

REFUSING NOSTALGIA: THREE INDIGENOUS FILMMAKERS'  
NEGOTIATIONS OF IDENTITY

*Jeff Berglund*

“Everyone assumes you’ve made a ‘grandma’ movie or you have at least one featuring sheep,” said filmmaker, Ramona Emerson, during a conference featuring the Southwest’s best U.S.-based indigenous filmmakers. Emerson, who is Diné—known to the rest of the world as Navajo—was making somewhat of an insider’s joke, as insinuated by her follow-up comment: “or a movie about a grandma with some sheep!” That joke got even more laughs as it likely brought to mind a number of Navajo-produced movies—highly crafted short works beautifully documenting, representing, or imagining the life of esteemed elders, particularly grandmothers. In 2009, Blackhorse Lowe had recently made one titled *Shimásání* (the Navajo word for maternal grandmother), and years ago the most well-known Navajo-directed film, *Navajo Talking Picture* (1985), featured the director’s grandmother, albeit as a reluctant ethnographic subject of her granddaughter’s filmmaking assault. It also featured sheep and sheep butchering. None of which was surprising given the well-known Navajo aphorism, “Sheep Is Life.” Emerson’s joke and Diné audiences’ memories of related films provide evidence of the twin poles of expectation: first, that as Diné filmmakers, there are typical subjects around which to develop films and, second, that to disentangle, disassociate or disambiguate oneself from such codes is to risk questions about being Navajo, about being different from other Navajo filmmakers, or at its most extreme, about being authentic. To distance herself from such expectations, Emerson, for one, created her newest film project, *Opal* (2012), about a bullied but feisty young

Navajo girl who loves Charles Bronson and the rock band KISS. Another Diné director, Melissa Henry's gem of a movie, *Horse You See* (2007), featured a talking horse, speaking exclusively in Navajo, instead of sheep or grandmothers. To the audience gathered in Albuquerque, Henry warned about the dangers of being pigeonholed: "It will break creativity. It will be limiting. I'm a filmmaker" (Emerson & Henry, 2011).

This chapter focuses on such thematic tensions in the creative work of three young indigenous filmmakers from Arizona in the United States: Deidra Peaches (Diné), Donovan Seschillie (Diné), and Jake Hoyungowa (Hopi & Diné), known collectively as Paper Rocket Productions.<sup>1</sup> Their collaborative productions afford viewers and scholars alike the opportunity to understand the artistic and political trade-offs and consequences of working at Native filmmaking. This, in turn, includes the implications of being identified by their tribal backgrounds, and of how the medium of film offers different means of exploring, representing, and creating identities that resist fossilised notions and expectations: some that pre-date intracultural filmic productions, and others that have grown up alongside developing trends—alluded to above—within the first four decades since Navajo-centered and directed films have existed. I see my reflections as a way to bring attention to their work, the beauty and technical skill exhibited in it, but also as a reflection on the contemporary process and challenges of making films outside of the commercial industry and within the support network of indigenous filmmaking and producing, including grassroots organisations such as Outta Your Backpack Media (OYBM),<sup>2</sup> based in Flagstaff, Arizona, and Longhouse Media,<sup>3</sup> based in Seattle, Washington. While it doesn't

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.paperrocketproductions.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://oybm.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.longhousemedia.org/>

interest me to offer arguments about how their work leads to shifts in Diné or Native epistemologies—I'll leave that to the anthropologists—I am primarily interested in their individual and collective negotiations within this network of being filmmakers who are Native, of being Native filmmakers, and of being supported as filmmakers who make Native films because they are Native filmmakers. Based on numerous interviews, shared viewings, and analysis of their films, this chapter discusses how these filmmakers navigate competing claims on their artistic vision while simultaneously advancing their own version of contemporary Native/Navajo (and Navajo/Hopi) identities.

Navajo people have been rooted in the Southwest for centuries, and according to Diné origin narratives—since time immemorial. Outright genocide and massive colonial disruptions have irrevocably changed patterns of life and modes of reflecting on its meaning and value. Traditions continue to evolve and undergo shifts, challenged by those claiming to be traditionalists, claiming that what once was, must continue to be. While there may be core consensus regarding culturally sacrosanct philosophies and cosmologies, the mode of transmission of this knowledge and of Diné epistemologies has undeniably undergone shifts and continues to be challenged further with the rise of different technological innovations.

