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Abstract

In struggles for political and cultural recognition many Indigenous groups employ visual media to make their concerns heard. Amongst these various channels for media activism are Indigenous film festivals which, in the words of festival coordinator Amalia Córdova, work to convey ‘a sense of solidarity with Indigenous struggles’. Córdova’s essay on Indigenous film festivals appears in the collection *Film Festivals and Activism* (2012). In the introduction to the collection co-editor Leshu Torchin writes about activist festivals as *testimonial encounters* or *fields of witnessing* where the films offer testimony and the audiences serve as *witnessing publics*, ‘viewers [who] take responsibility for what they have seen and become ready to respond’. To better understand how Indigenous film festivals embody these activist imperatives as *eco-activism* I consider the case of the 2011 Native American Film and Video Festival (NAFVF) with its special eco-themed focus Mother Earth in Crisis.

In my analysis of NAFVF I consider both the testimonies of the films and the festival context in which they are placed; by doing so I add to the growing scholarship in ecocinema studies which within the last ten years has become a legitimate and crucial aspect of ecocriticism’s purview – though surprisingly, with little attention devoted to film festivals. Through this analysis, by articulating what I term the *oblique* testimony, I argue that Indigenous film festivals are often strongly reflective of the environmental concerns and hopes of Native peoples and suggest ecological engagements that place them in the terrain of environmental film festivals. [excerpt]

Keywords

Native Film and Video Festival, Indigenous Film Festivals

Disciplines

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In struggles for political and cultural recognition many Indigenous groups employ visual media to make their concerns heard. Amongst these various channels for media activism are Indigenous film festivals which, in the words of festival coordinator Amalia Córdova, work to convey ‘a sense of solidarity with Indigenous struggles’.[1] Córdova’s essay on Indigenous film festivals appears in the collection *Film Festivals and Activism* (2012). In the introduction to the collection co-editor Leshu Torchin writes about activist festivals as *testimonial encounters* or *fields of witnessing* where the films offer testimony and the audiences serve as *witnessing publics*, ‘viewers [who] take responsibility for what they have seen and become ready to respond’.[2] To better understand how Indigenous film festivals embody these activist imperatives as *eco-activism* I consider the case of the 2011 Native American Film and Video Festival (NAFVF) with its special eco-themed focus *Mother Earth in Crisis*.

In my analysis of NAFVF I consider both the testimonies of the films and the festival context in which they are placed; by doing so I add to the growing scholarship in ecocinema studies which within the last ten years has become a legitimate and crucial aspect of ecocriticism’s purview – though surprisingly, with little attention devoted to film festivals.[3] Through this analysis, by articulating what I term the *oblique* testimony, I argue that Indigenous film festivals are often strongly reflective of the environmental concerns and hopes of Native peoples and suggest ecological engagements that place them in the terrain of environmental film festivals.

The festival context: Testimonial archive

Since its inception in 1979 NAFVF has been hosted either biennially or triennially (depending on the logistics of staffing and funding). Based in New York City, which has one of the nation’s largest Native American urban populations,[4] the festival is an initiative of the Film and Video Center, currently sponsored by the United States Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). The festival follows its parent organisation’s mission: to create a space for Native American media ‘to combat stereotypes, to address an information gap in non-native society, and to reinforce the cultural heritage of the community’.[5] One might argue in the terms outlined by Bhaskar Sarkar and

Janet Walker in their collection *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (2010) that NAFVF thus serves as a 'testimonial archive' or a place where the Native American community can both voice and record their own experiences of suffering *and* healing (past and present) for both native and non-native audiences alike.[6]

Over the years NAFVF has become a hub in the Indigenous film festival circuit along with festivals such as the American Indian Film Festival and at least 64 others located worldwide.[7] The selection of films at NAFVF is limited to the Americas, in keeping with its title and the general mission of the National Museum of the American Indian; however, the festival also accepts non-Indigenous productions. The program selection is framed by the belief that the 'dignified treatment of Indigenous themes' may outweigh 'Indigenous authorship'.[8] In four days, the 2011 festival showcased 100 films selected from more than 400 submitted, including work produced by both natives and non-natives.

NAFVF organisers use common threads in the submissions to help guide festival themes.[9] An overwhelming majority of films submitted for the 2011 festival depicted environmental struggles, leading to the special thematic focus Mother Earth in Crisis. In articulating this focus participants from across the Americas came together to share their stories.[10] The festival was open to the public and along with approximately 100 invited filmmakers drew both native and non-native audiences.

