

Tanya Leighton

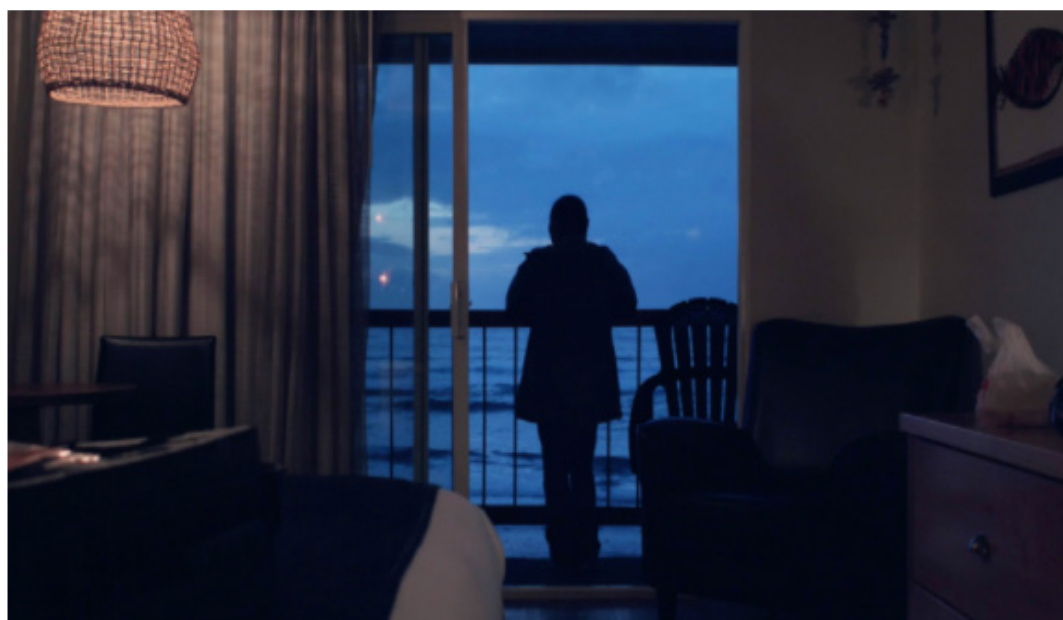
HYPERALLERGIC

Mining Indigenous Myths and Languages to Contemplate Life's Meaning

Sky Hopinka's rapturous feature-length debut, *malni—towards the ocean, towards the shore*, which premiered at this year's Sundance Film Festival, elaborates on his previous explorations of Chinuk Wawa while hewing to a more linear structure.



by Ela Bittencourt
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From *malni—towards the ocean, towards the shore* (2020), dir. Sky Hopinka (all images courtesy of Sundance Film Festival)

PARK CITY, Utah —Artist [Sky Hopinka](#) (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians) is best known for his intricate shorts, which explore questions of heritage and language, and the power of storytelling. Hopinka, who first learned Chinuk Wawa — a nearly extinct indigenous language from the Pacific Northwest — in Portland, Oregon when he was in his 20s, is particularly attentive to how experience is embedded in the sensorial aspects of language. Hopinka's rapturous feature-length debut, *malni—towards the ocean, towards the shore*, which premiered at this year's Sundance Film Festival, elaborates on these enduring themes. Presented as part of the Festival's New Frontier program — a section dedicated to the intersections of art, cinema and technology, *malni* screened alongside films

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from artists such as Ai Weiwei and Francis Alÿs, along with a sizable group of directors working in VR.

In the past, Hopinka has explored experimental animation and digital media. His shorts, such as *Fainting Spells* (2018), deal with indigenous myths, and others, including *Wawa* (2014), explore language acquisition. *Belonging*, in the context of indigenous resistance and protest, also features heavily in *Dislocation Blues* (2017). The results have often been dense, syncretic visual poems. With *malni*, which is set in the Columbia River Basin and features stunning forest and ocean views, Hopinka Mining Indigenous Myths and Languages to Contemplate Life's Meaning. The film centers on interviews with his two friends, Jordan Mercier and Sweetwater Sahme, in both Chinuk Wawa and English. The fact that both languages are subtitled calls into question the opposition of ideas of a “native” versus a “foreign” language.



From *malni—towards the ocean, towards the shore* (2020), dir. Sky Hopinka

Unlike his shorts, in which protagonists including Hopinka's language teacher and father, appear briefly, *malni* is a sustained documentary portrait. Via separate conversations with the filmmaker, Jordan, a young father, and Sweetwater, an expectant mother (no relation), each speak of drawing strength from Chinuk traditions (in Jordan's case, questions around masculinity and socialization; in Sweetwater's, coping with her family's struggles with alcoholism, and undergoing pre-natal water cleansing rites). Their personal stories reveal respective questions and journeys surrounding their identities. Their conversations are further framed by an indigenous origin myth. As Hopinka tells it, two protagonists, Lilu and

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T'alap'as (Chinuk for wolf and coyote, respectively), debate whether there should be an afterlife. Hopinka thus contemplates the meaningfulness of life vis à vis death.

At times, malni also feels like a richly woven ghost story. For example, in scenes where Jordan is shown driving, Hopinka, whom we never see, asks repeatedly where they are going. The effect is uncanny, as if an omnipresent, disembodied spirit were observing them an eeriness further enhanced by the evocative electronic score.

As with any myth, Hopinka makes us question what belief systems inform the world, in Chinuk Wawa or North American English. Like a Borgesian Aleph that holds the key to existence, Hopinka lays claim to mythology, and explores a paradigm shift from the sacred to the profane. Such a shift signals a loss of aura that perhaps only investigations of language can help reclaim.

malni—towards the ocean, towards the shore (2020), dir. Sky Hopinka, screened at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival. Upcoming screenings include March 18 at the Autry Museum of the American West (4700 Western Heritage Way, Griffith Park, Los Angeles).