

ALWAYS HERE

The Native American filmmaker Sky Hopinka explores language, place and memory using a poetic film language that is all his own

By Elena Gorfinkel

Sky Hopinka's enigmatic cinema vibrates with light and sound, spoken rhythms and chromatic intensities, bending with the shapes of fleeting, mobile landscapes. A member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin and Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians tribes, Hopinka contests documentary's ethnographic gaze, expository logic and colonial legacies with his image-making. He eschews representational modes of confession, autobiography and sober narration, citing "ethno-poetics" as an alternative filmic strategy and instead alighting on more liminal, affective territories. Hopinka's films unfurl ideas about language, place and indigenous experience reticently, like the slow movement of clouds seen from below, or the paths that snake across curving sand dunes.

Hopinka's study of endangered Native American languages, specifically the nearly extinct Chinuk Wawa of the Pacific Northwest, directed him from documentary film to more experimental forms. Transcribing family memories, recorded conversations, songs and shared rituals, Hopinka relays the intimacy and fragility of cultural communicability and transfer. Using type, script, calligrams and phonetic alphabets as concrete formal elements, Hopinka draws attention to the materiality of language. How is indigenous culture transmitted and cared for? In *Jáaji Approx.* (2015) he connects images of landscapes approached by car and foot, and recordings of conversations with Hopinka's *jáaji* (Ho-Chunk for 'father' in direct address). His *jáaji*'s speech, transliterated on screen in the International Phonetic Alphabet, recounts his travels on the powwow circuit, its dances, drumbeats, euphorias. The text is laid over vistas that both have travelled through – desert hills, windshilded skylines, mountainous ranges. As his father's voice sings 'Porcupine Travelling Song', Hopinka's voice accompanies him in crossfade, merging disparate recordings and spatial memories, the distance between them momentarily effaced.

Hopinka has lived around the US – in the Pacific Northwest, Southern California, Wisconsin. Wandering, walking and driving pervade his films. Place is never something pre-given, to be seized, owned, philosophised. In *Kunikága Remembers Red Banks, Kunikága Remembers the Welcome Song* (2014), Hopinka's grandmother is heard on a recording as she recalls Red Banks, the location of a Ho-Chunk village near present day Green Bay, Wisconsin, where the tribe first encountered European colonialism: "They claim to have discovered us, but we were always here, no one discovered us." Museological details and paintings of Jean Nicolet's arrival in 1634 are countered by the presence of Hopinka's body in what this place of 'first contact' looks like now. On the curved edge of a rippling bay, we hear footsteps crunching on gravel and

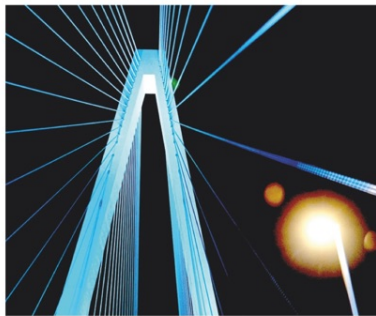


Protest and survive: *Dislocation Blues* (2017)

seashells, waves, the filmmaker's presence behind the moving camera, woven into this place's sedimentation of Native histories.

In *Dislocation Blues* (2017), place, sovereignty, and ecological survival are explored in conversations with two participants in the occupation in 2017 of Standing Rock, North Dakota, the largest and longest Native American protest against an oil pipeline on indigenous land. Hopinka presents the protest obliquely, from a distance, his camera never gawking. This intensifies the film's qualities of self-reflection, as its subjects recount their experiences – Terry Running Wild (Oglala Lakota) recorded on audio during the occupation, Cleo Keahna (Ojibwe, Meskwaki) via Skype after the protest. Terry discusses communality and belonging, and Cleo, who identifies as 'two-spirit', or trans, considers the specific solidarity of the camp: "I stopped thinking about my body there... back then, it was just us." Recognising Standing Rock as a site of intensive mediation by digital cameras, smartphones, news crews, Hopinka

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Jáaji Approx. (2015)

chooses an intimate register, making no claim to represent the event's entirety. Attending to the ethical gravity of filmic observation, he states, "I'm beginning to understand how to be a listener, without being a spectator."

Embroidering Native myths, *Fainting Spells* (2018) tells a speculative tale about the Xawiska, an Indian pipe plant used to revive those who have fainted. The plant is personified as a family member or intimate, addressed in handwritten messages that scroll across the image. The film wanders among landscapes that signal the otherworldly communications, embalmed memories and hypnotic dream narratives that the plant conjures. Colour-drenched skies and horizons overlap in the frame. Hopinka hypnagogically melds inner and outer journeys, the physical and transcendental, dreamlives and the material body. The imagined voice of the cursive reverberates with haunting musical interludes. In the opening shot's darkness, 'Go My Son' (1967) by Arlene Nofchissey Williams (Navajo) and Carnes Burson (Ute) plays elegiacally. Its lyrics suggest departure and return: "Go my son, go and climb the ladder, go my son, go and earn your feather..." The tune later reappears against a view of visitors at a sand dune, a layer of the image digitised as though peeling off its surface, a shimmering delamination, a layer of the film's reality taking flight. Asserting the co-existence of multiple planes of spiritual and sensorial consciousness, *Fainting Spells* represents Hopinka's rigorous craft at its beguiling apex.

Hopinka has extended his poetic film practice into a chapbook, *Around the Edge of Encircling Lake* (Green Gallery Press, 2018) which collects calligrams, film images and hybrid essays. The journeying of Hopinka's writing, like his cinema, is committed to a project of resisting indigenous objectification and oppression, linking it to the urgency of accepting uncertainty. As he puts it, the "difference between learning and knowing is little more than asking questions without the entitlement of an answer... honouring the vulnerability in saying and hearing 'I don't know.'" 🌀