

# Film Quarterly

## DESIRE LINES: SKY HOPINKA'S UNDISCIPLINING OF VISION

Diana Flores Ruíz

**Movement, memory, and imagination** beget one another in the films of Sky Hopinka, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and descendant of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians. Expressionistic and experimental in form, Hopinka's work concerns the vitality of contemporary Indigenous experiences. His films mediate scenes of land, kin, and community through in-camera and postproduction manipulations. Hopinka frames the dynamism of present-day Indigenous life with both extant cultural texts and the latest iterations of how Indigenous people use them to create new cultural productions. Historical documents and recordings take root in an unfolding present, which in turn produce new resonances for present and future Indigenous audiences. Merging aesthetic inheritances of the essay film and the lyrical film, Hopinka's enunciated subjectivity keeps the scope of his works personal. And, as revealed in this article's postscript, Hopinka works alongside Alexandra Lazarowich, Adam Khalil, and Adam Piron in a media-making collective, COUSIN, which aims to support the artistic proliferation of many different Indigenous perspectives.

Across his moving-image practice—over a dozen short films, a new feature-length film, a growing number of installations, and across 16 mm film, digital video, still photography, multiscreen works, calligrams, and poetry—Hopinka has rerouted the possibilities of audiovisual relationships to place and time on his own terms. Any medium-specific analysis of his individual projects, however, would diminish his larger contributions to a multisensory, multimedia approach that deliberately undisciplines vision.

Hopinka's visual poetics use conceptually robust editing techniques to create space, forge relations, and merge multiple temporalities. His films favor nonsync and layered

sound designs, beguiling cross-fades, hypersaturations, extreme color inversions, and hypnotizing time lapses, in addition to many other techniques. From film to film, strategies for poetic envisionings of Indigenous life develop alongside the particularities of subject matter and source materials.

While these rich editorial moments might solicit a reaction through their arresting impressions, Hopinka's refractions also operate in more concrete ways during his filming. For example, in infrequent scenes of Native groups or gatherings, in which audiences don't get to have a sense of their relationship with Hopinka, he works with their images generously and protectively. The camera might linger while pointing down, be kept at a distance, adjust the focus to blur, or intermittently turn away from a dance or ritual. Hopinka uses these simple cinematographic moves as well as mesmerizing, technically complex postproduction effects to safeguard Indigenous peoples' images even while celebrating their presence.

Throughout Hopinka's films, variations of land inversions and superimpositions become novel ways to visually experience lands, skies, and waters in time. Hopinka's deft, rigorous attention to rhythm and pacing situates these seemingly simple formal moves in ways that allow viewers to linger briefly in these compositions, but not long enough to take them for granted.

Hopinka's films take up the anticolonial covenant of "shooting back," aesthetically and politically countering the historical terms and conditions through which cinema has represented Indigenous peoples and cultures.<sup>1</sup> Given a broad overview of his films, Hopinka's contributions to undoing the harms of dominant visual culture might be characterized by a nuanced double move. Through formal innovation, the films construct a poetic and expansive Native diegesis, a space where Indigenous presence, ways of thinking, and modes of relation do not have to account for settler legibility. Through this visual worldmaking, Hopinka's films critique cinema's historical complicity in settler colonial visual regimes, including ethnographic

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Hopinka's elliptical editing honors and safeguards powwow dancers, in *I'll Remember You*.

documentary and the accessorizing of landscapes in Westerns. Yet Hopinka displaces the centrality of whiteness in making such critiques. Hopinka “shoots back” by creating new visual grammars and foreclosing ways of seeing that were historically promulgated by extractive tendencies in cinema, ethnography, and art history. Hopinka cultivates the political edge of abstraction in his poetic approaches to the present and futures of Indigenous cultures.

## Transits of Survivance

What it means to be in transit is to be in motion, to exist liminally in the ungrievable spaces of suspicion and unintelligibility. To be in transit is to be made to move.

—Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*

In *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*, Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd examines how material and ideological settler structures of extraction rely upon yet strategically obscure the role of indigeneity. As she characterizes the reckoning of Indigenous dispossession and its wake, she notes “a difference between recovered and having never lost in the first place.”<sup>2</sup> For Byrd, it is historical

analysis that can make Indigenous peoples’ dispossessions perceptible against perpetual systemic denial.

Indigenous storytelling forms a connective tissue between the affective states of living and creating in spite of settler violence. Chippewa scholar Gerald Vizenor characterizes this work as “survivance”—that is, something that “goes beyond mere survival to acknowledge the dynamic and creative nature of Indigenous rhetoric.”<sup>3</sup> Survivance is an “active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.”<sup>4</sup>

Hopinka’s films enact just such a process of survivance. They operate beyond the spectacle of romanticized or trauma-centric pasts crystallized by popular cinema and histories of anthropological extraction. They do not shy away from the complexities of such histories’ enduring reach into the present, but their focus remains on Native experiences and perspectives.

## Moving through Language

Hopinka began making films around 2010, while he was studying Chinuk Wawa, a language from the lower Columbia River basin. As is the case with many Indigenous people,

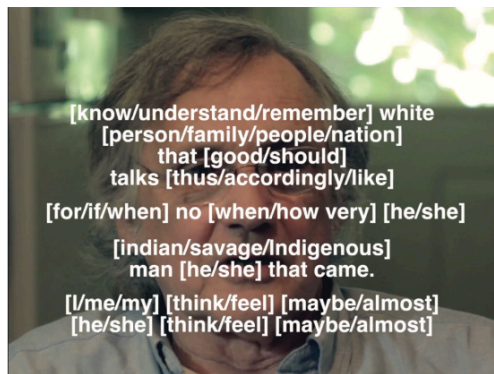
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Hopinka didn't grow up speaking his heritage Ho-Chunk or Luiseño languages. Born in the state of Washington, physically distant from his tribal lands in Wisconsin and Southern California, Hopinka turned to Chinuk Wawa when he was living in Portland, Oregon. He learned through "Where Are Your Keys?"—a set of language-acquisition techniques that draw on embodied gestures to cultivate an inviting, intuitive approach to learning.<sup>5</sup> "Where Are Your Keys?" moves beyond orthodox language pedagogies, lessening the focus on correct grammar structures.