By 2011, for example, filmmaking by Navajo directors, cinematographers, and producers is no longer an innovation that interests current anthropologists—unlike their 1960s counterparts. Here I am referring to John Adair and Sol Worth's project, culminating in the 1972 publication of his book, *Through Navajo Eyes*, wherein the anthropologist looks for filmmaking innovations and disruptions that intersect with Navajo cultural patterns and epistemologies where “the Navajo didn't follow the rule of editing on motion or action at all. The notion of smoothness of action or making

a connective unnoticeable didn't seem to occur to them, or wasn't important enough to do anything about, except in specific cases..." (171). In this passage, Adair and Worth are interested in pointing out how aesthetic effects are linked to tribal and traditional ways of seeing the world. Taken literally, Worth's study suggests that knowledge of tribal worldviews would predetermine filmmaking strategies. In *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community* (2003), Jennifer Deger locates the opposite but similarly limiting methodological tendency in an ethnographer such as James Weiner who claims, "The camera threatens to obscure and even erase traditional modes of being" (2003, 53). In both instances, according to these perspectives, technologies of filmmaking and traditionalism do not truly interact to produce modes. By contrast, Deger (2006, 40) prefers to see that indigenous cultures and subjectivities are emergent, processual, and responsive, and that films being produced by indigenous artists may instead be seen as "sensuous modes of perception," a notion I hope to echo in this chapter.

From my vantage point, currently, Diné-produced film is alive and thriving. I've carefully avoided the word "flourishing" because it's neither a successful economic enterprise, nor a well or easily funded venture. Nonetheless, there exists a cadre of incredibly dedicated and talented filmmakers who refuse to lay down the camera, who squeeze the blood from the proverbial turnip to buy editing software and equipment such as new cameras, memory sticks, and hard drives, who assemble crews, who pay entry fees to festivals, and who have worked hard to graduate from film and television programs. The founders of Paper Rocket Productions—Donovan Seschillie, Jake Hoyungowa, and Deidra Peaches—have done everything to support their never-ending drive to produce satisfying, if not breath-taking, films outside of the formal training of college level programs. In June and July 2011—after temporary stints as custodians/janitors—they worked on

film crews shooting in New Mexico, in Montana, and then earned prestigious mentor positions at Longhouse Media in Seattle, Washington.

These three successful filmmakers are all products of a local, activist-originated filmmaking workshop for Native youth. Outta Your Backpack Media—an indigenous youth workshop and resource distribution effort—provides youth access to filmmaking from inception to production, filming, and editing. Klee Benally, the lead singer of Blackfire and the founder of indigenous Action Media, has operated OYBM since 2004 out of Táala Hooghan, his infoshop in Flagstaff, Arizona. OYBM has, in the words of the organisation's vision statement, “empowered indigenous youth through free movie making workshops and resource distribution. OYBM is an indigenous youth response to the need for media justice in our communities” (Outta Your Backpack Media 2011). In conversations I've had with Klee Benally, he often notes the following: “We seek to create community ownership of media through youth empowerment. We challenge corporate dominated media by telling our own stories and by establishing our own networks and opportunities for media distribution. We emphasise resource access for youth with a focus on media literacy.”

With access to these tools, indigenous youth are telling their own stories in unique and unexpected ways, all reflections of multiple aspects of their identities, not readily identified as “traditional” or tribally centered. This mix of film technology and its intersections with regional, tribal, and personal interests inspires indigenous youth to find meaningful engagements with elements of their cultural heritage, though often in indirect and subtle ways. Working with an activist-oriented filmmaker such as Benally, the filmmakers educated by Outta Your Backpack Media also learn about the decolonising

possibilities of filmmaking, recognising that their self-representations, stories, and documentaries work to counter the legacies and the ongoing stream of misrepresentations of indigenous peoples. Part of the resistance to the legacy of misrepresentation is a clear eschewing of expectation and the burden of fulfilling others' notions of Indigeneity. A few years ago in a visit to one of my classes, Klee Benally was joined by one of his lead youth mentors, Shelby Ray, who described her own experiences of coming into this sense of empowerment: "[When] I first became involved I was just a participant, from the first workshop, going through [the] process of filmmaking, and [this] led to other experiences, going to the Smithsonian Film Festival in NYC and traveling. For me, it's in my opinion [all about] giving voice to your perspective." (Bennally 2009) For others, especially Deidra Peaches, Donovan Seschillie and Jake Hoyungowa, what OYBM represented was access to expensive equipment, including editing software. Don says, "When we were young, we weren't fully aware of everything [politics, etc.], but as Deidra explains, we were 'attracted to OYBM by the equipment'" (Seschillie 2010). As Donovan continued, further explaining his own experiences as a mentor, "What's the best part of OYBM is the contribution to Native youth in the community, it's free, [it inspires] youth empowerment. Some of the kids come from very chancy homes, very poor and they come to use the internet, from some homes where they can't afford the internet and some of the cameras cost \$3000, so we'd think of a story to make, grab a camera and just come back and edit it. Which is pretty cool. Getting them tools to tell their own social stories. That's what I like about it."

