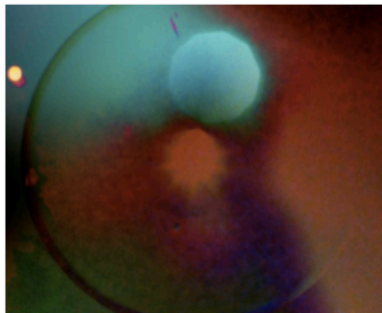




# In Search of Lost Words: The Work of Sky Hopinka

September 29, 2017 • By Matthew Jeffrey Abrams



“THE LIMITS of my language,” a young Ludwig Wittgenstein once wrote, “mean the limits of my world.” His entire philosophical project could be distilled into this single, oft-repeated line. Wittgenstein sought out boundaries, and specifically those of language. How do propositions relate to the world? How does language mediate our being? Where does language end, and what, if anything, might exist

beyond it? Most of Wittgenstein’s copious output dwells in these borderlands, especially in the odd penumbra that lies between word and non-word, existence and emptiness. It was a fecund space for the thinker, and one that many artists today have found no less fertile. The young, experimental filmmaker Sky Hopinka parallels Wittgenstein’s interest in the limitations of language more than most. And it’s upon this ground that the 33-year-old artist has built his own sophisticated project.

Born in Ferndale, Washington, Hopinka, like his father, is an enrolled member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin; his mother belongs to the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians of Riverside, California. He grew up alongside the Lummi Nation, which rests along the northern shores of Washington, and he’s spent much of his time in either the Coachella Valley,

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Riverside, Portland, or Milwaukee (the West, and especially the Pacific Northwest, looms large in his work). Hopinka's development as a filmmaker has been rapid, to say the least: he made his first video around 2010 but began exploring the medium in earnest around 2013, and over the past four years he's produced nearly a dozen shorts that range from five to 20 minutes. While varied in content, each video displays a highly controlled tone and aesthetic. Rigorously composed, these shorts have reached an international audience, and as Hopinka's works continue to mature, they are attracting greater critical attention. Most recently, several videos were included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and this year Hopinka has had screenings at the Sundance Film Festival, the Crossroads Film Festival, Filmfest DC, and nearly two dozen other venues. He will also return to New York this fall to screen his newest work, *Dislocation Blues*, which was shot at Standing Rock during the Dakota Access Pipeline protests.

Hopinka's works are predicated on the interrelationship between language, identity, and cultural construction. He especially considers how language can, like a misbegotten phrase, fall short, sputter, or fray. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising to learn that Hopinka's filmmaking career has coincided with several intense linguistic pursuits, namely his education in Chinuk Wawa, a revived creole trade-language once common in the Pacific Northwest, and Hočąk, the endangered, indigenous language of the Ho-Chunk people. Hopinka's works often lay bare language's generative power, like the poignant *Jáaji Approx.* (2016), where he yokes word to image in complex choreographies.

The opening shot of *Jáaji Approx.* establishes a pseudo-ethnographic tone, which undergirds most of Hopinka's work. We first see a title that is also a dictionary definition: *Jáaji: Father (direct address), approximate translation from Hočąk*. Ambient white noise from a recorder crackles behind Hopinka's voice. He announces, like a linguist noting an informant's interview, when the recording took place and with whom. In this case, it is literally with *Jáaji*, Hopinka's father.

A landscape appears with snow-capped mountains in the distance and verdant meadows before them. We are driving down a highway somewhere in the West. The sky is overcast and dark, as if a rain has recently fallen. The scene's magnitude is overwhelming, sublime even. Then we hear the beep of a recorder, and *Jáaji's* voice emerges while the landscape inverts. The dislocation and unease that derives from this simple editing device is powerful, and rhymes with both Hopinka's own complex relationship to his father and to their ancestral language, *Hočąk*, which Mike Hopinka still knows much better than his son. This is the first in a long sequence of subtle acts where the younger Hopinka does not tell, so much as show, the unease that derives from distance — whether that be the cognitive distance between knowing a

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language and not, the relational distance between knowing a father and meeting a stranger, or the physical distance between a highland prairie and a treacherous pass.

American communities that are organized around drumming, dancing, and singing. There is often a strong intertribal or pantribal sentiment, and powwow culture is particularly prominent among the Great Plains communities. Mike Hopinka's gravelly voice begins to tell his son what the powwow means to him, and how it works — how the drumming bleeds into singing, the singing into dancing, the dancing into community. “You just wait for that one certain beat to start with,” he says over sportscaster Joe Buck's play-by-play commentary, “and you want the dancers to dance; that's the object is to make the dancers dance, cause once they dance everything else goes into place with the powwow. First starts with the singers, relays out to the dancers, then pretty soon to the audience.” And during this discussion, hardcoded subtitles flash across the screen, but Hopinka transcribes his father's voice into the International Phonetic Alphabet rather than English. For example, the last sentence from the above quotation, “First starts with the singers...,” appears as:

*fɜrst stɑrts wɪð ðe 'sɪŋɜrz, ðen 'ri,leɪz ɔt tu ðə 'dænsɜrz ðen 'pɹɪti sʌn tu ði 'ɑdiəns*

In Hopinka's hands, words are mapped onto words, images upon images, and alphabets upon alphabets until they form a complex, thickly textured collage. And central to this visual, aural, and linguistic thickness is a shifting, or flickering, from one medium to another. In other videos, like his early *wawa* (2014), voices and sounds form unintelligible harmonies. Sometimes, like in the opening scene to *Visions of an Island* (2016), it is images that replicate and split into uncanny doublings. But there is always language play, and especially translation. In one passage from *Jáaji Approx.*, Mike Hopinka begins singing a *Hočqk* song while the son's voice cross-fades atop his father's, and then both are looped to create a lilting, intergenerational four-part harmony, with the junior's voice slightly quieter, more reserved, and less confident than the senior's. Hopinka, in his art and in his life, continually pushes against these linguistic boundaries, struggling to make meaning where none had existed before.

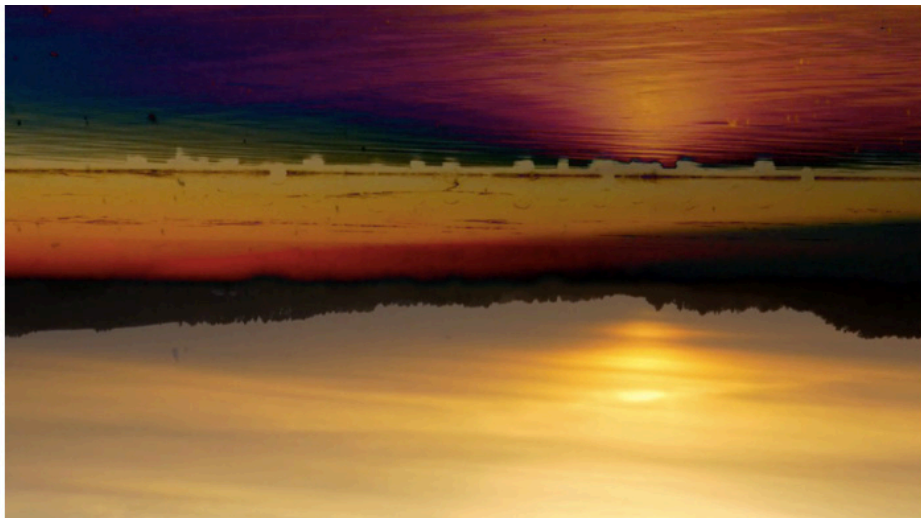
Using the IPA alphabet is a further nod to Hopinka's earnest linguistic education. It is also one of many elements that combine to put his works in dialogue with ethnography. Hopinka is like a researcher, struggling to pronounce foreign words, trying them on for size, and going about the tedious business of language acquisition. But in this case, the critical distance of his ethnographic position contrasts with the intimacy he maintains with his “informant,” most notably during their duet and the video's closing scene, where the elder Hopinka finally appears, backlit by a prismatic sunset that distorts through tinted car windows.



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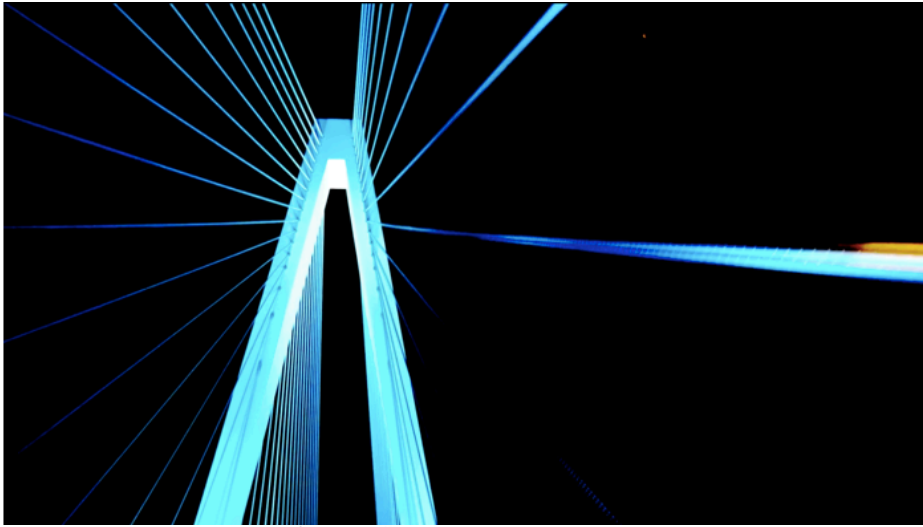


Sky Hopinka, still from "Jáaji Approx.," 2015, video, 7:37. Reproduced with permission of the artist.



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This, too, is significant. Hopinka often pumps up his video's colors until they effervesce in high-saturation tones. This palate resists the aesthetics of ethnographic film, a genre with its origin in works like *Nanook of the North* (1922). A legitimate anthropological research technique, ethnographic film is also a highly contested practice that can easily slide into exploitation. Hopinka knows this. "I guess the first thing is to be aware of what these documentary and ethnographic films look like," [Hopinka told interviewers earlier this year](#).