Now a teacher of Chinuk Wawa himself, Hopinka gives the endangered language a material longevity through the production and exhibition of his films. Language revitalization is an active process, one that Hopinka treats with nuance. His films tease out the complexities with which Indigenous languages are (and are not) passed down or revived through techniques that he devises to extend questions about cultural heritage into the very mode of communication itself. In his films, Chinuk Wawa terms and narrations might remain untranslated into English, for example, yet when filming with friends, Hopinka does not impose pressure or make any assumptions about their speaking Indigenous languages. His first feature-length film, *matni – towards the ocean, towards the shore* (2020), models a generous method of working across and between Chinuk Wawa and English without ascribing more value or emotional heft to either. With few Chinuk Wawa interlocutors, Hopinka's methods of cinematic language revitalization often use historical documents repurposed for the present. Hopinka expands the circle of speakers with whom he can talk through creative uses of archival texts and recordings.

In one of his first short films, *wawa* (2014), Hopinka devised a formal structure to bring a thirty-year-old (at that time) recorded conversation to bear on present-day language lessons. In the film, Hopinka shows a close-up talking head from an interview he conducted with the white linguist Henry Zenk. Zenk provides a window into his early lessons and practice in Chinuk Wawa with Wilson Bobb, a Grand Ronde and Yakima Nation elder fluent in the language. Hopinka cuts to a red screen and narrates the English translation of Bobb's dialogue in a 1983 recording. Zenk's side of the conversation with Bobb is presented in English text on-screen, without Hopinka's voice.

The excerpts chosen by Hopinka attest to the affection developed in the men's friendship. Often playful, Bobb is encouraging of Zenk's then-novice practice: "You know, if you don't know how to say it, later on you will learn how," Bobb assures him. The transcript does not just record a practicum, but enacts language pedagogy itself. Hopinka's



Potential English translations appear over an interview with Chinuk Wawa linguist Henry Zenk in *wawa*

recasting of the transcript enhances the significance of the film's other scenes depicting a group language lesson and expressing the labor of language acquisition. In the final shot, Hopinka translates the word "*wawa*" to "talk/discourse/dialogue/murmur," and the film takes up the full range of language study, as done both individually and socially. In extreme close-up, Hopinka flips through a Chinuk Wawa dual-language guide and sounds out particular pronunciations over and over again. The private tedium of learning a new language in these shots is offset by the pleasure of language in practice with others.

The film then cuts to a scene of a group of people (including Hopinka) speaking Chinuk Wawa in the corner of a conference room in New York City. They pass the camera around to one another in their seated circle, and are shown mostly in medium and medium close-up shots. Patient and supportive, they listen to each other speak, nodding, gesticulating, and nonverbally communicating as others talk or pause to think, searching for words. It's a calm, easygoing atmosphere of putting the "Where Are Your Keys?" techniques into practice. Their conversation is not subtitled, and the audio of their conversation is mostly removed in favor of the interview recordings that play instead. As the film progresses, texts from these off-screen interviews begin to appear over the image, stacking from the bottom to the top of the screen. Gradually, layers of text and sound surge into the scenes, as text overlaps and fills the image with multiple meanings of the interviews' translations.

Hopinka's phonetic practice escalates into a rapid, nearly exasperated overload. It's difficult if not impossible to read all of the crowded text or distinguish each of the sonic layers playing simultaneously. The audio from the filmed interview with Zenk continues to play as the pacing



of the cuts increases, flashing between the group lesson and sped-up page turning. Throughout Hopinka's films, a formal reciprocity between aural and written language plays out through the image's capacity to hold information and shape stories. Sometimes this reciprocity is treated with ample contemplative space, but at other times, as in the collaged climax in *wawa*, it accumulates to a point of overwhelming intensity.

Toward the end of the film, Hopinka pierces through the frenzied audiovisual crescendo to issue an urgent testament to keep the language alive. The film goes silent and a close-up of Zenk, looking wistful and straight into the camera, is synchronized with his written words from the archival transcript: "There's no one to speak chinuk wawa with." Hopinka cuts to red again, for a longer duration, reading Bobb's response: "Just you and me. But, with the two of us just going on talking away, later on you will learn. You should say everything that you want to say, even if it's completely wrong. Say it. That's the way you'll learn it. You certainly will know it really well."

Hopinka could have concluded the excerpt there with this rousing call to move past hurdles and put language into practice. But Hopinka keeps reading. Through Hopinka's audiovisual mediation, Bobb says to Zenk, "You'll speak it so very straight, you won't be at all white." The film flashes to the group lesson with Hopinka centered in a trio, all making eye contact with the low-angled camera. It is over this shot that Bobb tells Zenk, "You'll be Indian." Bobb's words finish out the film, sealing the complicated intersections of language, culture, and identity that the film has implicitly raised throughout. This conclusion shifts the film into a more circular pattern, one in which language as a social relationship and language as a historical vector circumnavigate one another.

Bobb's comments resonate with the debates over the history of Chinuk Wawa's formation, which the film introduces through Zenk's interviews with him: a linguistic shift from "proper" to "jargon" as a result of white fur traders and settlers simplifying the Chinook language into a pidgin language. Elsewhere, Zenk and others have written about the development and spread of Chinuk Wawa prior to settler arrival as a shared language produced by different Native tribes of the lower Columbia River to facilitate communication.<sup>6</sup> Unlike many debates over origin, the popular use of Chinuk Wawa in the mid-nineteenth century is uncontested. The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde included over twenty-five dialects; they used Chinuk Wawa as a lingua franca—so much so that it became a first language for many growing up on Grand Ronde Community reservations.

As one of Hopinka's earliest films, *wawa* lays the groundwork for his practice of eschewing dominant forms of grammar in the service of immersive, lived uses of language. Hopinka constructs new schematics of cinematic and communicative grammars.