Student projects at OYBM range from public service announcement films about smoking, date-rape, drug addiction, and diabetes, to documentaries on protests against artificial snowmaking on sacred mountains, and uranium mining and pollution, and to humorous take-downs of popular media and American myths—one on the 2008

film *Twilight* and its representation of Native peoples is particularly amusing, as is a lampoon of the Thanksgiving holiday and its mythic origins. Other films feature the Diné perspective on the value of water, and explore the beauty and wonder of the imagination. One features a “stick man” who comes to life and another, titled *Imagine* (2007), explores the imaginative play of children and provided the original inspiration for one of the longer films, *Rocket Boy* (2010), which I will discuss later. Deidra Peaches conceived *Imagine* for the National Museum of the American Indian's showcase “Thanksgiving Revisited: New Views by Young Filmmakers.” She says, “It started with the question, what are you thankful for?” I decided to make a video that was thankful for my imagination. So it was about a boy playing in a box, wondering how far you could let your imagination go, even though you didn’t have all of things. One aspect of it was a boy who built a rocket and he ends up launching it. It was just done with cardboard, spray paint and camera tricks” (Seschillie 2010).

Another stand-out filmmaker from this organisation, Camille Tso, the youngest mentor in its history, made a 29-minute film, *In the Footsteps of Yellow Woman* (2009), a story of her grandmother that is further entangled in a more familiar narrative of the Navajo oratory canon. It’s worth mentioning the two poles of Camille Tso’s experience: at age nine she was in front of the camera when she worked as an extra in Steven Spielberg’s *Into the West* (2005) television series; at age fourteen, after time spent behind the camera, she was showing her film at the Smithsonian’s Native American Film Festival + Video Festival in New York City and the San Antonio Film Festival, as well as receiving a scholarship to attend the prestigious arts boarding school, Idyllwild Arts Academy. The films produced in conjunction with OYBM clearly focus on a variety of topics, and filmmakers find value in play, in resistance to expectation, and in their own particular attachment and recognition of intrinsic tribal and

cultural values that may or may not mesh with activist efforts and a social justice agenda. Efforts such as Klee Benally's Outta Your Backpack Media are commendable, and luckily, not singular. Around the United States, other programs exist—some even more substantial and successful in producing bigger productions and garnering more attention. Seattle's Long House Media and its youth media project, Native Lens, both founded by Tracy Rector (Seminole), is a case in point. Rector brought her expertise in education to the organisation and was recognised with the National Association for Media Literacy Education Award in 2009. Long House has fostered a long line of indigenous filmmakers, including one current group that is making a full-length film adaptation of the James Welch (Gros Ventre) literary classic, *Winter in the Blood* (1986). Jake Honungawa and Deidra Peaches worked on this film in Montana in 2011 after each, respectively, concluded a prestigious and competitive internship with the headquarters of Long House in Seattle. Prior to this, Deidra Peaches participated in the 2008 SuperFly Filmmaking Experience in Seattle, and Jake Honungawa mentored at the 2009 SuperFly and reservation-based programs. Jake characterises these experiences in Longhouse's promotional material: "Working with Longhouse Media as a mentor in filmmaking has given me a greater perspective on being a member in my own Native community and Native lifestyle forgotten to some; however, reclaimed by a few" (Longhouse Media 2011). When I asked him about his work there, he chose to focus on a reservation in Idaho. "When we were in Idaho working with Longhouse Media, I met a kid who liked cameras and I was able to help him learn more, to get into it more. Kinda just to inspire him to keep going with it." Not surprisingly, the technical side of the process is what interests Honungawa most. Similarly, Donovan Seschillie noted that, compared to OYBM's emphasis on activism, "At Longhouse it's more about the filmmaking process" (ibid.).



The first video that grabbed my attention on OYBM's YouTube channel was a delightful short film, *Real Love*, (2007) directed by Deidra Peaches.<sup>4</sup> *Real Love* features characters in paper bag masks engaged in a romantic plot where love is desired, earned, lost, spurned, desired and earned again, all without dialogue. Filmed in a rich, sumptuous saturation of colour, it's set to the extra-diegetic Beatles' song "Real Love." This 3:51 minute film is a showcase for technical skill and thwarts viewer's expectation that identities will be revealed. Through alterations to the drawn-on faces, viewers watch the shifting emotions of characters in love, particularly as the primary male character's emotions shift from attraction to despair when competition throws his surety into question. Eventually, this despairing protagonist sees a new love interest. It begins raining, but the rain signals possibility and regeneration. Pink and red paper hearts start falling during the rain-shower. They walk hand in hand, run, play on the merry-go-round, talk, and laugh, as The Beatles track continues to repeat, "It's real love ..." "My thoughts having paper bags on the characters' heads," Deidra explained to me, "was to provide no distinguishing features of race or of different colour skin. Everyone was pretty much the same. And I wanted to show that emotions run the same, too, within all races. It wasn't pinpointing a certain race. I could've had people not wear the paper bags, but it wouldn't have had the same effect. But showing that similarities between people, the emotions—we all experience love, we all experience hate, we all experience fear—those are the themes I wanted to portray in the film."

