

DANA CLAXTON



ABORIGINAL SCREEN CULTURE  
celebrating 10 years of imaginative

cover *image*: Four Sheets to the Wind (dir: Sterlin Harjo)

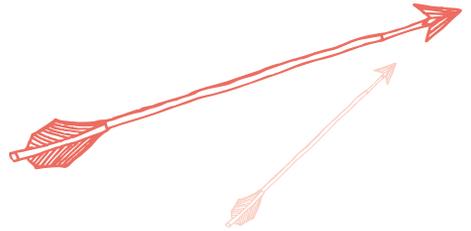


ABORIGINAL SCREEN CULTURE

*celebrating 10 years of  
imaginative*



HEARTALK\*: reflecting on *imagineNATIVE*



\*No, this is not a typo. *Heartalk* is the perfect commingling of three words that, together, begin to adequately speak of the delicate yet probing vision that Dana Claxton has applied to her curatorial project and to her essay printed here: *heart-talk* reflects her ability to write in the same voice that she speaks in, giving the impression, in places, that she is sitting across from the reader, speaking the words on the page; *heart(t)alk* addresses the origin of *her* words as well as the origin of her investigation into aboriginal drama, seeing it proceed directly from the speaking heart of each of the artists whose works she discusses.

So now to this programme and this publication.

For the 2009 imagineNATIVE Festival, Vtape has had the pleasure of working with the multi-talented, award-winning artist *extraordinaire* Dana Claxton to produce this publication. Dana's essay is based on her illustrated lecture/screening, "Aboriginal Screen Culture: Celebrating 10 years of imagineNATIVE", her very personal selection of twelve dramatic works produced from 1998 to 2007 and previously screened in the festival.

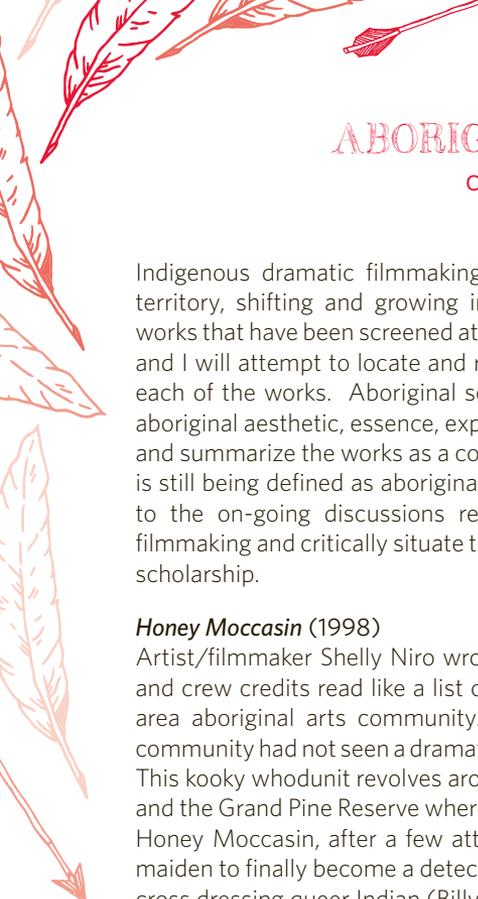
Dana's stated quest to, first, reveal and then define what she terms "aboriginal screen culture," is ambitious but perfectly suited to her talents as a keen observer and a courageous curator. Each of the dramatic works she has selected speaks with clarity and precision on its own. Woven together through Dana's delicate but powerful vision, the programme emerges as a witness to what she terms "indigenous knowledge" - but her sense of inclusiveness puts an "s" on knowledge, eliding perfectly into the expansive and pervasive nature of aboriginal experience as expressed by the artists in Dana Claxton's programme.

Ten years on and going stronger than ever, the *imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival* continues to amaze and engage with critically important programming and an unerring ability to attract the finest talents from around the world of Indigenous media arts.

I extend my personal appreciation to everyone at *imagineNATIVE* but especially to Kerry Swanson, Executive Director, and Jason Ryle, Board Chair, for their commitment to the on-going partnership between *iN* and Vtape. And many, many thanks to Daniel Northway-Frank for all his help with this publication.

Congratulations to imagineNATIVE! Ten years young, forever.

Lisa Steele  
*Creative Director, Vtape*



# ABORIGINAL SCREEN CULTURE

## celebrating 10 years of imagineNATIVE

Indigenous dramatic filmmaking is a relatively new practice, uncontextualized territory, shifting and growing instantaneously. I have chosen twelve dramatic works that have been screened at the imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival and I will attempt to locate and reveal what I view as aboriginal screen culture in each of the works. Aboriginal screen culture is best described as presenting an aboriginal aesthetic, essence, experience or worldview on the screen. I will discuss and summarize the works as a cohesive whole, as they connect to and shape what is still being defined as aboriginal screen culture. In doing so, I hope to contribute to the on-going discussions regarding indigenous cinema, social justice and filmmaking and critically situate the works within larger conversations of aboriginal scholarship.

### ***Honey Moccasin* (1998)**

Artist/filmmaker Shelly Niro wrote, produced and directed this work whose cast and crew credits read like a list of the who's who in the Toronto and surrounding area aboriginal arts community. Prior to its release, the aboriginal production community had not seen a dramatic film of this scale made by an aboriginal woman. This kooky whodunit revolves around Honey Moccasin's (Tantoo Cardinal) rez bar and the Grand Pine Reserve where someone is stealing women's pow-wow regalia. Honey Moccasin, after a few attempts, transforms from super woman to Indian maiden to finally become a detective, following clues that lead to the thief Zack - a cross dressing queer Indian (Billy Merasty).

When the community television station reports the theft of the regalia, a local Elder (Tom Hill) comments that youth need to realize the importance of making outfits and the Elders present an evening of handmade outfits made out of anything and everything from black rubber to Cheerios. Also that evening Honey's daughter Mabel (Florene Belmore) demonstrates what she is learning at art school. She has created a performance art work where she sings the classic hit "Fever" inside a tipi, while images of dislocated Indians are projected onto the canvas, referencing the Euro-Canadian/American germ warfare against aboriginal people. What is unique about presenting cutting edge contemporary art to reservation Indians is that it underlines the abilities of indigenous people on the rez to appreciate and understand contemporary art, showing that they do not need a go-between or art historian to explain what the art work is about.

In presenting a queer aboriginal cross dresser, *Honey Moccasin* is a landmark work. As he pranced around in stolen women's jingle dresses, Zack's "controversial" sexuality seems everyday, his queerness non-threatening to heterosexual comfort zones. Perhaps this is due to the fact that in many pre-contact aboriginal communities, gay males were part of the overall institution of life. The damaging onslaught of forced religious patriarchy and homophobia unfortunately introduced anti-gay sentiment into aboriginal thought. I would argue that a return to traditional ways of accepting homosexuality and variant sexualities is slowly being re-introduced. Individual autonomy, such as sexual choice within the tribe, is a traditional ideological and even spiritual practice for many aboriginal communities. The acceptance of this gay character by the Native community in *Honey Moccasin* presents a part of what aboriginal screen culture could be, is attempting to be, or that which it is. In this case the queer acceptance is non-western and non-eastern, non-dogmatic, and non-secularized. He is gay and that's okay, his sexual being is unregulated, no laws define his existence and he has individual autonomy within the tribe. His gay existence is not ahistorical, but part of a much longer history of culture. Another traditional point of view expressed in *Honey Moccasin* was the Elder's penalty imposed on Zack for stealing: he had to go on community television with all the dresses and give them back to their owners, demonstrating the Elders sanctioning forgiveness and understanding - a strong indication of the return to aboriginal self-government.