## Spaces of Visual Sovereignty

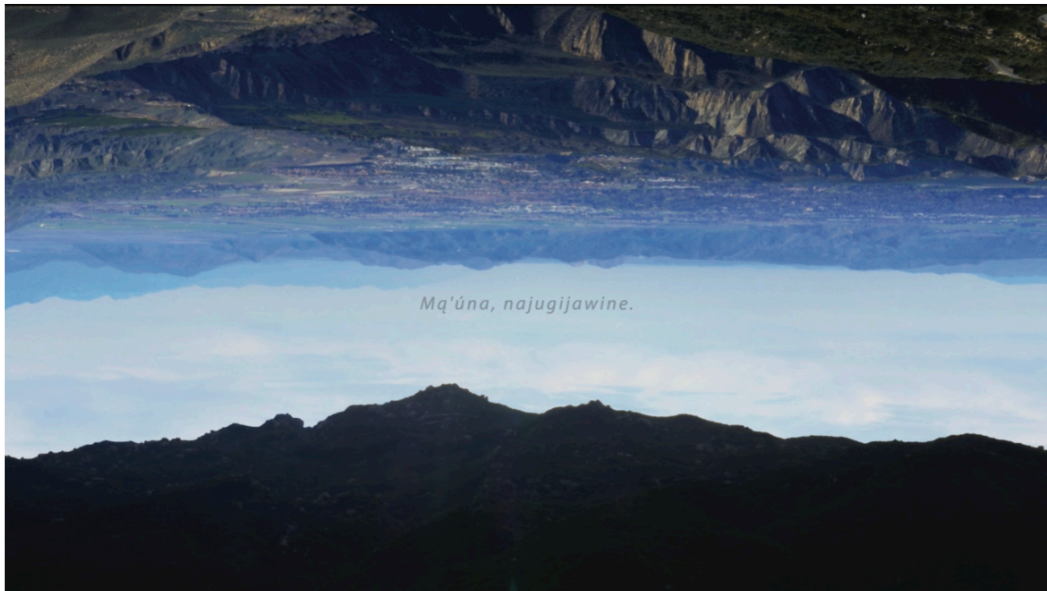
My choice to introduce Hopinka's films with *wawa* stems less from auteurism or chronology than from a critical determination to emphasize some of the formal terrain that his films traverse. To be sure, there is much to be said about the legacies of experimental and documentary filmmaking practices that inform his works and that he, in turn, innovates. Similarly, Hopinka's films offer visual anthropologists and art historians critical texts through which to reframe the historical representation of Indigenous people and/in place. Yet, although my position is that of a film and media scholar trained in such analyses, I worry that those analytic approaches limit the stakes of Hopinka's work.

Instead, I want to resist the academic proclivity to read Hopinka's work in ways that might ultimately recenter historical approaches to visuality within disciplines that have and continue to benefit from Indigenous dispossession within field-defining origin stories. Today, these historical academic disciplines are no longer monoliths: committed scholars redefining their fields continue to make progress. Fidelity to the self-sustaining bounds of particular disciplines, though, can risk instrumentalizing Hopinka's practice, incorporating a sliver of his cultural production into debates too often rooted in self-justification. However, I don't want to claim these films as a teleological defense, nor do I want to uplift particular fields of knowledge production. I am more interested in how Hopinka undisciplines sound and image in ways that exceed settler colonial taxonomies and hierarchies of perception, time, and place.

In *Jáaji Approx.* (2015), Hopinka continues his work with archival recordings in innovative ways. This time, they're even more personal than in *wawa*. He draws from decades of recordings of his father, or *Jáaji*, which translates into English as the direct-address form of "father." Hopinka's father was a Ho-Chunk powwow singer and drummer. In *Jáaji Approx.*, his recordings are played alongside and merged with static, handheld, and fixed moving images of the places and passages traveled independently by father and son. The film's awe-inspiring use of scale and superimposition in depicting views from the road make it tempting to invoke art historical discourses on the concept of landscapes.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, however, it is more generative to consider



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Ho-Chunk song lyrics, sung by Hopinka and his father, become part of the land in *Jáaji Approx.*

how the film opens up what Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts calls “Place-Thought,” which she defines as the “non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could nor can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts.”<sup>8</sup>

“Place-Thoughts” are layered in time, sound, and image. In *Jáaji Approx.*, Hopinka’s voice-over introductions to the recordings toy with a matter-of-fact delivery of information: whose recording it is, the date and time recorded. This narration sets up the expectation of consistency and measured distance in presenting recorded materials throughout the film. As soon as the recording machine first beeps, though, Hopinka inverts an image taken from the dashboard of a car on the open road. More than half of the image is a brilliant daytime sky above a cloud-covered mountain range in the far distance.

At the beep, his father begins to describe the intuitive interconnections and energetic choreography between a drumbeat, singers, dancers, audience, and traveling. Fused into the center of the image are phonetic subtitles of his father’s words, but after only a few, the film cuts to a handheld shot in which the pavement takes up about half of the frame. A series of short takes follows, showing the varied

scale of routes that Hopinka walks and drives through: city and rural roads, trails along a vast river cliff side and within dense woods, even a still shot at the entrance to the Pala Indian Reservation. Speaking over these shots, his father reflects on movement and music in transit: “Just leaving the powwow, then you’re cruising. Like you’ll be starting to crash out and, you’re driving the noise, the wheel, the sound of the road, it sounds like a song then.”

By the second recording, Hopinka adds an endearing “my” to “*Jáaji’s* recordings” and slightly delays the time of the recording, as if he almost forgot. The brief remarks at the top of the recording are subtitled phonetically on-screen, but then switch to English subtitles once his father begins to sing. The recording ends just as a large gasoline tanker truck zooms diagonally across the screen, narrowly avoiding the car on the shoulder of the road. The contemplative atmosphere of the film is interrupted by a reminder of the risks of the road.

The film stays in the night a while longer, parked in the next shot across from an illuminated gas station. Now Hopinka’s off-screen introduction provides the date but scraps the verbal time stamp as he seems to get caught up in the recording, speaking simultaneously with his father in naming the “old song from 1977.” His father’s singing begins, but suddenly the audience hears Hopinka change his mind and stop the recording before his father completes

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the phonetic translation on-screen: “No, uh, Ho-Chunk Song One instead, with a cross-fade into my accompaniment.” Off-screen tapes click, materializing in the viewer’s mind some of the selections Hopinka makes in the film. In *Jáaji Approx.*, Hopinka considers and toys with the anthropological impulse to standardize cataloguing practices. With each recording, however, he strays further away from the clinical announcement of recording facts and becomes more engaged with what his father is saying or singing.