When I brought up the response of one of my student viewers who asked me how this short was a "Native Film", Deidra responded, "I know one thing I would say before answering is to ask the question, 'What is Native film?' And there's no definition saying what Native

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/outtayourbackpack>

film is. I think this question falls into the same category. You could be non-Native making a film about Natives and would it be called a Native film? I think it's just as limitless as the video itself. That's why there's no dialogue in the film. It's all open to the audience's interpretation." I asked Jake and Donovan about their responses, too. Donovan said, "I just laugh. I think it's a stupid question. I think it comes from what they expect Native films will be." When asked about who their intended audience is, Deidra, Donovan and Jake are pretty consistent as well. Deidra, notes, for example, "Some of the Navajo filmmakers are just making films for other Navajos. We try to avoid that with our films. [We're going for] an emotional connection that all people share" (Seschillie 2010).

In summer 2010, in the offices of Native American Student Services at my university, Northern Arizona University, I saw a rough-cut of two of their then-recent films and finally had a chance to connect with these three talented and generous filmmakers. Deidra was still editing her very own film *Shimasani* (2009)—remember, that's Navajo for maternal grandmother—a movie about Lilly Manygoats, though it had debuted in 2009 at the Imaginative Film Festival in Toronto. At 3:43 minutes, *Shimasani* might seem completely different from *Real Love* (2007) in its exposure of a specific individual and her cultural inheritance. Strikingly, Deidra's grandmother's face is not once shown; viewers come to know her through her hands and her voice—speaking Navajo—and the objects in her home the camera lingers on while she speaks. The faces of grandchildren enjoying her cooking and the focus on daily rituals—from morning prayers, to work with her sheep, to butchering, as well as the beautiful land that cradles her existence—underscore for viewers the impact of her beliefs and teachings.

A string instrument soundtrack imbues the film with a serious, but not too dark, tone. In the first seconds of the film, the dawn's light displays the grandmother's hands sprinkling pollen: "You must always have your corn pollen. You pray, 'I walk in beauty at dawn' and that is what you live by. That is what you call LIFE and that is how you pray" (*Shimasani* 2008). Her words are matched by the camera panning over the red cliffs still in shadow, the sun not yet up over the horizon in the east. The camera then follows grandmother into her home and, as she talks about daily activities, we see up-close objects in her. Among other things, we see smoke coming from a chimney, a straw broom brush, a basket of fresh corn, tied dried corn, wedding baskets, images of Indian buffalo hunters, horse figurines, the grandmother's hands, sheep, herding dogs, a cornfield, butchering sheep, roasting mutton, and several methods of cooking corn. "You can cook corn in many different ways [close up of fire]. For example, dry corn to cook with soup or kneel down bread, for example this is what my late grandmother taught me." Viewers learn that the everyday ways of life for the grandmother play in and out between prayer and ceremonial life. Directly after her advice for cooking corn, she continues, "The ceremonies and prayers help you children think clearly. And live in harmony. Even if they live far away from home, ceremonies and prayers will keep them protected while they're travelling. That way they remember where home is. That is always why you should have a cornfield and sheep. That's what you eat to survive. When we butcher the sheep and cook the meat it will taste delicious." Viewers can't help but note Jake Honungawa's fluid, beautiful cinematography. The expert control of tone and emotions further supports the filmmaker's appreciation and validation of her grandmother, and her beauty and wisdom.

Equally commendable is Deidra's willingness to include her grandmother's lament about the generational divide that exists due to

the decline of Navajo speakers: “It’s kind of difficult and frustrating I think when your grandchildren don’t speak the Navajo language and you’re not able to understand each other. It’s very difficult when your grandchildren only know one language (English). You want to talk to them but you’re not able to.” (*Shimasani* 2008) Here, through wise tonal editing decisions, the camera focuses on corral fences used for butchering. Peaches’ grandmother continues, “If they understood Navajo it would be good for them. I would be able to teach them. If they spoke both spoke Navajo and English well it would be wonderful.” The eloquence and simplicity of the choices Peaches has made serves as a clear reminder to viewers that grandmother and granddaughter might share the same knowledge and values, even though the medium may no longer be the Navajo language. The concluding shot of the film is the same as the opening scene: the grandmother surveys the landscape, but this time the evening light is directed from the west. The cinematographer and director—from on site and in the editing room—encourage us to direct our attention to where the grandmother is looking.

When I asked Deidra the official title of her movie—it was untitled when I first saw it, and unlabeled in the cut she leant me—she smiled and said, “I call it ‘Shimasani, the Grandma Documentary,’ just to confuse people” (Seschillie 2010). This struck me as an outright nod to the generic expectation of the type of film she might make. Of course her use of the definite article “the” also makes me think it’s her fulfillment of the burden of expectation: Okay, I’ve done it. Here is the movie you expect me to make.

