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Fourth Biennial VisionMaker Film Festival Report

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Abstract

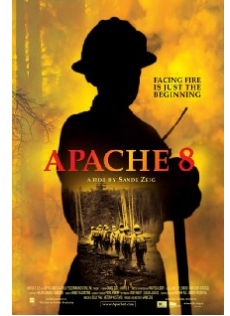
This article reviews films that were screened at the Fourth Biennial VisionMaker Film Festival in Lincoln, Nebraska, in September and October of 2011.

The Fourth Biennial VisionMaker Film Festival occurred in Omaha, Lincoln, and Kearney, Nebraska, with events from September 20 to October 6, 2011. This event features films made by and about Native Americans; some are fictional narratives, some are documentaries, and they include shorts as well as feature length films. This year there were more films shown than ever before, most of them at the Mary Riepma Ross Media Arts Center at University of Nebraska - Lincoln. They included several screenings of new films that have not been widely released. The festival offers a unique opportunity to celebrate Native American film and to note the ways in which the religious and cultural beliefs of Native Americans play a part in their self-representation and their representation of their past and their future. We hope you enjoy these reviews, and we hope that you will be able to see some of these films in other venues, if you missed them at the festival. Reviews are by Julien Fielding, Dale Stover, William Blizek, Michele Desmarais, and myself.

— John C. Lyden, Editor

Apache 8

The film begins with the story of an all-female, wildland fire-fighting crew from the White Mountain Apache nation in eastern Arizona. They gain renown for sometimes outperforming their male counterparts. Their history is traced from 1974 to 2005, when the first male joins the Apache 8 crew. By that time, two women from the Apache 8 have been accepted as members of the formerly all-male Apache Hotshots crew, famous as wildland fire-fighters.



The documentary broadens to consider the life-stories of some of the women of the Apache 8 who represent somewhat different generations. These stories include a female puberty ceremony for one of the women in 1976 in which as a girl she is blessed with understanding and sacred power. In her case, a trip to Washington, D.C. and a National Geographic article were outcomes of the ceremony. Another woman relates how her husband, a member of the Apache Hotshots, was burned in a 2003 fire when the ferocity of a firestorm blew away his emergency shelter and he subsequently died of his burns. Another of these women, Katy Aday, emphasizes the pride and bondedness of the women when she states, “You were with a bunch of women who could handle anything.” Regarding the conflict between family obligation and commitment to fighting wildland fires, she says, “You’ve got to be able to walk in both worlds.”

The documentary is not explicit about religious themes with the exception of the girl-becoming-a-woman ceremony. Nevertheless, there are moments when comments like, “We are one with the land,” point to an underlying understanding that fighting wildland fires is a way of paying respect to sacred dimensions of life by taking responsibility for your ancestral land and its inhabitants—trees, animals, and Apaches. It is likely that this kind of understanding also underlies the fierce commitment of the Apache 8 to the excellence of their work and to one another.

— DS

Bridge the Gap to Pine Ridge: Alex White Plume

This film documents the visit of a 23 year-old film-maker, Chris Bashinelli, to Pine Ridge Reservation where he spends a day in the company of an Oglala Lakota elder, Alex White Plume. There is a discussion about White Plume’s buffalo herd which he raises for ritual and cultural purposes and not for the commercial market. He tries to explain to the curious, but naïve, young man that Lakota people pay homage to the buffalo and engage with the buffalo for their assistance in maintaining self-respect as humans.



Chris is a bit spooked by riding off-road with White Plume in his rez car across hilly terrain looking for buffalo. Failing to locate any buffalo, they focus on repairing the radiator in the rez car. Investigating the dozen or more inoperable

rez cars in White Plume's yard, they eventually find a functional radiator with the right dimensions, and they dismantle it from the junked car and install it in the functioning rez car. Chris arrives at the conclusion that White Plume, as well as countless other Pine Ridge owners of rez cars, is a conservationist by not discarding old cars and, instead, retaining them as a kind of "parts store." While this is true as far as it goes, the film offers no awareness that the commercial infrastructure supporting automobile users in virtually any community off-reservation simply does not exist on Pine Ridge Reservation, with the exception of a single repair shop in Pine Ridge Village.

Alex White Plume is fully authentic in all that he says and does during this documentary day. Chris Bashinelli clearly communicates that he is in unfamiliar territory and his naiveté is still largely in place by the close of the day's filming. While several of White Plume's statements point to a religious understanding of everyday Lakota relationships and experiences, Bashinelli projects an environmentalist take regarding life on the rez.

— DS

Columbus Day Legacy

The Columbus Day parade in Denver, Colorado has a long history, dating back to 1906 when Colorado became the first state to sanction the observance of Columbus Day. Italian Americans from Colorado led the political movement which resulted in the federal sanctioning of Columbus Day in 1934. The documentary focuses on the conflict between the Italian-American community in Denver, which has sponsored Columbus Day parades for more than a century, and the local community of Native Americans, led in the documentary by AIM leaders Glenn Morris and Russell Means, which has mounted protests to the Columbus Day parade over the past two decades.



The voices of older Italian-Americans are heard earnestly expressing pride in their American heritage. They speak of the hard lot on the part of their forebears who worked in the mines of Colorado and who fought to gain some economic justice by forming unions in a union-busting era. Russell Means and Glenn Morris are the principal native voices, and their rhetoric is more politically practiced, but does not generate the same sympathetic hearing as a 75-year-old Italian-American woman communicating pride in her father's life-story.

