Indigenous Film in a Colonized Theater: The Role of Independent Exhibition in Screening Indigenous Films

By

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Abstract

The decisions that non-Indigenous independent film exhibitors make regarding exhibiting Indigenous film have the possibility of impacting the films themselves, as well as the audience's experience of engaging with these films, both in a problematic sense, or in a positive sense. By examining previous academic work surrounding the ideas of visual sovereignty and the virtual reservation, and finding where these ideas intersect with exhibition, it becomes clear how the role of White exhibition spaces can potentially impact the autonomy of Indigenous filmmakers, as exhibited through their films. The decisions exhibitors make regarding specific exhibition practices such as film selection, marketing practices, funding, etc. all have an important impact on the exhibition experience. Examining how specific exhibitors such as the Sundance Film Institute, the Doris Duke Theatre, and Northwest Film Forum, are currently engaging with Indigenous programming brings the conversation into the current industry landscape. Exhibition creates a unique set of opportunities for independent exhibitors to examine how best they can honor Indigenous filmmakers and their films, while still finding unique ways to contextualize these works within their individual spaces and for their specific audiences.

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Introduction

Sovereignty is a key concept within Indigenous scholarship, as a result of the politicized nature of Indigeneity in relation to colonial powers and the need to reclaim sovereignty from colonial systems which have attempted to take it away. However, sovereignty is not limited to land or law. It extends to every aspect of culture, including film and visual media. The majority of the current scholarly work on this topic focuses on two areas: film texts and filmmaking practices. However, in this thesis I will be focusing on a separate – yet also important – area: exhibition. Considering the idea of sovereignty in regards to exhibition brings up a variety of concerns and potentially problematic areas of discussions. If a goal is to ensure that sovereignty exists for the filmmakers, then how does exhibition impact this if the exhibitors are not Indigenous? In order to explore this area, I will be considering the topics of visual sovereignty and the virtual reservation as they connect with exhibition. I will explore how the virtual reservation can extend beyond the screen and include the exhibition space and how visual sovereignty can withstand possible restraints of an exhibition space. To do so, I will examine how exhibition spaces and exhibition practices can potentially alter what is on the screen. By examining specific exhibition practices and how these can impact the exhibition experience, we can begin to see the important role exhibition has in showcasing Indigenous film. Looking at specific exhibitors who have begun to prioritize programming Indigenous film will demonstrate examples of current exhibition practices around Indigenous film. I will argue that it is not enough to simply exhibit Indigenous films. Rather, it's important to consider how exhibition practices that may seem benign can actually have a very real impact on the final exhibition experience of Indigenous films.

This research fills a current gap in academic scholarship about the exhibition of Indigenous film by non-Indigenous exhibitors. Current scholarship is primarily about Indigenous films themselves, or production practices. When exhibition is discussed, it is typically in the context of Indigenous film exhibition spaces, such as the imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival. I am attempting to move the conversation into a new arena by examining the role of non-Indigenous exhibitors in regards to Indigenous film exhibition. The decisions that non-Indigenous exhibitors make regarding specific exhibition practices have the possibility of impacting the sovereignty which is expressed within the films themselves, both in a problematic sense, or in a positive sense, and examining both the theoretical framework and the specific exhibition practices themselves can start a new and important conversation for both academics and exhibitors.

This is important work to begin a discussion on both for academic and exhibition industry reasons. Exhibition is an important component of any film, as it is the vehicle by which audiences will often experience the film. Exhibition is also a part of the film process which is often devoid of input from the filmmaker. Exhibitors are often free to package films how they see fit and this level of freedom can create a set of potentially problematic scenarios, especially when considering primarily White exhibitors who exhibit Indigenous films to largely White audiences. This is also impacted by the role which curation has, as film programmers have a level of control over what films will eventually reach audiences. Exhibition creates a set of opportunities for exhibitors to examine how best they can honor filmmakers and their creative works, while still finding ways to contextualize these works within their individual spaces and for their specific audiences. This research fills an important gap in the current academic scholarship surrounding both Indigenous film studies and film exhibition studies, as well as

providing independent film exhibitors a foundation to begin examining their own organizations' relationship (or lack thereof) with Indigenous film and Indigenous filmmakers.