### ***Blood River* (2000)**

In this work, director Kent Monkman boldly employs non-traditional casting, allowing an Indian to play a non-Indian. Tantoo Cardinal was cast as a non-indigenous woman with an Indian fetish, who adopted a native child. At first the character is hard to believe, as the actress still looked like Cardinal wearing an ill-fitting blondish wig with pale make up. As the film progresses, the believability of her character becomes easier to accept. This attempt to deconstruct the fixed position that an Indian can only portray an Indian, I think ascribes to what aboriginal screen culture is also about - redefinition.

In *Blood River*, the adopted girl Rose (Jennifer Podemski) finds out that she has a brother while visiting her dead mother's First Nations friend who runs a foster home where the brother lives (the friend is also played by Cardinal, this time wearing an ill fitting black wig).

The brother (Brandon Oakes) is a street kid and hustler, whose nightmarish lifestyle is portrayed using post-production special effects that are intercut with his sister's dreams. As Rose dreams of blood and being sexually abused by a priest,

her brother puts out for an older man in a car; as Rose wrestles in her sleep, her brother is beaten in the streets. The connectivity she has with him is through the dream world that often brings teachings and visions. In Indian ways of spirit work, we get visited, guided and directed by spirits and ancestors and other-worldly beings.

In my own Lakota tradition, the dream world is considered the real world and we are to pay heed to powerful dreams that stay with us. To convey this on screen exhibits elements of aboriginal cosmologies that maintain belief systems of spirit work and spirit realms. Rose finally meets her brother and although she always wanted to meet her family, she realizes that perhaps these are not her people, and she clings to her adoptive white mother in the last frame of the movie. The reality of finding your Indian family after being raised in a white middle class home is not always a simple journey and often adoptees don't relate to the poverty or trauma of their Indian family, as was the case in *Blood River*. The white adopting mother won the love of her Indian child and suggests also adopting Rose's brother, which can only be a good thing, bringing the siblings together at last, despite the loss for their mother.

### ***Atanarjuat: Fast Runner* (2001)**

This film has been championed as Canada's first feature film written, produced and directed by an Inuit person, Zacharias Kunuk. In addition, the entire script is in Inuktitut. The macro northern landscape is seductive and the story line has all the classic elements—rape, murder, deceit, envy, good, bad, love, the supernatural, violence, sex and body fluid. The necessary needs for everyday survival are apparent: from seal oil to keep the lights on, to wondering where the next round of meat will come from— the endless task to sustain the people is very evident.

During one scene when the people need help, a shaman sends a message. As he performs the delicate movement of the Rabbit dance, time seems to stop as he beckons the spirits. The dance is other-worldly as he becomes an intercessor invoking the supernatural world to do the good work that needed to be done and protect those who needed to be shielded.

The colours of the film are white, (snow/sky), blue (snow/sky), tan (animal skins), black (hair), brown (faces) and yellow golden (glow from fire ) and the odd splash of red (blood /raw meat). This colour palette creates a stark look to film without compromising the sense of limitless space.

From building ice floors and houses, to eating whale heart, lighting the oil or crushing the meat, the representation of authentic Inuit everyday moments are endless.

The space that Kunuk has created on film is expansive and absorbing. The physicality of the north is endless and beautiful. The sheer aesthetic of the North and Inuit iconography, mixed with the language and the sound of the snow crunching, along with the enormous challenges of everyday northern existence, create the space of Inuit time on film. One can feel the ice chips as they fall upon the maker of the igloo and feel the fire from the long narrow flat oil lamp. Inuit screen culture seems to exist in every frame, every movement and in every word.

### ***Bearwalker* (2001)**

This Shirley Cheechoo film opens with the quote describing *Bearwalker* as “A powerful, spiritual phenomenon that employs the dark side.” And then a voice over continues, “it happen to my family, we go Bearwalked, it rips your soul in half...it transforms into anything.” This film is about aboriginal women and violence – ugly violence. Ella Lee (Renae Morriveau) is a battered wife and rape victim who kills her abusive husband. Cheechoo plays Rudy, the bleach blonde sister who is rough around the edges but has a wicked sense of humour. Cheechoo has created a magnificent film where the essence of time is non-linear and abstract, as the story goes before itself and doubles back again into itself and the device of flashbacks furthers the story line.

There are four sisters and three are rez women and Grace, a half sister who is half white, is a lawyer. Grace comes back to the rez because her sister Ella Lee has murdered her abusive husband. In this film, the police brutality is staggering and a reality that many aboriginal communities have been subjected to. Real life stories are often told when people gather and share their horror stories of police or paramedic brutality. Grace wants to seek revenge on the bad cop and invokes the *Bearwalker* to do so. She wanted the cop to “taste the other side of violence.” Although *Bearwalker* comes to her, a local elder prevents her from going any further, as it’s too dangerous. A voice over states, “in my culture if you die a violent death, your soul never rests and gets stuck between life and death and stays there until there is justice.” Ella Lee was killed violently by three men – her husband, her former boss (the rapist) and the bad cop. *Bearwalker* served justice for her death – as her three killers all die.

This haunting and disturbing work reveals an unsettling glimpse into life in a rural reservation and issues of racism, corruption, abuse and bad medicine. This trauma drama is hard to watch, the physical abuse is excessive and the essence of evil is frightening. The heavy subject matter is a clear and honest portrayal of one aspect of some aboriginal communities and what some people must endure, then

survive and move beyond. Trauma is very real in the aboriginal community and as a production community our stories will, from time to time, engage in the deepest pain that exists.

The supernatural force of the Bearwalker - shown through special effects and warped out sound - made its being very alive and eerie and its being, to some extent, interrupted the usual "a nice spiritual moment to a supernatural moment of terror." At the end of the film we learn that "when Bearwalker is surrounded by love it can't breath, it suffocates - it leaves us". This voice-over shows that even bad medicine or dark spirits can be brought down by a clear heart of goodness.

### ***Skins* (2002)**

Chris Eyre, the director of *Skins*, stated that his main intent in this edgy work was to humanize his central character Mogie Yellow Lodge - an acute alcoholic. The film opens with a montage of news clips about Pine Ridge Reservation, where the film was shot. Pine Ridge Reservation is the poorest of all counties in the United States, the average income is \$2,600.00 per year, and the life expectancy rate is 15 years less then the national average. Although horrifying statistics, we have heard these numbers for the last 50 years. The word *Skins* is an American Indian colloquialism used to describe self and others - he's a Skin, she's a Skin. *Skins* is a story of the dehumanization of a people, personal struggles and triumphs, excessive violence, murder and drinking, all wrapped up in brotherly love. Mogie (Graham Greene) is the older brother, a Vietnam veteran, an alcoholic and a father. Rudy (Eric Schweig) is the younger brother, a cop and a vigilante. The story flashes back to their love of football and how their parents would attend the games drinking and fighting. Wife beating on the Pine Ridge Reservation is very real and partially stems from the colonial violence that eradicated a warrior/ hunting culture. Lakota man have been emasculated as their traditional forms of governance were criminalized and the Head Men and Chiefs of the tribe had their authority taken away. With the complexities of government-sanctioned oppression, it has taken generations to regain a sense of self-worth. Mogie was raised in the 1950s by a father who was defeated, dehumanized and dejected. Some say alcohol takes away the generational pain that somehow inhabits indigenous bodies. Some of our families continue to live in, with and through trauma.