What is at stake religiously in this documentary is the issue of the Christian identity belonging to the European colonialism epitomized by

Columbus as its initial practitioner in the “New World.” The indigenous peoples of the Americas were defined by Columbus and the colonizers who followed him as savages, whereas the Christianity of the colonizers legitimated enslavement, dispossession, and genocide. The documentary includes Glenn Morris accusing the Columbus Day parade of endorsing “manifest destiny,” which is the nineteenth-century claim that the Biblical God has validated the American colonial enterprise of domination over indigenous territories. On the other side, a female parade organizer with a microphone is heard to say, “Columbus did not commit genocide, nor did he start it.”

Beyond the claims of ethnic pride on the one hand and a history of religious racism toward indigenous peoples on the other, are revealing scenarios—(1) the snarkiness of the primary parade organizer, George Vandegnia, as he says, “It’s only two hours once a year,” (2) the brisk, somewhat prideful, proficiency of the Denver police in arresting Morris and Means, and (3) the exasperated comment by Means that an Italian-pride march would be no problem if they would leave Columbus out of it. That is the sticking point—the Christian identity of European colonialism in the Americas is still being celebrated annually by Italian-Americans in Denver.

— DS

Facing the Storm: Story of the American Bison

Directed by Doug Hawes-Davis, this 80-minute-long documentary charts the rise and fall of the bison in America. Also known as “buffalo,” this animal is symbolic of the wild and the West, and its history is intimately woven with that of the American Indian. “They nourished us, and we nourished them,” one man explains. At one time, there were millions of these giant land animals roaming, from Alaska to Mexico. Today, there are only a few “pure breed” bison left. Most have both bison and cattle genes. So, what happened? The documentary demonstrates how a series of events conspired against the bison. First, American Indians acquired horses in the mid-18th century, allowing them to kill the animal with greater ease. Then in the 19th century, trade routes opened.



By 1870, settlers and the railroad came to the Great Plains, and it essentially became an us or them scenario. (The railroad offered hunting expeditions, during which people could shoot the animals from the windows, leaving mountains of dead animals behind to rot.) To some degree, the bison were exterminated as a way to exterminate the American Indian. Without enough bison to hunt, the native peoples felt they had little choice but to resign themselves to reservations. By the 1880s, homesteading resulted in great changes to the Plains. The landscape was de-buffaloed, de-wolved, de-prairiedogged and de-grassed. By

destroying the native ecology, the homesteaders made conditions perfect for what would become the Dust Bowl, during which one-third of the population left the region. By 1890, bison were completely gone from the Great Plains.

Today, a small group lives in Yellowstone, but even they continue to be threatened. As soon as they migrate into Montana, they are often rounded up and slaughtered. Despite the fact that there are about 400,000 bison on commercial ranches, very few of the “primitive” bison exist. Fear is that the animal will simply become “another cow.” What about the American Indian role in all of this? The InterTribal Buffalo Council is working hard to restore buffalo to Indian country, to preserve their historical, cultural, traditional, and spiritual relationship for future generations.

—JF

Family: The First Circle

“The medicine is already within the pain and suffering. You just have to look deeply and quietly. Then you realize it has been there the whole time.”¹



The above saying illustrates a theme central to Native American understandings of healing, as well as director Heather Rae's film, *Family: The First Circle*, examining methamphetamine addiction—that the capacity for healing often resides alongside the pain within the person suffering, as well as the family and community that they are a part of. Furthermore, healing within an indigenous context is never a purely individual endeavor, but rather is communal in nature. While methamphetamine abuse is a relatively recent problem in Indian Country, the drug's devastating toll can be readily seen amongst already stressed communities contending with a variety of social ills. The highest rates of methamphetamine addiction within Native communities are with individuals, ages 15-44. At least 1/3 of Native youths living in the Southwest have used meth in some capacity.² These depressing numbers exist alongside other social problems plaguing Indian communities, such as high rates of alcohol abuse, suicide occurrences, and diabetes rates, all of which are currently statistically higher than any other ethnic group in the United States.

Rae focuses particular attention on children taken into foster care as a result of their parent's or caretaker's inability to see to their needs. One social worker mentions that there are roughly 800,000 children in the foster care system in the United States. The good intentions of would-be foster parents and social workers are often hampered by state and local bureaucracies and endless obstacles

that often lead to programs being under-funded, cut, and drastically under-staffed. The result is little support for foster care providers, who more often than not, possess the noblest of intentions to help children.

Family: The First Circle is an unrelentingly bleak film, but it also shows the resiliency of the human spirit to endure suffering and begin down the path of healing. In particular, the children affected by their caretaker's addictions are often forced to mature psychologically beyond their chronological age. Several children and young adults interviewed speak maturely and stoically about their lives and circumstances, a result often of having to act as the adults of their homes. When parents are shown reuniting with their children, there is an understandable tendency on the part of the parents to mourn the loss of what could have been, and how rapidly their children have aged. So much has been lost that it's tempting to let that fact obscure these family's possible futures. One former addict participates in purification lodge ceremonies (Sweat lodge) as a means of maintaining balance in his life. Striking in its naked realism of the frailties a person still possesses after treatment, the message is clear—healing and treatment are monumentally important, in that they are the first step to wholeness, but the ritual of becoming whole again is a life-long process from that moment on. Furthermore, as this person's story illustrates, healing from any addiction involves more than the person themselves. The impact of their addiction extended

to and impacted their relatives and children. Everyone involved with an addict is traumatized as a result and in need of healing as well. Those scenes where the children and their addict-parents support one another and make amends for the grief and suffering caused are the most powerful scenes of this film.