Limitations

The scope of this thesis is limited in a number of ways. Due to the wide range of types of film exhibition which exist, I will not be focusing on the entire film exhibition industry, but instead will be limiting myself to independent exhibitors. I seek to open a conversation and introduce a topic that is in its infancy. There are many opportunities after this thesis for the conversation to continue (which I will discuss at greater length in the conclusion). I will provide examples of current exhibition practices and specific exhibitors, with the hopes that a more advanced analysis of these types of exhibitors will happen later. While I will provide analysis for specific examples, I am not giving overall evaluations of the Indigenous programming which is currently happening. This would require a much more in depth analysis, which could incorporate audience studies, interviews with Indigenous filmmakers whose work has screened, interviews with exhibitors, and on-site visits to exhibitors who are running Indigenous film programs.

An additional note is that I am writing this in 2021, coming on the heels of one of the most unusual years ever for film exhibition. As we are still very much in the world of virtual and hybrid film exhibition, I have chosen not to include an in depth analysis of this type of exhibition. Virtual programming definitely could impact these ideas. There is already speculation floating around the exhibition industry about how virtual programming could provide more access, both to audiences and to filmmakers, and could potentially level the playing field for filmmakers. However, I feel that there will need to be a little space from the time we are currently living through before incorporating the impact that virtual programming may have on the ideas I am proposing. I may occasionally reference a virtual program (especially in Chapter

Three) as an example of what an exhibitor is currently doing, but this will not be an area I will focus on or provide an evaluation on.

Current Scholarship

This thesis lies at the intersection of the topics of visual sovereignty and the virtual reservation with independent film exhibition practices. Because of the multiplicity of topics discussed, the literature on the topic includes both scholarly works and industry documents and data from film exhibition professionals and industry surveys.

As this thesis discusses scholarship revolving around Indigenous film it is important to ground this research upon scholarly works which speak more broadly to the academic landscape of Indigenous film. In order to do so, I have selected certain works which can provide a foundation to build on a more specific argument concerning exhibition practices and visual sovereignty in exhibition. While some of these works may focus more on a textual analytic approach to the topic, they will still provide a helpful foundation which should be acknowledged. These include Lee Schweninger's *Imagic Moments: Indigenous North American Film*, which offers a helpful framework for looking at the texts of films themselves and *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video*, a book by Beverly Singer, which moves the conversation on Indigenous film beyond the binds of Hollywood and Eurocentricity and carves out a unique space to have a conversation unfettered by assumptions of how to define certain genres and filmic styles (Singer, 2-3).

Sovereignty is discussed in scholarly works in the context of self-governance within Indigenous communities (Raheja, 197). A variety of scholars have built upon this concept to specifically discuss visual media. For the purposes of this research, I rely most heavily on Michelle Raheja's *Reservation Reelism* and use her work as a theoretical framework in

discussing the idea of the virtual reservation and the idea of visual sovereignty. Also, Kristin L. Dowell's book *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast* discusses sovereignty in a less theoretical and more practical sense, focusing much more on production practices. This is an important addition to the argument because it moves the analysis beyond the films themselves and into the production practices (Dowell, 2-3). Additionally, Houston Wood's *Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World* provides helpful discussion around the consumption of Indigenous films by White audiences (96), as well as the eurocentricity which often surrounds academic works and understandings about Indigenous film. This will be important as I move the conversation into the realm of exhibition and how White audiences can potentially have an impact on how the films are exhibited and received.