*Skins* is a sad story told through the tortured character of Mogie. Mogie stands in for all those people who suffer, have suffered or continue to suffer. Mogie is all those who have been harmed, are being harmed, or will be harmed. Mogie is all those who die young, die fast, die violently. But as terrible as Mogie's life has been,



he has love! A deep, deep love for his son and his brother and he died being loved by them. Mogie was cheeky even in his pain and his Indian humour throughout the film captured his resilient nature to live life with humour and irony.

### ***Prayer for a Good Day* (2003)**

This happy/sad/happy/sad short film directed by Zoe Ballentyne journeys into a delicate relationship between a girl and her dad. The story moves from her youth to young adulthood, as we watch several of her attempts to make her seemingly sad dad happy. Although we never see him drink on screen, he has some issues that impair his duties as a father. What is interesting is that although he is not always there for her - for instance he fails to get out of bed to usher her off to the first day of school, or he is too spaced out and burns her food, while at the same time, he buys her a bike and has provided her with a typical middle class all pink little girl's room. So, on one hand he provides for her, but isn't always there for her. There is an urgency of trauma in this short work, as the girl pleads a few times through voiceover "please let there be a good day." This child has seen too many bad days and requests a good one. The desire to make her father happy is finally absolved when, as an educated grown up she buys her father a complete field of broken down cars. The moment he encounters his field of dreams, he is elated and it is at this precise moment that aboriginal screen culture explodes on the screen, by way of offering a humble need - to fix broken cars. The fluidity of *Prayer for a Good Day* demonstrates a clear understanding of the craft of filmmaking, as does the story structure. The way Ballentyne tells her story is thoughtful, demonstrating a capacity to create a "feeling" within the very structure of the movement of her film.



### ***For Cherry English* (2002)**

Urban, sexy and cool, this short was written and directed by Jeff Barnaby and features a white chick and an Indian dude on drugs and having sex. The optics alone are challenging: the image of a pretty non-Indian woman with a hunky Indian man is rarely seen on North American screens. Even though romance novel covers portray this desire, the actual pairing is somewhat rare. As the drugs begin to kick in and they fall into a deep sleep, the white chick becomes a Wicca in his dream and asks him to speak Indian - "some old words or something". When the Indian dude declares that he can't speak Indian, she asks if the dream catchers and antlers hanging in his apartment are just decorations, void of meaning. In his drug-induced nightmare (or reaction to his allergy of cherries, as she feeds him some, or perhaps vision state), he loses his tongue, which metaphorically suggests the loss of his indigenous language. It's creepy watching someone lose their actual tongue and the special effects in this scene are superb. As the Indian dude falls

into a full-length mirror, he lands on the other side of life to be greeted by his dead grandmother and uncle. The entire time his grandmother is speaking in Indian, as his drunken uncle declares, “if you want to say something in Indian, get drunk and speak bad English.” This ugly statement hurts and we are reminded of all the intoxicated dehumanized Indians who have lost their inherent language as a result of residential schools and the criminalization of aboriginal culture.

*For Cherry English* attempts to unpack this situation and at the end of the film, after he has awoken, the Indian dude takes a drink from the same bottle that his uncle had in the spirit world. Perhaps he will speak Indian as soon as he gets drunk and speaks bad English. At first, I was unable to locate hope in this post-Indian work but upon reflection and the need to find something beautiful, other than the art direction and cinematography, I probed deeper and came to conclude that despite the loss of language, he did get his tongue sewn back into his mouth and he could now learn his language, if he tried. He would have to try very hard, but at least his native tongue is still being spoken and exists for him to learn.

### ***The Traveler's Bones* (2004)**

In Travis Shilling's black and white tale of a Giant, a covered wagon and the captives inside, the dialogue is sparse and most of the minimal action takes place inside the covered wagon. This highly creative work collapses the western genre and experimental cinema and brings forth a fresh approach to indigenous cinema. Most of the audio track is the continuous sound of the wagon wheels moving on the road. The wheels turn and turn and make an oddly comforting sound. There is a feeling of containment, since most of the film takes place inside the wagon. The captives have nowhere to go, yet they are in constant motion. The large and controlling Giant seems to stand in for the West and the impingements upon American Indian people. The captives inside seem to represent American Indian mobility and shifting locations as a result of forced relocation. The captives are moving forward, but to what end? The containment of the actors in this small space is both beautiful and annoying. A few times we see the outside, with the Giant pulling the little wagon along. Perhaps pulling along the small ideological ideas of foreign invasion and how the “west” drags along, even with its prisoners.

Finally, the sound of the moving wheels stops, the Giant is now drinking and the little people are now tied to a pole, perhaps a stir stick. The Giant reaches in a cup and swallows something. The next shot is of the little people inside the Giant's stomach.



Although well shot and aesthetically engaging, what does it mean? Are the captives American Indians who find freedom in their minds even though the Giant maintains the power? Regardless, the relationship between power and the powerless is at the root of this work and the question of who has real power is in question. I think the work asks: "Is real power the will to have freedom of your mind, despite dominating forces? Or is power held in the hands of the bullies?"

### ***The Winter Chill* (2005)**

Paul Rickard's film tells the story of two brothers (Glen Gould and Dakota House). As they go to their father's trap line to check traps they are reminded that their entitlement is to trap the animals that make themselves available. They both notice that the bush is eerie this time out, there are no sounds and no birds. The younger brother (House) goes to check the traps but they are missing and he hears weird sounds. He races back to the cabin and tells his older brother (Gould) that there is something out there, to which the brother replies, "of course there's something out there. It's the fucking bush!" Meaning, it's alive, there are spirits and dwellers of the bush that are both visible and invisible. As they discuss what is out there, the older brother states that their dad didn't want his sons to run from the spirits of the bush, but to learn something from them. Simon, the younger brother, attempts again to go find his father's traps and encounters a powerful spirit of the forest and asks, "Are you Windago?" The spirit replies, "No, I am my own creation, no one can control me." As their conversation continues in Cree, Simon asks, "What are you doing here?" The spirit answers, "I am waiting, collecting them to return." Simon asks, "Who?" Spirit, "The animals they have left. Disappeared. Nobody is hunting them. They were put here for you to use. Listen to me. Reverence."

What started out as an experience that was scary for Simon became a valuable lesson - he must continue the tradition of trapping. As Simon hears the clanking of metal and walks towards it, he finds all his dad's traps and his snowshoes hanging in a tree. The spirits have placed them there for him to use and continue this cultural practice that generations of his family have done before him.