In the cross-faded accompaniment that follows, arguably the audiovisual high point of the film, the pair sing in a round, which impresses the sense of an echo into the composite sky-and-land compositions on screen. An inverted extreme long shot of distant mountains against a basin and rolling hills hovers above a silhouetted jagged edge of indeterminate scale in the distance at the base of the screen. The two shots’ clear and hazy skies meld in the middle of the screen. Younger and elder Hopinkas create a vocal harmony across time, medium, and place. As the composite image is deconstructed, one layer at a time, Hopinka keeps the recorded audio intact. His father’s comments about stopping on the road make him laugh—a moment that briefly injects a sense of the quotidian into an otherwise transcendent moment created by matching the rounds of a song with the land and sky. The inclusion of the conversational aside reminds audiences that this is a father and son, that these songs and ways of being are part of the fabric of everyday life. Rather than detracting from an inspiring moment, their exchange grounds it, keeping it specific and unromanticized.

Hopinka cultivates defamiliarization with a limiting twist—challenging the viewer’s expectations and contexts for when and how the land might shift from being “unremarkable” to being instead endowed with visual interest or potentially even made spectacular. Hopinka resists the latter by grounding inverted, collaged shots in his subjective relations. In doing so, his creative convenings of disparate times and places push back against the enduring settler demands to parcel territory and profit through landscape.

Since the nineteenth century, photographic technology has been an accelerant to settler mythologies of pure, uninhabited spaces. The boundaries of the frame, its perspectival address, and the duality of the physical formations of nature and the coherent landscape images as produced through an artist or camera all combined to establish an enduring system of representation that either evacuated Indigenous life entirely or made it ornamental. Patrick Wolfe’s foundational formulation that settler colonialism is a structure rather than an event is borne out by how visual culture’s

historical propagation of landscapes has fostered a “logic of elimination” that methodically erases Indigenous people from their own lands.<sup>9</sup>

Hopinka’s formal strategies reconfigure ways of seeing and being to break with landscape’s commodification and utility for empire. By employing nonspectacular and poetic modes of presentation, his films repudiate the settler optics of land representation and possession. His sense of movement through and between places that are physically real and accessible, as well as composite or imagined, suggests alternative ways of moving through and perceiving place that can actively nurture memory and imagination.

Hopinka’s audiovisual engagement with land functions within Cree writer Winona Wheeler’s notion that “land is mnemonic,” that “it has its own set of memories ... it nudges or reminds.”<sup>10</sup> In *Jáaji Approx.* and other films, Hopinka’s interventions into landscape are engaged in a campaign to repurpose their historical inflections. Similarly, Jodi Byrd notes:

For American Indians, who have lived for tens of thousands of years on the lands that became the United States two hundred and thirty years ago, the land both remembers life and its loss and serves itself as a mnemonic device that triggers the ethics of relationality within the sacred geographies that constitute indigenous peoples’ histories.<sup>11</sup>

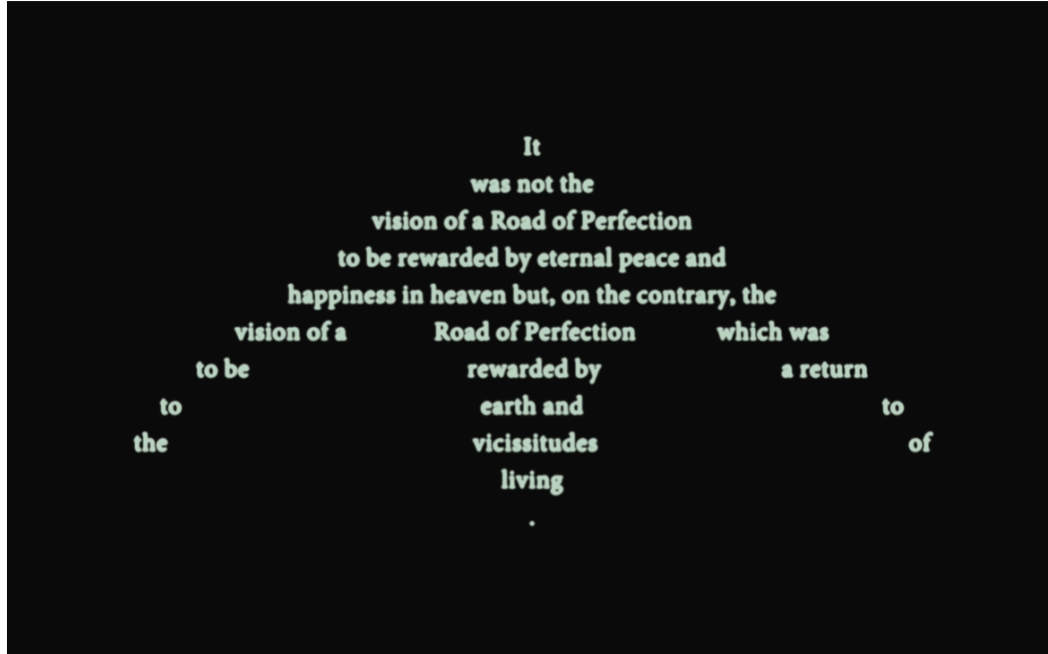
Hopinka’s intimate cinematography and inventive editing recalibrate the historical terms by which and for whom visibility operates in his films. As evidenced by *Jáaji Approx.*, his reworking of landscapes excises the “settler-scape” from Native lands and imagination.

## Editorial Ethics and Refusals

In *I’ll Remember You as You Were, Not as What You’ll Become* (2016), Hopinka employs calligrams—defined as texts that take the form of a pictorial or ornamental design—at the beginning and toward the end of the film. The language in the calligrams is excerpted from early-twentieth-century ethnographic texts written by anthropologist Paul Radin about the Ho-Chunk Nation.

For Hopinka and other Indigenous artists, working with archival materials sourced through anthropology brings up paradoxes of voice: many surviving texts and teachings were preserved through the lenses of white outsiders invested in a project to frame Indigenous ways of life in the past. One way artists have dealt with this issue is to

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The opening calligram of *I'll Remember You as You Were, not as What You'll Become*.

pursue the named individuals, the “informants” consulted or conscripted by anthropologists.

In recognition of the contested ethical nature of such texts (written by outsiders culling privileged or sacred information), Hopinka refracts Radin’s take on his tribe into new forms. The calligrams shape the excerpts into the figures of geographic Ho-Chunk effigy mounds. In so doing, Hopinka brings out the “Native informant” as a mediator between lived and extracted knowledge. The calligrams’ focus on key pieces of information, instead of on the anthropological frameworks that they originally served, turns the attention back to Ho-Chunk teachings. Hopinka reinvigorates archival materials in order to extend and adapt their meaning in the present.