Regarding questions about filmmaking and its intersection with culturally relevant materials, Jake explains that from the Hopi perspective (the culture in which he was raised, though he is also Diné), tribally specific values are a way of life. “You’d have to dedicate

your entire day to rituals and beliefs—I try not to bring that into my filmmaking... Hopi culture is really enclosed and they don't want to bring their culture out into the world too much. I guess I can respect that as well. I see first-hand wanting to go there and make a film. The village elders told me never to go down in the village and make a film. And, I gotta respect that from now on" (Seschillie 2010). By contrast, during the interviews, Deidra said, "with me, a lot of culture goes into it, even though I don't practice the culture. It's about my relatives and the people I've grown up with have suffered from boarding schools, suffered from relocation, suffered from not having resources that people outside of the reservation have. I think as a filmmaker, I want to show that different perspective on life, that perspective of not having a lot, that perspective of not having a lot of amenities that we might take for granted. People who live off the reservation have access to water, easy transportation, all of these things that people who live off the reservation have readily available. What I like to portray is that people don't have all of these things accessible to them... I think visual filmmaking is a way of showing audiences that this is happening. As a filmmaker, and as a Navajo person, I have every right to show that and that is really important right now and that is my contribution" (Seschillie 2010). All of these are social justice issues linked to her community today and imbricated in colonial legacies, and not necessarily cultural traditions that she feels compelled to project to the world.

In my discussions with Deidra, Donovan, and Jake, it is very clear that the driving force behind their work is their artistic ambition of producing, on a technical level, the very best films, and that are also available to all audiences. Jake shared with me his primary obligation and motivation: "It's the overall creativity, all the technical aspects that go into it. That's all really fun to me. Getting to learn all the different tools. Just writing your own stories as well. It doesn't have to be about

Navajo or comedy, just going off on personal experiences. There are funny times living with my parents and grandparents. There are sad times too, gotta bring those out too. A lot of our personal narratives for now” (Seschillie 2010).

Without a doubt, their recent film, *Rocket Boy* (2010), has been their greatest collaborative success. It was accepted by the short film division of the Sundance Festival, chosen as one of only sixty films out of 650 submissions, and they are, to date, the youngest Native filmmakers to have their work accepted. I’ll never forget the moment when, on December 6, 2010, I received a phone call from Deidra: “Jeff... We got into Sundance!! We can’t believe it! We found out 15 minutes ago!” In addition to Sundance, their film has been shown at numerous festivals, including the Smithsonian Native American Film + Video Biennale where *Rocket Boy* featured prominently in their 2011 promo reel.

This success was slowly earned. Donovan explains, “We entered *Rocket Boy* into a lot of Native film festivals and it got denied and it surprised lots of people. We went to Santa Fe and we told people that ImagiNation, one of the biggest film festivals in Canada, didn’t accept *Rocket Boy*. Also San Francisco American Indian Film Festival rejected it. We did show in Santa Fe. I joke we should’ve added in some flute music... I guess our film is out of the market. So many of the films in the program are socially oriented, for example, water rights, stories about pow-wows, families, and then there’s this film about a rocket boy by Native Americans about a little boy who has this ambition of going to space. It’s very stylised and is science fiction and doesn’t really match with the program” (Seschillie 2010). The filmmakers never receive specific details about the evaluation process, so they can only read between the lines when considering the other work accepted for the festivals. Specific selection criteria at all the festivals—from the

ones in San Francisco, Santa Fe, Toronto, and the Smithsonian—are nonexistent and filmmakers are judged in certain generic categories and on quality alone, although the Smithsonian Native American Film + Video Biennale has a roster of categories that must be checked, presumably to help organise programming. But, one wonders how it might set some implicit standards: filmmakers must not be Native, the films must have a “Native vision” and be produced in North, Central, and South America and Hawai’i. Three major subjects must also be chosen and they include such categories as Activism, Sovereignty, Water Rights, Health, Environment, Urban Life, Community, Traditional Values, Cultural Preservation, Reservation Life, Substance Abuse, Language, Love, Humor/Irony, and Identity, among many other topics, many of which might be hard to apply to a film such as *Rocket Boy*.

*Rocket Boy* is an elegiac film, in the vein of Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.* (1982), focusing on the power of the imagination when fueled by need and desire. It does not connect in any obvious ways to Deidra’s outline of her political aims as a filmmaker. It originated in an earlier short film titled *Imagine* (2007) and focused on the freedom and empowerment that come from creativity, and in this way, perhaps a link can be made to Deidra’s characterisation of her filmmaking interests. The film’s narrative follows the plans of an 8-year old boy, Calvin, and his quest to build a rocket to reunite with his long-gone father. The fifteen-minute short features minimal dialogue. We hear Calvin’s mother attempting to rationalise with him and remind him that his father is deceased, and, through an imagined flashback, we hear Calvin’s father say goodbye to his infant son. Calvin himself utters only one line, “I just want to be happy.”

