problem-solving issues that arose while my father co-directed the scenes and designed the set. There were some challenges when it came to cutting scenes during the editing process. I was attached to the storyline, but my dad wanted to prioritize the pacing of the story. I often had to let go of the plan and trust his years of experience. Other times, my dad listened to me and changed the story's direction to follow my lead in regard to character development. Our disagreements weren't enough to interfere in our relationship or in our creative father-daughter partnership. My dad valued my opinion and perspective. He did not outrank or overshadow my creative endeavors; he encouraged and supported me, and vice versa.

In 2019, Alex Greenlee, Jack's mentee, requested help working on his final film thesis, Intrepidus. Jack reached out to Native actors Michael Horse and Justin Rain to carry the horror film's storyline. While on set, Jack worked tirelessly and encouraged a supportive cohesion among the actors and crew. For one scene, the actors slide through a slit in the wall, which had been accidentally nailed shut. After some tugging, shouts for Jack ensued. He arrived with an electric saw and remedied the issue. Pretty soon, students pronounced that Jack was essential for any film project.

"It's our life; it's our time again
We can start from that place
That was taken from us."

Despite being estranged from his culture growing up and caring for his sisters, my father, like the Yurok boy who rode the inland whale, found self-motivation and determination within himself. He met people along the way who lifted him up and carried hopes for his dreams like his grandfather, his wife, and his project collaborators; they were his inland whales. He achieved higher education despite obstacles along the way and explored filmmaking as a way to reconnect with his people. He included me and I was able to act out, produce, and write about Native people's lived experiences. Through film, my father found his place and a way to give back to his people as well as future generations by telling a truthful history of colonization—with Native representation.

Native American Rock Opera: *Something Inside Is Broken.* Image courtesy of Carly Kohler.

K'ina Kil: The Slaver's Son (2014). Directed and written by Jack Kohler.

Safety in Numbers: Bringing Community to the Screen Through Language

*By **Chris Hoshnic***

March 2018. It is morning. The fringes of Gallup plunge into a chilling stillness. The long shadows of the cast and crew reach across the rugged red rocks and sagebrush. Frost lightly dusts the ground. Melissa, our short film's actress, and I discuss the use of *da'ahijigą́* or "fight," for a scene. This is not written into the screenplay, but I want to incorporate our Navajo language in some way. Instead, "family" comes crumbling out of my mouth, as a by-product of a dispute in my own family. This nature of language—how often do I find myself lost in this space of translation while cultivating a new way of expression? *Da'ahijigą́* does not directly mean "family." It lives nowhere near this word at all. This is where I find myself when working with film. How can I create a world where my filmmaking serves as a tool for preserving culture, rather than erasing it? What if I use these technologies unnatural to Navajo living not only to communicate but to strengthen my ties to the community and my mother tongue? "What do you mean by 'family'?" Melissa asks. I shake loose from the space of translation as I hear the crew whisper to each other.

Before long, I hold the camera up to Melissa's face and yell, "Go." Our short film is about a young Navajo mother's journey back to the reservation to see her daughter from the big city in the middle of winter.

It is a mirror telling of my own parents living in Phoenix, Arizona and leaving me with my grandparents in my fragmented memory of the reservation. This messy tapestry of frustration and love, and having to be away from my mother and father has disrupted my relationship to the Navajo language. Money was our priority, and it was Melissa's character, Bree's, as well. How monetary value is translated in Navajo for my characters is within their relation, or lack thereof, with the distance between each other. The wider the distance, the more money my protagonist can obtain. At least this was the argument from Bree's mother. This was called, *nízaadęę́'*, or "far away." According to Bree's mother, money was "far away." So when we refer to *nízaadęę́'*, we are truly talking about "money."

FADE IN:

EXT. NAVAJO RESERVATION - NIGHT

Black mesas outline the blue, starry night. It's picturesque, like a Renee Magritte painting. These lands used to be covered in a white blanket of snow this time of year. Now it's just hinted that it's WINTER.

A single beam of light makes its away from left to right - a car driving in the solitude of night.

INT. BREE'S CAR - NIGHT

IN THE PASSENGER SEAT, a PODCAST wraps up with some evocative tune that could've been from the 50's that's made this murder mystery a real zinger of arm hairs.

BRIANA (BREE), early 30's, Navajo, drives. She dozes off --

EXT. BREE'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

And like a a pair of scissors on wrapping paper, the car starts to go off kilter into the shoulder of the highway.