### **133 *Skyway* (2006)**

In Randy Redroad's film, Mohawk rocker Derrick Miller plays a guitar playing rounder with a best buddy who is a crack-head. Both live on the street. When the guitarist dies, the crack-head offers tobacco in the places where he liked to drink and sleep in the alleyway. The crack-head receives a small pouch/medicine bag from an aboriginal street woman who sings a death song of honour for the

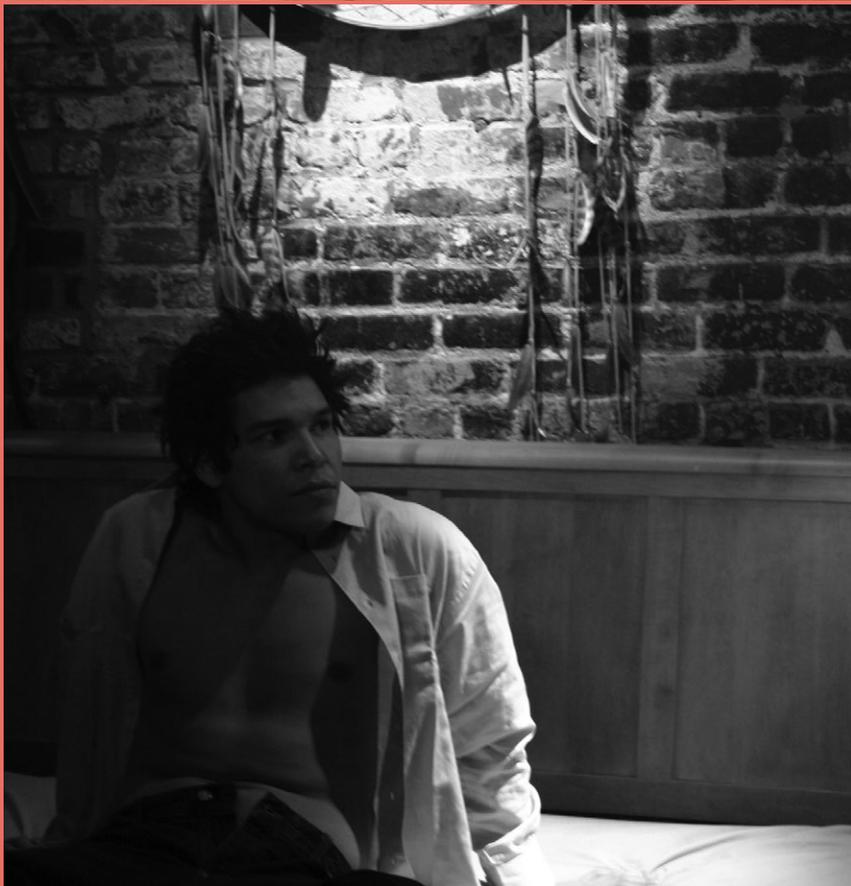


clockwise from top left: Honey Moccasin (dir: Shelley Niro), The Fast Runner (dir: Zacharias Kunuk),  
Bearwalker (dir: Shirley Cheechoo), Blood River (dir: Kent Monkman)





*clockwise from top left: Skins (dir: Chris Eyre), The Traveler's Bones (dir: Travis Shillings), For Cherry English (dir: Jeff Barnaby), Prayer for a Good Day (dir: Zoe Ballentyne)*







clockwise from top left: Winter Chill (dir: Paul Rickard), Four Sheets to the Wind (dir: Sterlin Harjo),  
Older than America (dir: Georgina Lightning), 133 Skyway (dir: Randy Redroad)



dead guitarist. She is seen a few times throughout the film, but when she gives the tobacco and sings the song, her purpose becomes clear. This street Indian mama gives tradition to the crack-head and sends off the alcoholic guitarist to the other side, by way of singing/chanting and ushering his spirit to the Milky Way. This is not a happily-ever-after film for the central characters, or at least not on this earth.

They remain on the street and die on the street. And what of hope? Some don't believe in hope, and perhaps the pawnshop girl represents hope as she reveals a very private and personal kindness ethic. She wants the guitarist to have his pawned guitar back, she knows it is his life line. Unable to do so, she is forced to sell it off but she gives the crack-head the ticket with the address of the person who bought the guitar - 133 Skyway. The story ends with the guitarist walking into the horizon playing his guitar, attached to a long amplifier cord. Perhaps it is the umbilical cord to life, or a symbolic rope that keeps him from falling.

#### ***Four Sheets to the Wind* (2006)**

Opening with English subtitles while an aboriginal language is spoken, immediately places this work outside the framework of an American English film and it becomes a foreign film on the ancient homeland of the writer/director Sterlin Harjo. The device of using Seminole is featured throughout the film in moments of deep thought or silliness. The voice-over is actually the father speaking. The father of Cufe Smallhills (Cody Lightning) has died and Cufe takes the body to a pond located on private property and releases it. When people inquire about the body, Cufe says that his father always wanted to be placed there. By placing watermelons into a coffin as weight since the body is in the pond, they have a funeral, the father gets buried and the rest of the family begin to heal old wounds and make new lives.

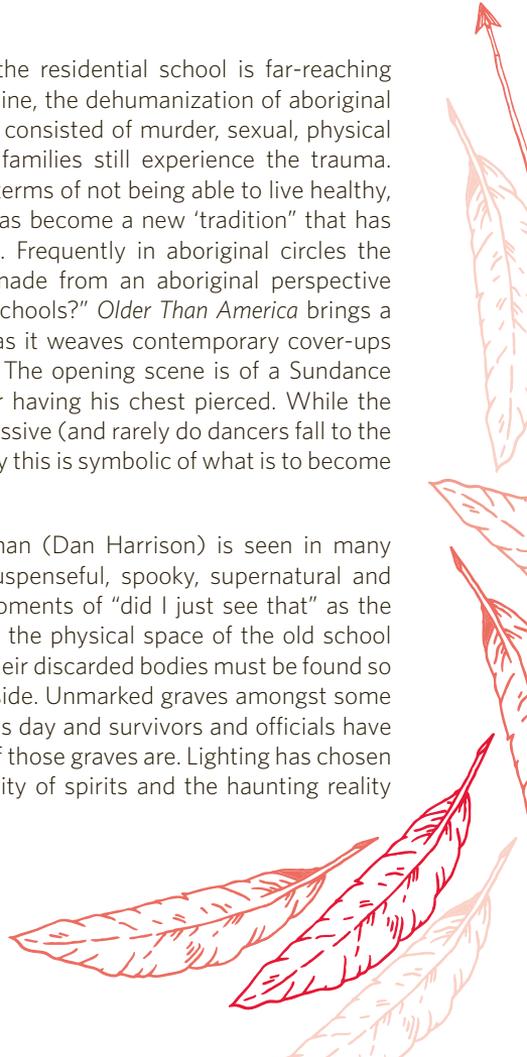
Cufe decides to go stay with his messed up sister Miri (Tamara Podemski) in the city. Miri's life is complex. She drinks too much, steals money from work, can't make enough money to pay her rent, and in one scene of sheer emptiness she has sex with a stranger. The vacant look in her eyes represents the displacement of aboriginal female sexuality and the dehumanization of American Indian women through systems of criminalizing traditional gender roles via outlawing cultural practices. Miri's problems seem to stem from the silence she learned from her mother and father and perhaps their silence came from being Indian in a world that didn't want to hear from them, or a world that didn't want them to exist, or a world that disallowed their existence. Although Cufe claimed that his father felt comfort in his silence. How do a people exist when they have been silenced?