However, the epilogues presented at the end of *Family: The First Circle* are not always pleasant for the families and individuals portrayed. Some situations remain the same, while others, sadly, deteriorated after showing potential for positive change. What is apparent is that, for better or worse, family is indeed the first circle, a circle that compels individuals into kinship bonds of mutual responsibility on behalf of one another.

Director Rae has quickly established a reputation for her honesty and real life approaches to her work. A consistent theme of her films is the healing power of families attempting to persist in the midst of crisis. An example of another of her films that illustrates this is the multi-award winning, *Frozen River*. Her latest work is crucial in that it highlights a growing epidemic throughout non-Indian communities and Indian Country. A good way of looking at the stories of addiction and loss showcased in *Family: The First Circle* is that addiction need not be the final story for a person. Author Maria Robinson is credited with the saying, “Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending.”³ This seems an entirely appropriate

summarization for the families and their stories in this film, even if many of them have not achieved a better ending up to this point.

— BD

Good Meat

Directed by Sam Hurst, this 56-minute-long documentary centers on Beau LeBeau (Oglala Lakota), an unemployed, 330-pound, Type 2 diabetic who is determined to change his lifestyle so that he can stay alive for his children. To do this, he eschews his “reservation junk food diet” and begins eating as his ancestors did, getting plenty of vegetables and buffalo meat. He also starts exercising. His first step is to kill a buffalo and get it butchered. This meat lasts him about six months, but it carries a hefty initial price tag: \$750. His experiment proves successful, and by the end he has lost about 70 pounds. In addition to feeling like an episode of *The Biggest Loser*, *Good Meat* reveals why obesity is epidemic on the reservation, why more than 50 percent of people living there have diabetes, and why the average life expectancy is 50 years old. The reasons are diverse, ranging from people not having easy access to quality, nutritious food to people preferring beef over buffalo. As LeBeau comments: he doesn’t eat healthily because he doesn’t know how to. Considering that he lives on the Pine



Ridge Reservation in “buffalo country,” it’s surprising to discover that few, if any, of his friends and/or family members want to eat buffalo. They either complain that it tastes too “gamey,” or they feel that it isn’t right to eat their “brothers.” This frustrates LeBeau, and in the end, he backslides, gaining back much of the weight that he lost; a sad fact, considering that, as one medical expert says, “60 percent of the population can prevent diabetes through food and exercise.”

—JF

Grab

The Native Showcase was back at the Sundance Film Festival this year and that’s a good thing. Growing up, director Billy Luther (Navajo, Hopi, Laguna Pueblo) never saw a contemporary native film. In school he watched outdated government-made films. “These are the Pueblos,” announced the God-like voice of a narrator. But the Pueblo portrayed on the black and white films bore little resemblance to Luther, his family, or community. Such films also gave the impression that Native Americans belong to the past, not the present.



These films and portrayals of Native Americans were a catalyst for Billy Luther to become a filmmaker whose films show that “traditions remain intact, despite everything.” The other catalyst? A grandfather who loved stories—

particularly Dallas and Dynasty—and who was a staunch supporter of Luther’s filmmaking projects.

Eleven years ago, Luther volunteered at the Sundance Film Festival. In 2007 his film *Miss Navajo* was a great success at the festival. *Miss Navajo* is a portrayal of a community who, despite decades of assimilationist policy, retains its cultural values—in this case through a pageant in which young women display their proficiency in the language, history and activities of the tribe.

Grab continues the exploration of the expression of cultural values in modern times. With no voice of God narration, the film provides us with an intimate look at three families of the Laguna Pueblo as they prepare to honor family members by hosting a throw. A throw is an ancient give-away tradition in which the host family distributes food and gifts to members of the surrounding community on “grab day,” which is viewed as a community-wide celebration of thanks and renewal. In modern times, families climb onto the roof with the groceries and gifts they have collected or made for months. A special gift is a traditional hand-made pot, which is thrown at the end.

Luther worked closely with all the families in the film and the result is remarkable openness and authenticity. We gain a sense of each family, their struggles, sacrifices, hopes and deep ties to the community as they prepare for

grab day. Particularly moving are the parts of the film that show the elders preparing for their own grab day. The Laguna Pueblo are extremely reticent about letting themselves be filmed, but the elders in the film participated in Luther's film knowing that their young people could learn from this about the origins of grab day. Beyond that, as Luther said, they realized that "their lives and stories are there for future generations." It is a tremendous gift.

One of the key characters in the film is a traditional hand-made pot crafted by one of the participants. We follow that pot throughout the film, from wet casting to the kiln and then to the big day itself. At the end of the film, children and adults gather at each house for the throw. Their arms lift to the air, they are sprinkled with blessings of water, gifts, food and finally—the pot itself is thrown. Hands reach up to grab it. Will it be taken home as a prized gift? Will it fall to the ground and break? Luther's film holds us in its joyous, beautiful grasp right to the very end.

— MMD

Growing Native

During this 10-minute "trailer" for the upcoming national television and Internet series, director (and host) Chris Eyre visits Sante Fe, New Mexico,



where he meets artist Roxanne Swentzell, a sculptor. She introduces him to the Indian Market, where, every August, more than 400,000 people gather to sell and buy art. In addition, this artist also maintains a “bank” of native seeds, such as corn and pumpkin, with the goal of sustainability.