The movie opens with a shot of foil-covered stars dangling from a ceiling slowly transitioning to an unknown figure, masked by a space

helmet, staring out of a window. Viewers follow him as he soon thereafter races his bike through a generic, but upper-middle-class subdivision, with lush manicured lawns and irrigation sprinklers. The smooth, expert riding matches the soundtrack—an original song commissioned by the filmmakers (which cost the bulk of the film's \$600 budget). A pensive, tonally upbeat melody featuring piano and violin, builds some tension, but mainly establishes a mysterious, but positive mood. The idyllic, peaceful suburban landscape is further reinforced by the camera's framing of the protagonist by the arced jets of lawn sprinklers irrigating lush green lawns. There is nothing interrupting the protagonist's ride as he glides effortlessly, yet with purpose, through the winding, traffic-less streets.

After this initial scene, we see the protagonist, still clad in a helmet, enter his house and climb the stairs. As he walks toward the camera, just as he removes his helmet, the camera blurs his face in the background to sharpen the focus on a hanging foil star in the foreground. As he moves closer to the star, his face comes into focus. It's not until almost five minutes in that viewers see Calvin's unobstructed face, his father and mother, and then potentially identify the characters as Native. I draw attention to the filmmakers' clear interests in eschewing what might be considered familiar filmic markers of Indigeneity in the first five minutes of this 15-minute film. This is especially the case in the context of U.S.-produced movies featuring Native people. They are usually set on reservations, where familiar, often rural landscapes provide context and narrative foreground and background. This film is set in a new subdivision with homes typically recognised as upper-middle class. But, how can I say that this film is not marked by other markers of indigeneity? An observant viewer familiar with tribally connected surnames in the Southwestern United States, of course, would have noted the surnames of many of those involved in the making of the film. Thus,



the title script, the printed word itself, would inscribe Native people as the producers, cinematographers, editors, directors, and screenwriters accountable for the film's creation and existence. Further conditioning most viewers' reception of the film would be the context of its showing/viewing. Film festivals, workshops, prize committees, even informal showings by filmmakers, all announce its status as a film made by Navajo and Navajo-Hopi individuals. I mention these facets to suggest a "re-framing" of indigeneity, a claim of Indigeneity that operates through refusal and a distancing from prior modes. This is true in terms of the setting in the subdivision as well and makes a profound claim though only indirectly: Native people are everywhere, Native people, at least these characters, live in new homes. How or why the mother and son live there is not the question (though apparently some festival-goers had questions about whether or not any of the filmmakers lived there). In sum, the erasure or elimination of older, stereotypical filmic references allows a new form of Indigeneity to emerge.

Returning to this initial "reveal" of Calvin's face, as soon as we see the dissolve-focus associating Calvin and stars, the camera offers viewers an extreme close-up of his brown pupil. A subjective shot of the close-up eye switches to an aluminum foiled star dangling from the ceiling followed by a fade to black. Calvin's view of the stars transitions us to a memory: silence and darkness dissolves to a twilight or dawn-lit scene where we see a man holding an infant in front of what looks like the very same window viewers first saw the protagonist staring out. "Calvin, I love you so much son. But I can't take care of you... I can't offer you the life your mother wanted, but I want a better life for you. I'll always love you son, and I'll always be there for you. Remember me" (*Shimasani* 2008). A zoom-in shot shows the infant Calvin alone, in close-up.

This close-up is matched by a medium close-up of a woman, whom viewers presume to be Calvin's mother. Troubled and saddened, she burns a photograph of this same man, an act which can have multiple meanings, as the backstory is only indirectly revealed through the tension between the mother and son regarding his memories—perhaps imaginative inventions—and her knowledge of Calvin's real father. This scene with the mother transitions to an exquisitely shot scene—in terms of lighting and detail—in Calvin's room where viewers see photographs of Calvin's father attached to foil stars hanging from his ceiling. The camera scans a wall filled with intricate drawings and a child's blueprints for building a rocket ship. Calvin sleeps surrounded by this mythic dream of space travel and the myth he has constructed about his lost father.

In the next scene—in his dream, the next morning—he dons his space suit worn during the opening sequence, grabs a photograph of his father, and uncovers something in his garage. In darkness, Calvin enters, flips a switch and viewers see before him a lit up control panel with a start-switch for which we had previously seen designs in the boy's room. On the video monitor, viewers see images of his missing father as if the machine has been programmed to locate him. This moment of magical wonder is interrupted by Calvin's flashback of his mother. In close-up, as if she were sitting across from her son at the kitchen table, his mother says, rather harshly, "You're trying to say you want to leave me? That's not gonna happen, you want to know why? Cuz your dad's dead. That's why. What makes you think he'll come back anyway?" To which Calvin responds, "I just want you to be happy." "We're not always happy, Calvin. We pretend to be. That's what you're doing. Nothing else," his mother responds. This reality-check is furthered in the subsequent scene—still in flashback, presumably—when viewers see Calvin in his room, sketching plans, looking at his father in wrinkled, perhaps recovered, photographs. In

voiceover we hear his mother telling him, “Put those away, I don’t want to see them again.” In a transition to another brief memory we hear Calvin’s mother try to use some of his reasoning about space travel: “Once you’re in space, I won’t be there to protect you, will I. Do you see me? I’m the light. And your father is the darkness.” She’s gentle, yet firm. In the subsequent segment we see the mother’s private anguish in her bedroom, later transformed into love and care when she enters Calvin’s room and tenderly caresses her son’s head and back.