Much of what has been written about Indigenous film exhibition is written from the perspective of a non-Indigenous scholar going into an Indigenous exhibition space and approaching the topic from an ethnographic perspective. This can become problematic if it results in an othering of Indigenous exhibition. Another potentially problematic aspect is the fact that many of these are written from the perspective of showing how Indigenous exhibition differs from non-Indigenous exhibition. This method can be problematic when it starts with an assumption that Eurocentric exhibition is the starting point and everything else exists only in comparison to this standard. In order to discuss the contextualization of exhibition, I will rely on Sonia Tascon and Tyson Wil's discussion of "off-screen space (Tascon and Wils, 8) in *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject*. They argue that the packaging of a film with Q&As, panel discussions, etc. creates off-screen space which may potentially alter the space on the screen (Tascon and Wils, 8). I will also incorporate Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* to discuss how the idea of paratexts can also be

applied to film exhibition and the off-screen spaces which Tascon discusses. This will inform my discussion of specific exhibition practices and how these practices can have an impact on the final exhibition experience, specifically in regards to the exhibition of Indigenous films. I will also be incorporating industry data from the National Audience Survey and the Theater Operations Survey, which both collect data on art house movie theaters from self-reporting theaters and their audiences. I will also draw on specific examples of exhibitors and different programs they have run, in order to demonstrate some of the ideas I will be exploring regarding certain exhibition practices. Finally, I will be looking at exhibitors themselves and the information they have provided regarding their efforts to prioritize Indigenous film. This information will come from the public-facing side of these organizations as well as news articles about the organizations and their work, and conference presentations.

Methodologies

The research for this thesis is a combination of conceptual analysis, industry research, and case studies. I examine several examples of academic scholarship regarding Indigenous film and film exhibition and find where these topics intersect and what aspects of theories regarding visual sovereignty and the virtual reservation can be applied to film exhibition. I am using scholarly sources to lay a theoretical foundation, which I will then build upon with industry data which can bring the conversation from a theoretical one to a practical one. I will then analyze specific exhibition practices and see their various types of importance within the final exhibition experience. And finally, I am looking at case studies of three exhibitors to demonstrate the practical application of these exhibition practices and how they may be impacting their prioritization of Indigenous film.

Additionally, the research is impacted by my own perspective. First of all, I am writing from my perspective as a White female. I am also writing from my perspective as someone who works in film exhibition as a film programmer and has experienced firsthand the conflicts which exist in this business in regards to attempts at diversifying programming in a largely White, male-dominated field. I will also be drawing on my general industry knowledge of having worked in the world of independent film exhibition for the past several years in a variety of roles. These are experiences which I will be able to draw on throughout the paper, and also the personal lenses and limitations which I will be approaching this work through.

Audience

I am writing this thesis as a part of an academic program but my hope is that this work can extend beyond academia. In an ideal world it would both lay a groundwork for future research from academics within film and media studies but also find its way into the hands of film exhibitors. I believe that both theory and practical application are equally important and should inform one another, as opposed to being isolated in silos. For these reasons I have intentionally attempted to incorporate both theoretical works and practical exhibition applications to reach multiple types of audiences.

Use of the Term "Exhibition"

Exhibition is a very broad term which can be used to describe an extremely wide variety of methods for screening and showcasing film. Exhibition can include multiplex movie theaters, drive-in movie theaters, film festivals, independent art house theaters, academic screenings, museums, etc., but the main forms of exhibition discussed in this paper will be independent movie theaters and film festivals, as well as some discussion of film exhibition within museums. Because many of these types of exhibitors are nonprofit, mission-driven organizations, these

exhibitors tend to be more active in regards to Indigenous film exhibition than commercial exhibitors are. Independent exhibitors are more likely to support lesser-known filmmakers and independent film in an attempt to provide alternatives to what the local multiplex may be showing (Berliner, 64-66). Additionally, exhibitors who are driven by a mission as opposed to only monetary profit may also be more inclined to prioritize championing underrepresented voices and developing diverse audiences, if this aligns with their missions and visions. For these reasons, I am choosing to focus on independent film exhibition and its role pertaining to Indigenous film. The specificity of this subset of the film exhibition industry creates a concise case study to focus on.

Even within the world of independent film exhibition there are differences between different types of exhibitors within this category. Brick and mortar theaters differ than film festivals in a variety of ways, most notably in the film curation process, which will be discussed more in Chapter Two. They also may differ in the amount of full time staff they are able to accommodate (for example, annual film festivals are probably less likely to support a large full time staff (Theater Operations Survey, 2019), as opposed to a movie theater which runs 365 days a year). I will be drawing on examples of different types of exhibitors to showcase how these differences can provide both opportunities and challenges.