Appearing first is a triangular, birdlike calligram using Radin’s text that describes a “vision of a Road of Perfection ... to be rewarded by a return to earth and to the vicissitudes of the living.” It sets the stage for the tone and direction of the film, described by Hopinka as an elegy to the Anishinaabe and Chemehuevi poet Diane Burns. Hopinka juxtaposes these Ho-Chunk calligrams with a video of Burns’s poetry reading, creating intergenerational connections of Indigenous knowledge. Next, Hopinka reworks

a longer, traditional Ho-Chunk text sourced from Radin’s fieldwork into a starlike shape: “But they apparently do not insist that existence depends upon sense perceptions alone. He claims that what is thought of, what is felt, and what is spoken—in fact, anything that is brought before his consciousness—is a sufficient indication of its existence, and it is the question of the existence and reality of these spirits in which he is interested.” These calligrams link the spiritual and visual poetics of reincarnation. By working with an archival poetry performance, Hopinka creates a space for Diane Burns’s thoughts, feelings, and voice to permeate the present. Her poignant messages and dry wit solicit a spiritual sensorium that grounds the film throughout in “the vicissitudes of the living” noted in the film’s first calligram.

Following the initial calligram, *I’ll Remember You as you Were, Not as What You’ll Become* presents a highly stylized long take from a dance credited as a Naimuma powwow. The editing transforms the footage through hypersaturation, photonegative inversion, blur, and vertically striated filtering. In conjunction with neon-bright colors, the effect of a lenticular veil of light beams produces a celestial quality. The editing is transformative, producing a poetic abstraction of the dance that offers something back to



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the dancers, while at the same time keeping settler demands for information and access to privileged Native spaces at bay. The dancers flicker in and out of focus, bestowing on viewers an impression of the vibrant, textured movement that can emerge from a collective Native experience when captured through nonextractive means.

Even with an ethics of care and a tool kit of editorial intervention at his disposal, Hopinka still faces quagmires in filming within Indigenous-centric and exclusive contexts. Of all of his films thus far, this situation is perhaps most pronounced in *Dislocation Blues* (2017). Using footage from multiple visits to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, Hopinka's film splinters the kind of resolution that might be expected from the front lines of a highly mediated protest. The constant presence of cameras and microphones indicates the copious media coverage, both that broadcast to audiences in the moment and that gathered for future documentaries, visual diaries, and other media about water protectors at Standing Rock.

In his book on Standing Rock, the Lower Brule Sioux writer Nick Estes explains that the Lakota phrase and rallying cry of the Standing Rock protests, "*Mni Wiconi*" (which translates to "water is life"), is "a future-oriented project ... as much as it reaches into the past." The idea that water is life "forces some to confront their own unbelonging to the land and the river."<sup>12</sup>

In *Dislocation Blues*, Hopinka keeps non-Indigenous viewers on the hook to continue to do the work by offering more questions than answers about the movement. In typical fashion, he offers much but explains nothing, denying any expository entry to the work. Posting limits on what kinds of knowledge he will make accessible is a practice that engenders the kind of refusal that, as Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson attests, "makes some liberal thinkers uncomfortable, and may, to them, seem dangerous. When access to information, to knowledge, to the intellectual commons is controlled by the people who generate that information, it can be seen as a violation of shared standards of justice and truth."<sup>13</sup>

Rather than narrativize his experiences as a coherent or stable account of the protests, Hopinka instead registers the onerous process of accounting for such a momentous assembly. He relays an open-ended processing of the gathering alongside two water protectors, Terry Running Wild and Cleo Keahna. Running Wild's voice off-screen suggests a perspective from an unfolding present, while Keahna mulls over the same experience in a retrospective virtual interview.

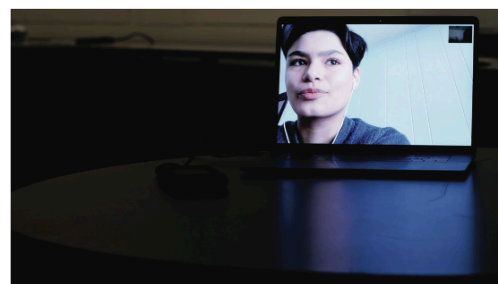
Throughout, Hopinka's sketches of the atmosphere draw on alternative aesthetic techniques different from those

in his previous films. In place of postproduction additive superimpositions, hypersaturation, photonegative overlays, and the like, Hopinka chooses to shoot with angles, positions, compositions, movements, and durations that amplify the visual impressions of what is occurring in real time at Standing Rock camps. Long takes of sun flares, billows of steam and smoke, wind's rustling touch, dusk light filtration, blankets of snow, and mirrored reflections, to name just a few visuals, ground the viewer in place as Running Wild and Keahna talk through their time there. Hopinka intercuts these still, observational takes with whirling and jostled shots of people conferring, dancing, watching out for one another. The film doesn't have any normative close-ups of people at Standing Rock, opting instead for stark silhouettes and low, sometimes canted angles.

Once again, Hopinka here punctuates the action with a solid-color screen, this time using black instead of red. The combination of these formal choices echoes the concerns of Running Wild and the recollections of Keahna, as Running Wild's commentary in the present tense complements Keahna's processing of the experiences in the past tense.

Running Wild's interview veers between personal reflections about the protest, observations about solidarity in the camps, and relaying on-the-ground information about events unfolding within the camps, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline surveillance. Appearing via a Skype call on a laptop, Keahna works through the monumentality and messiness of accounting for the time, especially in relation to Standing Rock as a media event. "My time there is now being cast into this magical, rose-colored nostalgia. But it was like *this*," he says, gesturing up and down.

Keahna alternates between personal and collective moments, between cross-coalitional solidarity and Native-led actions. Keahna cites instances in which false information was spread about the camps, and expresses an ongoing caution about discussing the movement. He remarks that



Appearing via Skype, Cleo Keahna reflects on Standing Rock.

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he would “be reluctant to talk about [Standing Rock] with anyone who’s not Native, who’s not been a part of resistance movements in their life.” Keahna expands the historical inflections of this point, saying, “[A]ll of media and all of representation ... even the basis of this country’s infrastructure is completely catering to the white world’s rules. Everything for them is for them. Everything for all of us is with them in mind.”