Several years after my grandfather died, I moved back to Phoenix to be closer with my own parents. One Saturday summer night, my parents came home from the local bar. I recall hands gesturing wildly, slicing through the air. The need to be heard, to be understood, their words in Navajo, like sharp and pointed objects scattered across my room. It was the first time I ever saw either of them this way. Time was catching up to them. They were still in mourning for my grandfather. A week later, we went to see a medicine man and found a spiritual connection between them and a certain kind of pain. "The cancer," the medicine man called it in Navajo, is "in the nape of your necks." He performed his duties and asked us to return after four days to complete the removal of "the cancer." In the car, I asked my father what the medicine man meant when he was pointing to his neck. My father said, in Navajo, "Beartooth." Silence blanketed the windows, heavy but comforting. We stopped at a gas station with the promise that we would find our way back to each other.

A bottle of Pepsi in one hand and sunflower seeds fisted in the other, we drove back to the big city and never returned to complete our blessing.

Years later, I discovered what my father and the medicine man meant by "Beartooth," and "cancer." This translation, this experience clamored, meant in its truest form, "conflict." The "conflict" was in the nape of our necks, meaning we had "ears up to our shoulders." We were "holding a bowling ball out in front of us." **English metaphors of the same concept, meaning stress, anxiety or conflict, have a more direct relation to the body.**

BREE hesitates and then answers --

INTERCUT with MOM, mid-night beauty routine.

BREE
What?

MOM
(in the same Navajo tone Bree was mimicking)
Where are you?

BREE
At the gas station right outside Tuba-

MOM
Which one?

BREE
The one AFTER Tuba City-almost there.

MOM
Hurry up, why are you taking forever? The devils are out-your uncle is still doing the witchcraft, did you know that? I don't like you out there by yourself.

However, in our short film,we say *da'ahijigą́* in place of this conflict.

Finding what makes an Indigenous language authentically represented on screen is to take safety into account. When I use the Navajo language, I consider all levels of learning in terms of safety. Instead of "where," I ask "how" these safe spaces can ensure Navajo, in its evolution, can move and still be autonomous. My practice is in how it is rooted in my own experiences, memory, and community. In particular, I use single Navajo words and phrases within context, or scenes in this case. In poetry, these scenes are often called "stanzas," meaning "rooms." In those particular rooms, it is the filmmaker's job to create safety. In horror films, this can be between horrific scenes when the characters are in their regular home lives, interacting with each other. Or more broadly, this is when the protagonist finds solace in a story outside the narrative, such as a love interest, a best friend, a maternal figure, or a mentor. Language honors relations this way through familiarity when two or more people are speaking. Finding peace in a narrative is integral for when the protagonist steps out of those safe spaces and relations begin to have a sense of urgency. This is where we want to save the relationships we came to love, or in the case of Indigenous languages, where we began to reclaim and properly represent. In this endeavor, I learned Navajo suffers a great deal of translation.

By constructing language, we are dependent on a certain experience and relationship towards and from how a word or a phrase is being used. The brevity of a thing here, as coined by Dr. Shaina Nez, then becomes less about the conciseness of the words but the economy of those words—the time in which those words mean something other than what we mean for them to be. In film, I try to make these spaces, or rooms, that house my relationship to the Navajo language become less about the representational image like a scarf or moccasins and more about the meaning those things carry. Not many are aware that Navajo moccasins were made of White Shell as the soles and the top representing Mother Earth. This is part of our creation stories. Often, they are ceremonial wear, however we tend to find these visuals in film to only mean a person is Navajo, with no true meaning. The same goes for Indigenous languages: If we are not intentional about the safety of these words and images, then representation will only be as hollow as it was before we came to take charge of our stories.

MOM
We go through this every time-after what? Two to three years, you pack up and say this. How am I supposed to believe you now?

BREE
Because I said so. Rudy isn't a pattern, he's the final stitch, I'm done. After this Christmas, I'm going to New York-

MOM
What will Clara and Lucinda-what will Grandma JoJo think?

BREE
I don't care what they think!

MOM
Then you won't care if I told you she's right here listening?

BREE
MOM, STOP, NO-

As the wind cuts through the bare branches, we complete the scene. A sharp bite of cold air swipes across our faces. "It's not there yet," I say. Melissa nods, but the tension in her shoulders is palpable. The effort to sound natural when speaking Navajo only makes the stiffness more obvious. It is not that Melissa did not understand the scene—she knows the lines, knows the beats—but something in the space between her and the language kept blocking the truth. Like trying to catch water in a cupped hand. I stop rolling and tell Melissa the story of my family and the medicine man. I do not tell her what to do; I guide her with my story, with a sense of our film's safety to find her character's truth. And in that sense, in that exchange, the scene came alive—an understanding of where the word *da'ahijigą́* and *nízaadęę́'* came from, perfectly aligned.