—JF

LITTLE BIG SHORTS (short films)

Bear Tung

In this movie two men are interviewed by a group of animals. Except that the interview takes place in the woods, it is very much like a typical press conference. The animals are asking the men, obviously hunters, about the animals they have killed. How many have they killed? How many do they need to kill? What do they do with the animals that they kill? And so on. In the Native worldview, the "four leggeds" are willing to sacrifice themselves to sustain the "two leggeds," but only if the "two leggeds" are respectful of that sacrifice. In this movie, the animals are holding the humans accountable for their actions. One of the hunters, played by Gary Farmer, answers the animals' questions and since he seems to express respect for their sacrifice the press conference comes to an end. At least these "two leggeds" show respect for the sacrifice made by the animals.



Horse You See

This very hilarious film tells a simple story. A horse introduces himself to the audience. "I am a horse." "These are my feet." And so on. The narration is in a Native language with English subtitles. This technique makes the story even funnier. The audience laughed out loud throughout the film. There just is something about a talking horse that is funny. The message of the movie, however, is that we (human beings) share the planet with other living creatures. We are not the only creatures to consider as we make our way through life. We are but one part of a larger system and we must pay attention to our relationship to other creatures and the land on which we live. Think here of the debate over the Trans-Canada pipeline that would run over the Ogallala aquifer. But the movie is no sermon on the environment or our place in the larger cosmos. The movie is just a horse introducing himself to the audience. Marvelous.



I Survived

I could not find anything about this movie related to religion or to Native American culture, except for the fact that the director is Zuni/Cochiti Pueblo and the main character, Sgt. Samuel Tapia, is Native American. It was the best film I saw, however, and thought that our readers should know about its existence. Sgt.

Tapia simply tells the story of how his Humvee is hit by an improvised explosive device (IED). That this horrific story is told so simply is what gives the film its remarkable power, for which Sgt. Tapia and the editor should be given the credit. The explosion sets the Humvee on fire. The doors to the vehicle will not open. The soldier next to Tapia is on fire and asks to be killed because he is in such pain. Tapia tries to get out the turret on top of the vehicle, but his leg is trapped. There is another explosion and the doors open, but Tapia is still trapped. Finally he jerks his leg free. As a medic pulls him to safety, the ammunition in the Humvee starts to explode around them. Helicopters, he is told, will not be available for three hours, so Sgt. Tapia is put on a stretcher and laid across the back seat of another vehicle. Tapia's legs hang over one side of the vehicle and his head over the other side. As he is driven to safety he wonders why soldiers put at such risk cannot get a helicopter for three hours and hopes that the vehicle in which he is riding does not hit another IED. This kind of story is told again and again about war and survival, but Sgt. Tapia is so genuine, so honest, as he tells his story, *I Survived* has a power that most other horrific stories do not have. It is a story that ends well, but nevertheless breaks your heart and part of the heart break comes from Sgt. Tapia's genuine thankfulness when he says: "I survived."

The Migration

This movie is set in the future. The survival of the planet is at risk. Disregard for the environment in the past endangers the future. The government is the problem, not the solution. One Native American family is hiding out. The government is looking for them all the time. The debate within the family is whether to surrender to the government because the war is over or whether to keep moving and fighting back. Sound familiar?



Stickball

Stickball is the oldest known Native American sport played in North America. Unlike urban stickball, which is similar to baseball, Native American stickball is more like some combination of La Crosse and American football. The



ball is tossed into the air; someone retrieves it with his stick and transfers the ball to his hand. From that point on, the player with the ball runs toward the goal (two sticks in the ground) while the opposing team tries to tackle him and take away the ball. A point is scored when the player crosses the goal line and then returns through the goal posts to the field of play. In order to score, the player with the ball must return to the field of play, even though the opposing players try to prevent him from doing so.

Yes, there is a World Series of Stickball. It is played in Mississippi between the Choctaw people of Oklahoma and the Mississippi Choctaw Reservation. Stickball, like the Vans of Louie Gong, is a symbol of identity that generates fierce competition between rivals, but also close connections between competing tribes. Originally, stickball was played as a way of settling disputes – sometimes on fields miles long – in order to avoid actual battle between tribes. It is now a part of Native American identity and a connection with cultural tradition.

Unreserved: The Work of Louie Gong

As a boy, Louie Gong loved Vans shoes, but couldn't afford this popular brand of shoe. When he got older and could afford a pair, he did not buy a pair with a fancy design, but rather the plainest pair. With a sharpie, he then decorated his own pair of shoes using the Coast Salish art with which he was familiar. Since Louie is of mixed ethnic background, the shoes he decorated became the first authentic expression of his cultural heritage. Although Gong designed shoes and other objects became a big hit, for Louie the shoes were always important for their expression of his identity, than his business success. Gong went on to work with various mixed race organizations in an effort to help people understand their identity when a single race cannot be used. This is a story about utilizing culture



to secure one's personal identity and about the importance of personal identity in feeling at home in the world around us.

—WLB

Older than America

In earlier decades of the 20th century, Native American children were often forced to attend Roman Catholic religious schools where they were forced to give up their traditional religious beliefs. They were also frequently abused physically or sexually. The plot of this film uses this as its starting point; a young woman begins to have visions of the murders and abuse that occurred at a long-closed Roman Catholic school, of which there has been a massive cover-up. Native American spirituality also plays a part, as the spirits which speak to her finally reveal the truth, and even intervene physically in the world to see that justice is done. As such, this is a Native American ghost story, but it seeks to educate audiences about the real injustices that took place in the past, and the discrimination still suffered by Native Americans.