An image of a foil-covered star brings viewers back to scene with Calvin in his rocket ship. He presses the launch button and viewers see the control board light up, rumble, and we see a montage of images of father and infant. The instrumental soundtrack crescendos, intensifying the mood, and then it calms down and the camera zooms in on a photograph, blocking out the shaking wires, control panels, and most of the flashing lights. Viewers see an empty cockpit and a lone photograph of a grinning man looking down at his infant. This shot dissolves into blackness and then transitions to an abstract scene of lightness where slowly, incredibly slowly, viewers see a foil star come into focus, something Calvin had looked at everyday alongside his rocket designs. The credits roll after the star fades to black. The deliberate ambiguity and refusal of closure underscores the sophisticated storytelling at work in this film. Perhaps Calvin has found, through ingenuity, the means to recover his lost father, perhaps Calvin hangs on to false versions of his past, illusions that will jeopardise him in the future, perhaps Calvin learns the hard lesson that his desires and dreams can’t alter the past and decisions made by adults.

In general, the three partners of Paper Rocket Productions feel little obligation to fulfill audience expectations, though they expect to be

confronted with questions about theme and subject matter as it intersects with their subject positions. Some readings are shrugged off. As Jake says, “Take what you want. I guess I think if you don’t like something, then so be it. I can’t change you or what you expect.” While some comments are given serious thought: “One older man at our New York City screening [of *Rocket Boy*] said that film’s theme was clearly Native American since it is fundamentally about loss.” Donovan, *Rocket Boy*’s director told me, “That’s interesting. I hadn’t thought of that before.” When pressed, neither Donovan, Deidra, nor Jake would necessarily say they bought that notion, but were intrigued that this viewer found that particular meaning. Rather than validate this or other interpretations, each would rather talk about how the film exhibits their technical skill. Deidra has grown more confident about editing and tone, Donovan is proud of camera composition and lighting and the way “still, very subtle movements amplify[ied] emotion,” and Jake speaks about the intersection of set building, realism, and the visual artifice of cinematography (Seschillie 2010).

Does an analysis of this film—or their technical commentary on their experiences—help us figure out how the filmmakers are negotiating indigenous identity? It does insofar as it stakes a claim for the sovereignty of the imagination, of the right to tell any story, in the way it resists the codified notions (especially in film and much scholarship) that culture and indigeneity is unchanging and uniform, if not univocal in its expressive vision. In this regard, culture in the guise of tradition or traditionalism can become a limiting and a predictable force in determining so-called authentic versions of representing, embodying, and realising Indigeneity. In fact, as Martin Nakata points out, “As the central representational element, culture has a constitution with acceptable/unacceptable definitions that provide the State a standard/norm to either reward or penalise. Furthermore, culture is important for the State because it sets up a public knowledge

where individuals may self-regulate their own behaviours (e.g., internalising culture as a the rudimentary premise for viewing and solving problems)” (1993, 343).

How does this affect the creative vision of filmmakers? Well, if “Culture” or “Traditionalism” become determining factors in developing narratives, themes, and perspectives for film projects, and if static notions of culture and tradition are the guides, albeit developed by non-indigenous peoples, then the products are not necessarily free expressions of indigenous identity and vision, but recapitulations to settler colonialist social vision. Much of this linkage between indigene and Native is directed from the field of colonial power, but potentially, if not inevitably, becomes an internalised controlling legacy difficult to break. And the process is recursive. Marcia Langton, in an essay on Indigenous Australian film and art, notes, that, in fact:

“Aboriginality,” therefore is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation, and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create “Aboriginalities,” so that, in the infinite array of intercultural experiences, there might be said to be three broad categories of cultural and textual construction of “Aboriginality”: first, that emerging from closed, Aboriginal-only social situations; second, the creation of “Aboriginal” stereotypes, iconography, and mythologies established by Anglo-Australians with no dialogue with Indigenous Australians; and third, those notions growing out of “actual dialogues between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people” (2003, 120).

Well-known Spokane/Coeur d’Alene author, puts it more colloquially, “In my dictionary, ‘Indian’ and ‘nostalgic’ are synonyms” (Thiel 2004). For Alexie this explains why non-Native people continue to be racist, ignorant, and naïve about contemporary indigenous people. But

Alexie continues, further suggesting the nostalgic underpinnings of internalised colonialism: “As colonized people, I think we’re always looking to the past for some real and imaginary sense of purity and authenticity” (Thiel 2004).