Language is not merely a collection of words; it is woven into the fabric of culture, history, and identity. The study of a language changing over time, of English especially, has more data compared to any Indigenous language documented. I can argue that filmmakers may be the first documentarists of their Indigenous languages by showing an accurate representation of their uses within their lifetimes. Understanding and learning Navajo is not enough to facilitate hope for future generations that they, too, can learn it. It is the relationships we nurture that give us our language, which then we can pay forward. This is what makes Indigenous languages unique in practice. Filmmaking, like relationships with family or friends, houses its own languages. Each and every scene is a separate room full of memories and experiences that can feel universal. It is our job as Native speakers and artists to assemble it, whether that is in a single word, or a phrase, or an entire sequence of scenes that bring a community safety. This is what audiences will carry with them long after the film is over. *Da'ahijigą* now not only means "to fight"or "they are fighting"—it means a family in distress or a miscommunication between loved ones.

Nízaadęę́' traditionally means "far away," but it can mean wealth or an act of love as it does for our protagonist.

Working with the Navajo language on film is extremely complex, but with the care and understanding of its speakers, it can be one of the most rewarding experiences of building community.

Native Narratives Can Change a Person's Perspective of a Culture

*By **Pamela J. Peters***

As a Navajo woman deeply passionate about the art of storytelling through various multimedia forms, including photography, film, and poetry, I firmly believe that it is crucial for Native peoples to share their narratives. This practice empowers us to influence the preservation of our rich and diverse Native history and culture.

My enthusiasm for the narratives owned by Native Americans is profoundly influenced by my childhood experiences on the reservations during the 1970s, a time when having access to a television was considered a luxury. However, my parents were able to purchase a small, used black-and-white television on which our antenna could only receive three channels in the desolate area in which we lived. Despite its limitations, this was a remarkable experience for a child living on the reservation. Saturday afternoons were filled with Western programs that featured "Cowboys and Indians" narratives, which I particularly enjoyed because it allowed me to bond with my father, who was an avid fan of Western programs. I later discovered that many Navajos shared this interest when I realized that several Navajos appeared as extras in these programs and films, including some of my own relatives. From the 1930s to the 1960s, numerous Western movies were shot on the Navajo reservations; however, it is amusing to note that Navajos were often depicted as Plains Indians, with many stories generating a landscape of the Southwest. The narrative structure surrounding the ideology of Manifest Destiny primarily centered on a singular portrayal of the savage Indian, neglecting the rich diversity present among various tribal nations.
To truly grasp the complexities of these tribal nations, filmmakers needed to delve deeper into the diversity of Native cultures. However, it was often more convenient for Hollywood creators to adopt a generalized image of a Plains Indian, rather than acknowledging those from the Northern regions of the United States. For instance, filmmakers such as John Ford opted to portray Navajo people as Plains Indians from the Southwest in a simplified manner, depicting them in headdresses and residing in teepees within the iconic landscapes of Monument Valley and other areas of Arizona. The film industry laid the foundation that all Indians lived in teepees and that headdresses were part of the regalia worn by all tribal members, along with the idea that all tribal nations lived in desolate dryland, that has led the Navajo Nation to become a prominent backdrop for Western-themed films. This has transformed it into an iconic landscape that attracts many tourists from all over the world, which continues today.

Hollywood Western films remain problematic today due to their limited representation of Native peoples and lack of understanding of the complexity of tribal nations, stories, and imagery. As a child, I found it perplexing when my father expressed enthusiasm for the death of the "Indians."

When I questioned him, asking, "Why are you saying that? Aren't we 'Indians?'"

he would respond that they were the bad ones. Ironically, the actors portraying these characters were Navajo. Even at a young age, I sensed the confusion surrounding Native representation. I now understand that when Native individuals were depicted, it was often briefly, and heavily influenced by Hollywood stereotypes, which portrayed us as either relics of the past or as "savage" figures, leading audiences to cheer for our demise. As an adult, I came to comprehend the reasons behind my father's feelings: they stemmed from his experiences in boarding school and the necessity he perceived to abandon his cultural roots in favor of adopting Western ideologies. I understood this as I, too, encountered the same feelings. Throughout my transition from childhood to adulthood, I witnessed the widespread misrepresentation and distortion of Native narratives in both film and television, which has significantly impacted my self-identity as a Native woman. From an early age, I became increasingly aware of the inconsistencies and the lack of agency afforded to tribal nations in the stories told not only in films, but also in television series like *Bonanza* and *Little House on the Prairie.*

As a child, I grappled with the shame associated with these portrayals and sensed the overt animosity from my non-Native classmates. For instance, I would often be ridiculed by White students who would make whooping sounds and laugh as I walked past them.