Having said that, it remains true that the plot is overly convoluted and somewhat contrived. Although the story of the abuse is real, the characters are such stereotypes that the realism of the story suffers. In order to emphasize the value of Native American spirituality, the film paints Christianity and Roman

Catholicism in particular as completely evil in relation to Native Americans. This ignores the fact that many Native Americans are Roman Catholic, and others have combined many elements of Christianity with their own native spirituality in movements such as the Native American Church. This film, however, creates a dualistic world in which everything outside of the ancient traditions is to be rejected. This does not fairly represent the reality of Native American life today or the possibilities for its future, and the stark characterizations ultimately make the story less believable.

None of this is to take away the importance of telling the story of the cultural genocide directed at Native Americans throughout history, which is all too real, and this film does raise consciousness about those issues. This film is a reaction to the numerous films of earlier decades that depicted Native Americans as “savages” to be civilized, and that justified genocide in the name of Christian and Western values. It is understandable that there would be a reaction to such films from Native American filmmakers who seek to tell a different story, but the flaws in the fictional elements of this film undermine some of the very valid points it seeks to make.

—JCL

On the Ice

On the Ice begins with shots of a graveyard, snow, crosses, graffiti, traditional drumming and dancing, partying and hip hop music. Inupiat director and screenwriter MacLean gives this glimpse of life for young Inupiaq in Barrow, Alaska, while telling a story of three friends who venture out on to the ice. When only two return, their version of what happened there begins to crack and shift much like the summer ice itself.



Qalli and Aivaaq live in a small isolated community in which closeness and claustrophobia coexist, just as traditional ways and modern life do. Aivaaq is from a troubled home. His friend Qalli has strong, supportive parents and a loving, traditional grandmother. The two friends share a love of hip hop and seal hunting, but Aivaaq's drinking and drug use begin to strain the friendship, just as they reflect stressors for the community as a whole. When Aivaaq and their friend James head out early on a seal hunt, Qalli later catches up and finds them fighting. As the violence escalates, James is killed and Qalli and Aivaaq attempt to cover up what happened. They come back to town and tell a story of James' snowmobile falling through the ice, but here Qalli's father shows both his principled nature and his expertise as a tracker. Qalli and Aivaaq are tormented by

guilt as Qalli's father gradually uncovers the truth and confronts the two. "I can't tell you what kind of person to be," he says in the end, "It's your decision."

While this is not an overtly religious storyline, MacLean's film does focus on universal themes of truth, guilt, life, death, friendship, love and responsibility. His reputation as an award-winning short film maker meant that well over a hundred members of the press and film industry lined up for an hour waiting to view *On the Ice*. The film premiered not as part of the Indigenous Showcase, but as one of the feature-length films in the U.S. Dramatic Competition.

— MMD

Check out the short film on which the feature length film is based at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0d1UCsaZOg>.

Reel Injun

This award-winning documentary by Neil Diamond (Cree) offers a chronological history of how American Indians have been portrayed in Hollywood films, beginning with Thomas Edison's



footage of the Laguna Pueblo people and ending with *The Fast Runner* (Atanarjuat), the “most Indian movie” ever made. Over the course of 86 minutes, the documentary separates fact from fiction; reality from stereotype.

For instance, despite the fact that hundreds of tribes exist in the United States, most films depict these people as fairly homogenous. Most of them are shown riding horses, hunting buffalo, living in teepees, and wearing buckskin; all activities characteristic of Plains Indians. Because no one in Hollywood bothered researching actual native languages, some early filmmakers created “Tonto speak” by running the English language track backwards. In some films, the native actors substituted their own, quite colorful, lines, knowing full well that neither the studios nor the audiences would be the wiser. This would be their inside joke.

And rather than casting authentic native actors in the roles, filmmakers turned to white actors, including Burt Lancaster, Charles Bronson and Burt Reynolds, who were essentially performing “in red face.” Pocahontas, too, has been misrepresented throughout cinematic history. In the Walt Disney animated film, she is a tall, beautiful exotic; the “embodiment of American (male) desire.” In reality, the native princess was, by some accounts, only about 12 years old when she met John Smith.

A few additional myths busted by this very interesting documentary are: Native peoples didn't wear headbands. Designers added them to costumes as a way to keep the long, black wigs anchored to actors' heads. One of the most famous "native" actors was Iron Eyes Cody, who is probably most famous for being the "crying Indian" in the Keep America Beautiful anti-littering campaign; he actually wasn't native at all. The truth is he was born as Espera DeCorti, the son of two first-generation immigrants from Italy.

For this documentary, Diamond interviewed a veritable Who's Who of native America, including actor Adam Beach, director Chris Eyre, model Sacheen Littlefeather, and activists Russell Means and John Trudell.

—JF

Return of Navajo Boy

"*Navajo Boy*" is the title of a silent film about a Navajo community in Monument Valley on the border between Utah and Arizona made in the 1950s. In 1997, a white man named Bill Kennedy visited the same Navajo



community and he brought with him the original film, "*Navajo Boy*." It had been made by his father who was deceased, and its return by the son is the story of the documentary. The people of the community are amazed to see the film images of

themselves as children and of their deceased family members. They exclaim that they had never seen the film itself.

Elsie Mae Cly Begay holds center stage as the matriarch of the Cly family. The film includes images of her baby brother, John Wayne Cly. Shortly after the filming of the 1950s, Elsie's mother was taken away to the hospital where she died, presumably of uranium poisoning. The family was in disarray and, with no one to care for two-year-old John Wayne Cly, he was given to a missionary family for temporary foster care. The missionary family spirited him away and there was never any knowledge of his whereabouts, but a keen awareness of his absence was felt by the family even forty years later as they view the 1950s film.