This has definitely influenced how I approach documentary, or how I approach cinema [...] It's important for me to see the things I'm representing as bright and vivid and colorful, and not as black-and-white or sepia or desaturated to make you feel emotional about the pitiful Indians. Making things bright and vibrant is a way to counter that.

And so Hopinka's blown-out contrasts and pulsing neons are deployed to destabilize the classical depiction of natives in ethnographic film. In this case, the carnivalesque, or the surreal, hardly recalls the romanticized "Indian."

But color manipulation accounts for just one of the artist's countermanding tactics. With Hopinka, we have a native artist who has appropriated the tools and tones of cultural anthropology and then turned them against that very discipline. Ethnography, in particular, has a complex and historically shameful relationship with Native Americans. Salvage ethnography, for instance — a practice associated with the founder of the American anthropological discipline, Franz Boas — believed in the inevitable extinction, or

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westernization, of a given native group, and thus believed that its pre-contact cultural forms needed to be recorded at any cost (these scholars were unaware that they were seeking a chimera, that culture is always blending with other cultures and that it has no pure, static, “pre-contact” state). This led to deeply unethical behaviors and disastrous consequences. A great student of Boas, Elsie Clews Parsons, went on to become the founding figure of Pueblo anthropology. Her research remains crucial to American anthropologists, but her tactics were so immoral and her published results so hurtful that Puebloans in the American Southwest regularly stole *Pueblo Indian Religion*, her two-volume, encyclopedic work, from public libraries.

Ethnographers like Parsons once felt that any knowledge, social more, song, or rite, should be shared with the scientific community. Today’s ethnographers are trained to be much more respectful, but the legacy remains. Smartly, Hopinka has found within this fraught scientific tradition a model of resistance to its very project. This is, perhaps, the artist’s most interesting contribution. He produces artworks that stand in service of the native communities that he engages while respecting their cultural and intellectual boundaries. In this sense, his works are often more *ethnological* than ethnographic, investigating the history of ethnography rather than practicing it *per se*.



Sky Hopinka, still from “Visions of an Island,” 2016, video, 14:55. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

In *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2017), for example, Hopinka layers footage from Oregon and Washington reservation lands with found recordings of a conversation between the anthropologist Dr. Henry Zenk and Wilson Bobb, a native Chinuk Wawa speaker who hailed from the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. As Hopinka has



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explained, in his time Bobb was one of the last, best speakers of Chinuk Wawa, and he taught Zenk, who has since helped the community preserve and revive the language. Hopinka knows this history well. He is the pedagogical great-grandchild of Bobb: his Chinuk Wawa teacher was Evan Garner, whose teacher was Zenk, whose teacher was Bobb.



Sky Hopinka, still from "Visions of an Island," 2016, video, 14:55. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

The video showcases Bobb and Zenk's interviews, revealing a tender relationship between a young, white anthropology student and his native American teacher, who then was roughly 90 years old. Footage of ferns and undergrowth in lush forests flickers before the viewer, who hears Bobb tease Zenk, and Zenk light-heartedly take it. Zenk asks again and again, *how do you say this? Is there a word for that?* At one point a fatigued Bobb struggles to respond while Zenk finds his own answer and rattles off Chinuk Wawa. Bobb laughs: *you're gettin' better than I am!* Zenk demures, says "naw, all I know is words," and the badinage continues.

This practice of language acquisition through a lineage of teachers, all of whom comprise a small community, lends the activity an intimacy and warmth that, say, learning a Romance language at an American university rarely, if ever, possesses. And these passages are among Hopinka's most bracing. It is here that we see the young artist deftly consider how language forms our knowledge and our social identity. Hopinka's interests are epistemological and metaphysical, and, like Wittgenstein, he always keeps an eye toward the linguistic. How does language shape us, the filmmaker seems to ask, and what happens when we try to outstrip our words? Can we spill out beyond the realm of language, or will we collapse upon ourselves in solipsistic self-possession? Or can we do both at once, expanding and contracting through

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language like the chambers of a heart, filling with life and disgorging that life in a ruthless simultaneity?

But Hopinka, like Wittgenstein before him, also intuitively recognizes that images can do things that words never could. His careful manipulation of the two mediums is therefore especially gratifying to behold. *Anti-Objects* takes its name from a text by the Japanese architect and philosopher Kengo Kuma, whose radical theory peppers the video with brief block quotations, which buttress Hopinka's own aesthetic: "The image remains fragmented," one Kuma quotation reads in oxblood red, "it never coalesces, even when a number of different aspects are overlapped. The silhouette is ambiguous." Layering, ambiguity, and *in-betweenness* — these seem to drive Sky Hopinka. His works are investigations into the ineffable. We could even say that works like *Anti-Objects* are meditations on the *architecture* of language — not so much the words as the pregnant spaces in-between, the chittered stops of a nervous tyro, the laughs of a patient master.

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