*Rocket Boy* refuses this nostalgia—as does *Real Love*—and instantiates the very sort of inter-subjective dialogues Langton refers to that might bring all of us to new understandings of nascent, emerging, and vibrant Indigeneities. And, while *Shimasani* honors her grandmother’s culture, the filmmaker never once holds it as the model she must emulate. Hip filmmaker that Deidra Peaches is, you would never mistake her love and admiration for her grandmother for her wish to be her grandma, or her sense of obligation to be like her. Quite the opposite. So, the value of a film such as *Rocket Boy* is also this: that it stands alongside other works by the very same filmmakers as potential disruptions of a long circuit of expectations, including those that film festival boards might uphold. Ultimately, Deidra and her partners recognise that the real key to building an audience base, particularly a Native or Diné audience base rests in refusing to recapitulate to nostalgic portraits of capital—C “culture,” culture as it has been used to control, culture as it has been internalised to regulate. When asked how a larger and younger audience base can be fostered, rather than looking for more support from the Navajo Nation—as suggested by one scholar<sup>5</sup>—Deidra puts the onus on filmmakers,

---

<sup>5</sup> Lewis suggests this body of film will only flourish if a local audience base is developed and he suggests the Navajo Nation itself make a greater effort to support filmmaking initiatives. Taking his theoretical cues from postcolonial interrogations of nationalism, but acknowledging the power of the formation of national canons of film, Lewis simplistically summarises commonalities among all of the films, laying out, I would argue, problematically, a superstructure for anything identified as Navajo film: “Again and again, as I watched these often hard-to-find titles, I saw filmmakers commenting on the preservation or

thinking that the Nation would be its own regulatory force dictating its vision of culturally relevant narratives: “I think there’s no appeal for the younger generation in these stories. It’s all traditional based, based on tradition and culture. In order to create a film, it needs to be based on the youth. Even the water rights, they leave the youth out, leave us out. If you want to make a successful film, you need to bring in the youth.” Don jumps in, “Yeah, if you shove traditional things, people may shut down.” To which Deidra responds with laughter, “I see movies to get away from all that...” (Seschillie 2010).

## References

- Benally, K. and S. Ray. Visit to Jeff Berglund’s English 345 class, Northern Arizona University. 2 Feb. 2009.
- Deger, J. *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006..
- Emerson, R and M. Henry, et al. ‘New Mexico Filmmakers: A Roundtable.’ Native American Literature Symposium. Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico. 18 Mar. 2011.
- Horse You See*. Dir. Melissa Henry. Red Ant Films, 2007. Film.
- Imagine*. Dir. Deidra Peaches. 2007. Film.

---

restoration of familial ties, cultural continuity, Native language, individual wellness, and tribal land. The last is crucial—as descendants of a dispossessed people (at least for portions of their history), Navajo filmmakers are understandably concerned with the politics of geography. Many of them have demonstrated a powerful awareness of their ancestral landscape and use its unique features as vital elements in their work. Similarly, many of them share an emphasis on negotiating past and present, tradition and modernity, in a manner that pushes them toward narratives of homecoming, some successful, some not” (53).

- In the Footsteps of Yellow Woman*. Dir. Camille Manybeads Tso. 2009. Film.
- Langton, M. 'Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics Of Representation.' In *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, edited by Michele Grossman. Carlton: Melbourne UP, 2003.
- Lewis, R. 'The New Navajo Cinema: Cinema and Nation in the Indigenous Southwest.' *The Velvet Light Trap* 66 (2010): 50-61.
- Longhouse Media. Accessed 31 Oct. 2011.  
<http://www.longhousemedia.org/>.
- Nakata, M. 'Culture in Education: For Us or for Them?' Eds. N. Loos & T. Osanai. *Indigenous Minorities and Education: Australian and Japanese Perspectives of Their Indigenous Peoples, the Ainu, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*. Tokyo: San-You-Sha, 1993. 334-349.
- Navajo Talking Picture*. Dir. Arlene Bowman. 1985.
- Outta Your Backpack Media. Accessed 31 Oct. 2011. <http://oybm.org/>.
- Real Love*. Dir. Donovan Seschillie and Deidra Peaches. 2007. Film.
- Rocket Boy*. Dir. Donovan Seschillie. Paper Rocket Productions, 2010. Film.
- Seschillie, D., Peaches, D. and J. Hoyungowa. Personal interview. 11 Oct. 2010.
- Shimásání*. Dir. Blackhorse Lowe. Másání. 2009. Film.
- Shimasani*. Dir. Deidra Peaches. 2008. Film.
- Thiel, D. "A Conversation with Sherman Alexie." *Crossroads* 61 (2004). Accessed at  
<http://www.poetrysociety.org/journal/articles/salexie.html>
- Worth, S. and J. Adair. *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.