In creating the program the organisers planned a special afternoon symposium composed of films and a panel discussion about Indigenous struggles around rivers. Besides this eco-activist symposium the festival as a whole was replete with films that explicitly addressed environmental concerns; it also included films that are not as easy to shoehorn into traditional environmental categories, highlighting instead social themes such as language loss, violence against women, alcohol use, and generational misunderstandings. However, festival director Elizabeth Weatherford acknowledged that an environmental consciousness is often simmering below the surface of many of these films as well.[11] To better understand how these films forward eco-activism we can consider their modes of testimony. While the more explicitly eco-focused films of the symposium and festival work with testimonies that conjure powerful imagery of what one might call the 'ecological Indian' in his or her various guises, many other films offer *oblique* testimonies that are important to consider.

Forms of eco-testimony: From explicit to implicit eco-imaginings

Testimony, as Shoshana Felman writes, occurs 'when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt, and when both truth and its supporting materials are called into question'.[12] The NAFVF 2011 program included many films with protagonists that testify to the sufferings and resilience of traditionally marginalised communities. However, when one considers the notion of the eco-testimony the person relating it and the manner in which they do so can be broadly categorised into four types: three reference the trope of the ecological Indian in different ways, one absents it completely. Each category of testifier orients a particular eco-activist imperative which in turn serves to engage the NAFVF audience in various ways.

The ecological Indian is a historically significant trope that speaks to Indigenous relationships with nature which are based on traditions of respect and reciprocity; the most common and controversial representation is in what one can term the 'white celebrity testimony'. A large amount of scholarship points to how Western celebrities have appropriated this trope in popular culture to fulfill white fantasies

of primitivism and escape from modernism.[13] Not surprisingly, there are a few instances of such testimonies at the festival, for example James Cameron's *A Message from Pandora* (2009). The central focus of this 20-minute documentary is Cameron, not the Indigenous people of the threatened Xingu river basin in Brasil; he is their heroic yet humble spokesman. Despite this 'white man savior' persona many understand how such celebrity power can and does work to draw attention to Indigenous concerns even though it might stereotype Indigenous people as exotic primitives.[14]

More typically the festival films foreground Indigenous testifiers where the imagery of the ecological Indian is not appropriated by white voices. Control of the ecological Indian primarily occurs in two ways: through presenting testimonies of traditional elders coupled with the visual presence of Indigenous film producers (e.g. the shorts *Elderly Words: Who's Threatening the Water?* and *How Did We Do Elderly Words?*); and by engaging testimonies of 'modern' indigenous spokespersons – i.e. plain-clothed, educated natives (e.g., *Down the Mighty River*). As a variety of Indigenous media scholars have written, using modernity's tools while respecting traditional ways speaks powerfully to the dynamism of Indigenous culture.[15] Such technological know-how juxtaposed with traditionalism re-casts the white celebrity testifier's stereotype of native peoples as rustic, victimised primitives and draws attention to complicated colonial histories that shape contemporary Indigenous responses to development.

Aside from these explicit testimonies of eco-activism the festival incorporates compelling forms of what I term *oblique* testimony. Articulated through the personal struggles of individuals caught in the hybrid spaces of Indigenous-colonial encounters, such films spotlight how eco-identity permeates Indigenous experience outside battles for environmental conservation and autonomy. An example of such testimony is *Wapawekka* (2010), a fictional short based on its Metis (Cree) filmmaker Danis Goulet's autobiographic reality. Goulet casts her cousin Josh Goulet, a hip-hop artist, and her father Keith Goulet to play a father and son on their last hunting trip before their northern Saskatchewan cabin is sold. The understated conflict is a comment on her own relationship with her father and the film is primarily a tale of generational tensions as the son clashes against his elders. Filmed along northern Saskatchewan's lakes, the film's setting is a key agent in Josh's changing emotions towards his father and traditional ways of living. Initially Josh appears impatient with traditional activities and being outdoors with his father. In contrast, he focuses on contemporary pastimes (such as listening to and creating hip-hop music). Goulet's repetition of exquisite long takes of the tranquil summer lake and surrounding woods from Josh's point-of-view as he accompanies his father prepares us for the denouement. On the verge of boarding the boat for their return trip Josh asks his dad to wait. He returns to shore near the cabin, bends down to touch the earth, and for the last time looks out at the panorama. His final actions confirm his love for this place and his potential investment in the ecological traditions that imbue his dad's life. Without being specifically about eco-struggle the film is an eloquent testimony to Indigenous eco-activism; it re-affirms the value of the land as a restorative site.

Many other films screened at the festival also affirm such oblique testimonies to ecological consciousness. Félix Lajeunesse and Paul Raphaël's (Inuit) *Tungijjuq* (2009) and Travis Shilling's (Ojibwe) *Bear Tung* (2010) draw from animistic, Indigenous traditions to comment on changing human/more-than-human relations. Jeff Barnaby's (Mi'kmaq) sci-fi film noir *File Under Miscellaneous* (2010) renders cultural annihilation through the literal metaphor of replacing Indigenous skin with white skin through facial surgery. The film presents a sharp testimony of eco-critique: does the body (a symbol of nature)

shape a man's socio-cultural acceptance? NAFVF is replete with such oblique testimonies, providing viewers a sense of how Indigenous identity can be intricately woven into ecological relations.