Finally, Cufe meets a lovely young woman in the city and falls in love. The timing and pacing of the humor is sort of a cross between deadpan and **Fargo**. Cody Lighting gives an amazing performance that is grounded in Indian humour and a relationship to time and space. This is completely Cody Lighting's film. It is shot almost Dogma style with little lighting. What Sterlin Harjo seems to be creating in his work is a rhythm and an aesthetic that is his own. His work is not caught up in flash, but an indie Indian outré. In all, *Four Sheets to the Wind* packs in many moments of pain and suffering, humour and hope, love and a future.

### ***Older Than America* (2007)**

In Georgina Lighting's film, the legacy of the residential school is far-reaching and painful. On both sides of the medicine line, the dehumanization of aboriginal children from state and church-run schools consisted of murder, sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Survivors and their families still experience the trauma. Unfortunately, families are still impacted in terms of not being able to live healthy, loving lives. Sexual abuse still lingers and has become a new "tradition" that has been passed down to the next generation. Frequently in aboriginal circles the question arises, "When will a movie be made from an aboriginal perspective that discloses residential/Indian Boarding schools?" *Older Than America* brings a fragment of that experience to the screen as it weaves contemporary cover-ups with historical institutional illegal behavior. The opening scene is of a Sundance and a male dancer falls to the ground after having his chest pierced. While the blood that runs from the wound is a tad excessive (and rarely do dancers fall to the ground) but in this film the man falls. Possibly this is symbolic of what is to become of the people.

As the story moves, a mysterious spirit man (Dan Harrison) is seen in many locations and the appearance of him is suspenseful, spooky, supernatural and oddly comforting. He is good. There are moments of "did I just see that" as the spirits of some of the dead children inhabit the physical space of the old school building and the streets of the small town. Their discarded bodies must be found so they can continue the journey to the other side. Unmarked graves amongst some residential school sites are still hidden to this day and survivors and officials have the common knowledge as to where some of those graves are. Lighting has chosen innovative devices to represent the invisibility of spirits and the haunting reality that the children endured.



The lead character Rain (played by director Georgia Lighting) begins to have visions about the residential school and sees people from her dream materialize in the daytime. This frightens her as her own mother, a residential school casualty, had her mind taken through medical abuses, electro-shock treatments and administered drugs and her induced condition was portrayed as a mental illness, which Rain thought she was getting. The corrupt priest had her mother admitted and sought and succeeded to have Rain committed to a mental institution. Rain's Auntie Apple (Tantoo Cardinal) is a pitiful character who was brainwashed by the church and is in love with the priest. The repulsive fact that she supported the priest's corruption, watched as he de-stabilized her own sister and all the while had a perverted liaison with the creep was a remarkable plot line. Her implication in both the drugging and shock treatment of her sister and niece, combined with her desire presented how forced religious conversion corrupted her to basically become evil - they took the Indian good out of her. Eventually, Rain forces her to rethink what she has done and Auntie Apple - in a defiant act - rips her own gold cross necklace off her neck and throws it on the counter - indicating that she is finished with this false religion that is not inherently hers. Auntie Apple has been so damaged by the manipulating priest that she is but a confused vacant carcass.

Sometimes it is hard to watch the brutality of these schools on screen and Lightning has drafted a script that brings all this ugliness to life, and there are many other subplots in the story. The film ends with the funeral of the children from the boarding school. Hundreds of people are circled around the drum as the camera pans to the young white man who came to town to research. During his stay he met and fell for a local Indian woman and now he is standing beside her. This image of a white boy becoming part of the circle was a tremendously generous act from Lighting. This simple gesture situates him as hope for all of white America/Canada to know what has happened upon this ancient homeland of American Indian people and that despite the legacy of his ancestors, he has been brought into the circle. Possibly as an act of reconciliation, possibly as an act of forgiveness, possibly he has simply gone Native.

The spirit children from the residential school who appear throughout the film can leave the town now, along with the spirit man who has guided Rain. Their spirit work is complete and now they have been properly buried. We watch as they move through the crowd heading to the other side. The hope is that through reconciliation and acknowledgement, we can move forward, while maintaining our aboriginal ways that are older than America.

### **Summation**

These dramatic works all exhibit different complexities of the American Indian/ First Nations experience. From historical acts of violence, family love, spirit work, traditional practices, contemporary realities, vast landscapes and living off the land, experimental narrative, humor and irony - combined these films capture what is going on in aboriginal thought. One of the strongest links I could locate between the works was the enduring strength of character of American Indians/ First Nations to make self-presentational works and to unpack this difficult history we have in North America. Some works were more celebratory than others, while others deeply unwrap what has come to be termed as "post-colonial traumatic stress disorder." The continued theme of trauma ran deeply in many of the works and I questioned my own trauma and why these works spoke so personally to me. Had I chosen works with trauma? No. Did the majority of works reveal trauma? Yes. I can't completely articulate all the reasons why the trauma exists and why the trauma continues to inhabit aboriginal bodies. What I can articulate is that trauma is real and alive in Indian country and through filmmaking, I think some of it can be released.

By pondering indigenous dramatic film, I became curious about the actual making of aboriginal productions and through which cultural means. I am specifically wondering about hiring practices and production methodologies that combine aboriginal ways of being within production models. With the incorporation of traditional teachings such as Medicine Wheel pedagogy - which comes from natural law and universal wholeness - production styles could have the great potential to maintain aboriginal ways of being through the application of practicing living cultural philosophies in all areas of production.

Aboriginal filmmakers can be both makers of culture and keepers of tradition, by way of approaching productions within realms of traditional knowledge and practices. I know some directors, including myself, who incorporate traditional teachings on set, whether talking circles, crew and cast smudging, having the set and camera blessed by a medicine person or simple attempts of Red Road teachings, which are rooted in generosity and kindness.

Aboriginal screen culture displayed through various devices ranging from indigenous worldviews written into the script, a character's being, the supernatural, aboriginal languages, sets, props and costumes that reflect traditional iconography to urban and rural experiences, combined present aboriginal screen culture. The methodologies may vary; not all will practice a holistic form of set or production

management, or even hire an aboriginal crew, but what is being projected on the screen is an aboriginal experience whether based in traditional teachings or a variant, or completely devoid of tradition, the aboriginal experience is there in whatever manifestation it exists because the writer, director, producer and actor are of the blood line. And regardless of acculturation, assimilation, religious conversion, tribal background, paint or no paint, braids or no braids, drum or no drum – our works tell ourselves and non-Indians who we are and what we experience, think, know and dream.

Through image making, aboriginal cultural producers hold the great potential to shift consciousness not only to undo the damage of the structural dehumanization that has been bestowed upon our communities, but to share, honor and live indigenous knowledges that span from the infinity of Milky Way to the Buffalo Grass we walk upon. Our cosmologies, world views and the diversity of aboriginal thought from the four directions can be projected for all to see. Aboriginal screen culture is highly potent as it has the great capacity to awaken, to teach, and to undo harm. While at the same time there may be those who view aboriginal screen culture as dangerous, because it possesses great mana.