This animosity stemmed not only from my brown skin but also from society's broader failure to accurately depict contemporary Native individuals. I often felt that my mere existence as a real, modern Native person was dismantling the fantasy constructed by Hollywood's representations of Indian identity, a heavy burden to carry at such a young age, and one that continues to affect societal perceptions today.

The capacity to convey Native stories through an Indigenous perspective is essential. Historically, the portrayal of Native peoples in film has often been generated by damaging narratives within Western cinema. Regrettably, even with the emergence of new period pieces reflecting Western ideologies, the representation of Native individuals in Hollywood remains largely unchanged. Productions such as *Horizon* by Kevin Costner and Taylor Sheridan's series 1883, 1923, and *Yellowstone* continue to adhere to a White patriarchal framework, failing to incorporate Native voices or capture the complexities of Indigenous lives. Instead, these films and series predominantly depict the ongoing narrative of White settlers encroaching upon Native lands. Unfortunately, the series overlook the opportunity to allow Native writers to present the authentic stories of Indigenous nations facing encroachment on their ancestral territories.

Recently, however, there has been a notable shift in Native representation, particularly with the proliferation of streaming platforms such as Roku, Amazon, and Google TV. These platforms have introduced series like *Reservation Dogs* and films such as *Frybread Face and Me*, which not only showcase Native representation but also present contemporary narratives that are crucial for Native communities, especially our Native youth. The availability of such programs brings a sense of positive change, as it allows young Native children to see themselves reflected in the media, signaling a growing societal recognition of contemporary Native identities.

Throughout the years, I have utilized multimedia access to present a positive and accurate narrative based on my direct experiences and observations, which have significantly impacted both my life and that of my Native community.

My artistic journey began as a photographer, where I aimed to provide authentic representations of Native peoples. This endeavor evolved to include giving a voice to the images I captured and fostering a collective connection that allowed these visuals to narrate their own stories.

It has been essential for me to create authentic and diverse imagery and articulate the narratives behind who and what I was showcasing. Over the years, the Native community has advocated for more genuine and varied representations of Native America across all forms of artistic expression, including film and poetry. This effort is crucial as Native individuals strive to reclaim our narrative and challenge the misconceptions perpetuated by non-Native artistic expressions. For instance, as a photographer this past year, I displayed more than 10 billboards across Los Angeles featuring individuals representing their tribal nations, with the hashtag #NativeNationsInLA. This initiative aimed to educate the city about the rich diversity of the tribal nations that are part of Southern California's cultural landscape. Furthermore, for the last six years, I have been highlighting the diversity of tribal nations through poetry readings, as poetry plays a crucial role in conveying the resilience and creativity inherent in these communities.

Native American representation in poetry has similarly been a subject of considerable debate, as numerous poets strive to authentically express the intricacies of Indigenous identity and history in their work. While some Native poets have successfully elevated tribal voices and perspectives, others have unfortunately fallen into the pitfalls of cultural appropriation and misrepresentation, often aligning with the expectations of a predominantly White audience. In response to this, I developed a series entitled *Waging Words*, where poets from various tribal nations engage audiences to comprehend the history, landscape, and contemporary issues affecting Native communities.

It is important to engage with these perspectives from Native voices and advocate for a marginalized community.

Addressing issues such as Murdered and Missing Indigenous relatives, cultural appropriation in popular culture, and the resilience of Native communities is essential for an audience to comprehend the challenges faced by Native peoples today.

For instance, Kelly Caballero, a poet from the Tongva tribe, presented a poem entitled "City Indians," in which she emphasized that it transcended a mere performative acknowledgment of the land; it was about engaging with and comprehending the origins of the land and its original inhabitants of what is known as Tovaangar, a.k.a. Los Angeles.

This illustrates how Native voices expressed through poetry provide a nuanced understanding of tribal nations, characterized by respect, authenticity, and a focus on the voices that shape the landscape. Consequently, poetry can act as a powerful tool for dismantling stereotypes and contesting dominant narratives surrounding Native American communities, similar to the initiatives undertaken by numerous Native filmmakers today.

The land is the essence of our Native soul, not a concession stand for Hollywood fantasies. Since my transition from Los Angeles to the Navajo Nation, my connection to the land has deepened, and my perspective on its significance has evolved now that I have returned to my homeland in Arizona. Living here has allowed me to re-examine the meaning of this land as a tribal woman, transcending the representation often depicted by Hollywood, and has motivated me to pursue more writing. I would like to share a brief poem and express my aspiration to create more narratives from an Indigenous viewpoint.