Conclusion: Indigenous film festival as environmental film festival

As Leshu Torchin indicates, the festival site expands the individual cinematic encounter through the presentation of many films screened together; panel discussions that follow the programmed films heighten this testimonial encounter. The Mother Earth symposium concluded with a panel featuring filmmakers and related activists interacting with moderator Tonya Gonnella Frichner (Onondaga), the founder of the American Indian Law Alliance and the North American representative to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. While Frichner framed the legal and political facts of explicit struggles against environmental exploitation of lands the panelists' repeated commentary on how such material exploitation is tied to cultural and social survival alerts viewers to other programmed clusters that are not explicit in their messages of environmental struggles but nonetheless strongly indicative of oblique eco-testimonies.

Ultimately, understanding Indigenous eco-activism both as deliberate, explicit testimonies against political environmental threats and as ingrained in narratives that celebrate and seek to reclaim traditional cultures and worldviews is an important task. This helps us consider how Indigenous film festivals can be classified as environmental film festivals. Other types of activist film festivals such as those focusing on human rights, local issues, or disabilities may similarly engage eco-concerns in oblique but nonetheless pervasive ways. As 21st century ecocriticism constantly reminds us, nature and culture are intertwined. Recognising this intricate relationship in non-explicit films showcased at many film festivals calls for understanding them as part of the eco-mediascape.

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[1] Amalia Cordova. 'Towards an Indigenous Film Festival Circuit' in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism* edited by Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012), p. 64.

[2] Leshu Torchin. 'Networked for Advocacy: Film Festivals and Activism' in *Film Festival Yearbook 4: Film Festivals and Activism* edited by Dina Iordanova and Leshu Torchin (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2012), pp. 2-3.

[3] Some of the recent overviews of research include Adrian Ivakhiv's 'Green Film Criticism and its Futures' in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 15, no. 2 (2008): 1-28; Paula Willoquet's (ed.) *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (Charlottesville: University

of Virginia, 2010); and Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt's (eds) *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (AFI Film Series) (New York: Routledge, 2012). The latter includes one chapter on film festivals, which is also referenced at the Film Festival Studies website with a handful of other articles on environmental film festivals (see <http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org/index.php/ffrn-bibliography/9-specialized-film-festivals/9-2-genre-based-festivals/9-2-d-social-concern-festivals/>).

[4] While western states are usually recognised as having large Native American populations urban centers such as New York City as well as the state of New York is home to over 100,000 individuals who identify as Native American (see 'American Indians by the Numbers', U.S. Census Data compiled by InfoPlease:<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/aihmccensus1.html>). See also Sabirah Abdus-Sabur's 'Native Americans say New Yorkers don't know enough about them', *Dollars and Sense* (2 June 2011): <https://blsciblogs.baruch.cuny.edu/dollarsandsense/2011/06/02/native-americans-say-new-yorkers-dont-know-enough-about-them/>.

[5] Elizabeth Weatherford and Emelia Suebert. *Native Americans on Film and Video*. 2 (New York: Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation, 1988), p. 8.

[6] Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker (eds). *Documentary Testimonies: Global Archives of Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 17.

[7] Córdova 2012, p. 69, p. 73.

[8] The quotes are from Cordova's statements about Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Cine y Comunicacion de los Pueblos Indigenas (or CLACPI) festivals hosted across Latin America, which I also see as applicable to NAFVF. Corinn Columpar makes a similar argument when describing indigenous films in her treatise *Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), pp. xi-xvii.

[9] Weatherford, personal communication, April 2012.

[10] Native Film and Video Festival (2011). The festival website is http://www.nativenetworks.si.edu/eng/blue/nafvf_11.html. References to all films cited in this review can also be found on the website.

[11] Weatherford, personal communication, April 2012.

[12] Shoshana Felman. 'Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching' in *In Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

[13] See for example Edward Buscombe's *Injuns! Native Americans in the Movies* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006); Shari Huhndorf's *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Fatimah Tobing-Rony's *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

[14] See Salma Monani's 'Evoking Sympathy and Empathy: The Ecological Indian and Indigenous Eco-Activism' in *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film* edited by Alexa Wiek von Mossner (Environmental Humanities Series. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, forthcoming in 2013). In this essay I make a similar argument about these films but approach them from a cognitive film theory angle where I consider their emotive orchestrations.

[15] Steven Leuthold. 'Native Media's Communities' in *Contemporary Native American Cultural Issues* edited by Duane Champagne (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press 1999), pp. 193-216. See also essays

in *Media Worlds* edited by Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Michelle Raheja's 'Reading Nanook's Smile: Visual Sovereignty, Indigenous Revisions of Ethnography, and Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)', *American Quarterly* 59.4 (2007): 1159-1187.