## DANA CLAXTON

*Dana Claxton works in film, video, photography, multi channel installation, performance, curation, aboriginal broadcasting and pedagogy. Her work has been shown internationally at the Museum of Modern Art, Walker Art Centre, Sundance Film Festival and the Eiteljorg Museum and is held in public collections such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, National Gallery of Canada, Art Bank of Canada and the Winnipeg Art Gallery. She has received numerous awards including the VIVA Award and the Eiteljorg Fellowship. She has presented papers at the Getty Institute (LA), Mid-American Art College Association and the College Art Association (USA). Currently, she is the Ruth Wynn Woodward Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University and her art work has been selected for the 17th Biennale of Sydney 2010.*

*Dana Claxton would like to thank Lisa Steele, Daniel Northway-Frank, Vtape, imagineNATIVE, and all of the filmmakers. A special pila maya to Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie for our precious conversation about mana.*



# PROGRAMME NOTES

Friday, October 16, 2009 at 3pm, Al Green Theatre, Toronto

**TITLE** Honey Moccasin

**DIRECTOR** Shelley Niro

**RUNNING TIME** 47 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 1998

This all-Native production, by director Shelley Niro (Mohawk), is part of the Smoke Signals new wave of films that examine Native identity in the 1990s. Set on the Grand Pine Indian Reservation, aka "Reservation X," *Honey Moccasin* combines elements of melodrama, performance art, cable access, and 'whodunit' to question conventions of ethnic and sexual identity as well as film narrative. A comedy/thriller complete with a fashion show and torchy musical numbers, this witty film employs a surreal pastiche of styles to depict the rivalry between bars The Smokin' Moccasin and The Inukshuk Cafe, the saga of closeted drag queen/powwow clothing thief Zachary John, and the travails of crusading investigator Honey Moccasin. This irreverent reappropriation of familiar narrative strategies serves as a provocative spring-board for an investigation of authenticity, cultural identity, and the articulation of modern Native American experience in cinematic language and pop culture.

*Shelley Niro is a member of the Turtle Clan, Bay of Quinte Mohawk from the Six Nations Reserve. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art, Niro received her MFA from the University of Western Ontario. Working in photography, painting, sculpture and film, Niro frequently utilizes parody and appropriation in her works to challenge stereotypical images of Aboriginal peoples, and women in particular. Often humorous and playful, her works address the challenges faced in contemporary Native North American society. Niro's work has been broadly exhibited in galleries across Canada and can be found in the collections of the Canada Council Art Bank, Canadian Museum of Civilization, and Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. Her award-winning films, including Honey Moccasin, have been screened in festivals worldwide. Her recent video The Shirt, which she wrote, directed and produced, was presented at the 2003 Venice Biennale. Her latest feature, Kissed by Lightning, is an official selection at imagineNATIVE 2009.*

**TITLE** Blood River

**DIRECTOR** Kent Monkman

**RUNNING TIME** 23 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2000

Rose (Jennifer Podemski), a hip Native Law student, can barely tolerate her well-meaning but clueless adoptive mother (Tantoo Cardinal). Feeling at odds with her idyllic white suburban existence, she searches for her natural family. Through Rose's vivid hallucinatory nightmares, we see a Native youth trying to survive on the streets of a big city. As he is pimped, bullied and bashed, Rose experiences his terror and isolation. When she finally meets her brother (Brandon Oakes), they have a hard time bridging the gap between his

harsh reality and her sugar-coated existence. Perhaps she has been too quick to write off what she does have.

*Born in St. Marys, Ontario, Kent Monkman is an artist of Cree ancestry who works with a variety of mediums, including painting, film/video, performance and installation. He has had solo exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Walter Phillips Gallery, and the Indian Art Centre, and has participated in various international group exhibitions including: "We come in peace..." Histories of the Americas, at the Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal, and The American West, at Compton Verney, in Warwickshire, England. Monkman has created site specific performances at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, and at Compton Verney, UK, and has also made super 8 mm versions of these performances that he calls "Colonial Art Space Interventions." His award-winning short film and video works have been screened at various national and international festivals, including Sundance, Berlin, and the Toronto International Film Festival. His work is represented in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Museum London, The Mackenzie Art Gallery, the Woodland Cultural Centre, the Indian Art Centre, and the Canada Council Art Bank. A solo exhibition of his work was mounted by the Art Gallery of Hamilton in the summer of 2007 and will tour to museums across Canada including Art Gallery of Victoria, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.*

**TITLE** Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner

**DIRECTOR** Zacharias Kunuk

**RUNNING TIME** 172 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2001

Evil in the form of an unknown shaman divides a small community of nomadic Inuit, upsetting its balance and spirit.

Twenty years pass. Two brothers emerge to challenge the evil order: Amaqjuaq, the Strong One, and Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner. Atanarjuat wins the hand of the lovely Atuat away from the boastful son of the camp leader, Oki, who vows to get even. Oki ambushes the brothers in their sleep, killing Amaqjuaq, as Atanarjuat miraculously escapes running naked over the spring sea ice. But can he ever escape the cycle of vengeance left behind?

*Zacharias Kunuk (b. 1957, Kapuivik near Igloolik) won the Camera d'Or at Cannes 2001 for Isuma's first feature, Atanarjuat the Fast Runner. He is president and co-founder. in 1990 of Igloolik Isuma Productions, Canada's first Inuit-owned independent production company. In 1981, Kunuk sold three sculptures in Montreal and brought home the Arctic's first home video camera. Kunuk's credits include the short dramas Qaggiq (Gathering Place, 1989), Nunaqpa (Going Inland, 1991) Saputi (Fish Traps, 1993) and documentaries NIPI (Voice, 1999), Nanugiurutiga (My First Polar Bear, 2001) and Kunuk Family Reunion (2004);*

as well as Isuma's 13-part TV series *Nunavut (Our Land, 1995)*, broadcast on Bravo! and exhibited at *Dokumenta 11* in 2002. Having completed the documentary *Kiviaq Versus Canada*, Kunuk is shooting his latest documentary *Exile*. Kunuk is the winner of the National Arts Award, National Aboriginal Achievement Award and in 2005 was awarded the Order of Canada.

**TITLE** Bearwalker

**DIRECTOR** Shirley Cheechoo

**RUNNING TIME** 83 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2001

*Bearwalker* is the story of a supernatural force at work in a small community where prejudice, injustice, corruption and revenge are simmering just below the surface. It is a dramatic and compelling tale of four Aboriginal sisters' struggles with the powerful and menacing spirit of the Bearwalker, an evil force that takes possession of and tears apart several lives in the town.

*Dr. Shirley Cheechoo is an award winning filmmaker, director, writer, actor and visual artist. She is a master storyteller at heart, writing scripts, plays, film and television dramas that search for significance. She creates films that are both poignant and transformative. She takes great care in her work because good stories take time and patience.*

*These groundbreaking actions make her not only a mentor to so many in the Native arts community but makes her one of Canada's most well-known and respected artists. Her patronage to the arts doesn't stop there. She is co-owner of Kasheese Studios art gallery with her husband Blake Debassige promoting Aboriginal artists. She is also the president of Spoken Song film production company and founded the Weengushk Film Institute on Manitoulin Island that will train, develop and guide independent filmmakers.*

**TITLE** Skins

**DIRECTOR** Chris Eyre

**RUNNING TIME** 87 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2001

*Skins* is a 2002 feature film by Chris Eyre and based upon the novel of the same name by Adrian C. Louis. The film is set on the fictional Beaver Creek Indian Reservation in South Dakota near the Nebraska border, a place very much like the actual Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, the setting in the book and the place where the film was actually shot. Lakota Sioux tribal police officer Rudy Yellow Lodge (Eric Schweig) struggles to rescue his older, alcoholic brother, Mogie (Graham Greene), a former football star who

was wounded in combat three times in Vietnam. Winona LaDuke makes a cameo appearance as Rose Two Buffalo.