Our land is red, due to the strength of my ancestors who bravely evaded the cannons in their lifetime, paving the way for my existence today.

Our land is red, as a reminder of my ancestors who fought to survive on this soil, enduring hunger so I could experience the richness of life today.

Our land is red, marked by the bloody feet walking through the dreadful heat, paving the way for my future.

Hollywood, recognize that our land is not just a canvas for your stories; it is alive and lives within us — within me!

Małni—Towards the Ocean, Towards the Shore.
Image courtesy of Sky Hopinka.

The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle His Picture House

By ***Adam Piron***

Cutting a hefty 250-pound frame, William Mortimer Belshaw was a man with an ability to bend reality to his will. Being the San Franciscan industrialist that he was, he naturally set off for Inyo County once word broke of a silver strike high in the mountains just east of Lake Owens's shore. The ruckus of the Gold Rush of 1849 had cooled and silver was now on the rise. In April of 1868, he arrived at the Union Mine of Cerro Gordo, a silver-lead-bearing lode discovered just four years prior after the Paiute, the area's Indigenous people, had been largely worn down through a series of brutal massacres, and by the US Army occupation at nearby Fort Independence, which eased the extraction of their land by the flood of white settlers.

After purchasing a stake in the mine, Belshaw soon became the local man in charge, due to his efforts in hauling a smelter, piece by piece, up the mountain.
By December of that same year, his machine processed lead-silver bullion day and night at a then-unheard-of speed of four tons daily. His payload was then shipped by the wagonful across the Mojave Desert to San Pedro's harbor and from there to San Francisco three days later.
Upon reaching the city's wharves, Belshaw's extraction was transported to the smelting works of future San Francisco Mayor Thomas H. Selby, where an even more powerful smelter would separate the bullion into lead and silver. The silver was kept in the city's first Mint building, constructed in response to the deluge of Gold Rush wealth, and the lead was used to create Selby's signature commercial shotgun pellets. From 1865 to 1879, Cerro Gordo would reign as the largest producer of silver and lead in California and earn Belshaw the title of "The Silver King of Owens Valley."

As its production waned in the 1880s, Inyo silver was still being mined at a steady pace. The completion of the transcontinental railroad allowed for a quicker turnaround for shipping the land's spoils back east to the Philadelphia Mint as well as to various enterprises acquiring the metal, one of which was The Eastman Kodak Company. The extracted silver was an essential component in the chemistry of their film's light-sensitive emulsion, and it played a key role in their eventual innovation and dominance of early photographic and cinematic technology. Working with Eastman's funding, William Kennedy Dickson pioneered the use of 35mm film at Thomas Edison's Black Maria Studios, the world's first motion picture studio. It's hard not to see an irony in two of Dickson's landmark Kinetoscope works, *Buffalo Dance* and *Sioux Ghost Dance*, both filmed in 1894. The brief clips feature dancing Indigenous performers from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, themselves survivors of the American Indian Wars.

These were later classified as the first known films to depict Native Americans.

As an Indigenous artist working in the moving image, it's been essential to weigh these histories. To know them is to realize that film is an echo, and one that only grows louder as it travels. At a material level, cinema was created by a series of shadows frozen in silver, a piece of time suspended and kept for reanimation in exchange for capital. In a historical sense, it was built from a series of reverberations formed by the land itself until eventually rolling into something seismic, unstoppable, and altogether singular before looping back in on itself. If anything, it's easy to get pulled into its allure and, eventually, its undertow.

American Cinema is something like a braid twisted from strands of different histories on a loom forged from ill-gotten wealth and the violence that birthed it.

Any attempt to untangle them will yield a Gordian knot at best and a noose at worst. While some of its early threads are indeed rooted in Indigenous realities, American Cinema has become something totally of its own and, in this writer's opinion, beyond redemption. One needs only to look at the history of the image of the "Indian" that evolved from literature to Wild West shows, and consequently to film, to realize that the "Indian" has always been a fabrication, an oversimplification, and a necessity for white supremacy. The name itself was always a label of convenience for the colonial endeavor, the flattening of two continents of unique peoples and cultures into a single, distinguishable bucket defined by its deficiency or proximity to whiteness. It has become nothing more than a shape, a costume, or a space to be filled on-screen by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike who choose to embody it. It survives only in the constant attempts to correct it. How can one decolonize something that was birthed by colonization itself?