Publicity about the contemporary documentary brought the story of the Cly family to the attention of 42-year-old John Wayne Cly in New Mexico. He had experienced a sense of lost identity throughout his life, and he contacted the Cly family with new hopefulness. His return to his family is movingly documented. The documentary also focused public attention upon the contamination brought to the community by uranium mining. The Kerr-McGee company and the federal government are exposed in the documentary as crass exploiters, and the government has since undertaken remedial action concerning uranium contamination and related medical problems for the Cly family.

“The land is our Mom and the Sun is our Father,” says one of the Cly family members. The film gains such intimate access to the family that a viewer begins to appreciate the religious character of the bonding of family members to one another and of family to place. This is also evident in segments of a healing ritual in which the healer is constructing a mosaic on the earth floor of a hogan using small pieces of rocks of varied colors to create a design representing sacred beings enacting a sacred story—pieces of earth itself bring the power to heal into the present to make a living person well. Yet, other pieces of earth—uranium—can sicken and kill humans. Still, our story implies, the uranium cannot defeat the bonds of family with the earth and its sacred medicine.

— DS

Search for the World’s Best Indian Taco

This short film shows an older Choctaw man telling his grandson a story about how a young man found the world’s best Indian taco. In the dramatization of the story, the young man is



charming, gifted, and self-confident. His name is “Three Shades of Black.” Eventually, he arrives at an Indian taco booth at some powwow where a long line of male suitors, each carrying a bouquet of roses, are waiting to buy an Indian

taco and try their luck with the beautiful Indian woman, named Rose, who is making the Indian tacos. The conventional approach of the suitors is quickly trashed by Rose, and Three Shades of Black has his turn. He is genuinely interested in her Indian taco and, after tasting, realizes he has found the world's best. He then successfully shifts into romancing Rose, which is capped off when he gives her a glorious and distinctive ring which she gladly accepts.

The film shifts back to the Choctaw grandfather and his grandson. A final scene shows the grandfather's wife gently scolding him about exaggerating his story. Then, in one brief glimpse the viewer sees the ring on the wife's finger and recognizes it as the one given by Three Shades of Black to Rose. Thus, the viewer is subtly reminded of the deeply held belief within indigenous traditions that the oral stories of elders really do carry the indisputable truths about human life.

— DS

Shimásání

The film sketches a story of two Navajo sisters living with their grandmother in an isolated hogan with a small flock of sheep. It is set in the late 1920s, and the dialogue is in Navajo with English subtitles. The



older sister has left boarding school and returned home, angry about mean treatment at school. Her younger sister takes care of the sheep and looks after their grandmother and appears sweet-tempered in comparison to her embittered sister. When the younger sister inquires about what happens at the school, the older one tosses her a book and tells her sister she can have it since she herself cares nothing for it. The next day, the grandmother arranges for a Navajo man to transport the older sister back to school.

The younger sister is fascinated by the book and its pictures of exotically dressed people in faraway places. She imagines what novel persons and places are to be found on “the other side of the mountain.” She tells her grandmother that she herself wants to go off to school and is told “No.” Seeing that she is bewildered and hurt, her grandmother gestures to the sheep and the hills and tells her insistently that these are her land and livelihood and they insure her survival. Moreover, if the girl leaves, she, her grandmother, will be alone with no one to care for her. In the morning, the frustrated girl takes the book and a knapsack and strides purposefully out of the Hogan down the path to the road, then stops, torn with doubt as the film ends.

Despite her older sister’s disaffection with school, the photographs in the book have created a desire in the younger sister to know about what is other in the world. Yet, the bonding of Navajo life-ways with land and livelihood represent

intergenerational dimensions of identity—one’s selfhood is bound up with sheep, land, and hogan as faces of the sacred.

—DS

Smokin’ Fish

This film relates the efforts of a Tlingit man, Cory Mann, to negotiate between survival in the world’s economy as an entrepreneur and retention of his cultural identity as a member of the Thunderbird Clan. His business travels take him across the Pacific to various Asian countries, but the lure of smoking fish draws him to abandon his office in Juneau and spend a couple of summer months smoking fish among relatives near Klukwan, Alaska. There at the fish camp, “all the world is alive,” whereas, “down in the United States only people are alive.” Moreover, when you are smoking fish, “the past, present, and future are all the same.”



The message of the film is casually presented by way of Cory Mann’s participation in traditional life—fishing with his nephew, using a canoe and a long net; cutting up the fish so that they can be hung on poles and placed in the smoke house; repairing and reconstructing the smoke house; participating in ceremonial dancing; along with an offhand, almost humorous, personal commentary about the significance of these activities. We hear that the Tlingit, after the arrival of

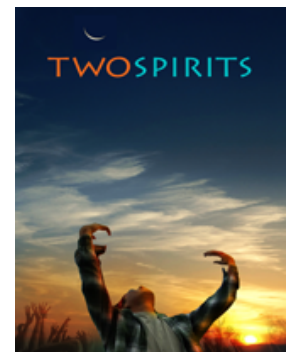
Europeans, became half Christian and half salmon-worshipper, and, if you run into bears, talk to them since they also belong to the Thunderbird Clan. Because of the casual style by which Cory Mann serves as the cultural broker, the varied scenes of Tlingit cultural life begin to seem natural rather than exotic. When the comment is made that the smoke house serves as a family haven, the statement seems perfectly understandable, and the viewer may wish he or she could also take refuge there.