*Chris Eyre was born in Portland, Oregon to a Native American mother, and then given up for adoption. Raised by Caucasian parents, Eyre eventually reconnected with his biological mother and the rest of his extended Native family, who live throughout the American West. Intrigued by visual storytelling from an early age, Eyre majored in Media at the University of Arizona, where he directed his first 16mm shorts, then went on to receive his Master's from the NYU Film School. While there, he wrote and directed several short films, including the Indian drama Tenacity. Released by Forefront Films, it won NYU's Best Short Film, the coveted Mobile Award, and a place at the 1995 Sundance Film Festival.*

**TITLE** Prayer for a Good Day

**DIRECTOR** Zoe Ballentyne

**RUNNING TIME** 12 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2003

A young girl constantly offering prayers for good days guides her father through his numbness.

*Zoe Leigh Hopkins is Heiltsuk from Bella Bella, BC, and Mohawk from Six Nations, Ontario. Her short film, Prayer for a Good Day, premiered worldwide at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. Her latest short film, One-eyed Dogs are Free, premiered at the Worldwide Short Film Festival in Toronto. Based out of Vancouver, Hopkins is currently in pre-production with a new Mohawk-language short film that will premiere at the 10th Anniversary of the ImagineNATIVE Film and Video Festival in Toronto. Hopkins graduated in 1997 from Ryerson Polytechnic University with a B.A.A. in Film. She was a Fellow at the Sundance Institute's Filmmaker's Lab with her feature script, Cherry Blossoms, which is now in development through Telefilm with a Vancouver-based production company.*

**TITLE** For Cherry English

**DIRECTOR** Jeff Barnaby

**RUNNING TIME** 10 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2004

*For Cherry English is a surrealist Mi'gMaq allegory about the loss of language and identity to the anonymity of an urban wasteland. Traylor, a Mi'gMaq man being pulled between two worlds meets a non-native woman who sends him on a hallucinogenic journey of masochism, and self discovery. The film explores the relationship that Traylor has with his language, culture, and past.*

*Born and raised on the Mi'gmaq reservation of Listuguj Quebec, a consummate iconoclast, Jeff Barnaby dropped the drum and the feather for sex, violence, and booze hound broken Indians, earning him the badge of bad boy of native Canadian cinema. Having only graduated in 2004 from Concordia's film production program, he has already won numerous awards and his films have been shown around the world. He currently lives Montreal and is working on his first feature, Dirty Red Boys.*

**TITLE** The Traveler's Bones

**DIRECTOR** Travis Shillings

**RUNNING TIME** 21 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2004

Offering a humourous nod to the western, this is a film for anyone who has ever taken a journey into unknown territory.

*Travis Shilling is a visual painter who has always produced and directed short dramas alongside his paintings. The balance of the mediums is vital. He has directed the documentary Journey to the Fish Weirs and has directed and written for Buffalo Tracks.*

**TITLE** The Winter Chill

**DIRECTOR** Paul Rickard

**RUNNING TIME** 24.5 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2005

A young Cree man ventures to an unknown region of his father's trapline and meets Pakaaskokan, the last remaining supernatural being of its kind. Though initially frightening, the man answers the pleas of help from the creature that leads to a shocking moment of realization. *The Winter Chill* is an adaptation and modern retelling of a traditional Cree narrative about the filmmaker's great-grandfather's own encounter with this ancient emaciated being. In traditional Cree storytelling, Pakaaskokan is one of the lesser-known Cree supernatural beings that inhabit the boreal forests of the Canadian sub-arctic. It has the ability to fly, is skeleton or emaciated in appearance, its origin is of human victims by starvation or disease, and it signals its presence by a weird laughter, moans, or rattling bones. It is sometimes blamed for missing traps that it steals from trappers.

*Mushkeg Media's president Paul M. Rickard is an Omuskego Cree from Moose Factory in Northern Ontario. For the past 15 years, he has been working as a producer, director and cameraman in collaboration with independent production companies and organizations such*

as *Nutaaq Media Inc., Wildheart Productions, Wawatay, CBC North and the National Film Board of Canada*. Now Paul is venturing into the area of independent production. In 2005, Paul wrote, directed and produced his first dramatic short film entitled *The Winter Chill* based on a traditional Cree story told by his father. In 2005, it was nominated for Best Aboriginal Short and Best Actor (*Dakota House*) at the Yorkton Short Film Festival, as well as Best Short at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco, California. In 2006, it won for Best Film and Best Director at the Music & Film In Motion Festival in Sudbury, Ontario. Paul is currently in development of a feature length film script entitled *Sideways North*.

**TITLE** 133 Skyway

**DIRECTOR** Randy Redroad

**RUNNING TIME** 21.5 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** Canada **YEAR** 2006

As his health fails, a homeless man endeavors to get his guitar out of hock, relying on a troubled friend and the kindness of a lonely pawn shop employee.

*Randy Redroad has written and directed numerous award-winning shorts, including Haircuts Hurt and High Horse; the feature film, The Doe Boy; and the groundbreaking short film, Mocassin Flats. 133 Skyway is his latest contribution to Aboriginal media.*

**TITLE** Four Sheets to the Wind

**DIRECTOR** Sterlin Harjo

**RUNNING TIME** 84.5 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** USA **YEAR** 2007

Beautifully crafted and set under a gorgeous Oklahoma skies, this poignant and wryly funny story of family and healing begins the morning of Cufe Smallhill (Cody Lightning) finds his father quieter than usual, an empty bottle of pills at his side. Fulfilling his dad's wish, Cufe sinks his father's body in the pond to spare him the big circus of a funeral. Cufe, his cousin, and mom decide to fake a funeral to satisfy the community, and Cufe's beautiful and tormented sister Miri (Tamara Podemski) comes home just long enough to convince Cufe to leave the reserve and visit her in the city. Once there, shy Cufe meets a girl who gently opens up his world.