Sovereignty is a concept that we as Indigenous people grapple with perpetually. In the case of cinema, terms such as "narrative sovereignty," "screen sovereignty," and "reclaiming the narrative" have been utilized ad nauseam to express a spectrum of ideas, usually with the inferred goal of establishing representation within the non-Indigenous-controlled American film industry itself, rather than something truly independent of that system. While there are artists doing commendable work and creating real opportunities for fellow Indigenous film workers within that arena, cinema is still the youngest of the arts and one that has not been fully esteemed at the level of other mediums viewed as traditional within Native communities. Works such as pottery, weaving, and music are evaluated for their craft and the resonance that they hold to communities and traditions, whereas the metric for a film's success is still measured by its connections to Hollywood and box office returns. This may be a consequence of how moving images evolved or even the reality of Indigenous people and their constant negotiations in navigating a world shaped by settler colonialism and its demands of capital, but it also points to a possibility and the need for an alternative.

The idea of Native American Cinema(s) existing outside of the system of the American film industry is not new, nor is it without precedent. In the wake of the social turbulence of the 1970s and the boom of accessible video technology in the early 1980s, a handful of Native artists of disparate backgrounds began to create films that were decidedly non-commercial, shrugging off the responsive dynamic to correct representation, rejecting authoritative stances on the Native experience, and rooted within their own interpretations of their Indigeneity. Victor Masayesva, Jr.'s *Itam Hakim Hopiit* (1984), a poetic visualization of Hopi philosophy, or Arelene Bowman's *Navajo Talking Picture* (1985), an interrogation of documentary methods clashing with Diné traditions, are just some of the films that laid the groundwork for what Native American Cinema, both tribally specific and deeply personal, can be. Made on their cultural terms and conditions, these films are invitations to Indigenous audiences first and an open door for others to experience a specific cultural point of view on film, free from the Western European traditions of American narrative structures.

More importantly, these works were created independently of each other, forming something of an archipelago rather than a collective effort built around a solid core.

This decentralization has been key to the blossoming of these Native Cinemas and their emphasis on subjectivity, leading the way to some version of sovereignty in their own rights. It's the very unmooring of a pan-Indigeneity, a specificity that refuses a singular umbrella, that frees these work into their own open territories.

In contrast to the scaffolding of the image of the "Indian," it would be a mistake to categorize these works as a collective effort toward a singular goal (i.e., representation, correction) or even by their proximities to Hollywood.

In a sense, their work paved the way for a generation of Native American artists that came to follow, the likes of which have come to include Sky Hopinka, Fox Maxy, Adam and Zack Khalil, Woodrow Hunt, and others. Like the analogy of film as an echo, the spirit of this cinematic trajectory continues forward, amplifying and modifying to the contours it weaves by, always bleeding out. It is free of the bounds of Hollywood, forever doomed to spin in its own feedback loop.

Like islands, each of these cinemas formed off the gravitational shores of American film, each their own shape and dotting a line toward the horizon, toward something new, constant, and unknown.

If the land could be stripped to yield the white man's cinema, imagine what it could give to the Indigenous people who have always been rooted in it.

Contributor Biographies

Emily Clarke – Guest Editor

Emily Clarke is an enrolled member of the Cahuilla Band of Indians and a Scorpio, traditional Bird Dancer, and avid believer in reading for pleasure. She is also a recipient of Hayden's Ferry Review's National Indigenous Poets Prize and a beadwork artist and community programmer. Her current obsessions include thinking deeply about writing a new poem but never actually putting pen to paper, the color pink, 1000-page-long Romantasy novels, and making beaded earrings inspired by her favorite aesthetics. Emily strives to create work that serves as a personal and community-conscious representation of Indigenous femininity. When she is not writing poems or organizing various events, she can be found surrounded by beads, sparkly lip gloss, and cat hair.

Ray Rivera – Publication Designer

Ray Rivera is a Los Angeles–based publication designer working across print, editorial, and digital formats. With over a decade of professional experience, Ray has collaborated with museums, publishers, nonprofits, and mission-driven organizations on projects spanning cultural programming, academic publishing, environmental communication, and public-facing campaigns.

Ray's practice is rooted in clarity, accessibility, and disciplined execution. He approaches publication design as both a visual and editorial responsibility, emphasizing strong typographic hierarchy, thoughtful layout, and cohesion across complex, multi-page systems intended to be read, circulated, and archived.

As a Native designer of Yaqui and Ventureno Chumash descent, Ray brings lived experience and cultural competency to his work, approaching each project with care, responsibility, and attention to context. His practice prioritizes specificity over aesthetic shorthand and considers how design decisions shape authorship, representation, and audience understanding.