Cory's aunt has a gift for delivering deliberate and genuinely profound commentary affirming traditional Tlingit understanding of matters. At the same time, this aunt has a husband who is an Italian immigrant, and who appears on screen as someone who is happily and seamlessly integrated into Tlingit life. You cannot script such unexpected factors, and it is the unscripted style of "Smokin' Fish" that captivates the viewer and validates a Tlingit worldview as religiously appropriate in this modern moment.

—DS

Two Spirits

Directed by Lydia Nibley, this documentary focuses on Fred Martinez, a 16-year-old Navajo youth who grew up in Cortez, Colo.



and was murdered because of his gender identity. The director uses this case as a way to compare and contrast traditional Navajo beliefs with Western ones. For instance, whereas in the West, gender is “neatly divided” into two, the Navajo believe that there are four genders: male, female, the feminine male, and the masculine female.

Because of this “flexibility” in thinking, the Navajo, a matrilineal tribe, have been much more accepting of homosexuality and transgendered peoples. In fact, one of the festivals celebrated by the Navajo involves males and females switching clothing. Furthermore, people who “occupy” the middle spaces are seen as special and gifted. (Although the crossroads is a dangerous place to inhabit, it is also a place of power.) These people become the matchmakers, the caretakers, and the healers of their tribes. They are “known and admired.” For instance, We’wha, a six-foot-tall Zuni “princess,” became a celebrity in her own right, and even shook hands with President Grover Cleveland.

Western influence – chiefly the imposition of Christianity – has eroded Navajo attitudes toward transgendered people. By 1920, the documentary reminds us, 10,000 to 20,000 children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in, usually church-run, institutions where they couldn’t communicate with each other. Not because they were ill-educated, but because they all came from different tribes that spoke different languages. Even when they learned English, it

was poorly taught. Not able to speak to each other and not able to communicate with their parents/elders meant that all they needed to know about their native cultures – religion and spirituality – was gone.

Times are slowly changing within the community, and in 1989, the designation “two spirit” was officially recognized. But problems continue, especially when native and non-native thought come into contact. Sometimes the result is what happened to Fred Martinez.

—JF

Up Heartbreak Hill

Directed by Christina King, this 56-minute documentary centers on three Navajo senior high school students: Thomas Martinez, a runner; Tamara Hardy, class president; and Gaby Nakai, a wall flower interested in photography. For one year, the documentary follows these students as they ponder whether or not to leave the reservation after graduation. Despite the poor conditions under which they live – bad roads and housing, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and low annual income – many students are hesitant to leave the reservation. Gaby explains that she’s “scared” to leave; that she has “nothing to offer.” Another



student claims that to leave means being a “traitor” to one’s people. And even when they do leave, many of them want to return to their families and community.

—JF

We Still Live Here: Âs Nutayuneân

This is a one-of-a-kind documentary that includes interesting historical ironies. It tells the story of how the Wampanoag people, descendants of the very Indians who generously saved the English Pilgrims from starvation, have been able to recover their aboriginal language a century after the death of the last speaker of the language. Near the end of the film, Noam Chomsky, the internationally known linguist from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), appears on screen to say that, if he had been asked beforehand about the Wampanoag language recovery project, he would have said it was impossible, but now he can see that they have succeeded. He goes on to say, “There is nothing I know of that is anything like the Wampanoag case.”



Inasmuch as the Wampanoag were a matrilineal people and, at the time of their association with the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, there were two Wampanoag communities with female leaders (sachems), it is fitting that the key figure in their language recovery project has been a woman, Jessie Little Doe (her

married name is Baird). In her telling, the story begins in 1994 with a dream she had which was repeated three nights in a row. In her dream, a circle of faces speak an unfamiliar language, including one particular statement which, she later learned, meant “We still live here.”

One day a road sign, Sippiwissett Road, caught her attention because the word sounded like the language spoken in her dreams. She began to realize that the people in her dreams were speaking the language of her ancestors. The language had been considered “dead” for many generations and the Wampanoag people were often considered “dead” as well—a result of epidemic diseases, war, and conversion to Christianity. Eventually, she raised a question to her Wampanoag relatives. “Would you like to have our language home again?” While Jessie Little Doe plays the lead role in this story, the film makes clear that it is definitely a collective effort, involving a fiercely protective, well-organized, and deeply unified movement by which the contemporary Mashpee and Aquinnah Wampanoag communities retake ownership of their language.

One irony at the heart of the story is that John Eliot, the Puritan cleric who focused on converting the natives of New England to Christianity, had brought two Wampanoag men to Harvard College in 1655 for the purpose of translating the King James Bible into the Wampanoag language to facilitate his missionary work. This Eliot Bible, as it was called, was completed in 1663 and played a

critical role in the recovery of the Wampanoag language. After Jessie Little Doe discovered from documents in the tribal archive that the language had been given an alphabet and written down and that her ancestors were literate in their language, she researched further and learned that eleven Eliot Bibles remained extant, all of them in archives accessible only to scholars.

In 1995, an unusual letter arrived at the tribal office inviting an individual from the Wampanoag community to apply for a research fellowship at MIT. Jessie Little Doe applied, though she had never attended college, and she was accepted. At MIT she studied linguistics under the mentorship of Professor Ken Hale, and she focused on Wampanoag language recovery. Fortunately, there was an Eliot Bible available to her at MIT. In 2000, she received a masters degree in linguistics from MIT.