Keahna’s astute insights about the visual persistence and materiality of settler colonialism elevate *Dislocation Blues* as a work that aids the formation of an incipient Indigenous visual sovereignty. Tuscarora artist and scholar Jolene Rickard coined the phrase “visual sovereignty” as part of the wider Indigenous-led project to create specific analyses and expressions of self-determination. She quotes Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred’s call to “challenge Indigenous peoples in building appropriate postcolonial governing systems to disconnect the notion of sovereignty from its Western, legal roots to transform it.”<sup>14</sup>

For Rickard, visual sovereignty is a way to, in her words, protect, reimagine, and affirm Indigenous philosophies and cultural practices.<sup>15</sup> Visual sovereignty is not exclusive to *Dislocation Blues*, as its characterization is active in all of Hopinka’s films. This idea of visual sovereignty is a helpful framework to make visible, even prismatic, the implications of the politically motivated rejection embedded in Hopinka’s refusal to explain, Running Wild’s request to end the interview, and Keahna’s ambivalence.

## Continuing Myths and Movements

Sto:lo poet, novelist, and scholar Lee Maracle writes, “Every time Native people form a circle they turn around. They move forward, not backward into history. We don’t have to ‘go back to the land.’ We never left it.... One does not lose culture. It is not an object. Culture ... is constantly changing and will do so as long as people busy themselves with living.”<sup>16</sup>

Hopinka’s forward-looking casting and recasting of myths enlivens them for present and future Indigenous audiences. His *Fainting Spells* (2018) generates a cinematic Ho-Chunk myth centered on a personified Xąwjska plant. In another short film from the same year, *When You’re Lost in the Rain*, Hopinka poses a more critical approach to the embedded mythology of settler expansion.

Hopinka’s recent debut feature film, *matni – towards the ocean, towards the shore* (2020), explores a Chinook myth recounting the origins of death and the possibilities of reincarnation. Filming in the Pacific Northwest, where he first

learned Chinuk Wawa, Hopinka incorporates scenes from a canoe journey with interviews and footage of two of his friends, Jordan Mercier and Sweetwater Sahme. Hopinka filmed separately with Sahme and Mercier, though their conversations fold into his narration throughout the film. Sahme’s pondering of life and death is particularly poignant, as she had just lost her grandmother and is in her third trimester of pregnancy in the film. In turn, Mercier’s position in a growing family—as father to a toddler and a newborn—brings up reflections about passing on Indigenous traditions.

Although the two don’t physically share scenes in the film, their sentiments often parallel, circle around, and echo one another. They both discuss breaking cycles in the hopes of a better future for their children. Ever attentive to the ways in which intimate knowledge is conveyed, Hopinka embeds their insights in scenes of everyday living. Hopinka spent time filming with each of them on hiking trails, around town, and inside their homes, resulting in quiet, revelatory moments that maintain his aesthetic commitment to nonspectacularizing modes of representation.

As with *Dislocation Blues*, Hopinka is relatively sparing with his use of postproduction transformations of the image, particularly as compared to his earlier work. Some outdoor scenes are highly saturated, but slow motion is applied intermittently, and in-camera decisions about framing, composition, and movement navigate the stakes of seeing and being seen. Throughout the canoe journey that Hopinka follows, gatherings of increasing size of participants sing, drum, and dance at night. Hopinka doesn’t rush to the front of the crowd to get the most direct or unobstructed shots of singers, drummers, and dancers. Instead, he foregrounds elements: the shoulder-to-shoulder excitement or knee-to-knee child’s perspective, a teeming sense of community fostered by the festivities. In one crowded medium shot of drummers and singers, Hopinka’s camera even stays behind the crowd’s recording cell phones, keeping their videos in frame, respecting these crowd recordings. As the song progresses and dancers begin to fill in the floor, Hopinka pivots the camera away, without cutting, giving audiences the sound but no vision of what’s happening on the floor.

The soundscape of the film mobilizes Hopinka’s editorial ethics: nonsynced sound, silence, fades, and ethereal scoring produce a sonic atmosphere that prioritizes an address to Native audiences. In a separate, more spacious gathering on a football field that occurs earlier in the film, Hopinka follows Mercier closely, at his side, just behind his drum. The sound of collective drumming fades to a faint

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impression, as if hearing the song from a great distance. Hopinka narrates over the atmospheric rhythm: “People say, if you sing, if you drum, if you dance, you do so for those who can’t.”

Lee Maracle, thinking through the “mass and weight” of spirit in transformative moments between life and death, has written that “sound travels in waves. It is transmitted by electricity. The body possesses an electrical system on which it operates.... Sound waves do not leave the earth’s atmosphere. They remain caught forever in the atmosphere. The living voices of the dead remain trapped in the air we breathe and travel on the wings of their own waves.”<sup>17</sup> With *matni – towards the ocean, towards the shore*, Hopinka makes sure that questions about rebirth and the afterlife are posed, sustained, and hypothesized through sound.

About three-quarters of the way into the film, Hopinka reads from the Chinookan source text that was dictated by Mose B. Hudson in 1932 and here is narrated over a panning shot across a sunset shoreline, ending: “That’s as much as there is now of this Indian myth. Perhaps it is not correct entirely as I have told it.”<sup>18</sup>

With that statement, the contested possibilities of rebirth as they play out in the myth open back up a bit, giving the film space and encouragement to add to the creative interpretation of the myth. Cutting to the ten-yard line of the football field shown earlier, Hopinka begins a long take of the most visually abstracted scene in the film. In a steady wide shot, dancers make their way across the field in what is nearly stop-motion, their movements blurred and semifrozen into gestural sweeps of light. Though the stop-motion-like effect keeps the field’s goal lines intact, the dancers’ stylized movements recalibrate focus within the image. The shimmering tones of the score match the lightened movement across the field, making the ninety-second scene feel both elongated and disproportionately short for the magnitude of its impact. Compared with many of the other locations depicted in *matni*, this spiritual high point takes place in a rather banal location. Yet, Hopinka cinematically captures the football field with the same kind of reverence as Sahme’s waterfall scenes or Mercier’s shoreline shots. Hopinka’s visual contribution to continuing myths and to recasting their relevance for Native people today meets Native people wherever he is and however his communities move.