Ray is known for a reliable, structured working style and for translating complex ideas into visuals that are both functional and engaging.

Joely Proudfit

Dr. Joely Proudfit is a Luiseño/Payómkawichum and Tongva scholar, activist, and media maker who chairs the American Indian Studies Department at CSU San Marcos and directs the California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center. She owns Native Media Strategies and has produced and consulted on film and TV projects including work with BBC, PBS, National Geographic, ABC/Disney, and Netflix. She founded California's American Indian & Indigenous Film Festival. Her accolades include 2024 NIEA Educator of the Year and Variety's 2022 Entertainment Educator of the Year.

Chris Hoshnic

Chris Hoshnic is a Navajo Poet, Playwright and Filmmaker. A recipient of the Poetry Northwest 2025 James Welch Prize, Hoshnic's work has received support from Indigenous Nations Poets, Playwrights Realm, Tin House, Juniper Institute and more. His work has been published in POETRY, Kenyon Review and elsewhere. He currently directs Diné Kids Film Club, an Indigenous youth project dedicated to giving resources and networking opportunities for young Native filmmakers.

Carly Kohler

Carly Kohler is Yurok, Karuk and Hupa and she co-wrote the MMIW feature film, Gift of Fear, with her father, Jack Kohler. Carly grew up in Sonoma County in a theatrical family. In 2013, Carly played the role of a kidnapped Native girl and acted in *K'ina Kil* along side Martin Seismeier. In 2016, Carly played the role of Maj Kule, a kidnapped Nisenan slave girl at Sutter's Fort in the musical, *Something Inside Is Broken*. Carly graduated from Stanford University with a B.A. degree in Psychology in 2013 and then received her Masters of Social Work. Carly worked for Child Protective Services for 6 years in Family Maintenance and Reunification. The hands-on experience of working with foster youth and families experiencing trauma helped guide her screenplay writing to include realistic scenarios of difficult situations. Carly is currently a school counselor for a Native tribal school in Auburn, California, area where Carly lives with her wife, Shelly, son, Re'Noh, daughter, Naomi, and Korra, their wild husky dog.

Adam Piron

Adam Piron is a member of the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma and a Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) descendant. He currently acts as the Director of Sundance Institute's Indigenous Program where he helps oversee the organization's investment in Indigenous filmmakers globally. He also serves as a short film programmer for the Sundance Film Festival.He is also a co-founder of COUSIN: a film collective dedicated to supporting Indigenous artists experimenting with and pushing the boundaries of the moving image. He was previously the Film Curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). He received his BA in Film Production from the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts. Piron currently serves on the Editorial Advisory Board of Seen, a journal produced by BlackStar examining the visual culture of communities of color, featuring interviews, reviews, and essays about Black, Brown, and Indigenous visual culture. He concurrently serves on the Indigenous Advisory Board for TIFF. He has also been on advisory panels for Canyon Cinema, the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts, The Jerome Foundation, The Princess Grace Awards and the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative.

Pamela J. Peters

Pamela J. Peters (Diné) is a multimedia documentarian from the Navajo Nation, where she currently resides. Pamela's culture and heritage play a significant role in her creative process, and she draws directly from her lineage when approaching her work. Her first clan, *Tachii'nii* (Red Running into the Water clan), evokes a visual confluence that manifests in her photography. Her artistic endeavors encompass not only still images that document diverse peoples, cultures, and environments but also storytelling through video. Pamela's creative perspective explores the tribal history and identity of her participants, a concept she refers to as Indigenous Realism, which often imbues her photographic images with a nostalgic aesthetic. She employs black and white photography in her series Legacy of Exiled NDNZ, which examines the 1950s Indian Relocation program, and Real NDNZ Re-take Hollywood, which evokes the glamour of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood through studio-style portraits. Her work has been showcased at the J. Paul Getty Museum and is included in collections at the Triton Contemporary Museum, the Field Museum, the University of Oregon's archival department, as well as the British Museum.

As a filmmaker, her artistic expression, rooted in her experiences as a Diné person living in an urban environment, confronts the social consequences of the harmful and misleading stereotypes of American Indians that are propagated by mass media, offering a modern, dignified, and respectful narrative in the present day. Recently, she completed a short film titled Indian Alley, which has won a series of prestigious awards, including Best of Show in the inaugural ATALM Emerging Producers Awards in the fall of 2024. Pamela's other works and passions include creating various platforms to promote contemporary Native narratives. She regularly curates poetry events across Los Angeles, providing a place for Indigenous poets.

Program List

Want to revisit the Indigenous Voices in Film programs? Use the links below to deepen your experience of the project.