The documentary explains how comments written in the Eliot Bibles by their Wampanoag owners provide clues to their way of understanding religious questions all the way back to the seventeenth century. Also, we learn that rediscovering how to pronounce Wampanoag words is accomplished by studying the pronunciation of the same or similar words in one or more of the Algonquian languages still spoken today—there were once three dozen Algonquian languages, including Wampanoag. Jessie Little Doe and her associates eventually offered language classes for adults and language-immersion classes for children. The

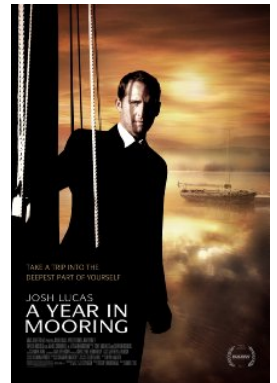
viewer sees moments from these classes and also dance scenes from the Aquinnah Wampanoag Powwow where songs are sung in Wampanoag. And we see Mae Alice, the daughter of Jessie Little Doe Baird and her husband, who is now six years old, and who speaks Wampanoag as her first language—the first person to do this in over one hundred years.

The documentary, written and directed by Anne Makepeace, whose ancestors were sixteenth-century New England Puritans, also includes animation sketches of Wampanoag history and Wampanoag origin stories. It succeeds in portraying this remarkable and improbable language recovery as a deeply transformative experience for contemporary Wampanoag people. Since the completion of the documentary, Jessie Little Doe Baird, Mashpee Wampanoag, in 2010 received a MacArthur genius award.

— DS

A Year in Mooring

Chris Eyre's latest film has not yet seen theatrical release, but was screened on October 1 at the VisionMaker Film Festival. This is a remarkable and beautiful film which is about, in Eyre's own words, "a man being reborn." Eyre was on hand to discuss the film after its screening, and shared a



number of insights about its production.

The story is told with little dialogue, and there is much that remains unexplained even at the end of the film. Josh Lucas plays a man who buys a boat that is “in mooring” and that is unable to put out to sea. He has suffered great trauma due to a tragic family loss that is alluded to in enigmatic flashbacks but never really clarified. He lives on the boat all winter, after almost everyone has left for the season except for a waitress (Ayelet Zurer) and an old sail-mender (James Cromwell, referred to in the credits only as the “ancient mariner”). During this time, the young man works on his boat and slowly begins to reassemble his life, until at the end of the year, he is able to sell the boat and leave.

Those who are looking for a conventional Hollywood narrative will be disappointed; every time one thinks that the young mariner is about to be “saved” by something like a romantic relationship, the possibilities abruptly close. In conversations with the waitress and the sail-mender, he does begin to heal, but it is never obvious how or why this happens. He learns to continue his life journey, and although one senses that his grief has not ended, he endures and finds some hope and direction again.

It is precisely these elements which make the film so poignant and realistic; it resists simplistic explanations or easy plot resolutions. The

screenwriter, Peter Vanderwall, himself suffered a tragic loss before writing the screenplay. When Eyre first read it, he said that his first reaction was, “what the heck is this??” Yet Eyre was drawn to the story, seeing it as a depiction of a rite of passage and a journey towards rebirth. Eyre mentioned his earlier film, *Smoke Signals*, as another example of a film that represents a journey towards rebirth, hope, and redemption. The young mariner only takes a tiny step, but it is enough. Viewers of the film will experience the story in different ways, depending upon how they interpret it, said Eyre; he quoted his Director of Photography, who stated that “the movie will reveal what it is.” It is also worth mentioning that the cinematography is beautiful; Eyre shot it with an aspect ratio of 1:2.35 in order to capture the panoramic scenery of Traverse City, Michigan where it was filmed.

With a tendency to emphasize the visual over the linguistic, there is also plenty of symbolism in the film. The young mariner’s repair of the boat is both therapy and metaphor for his life and the journey that it is. “It’s all a grand traverse,” says the old sail-mender, who has also suffered tragedy. As the young mariner repairs his boat and his life, the waitress speaks of a trip around the world, and the young mariner maps out such a journey; he discovers a small statue of a Buddha, which he places on the map, as if to suggest that this spiritual figure of peace and acceptance is involved. The name of the boat is also significant, the *Hesperus*. This seems to be a reference to Longfellow’s poem, *The*

Wreck of the Hesperus, which is mentioned several times in the film, and it does seem that the boat as well as his life is a “wreck” that must be salvaged or rebuilt. At the same time, the main character learns that Hesperus is the god of the morning star, a symbol of peace and hope that guided sailors home to port; he does not change the name of the boat.

This film is certainly worthy of much critical attention, and one can hope that many will see it, although it may not be distributed as widely as a more conventional film would be. It is a remarkable and thought-provoking film from a man who is arguably the foremost Native American filmmaker today, and it speaks in a profound way to issues of loss, meaning, and new life. In spite of its unusual nature, Eyre loved making the film; “it was a gift to make this movie,” he said. If you can see this film, you can share the gift.

— JCL

¹ Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling With American Indians and Other Native Peoples* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2006), 49. The saying is attributed to a body of Native American oral tradition, though the specific tribal affiliation is unknown.

² Barbara Marquand, “Fighting the Meth Addiction Epidemic in Indian Country,” *Minority Nurse MN* (2006 Fall), Accessed October 1, 2011, <http://www.minoritynurse.com/american-indian-native-american/fighting-meth-addiction-epidemic-indian-country>

³ Maria Robinson, “Quotable Quotes,” <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/186119>.