## Desire Lines

Through interconnections among language, placemaking, and movement, Hopinka’s filmmaking produces a “desire

line” that diverges from disciplinary ways of seeing. The “desire line” is a term used by landscape architects and urban planners to describe the visible trace formed by people moving away from official or paved paths.<sup>19</sup> Desire lines encompass a physical phenomenon in which new trails are formed that deliberately ignore preexisting paths. With enough foot traffic across time, desire lines show a preferred collective route and insist on an alternative way to move. They might popularize a shortcut, indicate a need for wider sidewalks, or provide suggestions for vistas off a designated trail.

Seemingly innocuous, desire lines can index changing social needs or mark everyday resistance, creating new visual relations between communities and the land they traverse or inhabit. Although they form in diverse topological conditions and sociocultural contexts, desire lines embody contested relationships between demarcated restraints and the possibilities of people in a place. What may have once been the most effective or aesthetically pleasing route may no longer serve or appeal to people’s needs.

Desire lines, by their very existence, raise larger questions about the design of infrastructure and the regulation of land use. Whose needs aren’t being met by the routes currently set in place? Whose and what kinds of activities are permitted, encouraged, or curtailed by their limits? What are the risks and rewards of moving out of sync with a system that is in place? Within a wider historical and geographic view, desire lines must be contextualized back in time, too, within the infrastructures of movement and its policing as originally imposed by settler colonial incursions throughout Turtle Island (that is, North America).<sup>20</sup>

Physical infrastructures, such as roads and reservations, as well as systems of media representation in the United States were built to support the spread and protection of white supremacy. Recalling a moment midway through *Dislocation Blues*, Keahna comments on Native survivance in spite of material and mediated settler infrastructures. When Keahna says, “[E]verything for all of us is with them in mind,” Hopinka cuts from a shot of passing cars on a peripheral highway to a quiet moment on Flag Road at Standing Rock. This is not a contrasting cut between “modern” and “primitive,” as some of the most enduring and racist paradigms of mass mediated Indigenous representation would suggest. Philip Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux) analyzes such paradigms that have “explained and contained Indian actions.”<sup>21</sup> Taking a long view of non-Indigenous cultural productions depicting Indigenous peoples, Deloria summarizes how “primitivism, technological incompetence, physical distance, and cultural difference have been the ways many Americans have imagined Indians,” and



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Water protectors and allies along Flag Road at Standing Rock, in *Dislocation Blues*.

how “such images remain familiar currency in contemporary dealings with Native people.”<sup>22</sup> Hopinka’s audiovisual economy bypasses the adjudication of where and how contemporary Indigenous life takes place. In creating desire lines away from the historical modes of seeing Indigenous life, Hopinka poetically envisions contemporary Indigenous politics of space and movement.

In applying the notion of desire lines to film history, Hopinka’s films cleave away from historical cinematic approaches toward Indigenous representation. Hopinka’s filmmaking reflects an acute awareness of the visual infrastructures through which Indigenous (mis)representations have been cemented in visual culture. In “shooting back,” Hopinka refuses the historical thoroughfares of Indigenous cinematic representation. He refuses such conventions and expectations, denying the audience full access to Indigenous knowledge, oversimplifications of Indigenous epistemologies, and extractive or didactic frames to assuage non-Indigenous viewers. Instead, Hopinka’s films create a desire line that reroutes toward Indigenous audiences.

Poetic forms facilitate the desire line of Hopinka’s filmmaking, shaping a track that leads away from institutional pressures to educate non-Natives. In the absence of didactic distillations or expository information, his films provide abundant audiovisual insights, raise powerful questions

about culture, and grant viewers a space to experience select frames of his own perspective. In doing so, Hopinka dismisses the centrality of settlers in making and enlivening Indigenous cultural productions.

This kind of dismissal facilitates a primary address to Native audiences. As a non-Native viewer, I find it generative to follow the desire line posed by Hopinka’s film practice. In doing so, viewers might see something else that Hopinka’s works offer: a gift of “presentness,” a gift of time spent being and thinking in place. This presentness, coming from an individual, subjective perspective, is deeply rooted in a hopeful curiosity toward the future, forged by active lessons and ongoing relations that span generations.

For Hopinka, however, the individual cannot be the boundary line to his visualizations. While continuing his own work, he has created space for other Indigenous artists and contributed to their visions, too. Since 2016, Hopinka has organized the Indigenous-centric film program *What Was Always Yours and Never Lost*. The Whitney Museum of American Art screened the 2019 iteration of the program for its biennial of the same year.

Concurrent with these efforts to show more works by other Indigenous artists, Hopinka formalized his collaborations with three other Indigenous filmmakers to assist in the production, development, and funding of Indigenous films and media. The COUSIN collective materializes and

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multiplies desire lines of Indigenous visions. COUSIN lives out what Gerald Vizenor terms “transmotion ...[a] sense of Native motion and an active presence [that constitute] *sui generis* sovereignty. Native transmotion is survivance.... Native stories of survivance are the creases of transmotion and sovereignty.”<sup>23</sup> Whether figured as desire lines, transit, or transmotion, COUSIN is indisputably Indigenous movement. Make way and keep watching.

## Postscript: COUSIN

In 2018, Hopinka cofounded the COUSIN collective alongside Adam Khalil (Ojibway), Alexandra Lazarowich (Cree), and Adam Piron (Cáuiḡ and Kanien’kehá:ka). Each brings a wealth of experience in cinematic craft and industry experience for cumulative leverage in supporting Indigenous filmmakers and artists.

COUSIN’s cofounders are leading figures in major film festivals. Lazarowich’s producing career spans independent film and popular television (as the producer of the Canadian comedic reality show *Still Standing* 2004-2006), while her own short documentary *Fast Horse* won the 2019 Sundance Film Festival Special Jury Award for Directing. Khalil’s filmmaking and art practice, particularly with the “public secret society” entitled New Red Order, interfaces with international modern-art spaces, such as the Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern, Artists Space, and the Toronto and Whitney biennials. Piron was a film curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art before his current position as interim director of Sundance Institute’s Indigenous Program, while also serving on the board of trustees of the Flaherty.

From their credits, it becomes clear that these four are in close dialogue and are instrumental in shaping each other’s films. Lazarowich coproduced two of Khalil’s feature films, Khalil and Piron recently codirected a short film, *Halpate* (2021), and Khalil and Piron appear prominently in Hopinka’s film credits. COUSIN is committed to working to subvert the delimiting and demeaning visions of Indigenous peoples and places produced by cinema’s complicity in propagating colonial visual regimes.