*Sterlin Harjo belongs to the Seminole and Creek Nations, and is a native of Holdenville, Oklahoma. Interested from an early age in visual art and film, Harjo studied painting at the University of Oklahoma before writing his first feature-length script. Since then he has studied screenwriting in the University of Oklahoma's Film and Video Studies Program and*

*under the Sundance Institute's Feature Film Program. In 2004, Sundance Institute selected Harjo to receive an Annenberg Fellowship which provided extended support over a two-year period to facilitate the creation of his feature project. In 2006 Harjo was in the first class of United States Artists award recipients. He was also the youngest recipient. Sterlin Harjo completed a year of development on his feature film script Four Sheets to the Wind through the Sundance Institute's Filmmaker Labs where he worked under the guidance of industry veterans such as Robert Redford, Stanley Tucci, Joan Tewkesbury, Susan Shilliday, Frank Pierson, Walter Mosley, and Antonia Bird. Sterlin's project was one of 12 projects chosen from a pool of almost 2,500 based on the uniqueness of his voice, the originality of his story and the promise of this feature film offering something poignant to American cinema.*

*Harjo has directed three short films Crooked Little Heart, They're Playing his Song, and Good Night Irene which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 05 and has gone on to play festivals around the world. The short film has garnered Harjo awards including Special Jury Recognition at the Aspen Shorts Festival and Best Oklahoma Film at the Dead Center film festival in Oklahoma City.*

*In January 2007 Harjo's first feature film, Four Sheets to the Wind, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival. The film garnered warm responses from both audience's and critics. Tamara Podemski won a Special Jury Prize for outstanding performance for her role in the film as Miri Smallhill.*

*Harjo's new film Barking Water had a successful premiere at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival, and it recently screened as a part of the highly acclaimed New Directors/New Film series in New York City. Barking Water is the only American film playing in the Venice Days section of the 2009 Venice Film Festival.*

**TITLE** Older than America

**DIRECTOR** Georgina Lightning

**RUNNING TIME** 102 min (2 minute excerpt)

**ORIGIN** USA **YEAR** 2008

A woman's haunting visions reveal a Catholic priests sinister plot to silence her mother from speaking the truth about the atrocities that occurred at a Native American boarding school. The contemporary drama of suspense, *Older Than America* delves into the lasting impact of the cultural genocide that occurred at Indian boarding schools across the U.S. and Canada.

*First-time feature film director/lead actress Georgina Lightning, a Cree Indian Artist who has creative experience in film industry as an actor, producer, acting coach on projects as:*

Backroads, Dreamkeepers, Johnny Greyeyes, Christmas in the Clouds, Tecumseh, The Oath, and Smoke Signals. She guest starred on TV episodes, Walker Texas Ranger/West Wing and recently named by "Filmmaker Magazine" as one of the top 25 Filmmakers to look out for in 2008. Since its premiere at imagineNATIVE, Older than America has won over 18 awards at film festivals around the world. Lightning is also the cofounder of Tribal Alliance Productions, a production company committed to producing media that matters told from a native perspective. A long time advocate of Native Indian advancement in the film industry, Lightning also formed Native Media Network, a group dedicated to the promotion and advancement of Native Indian talent.

Published in 2009 by Vtape  
401 Richmond Street West, #452  
Toronto, ON M5V 3A8  
Canada



tel 416 351-1317  
fax 416 351-1509

www.vtape.org  
ISBN: 978-0-9734831-8-5

Printed by Print Maximum  
Designed by Linseed Projects

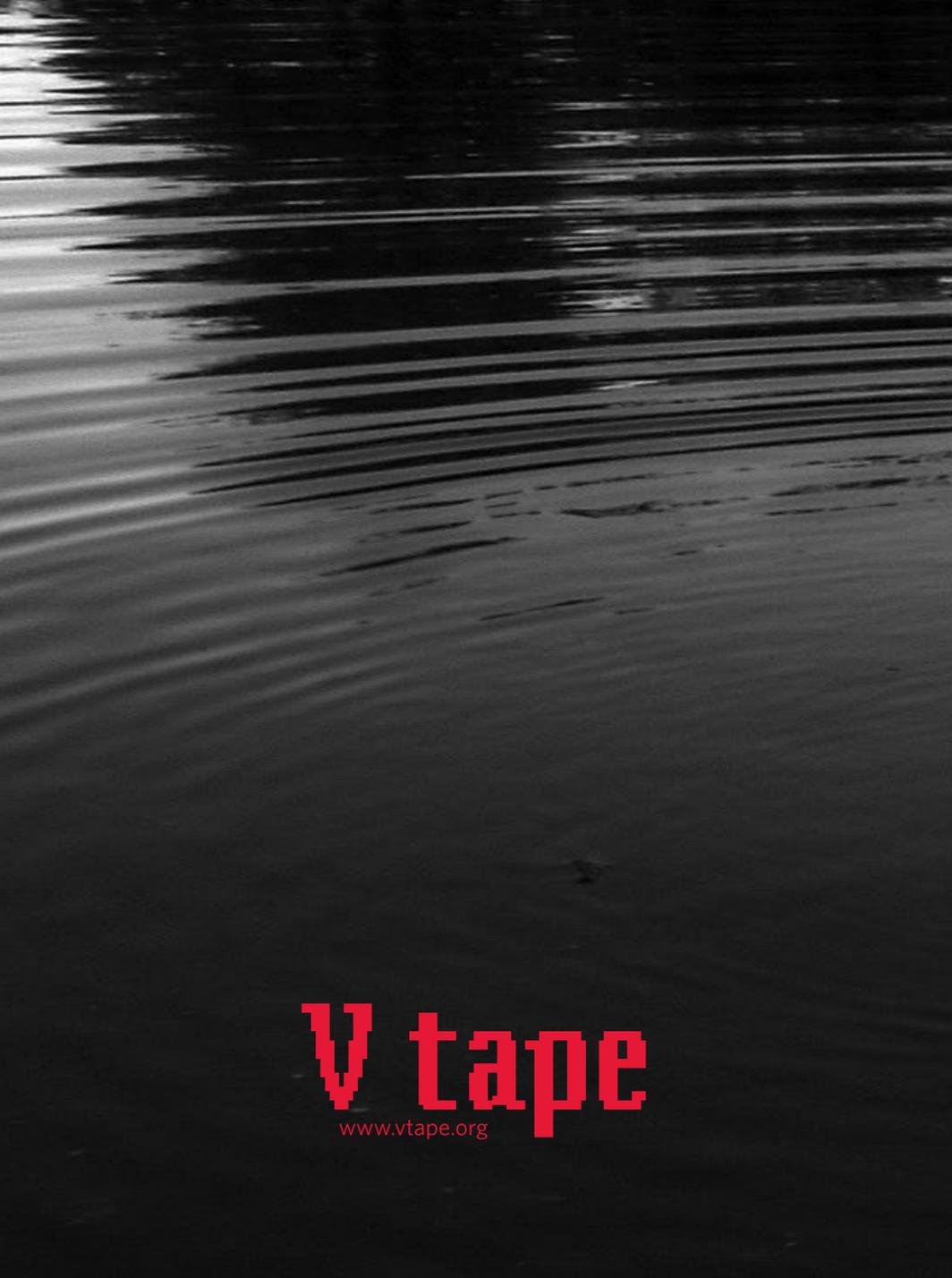
Operating as a distributor, a mediatheque and a resource centre with an emphasis on the contemporary media arts, Vtape's mandate is to serve both artists and audiences by assisting and encouraging the appreciation, pedagogy, preservation, restoration and exhibition of media works by artists and independents. Vtape receives operating funds from the Canada Council for the Arts Media Arts Section, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council.



The imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival is an international festival that celebrates the latest works by Indigenous peoples on the forefront of innovation in film, video, radio, and new media. imagineNative runs October 14-18, 2009.



www.imagenative.org



**V tape**  
[www.vtape.org](http://www.vtape.org)