Program 1

Indigenous Voices co-coordinator Maya Austion sits down with filmmaker and Indigenous Voices in Film advisory board member, Roberto Fatal to explore their filmmaking practice and what it means to be an Indigenous filmmaker in Sacramento today.

Recording Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oull5rpjR_Y

Program 2

Filmmaker and Indigenous Voices in Film advisory board member, Roberto Fatal chats with filmmaker Jody Stillwater about filmmaking and film infrastructure in the Northern California region.

Recording Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9B7iOWUocg4

Program 3

Adam Piron, director of the Indigenous Program at Sundance, filmmaker and Indigenous Voices in Film advisory board member Jack Kohler and filmmaker Jody Stillwater sit down to discuss the nuances and intricacies of Indigenous filmmaker across the country.

Recording Link: https://www.youtube.com/live/dRWgXa0kA90

Program 4

No recording

Program 5

No recording

Program 1

September 30, 2023
2 PM

Don't miss the first installment of this exciting new series! Filmmaker Roberto Fatal presents their short sci-fi drama, *Do Digital Curanderas Use Eggs* In Their Limpias, which made its world premiere at the British Film Institute's Flare Festival in 2023. In this film, a struggling Latinx healer considers abandoning the physical world for promises of a digital utopia. Indigenous Voices in Film co-coordinator Maya Austion sits down with Fatal for a Q and A following the film screening.

Free for everyone. Advance registration recommended.

Program 2

March 30, 2024
2 PM

A mix of emerging and established filmmakers present an afternoon of short films that tell stories from or connected to Northern California. After the screenings, filmmakers discuss working in the shorts format, developing feature length films, and crossing over into television and streaming.

Long Line of Ladies, directed by Rayka Zehtabchi and Shaandiin Tome

A girl and her community prepare for her Ihuk, the once-dormant coming-of-age ceremony of the Karuk tribes of Northern California.

The Wind Telephone, directed by Jody Stillwater

A playful, occasionally dark, and emotional dance film about girl-child Micah, who has built a spectrum of imaginary friends to replace her parents, each of which help pave a path back to her heart.

Your Name Isn't English, directed by Tazbah Chavez

Each time Tazbah, a young professional woman gets into a ride-share car she takes on the unexpected role of becoming a free history teacher as her drivers struggle to pronounce her name. It's an American history lesson they will never forget.

Roberto Fatal and Jody Stillwater will be in conversation after all the shorts.

Free for everyone. Advance registration recommended

Program 3

June 29, 2024
2 – 4 PM

Indigenous Voices in Film explores and highlights the work of Indigenous peoples at the intersection of film, video art, and media arts. Supported by a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art to broaden the understanding of American art history, this project is committed to presenting films and video art created by Indigenous peoples along with advancing critical discussion of these works in the region and within the museum field.

Virtual discussion featuring a range of regional and national filmmakers, scholars, and artistic professionals.

Adam Piron, director of the Indigenous Program at Sundance, filmmaker and Indigenous Voices in Film advisory board member Jack Kohler and filmmaker Jody Stillwater sit down to discuss the nuances and intricacies of Indigenous filmmaker across the country.

Free for everyone. Advance registration recommended.

Program 4

August 31, 2024
2 – 4 PM

Indigenous Voices in Film explores and highlights the work of Indigenous peoples at the intersection of film, video art, and media arts. Supported by a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art to broaden the understanding of American art history, this project is committed to presenting films and video art created by Indigenous peoples along with advancing critical discussion of these works in the region and within the museum field.

This month, enjoy a special screening of *Fancy Dance* (2023), a story of a Native American hustler who, following her sister's disappearance, kidnaps her niece from the child's white grandparents and sets out for the state powwow in hopes of keeping what is left of their family intact.

Run time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Rated R.

Free for everyone. Advance registration recommended.

Program 5

November 30, 2024

Indigenous Voices in Film explores and highlights the work of Indigenous peoples at the intersection of film, video art, and media arts. Supported by a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art to broaden the understanding of American art history, this project is committed to presenting films and video art created by Indigenous peoples along with advancing critical discussion of these works in the region and within the museum field.

The series finale brings together board members, filmmakers, and the community for a public forum to discuss the evolution and future of this critical project. Co-coordinator Maya Austin, filmmaker Roberto Fatal and film curator Colleen Thurston sit down with Education Manager, Houghton Kinsman to discuss the Indigenous Voices in Film project.

Public participation in the forum is encouraged!

Free for everyone. Advance registration recommended.

INDIGENOUS VOICES IN FILM

CROCKER
art museum