As a nonprofit organization, COUSIN backs “Indigenous artists expanding traditional definitions and understandings of the moving image by experimenting with form and genre.”<sup>24</sup> Together, and with the guidance of its board members Maya Austin (Pascua Yaqui/Blackfeet), Melanie Nepinak Hadley (Ojibway), and Jas Morgan (Cree-Métis-Saulteaux), COUSIN commissions and supports the completion of projects by Indigenous artists, as

well as organizing international showcases of their works. At this writing, their “cycle” of artists included Colectivo Los Ingrávidos (Mixtec), Raven Chacon (Diné), Olivia Camfield (Mvskoke) & Woodrow Hunt (Klamath/Modoc/Cherokee), Miguel Hilari (Aymara/German), Kite (Oglála Lakłóta), Eve-Lauryn Little Shell LaFountain (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), Fox Maxy (Ipai Kumeyaay/Payóm-kawichum), and Rhayne Vermette (Métis).

While a sense of “shooting back” from the historical perspectives of anthropologically scrutinized positions unites COUSIN’s cinematic camaraderie, it by no means dictates exclusive formal vehicles to do so. The artistic methods range from remixing the historical record to reclamatory narratives to speculations about Indigenous pasts and futures. Artists working in relation to COUSIN take part in its shared project of undisciplining vision to better account for the survivance of Indigenous knowledge, wisdom, and experiences through audiovisual means. The poem “Native Videographers Shoot Back,” by Adam and Zack Khalil’s late mother, Allison Boucher Krebs (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians), presciently articulates the significance and the necessity of an entity such as COUSIN.<sup>25</sup> It seems only fitting, then, to end this essay with her words of inspiration.

## Native Videographers Shoot Back

*Native videographers are armed and dangerous:  
ready willing and able to shoot back,  
taking no captives,  
aiming straight from the hip  
to the heart of the unsuspecting audience.  
Native videographers wind the thin corn silk  
of storytelling genealogy —  
layering  
image,  
word,  
sound,  
and silence—  
challenging the purposeful amnesia of American History.  
Native videographers lean into and snap apart  
the imaginary lines separating history from prehistory,  
reach across the permeable boundaries  
drawn tentatively on maps of modern nation states,  
sweep aside the borders that  
dot dash dot  
across the terrain,  
and speak in tongues to the land  
who breathes a sigh of relief to hear our voices*

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resonating back through the once breathless silence.  
Native videographers open the aperture  
extending the depth of focus  
beyond the doctrine of discovery,  
the Papal Bulls,  
manifesting a destiny of space time continuum  
embedded in a metaphysic  
of resonance,  
resilience,  
persistence and  
performance,  
repeating itself patiently  
in looped frame insistence  
that while everything has changed,  
nothing has.

## Notes

1. Within film and media studies, scholars such as Faye Ginsburg and Fatimah Tobing Rony charted the political and visual stakes of Indigenous filmmakers reversing a (settler) colonial gaze historically used to capture and represent Indigenous peoples. More recently, historical projects by scholars such as Liza Black (Cherokee) have examined the forms of resistance employed by Native actors, extras, and set workers within Hollywood films. See Liza Black, *Picturing Indians: Native Americans in Film, 1941–1960* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020); Faye Ginsburg, "Shooting Back: From Ethnographic Film to Indigenous Production/Ethnography of Media," in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999); and Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
2. Byrd, xi.
3. Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 19.
4. Vizenor, 20.
5. Evan Gardner and Susanna Ciotti, "An Overview of Where Are Your Keys? A Glimpse Inside the Technique Toolbox," in *The Routledge Handbook of Language Revitalization*, ed. Leanne Hinton, Leena Huss, and Gerald Roche (Milton, MA: Routledge, 2018), 139.
6. Henry Zenk, "Bringing 'Good Jargon' to Light," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 113, no. 4 (Spring 2012): 560.
7. Almost thirty years ago, W. J. T. Mitchell set out to transform "landscape" from a designated art historical object to a culturally embedded process. Admittedly inspired by the ways in which cinema and photography put conceptual pressure on the supposed stability of "landscape" as a painted representational practice, Mitchell contended that "landscape might be seen more profitably as something like the dreamworks of imperialism." Mitchell argued that imperialism "conceives itself precisely (and simultaneously) as an expansion of landscape understood as an inevitable, progressive development in history, an expansion of 'culture' and 'civilization' into a 'natural' space in a progress that is itself narrated as 'natural.'" See his essay "Imperial Landscape" in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5–34.
8. Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013), 21.
9. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.
10. Winona Wheeler, "Cree Intellectual Traditions in History," in *The West and Beyond: New Perspectives on an Imagined Region*, ed. Alvin Finkel, Sarah Carter, and Peter Fortna (Edmonton, AB: Athabasca University Press, 2010), 55.
11. Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, 118.
12. Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso Books, 2019), 256.
13. Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and Colonial Citizenship," *Junctures: The Journal of Thematic Dialogue*, no. 9 (2007), 74.
14. Jolene Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017), 82.
15. Rickard, 84.
16. Lee Maracle, *I Am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* (Vancouver, BC: Press Gang Publishers, 1988), 109–10.
17. Maracle, 114.
18. The Origin of Death Myth from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, as dictated by Mose. B Hudson to Melville Jacobs, 1932.
19. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard is credited with the germ of the idea of the desire line, as he described "pathways of desire" in *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (1958), though the concept is also closely linked with Michel de Certeau's "rhetorics of walking" discussed in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).
20. South African writers Noëleen Murray, Nick Shepherd, and Martin Hall note how desire lines "indicate the space between the planned and the providential, the engineered



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and the 'lived,' and between official projects of capture and containment and the popular energies which subvert, bypass, supersede, and evade them." The authors stress that the phenomenon of desire lines has the capacity to be applied to other colonial contexts beyond South Africa in which "modernist planning coincided with forms of racialized population control." *Desire Lines: Space, Memory and Identity in the Post-Apartheid City*, ed. by Noëleen Murray, Nick Shepherd, Martin Hall (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge/Architext, 2007), 2.

21. Philip Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 7.
22. Deloria, 4.
23. Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 15–16.
24. Cousin Collective, [www.cousincollective.org/about](http://www.cousincollective.org/about)
25. Thanks to Adam Khalil for permission to reproduce "Native Videographers Shoot Back."