Use of the Term "Indigenous"

For the purposes of this thesis, the focus will be primarily on the exhibition of film made by Indigenous individuals of North America. However, some scholars referenced throughout the paper will use this term in a broader sense, regarding Indigenous peoples of Australia and Palestine as well as of North America. Definitions of Indigenous will also vary within the programming of exhibitors and what regions their films are being programmed from.

It is also important to note that the terms “Indigenous” and “Indigenous film” are extremely broad. Indigeneity in the United States is not a monolith. The term “Indigenous” encompasses 573 different sovereign nations within the borders of the United States (Bureau of Indian Affairs). For the purposes of this paper I am using this general term, but it’s important to keep in mind that broad generalizations can be problematic and I am not going to attempt to make assumptions about Indigenous filmmakers or communities. However, these generalized terms are often used for programming classifications, which means that a film series may be running a film highlighting Indigenous communities from Hawaii, New Mexico, and New York, all in one series, for example. For this reason, I will speak about Indigenous film as one group of film, while knowing that this is not a monolith.

There is some debate over which term to use to describe Indigenous peoples. I have chosen to use the word Indigenous throughout.

Chapter Synopses

Chapter One – Visual Sovereignty in the Theater

Chapter One places Indigenous film exhibition within the context of Indigenous scholarship regarding visual sovereignty and the virtual reservation. I will be examining what scholarly work currently exists on the topic of visual sovereignty regarding Indigenous films and Indigenous film production and then determining how we can expand the conversation to incorporate exhibition, and which of these ideas can be applied to film exhibition. Following this, I will begin to look more specifically at film exhibition in regards to Indigenous film. This will include a discussion of the physicality of film exhibition spaces which sit on stolen Indigenous land, as well as discussions on the impact of White audiences as the primary audiences of these exhibition spaces and how White consumption of Indigenous film can be

problematic in regards to maintaining the sovereignty of the films once they have entered an exhibition space. Using this as a foundation, I will then go on to lay out a variety of ways that Indigenous film is often categorized within exhibition spaces, including education, diversification, activism, humanitarianism, and art. Each of these classifications can bring with it a specific set of challenges and opportunities which creates another layer of complications.

This chapter will lay a theoretical foundation for the rest of the thesis to build upon in a more practical sense. By building this foundation we can see where the current academic scholarship is regarding the topics of Indigenous film exhibition and we can see where there are gaps to be filled. This will also provide an overarching, theoretical lens through which to view these ideas, before moving on to a practical, on-the-ground lens.

Chapter Two – Behind the Screen - the Impact of Exhibition Practices on the Exhibition Experience

Chapter Two will parse out a variety of exhibition practices which exist in independent film exhibition spaces and how these exhibition practices can impact the final exhibition experience for audiences, specifically in relation to the exhibition of Indigenous films. Because of my focus on independent exhibitors I will explain some of the specificities of nonprofit exhibitors. Many of the exhibition practices I will be discussing are inherent to nonprofit organizations. I will then go on to explore several different exhibition practices, including the film selection/programming process, community partnerships, branding/marketing strategies, target audiences, funding, and pre- and post-screening discussions/Q&As. This is a sampling of a few specific exhibition practices which I chose to highlight, but there are certainly more ways that exhibitors can potentially impact the final exhibition experience. This will introduce certain practices and the impact they may have. For each of these I will discuss the exhibition practice,

how this can impact the final exhibition experience, and how this can then specifically impact the exhibition of Indigenous film. This chapter will draw on the National Audience Survey and the Theater Operations Survey, which both provide useful data on audiences, audience expectations, funding, and other specific attributes of independent film exhibitors.

This chapter will build upon the theoretical foundation established in Chapter One and bring the conversation into the exhibition spaces themselves by examining the practical application of these ideas in action. By bridging the gap between the theoretical and the practical, we can begin to see this topic from multiple approaches, which can provide a richer understanding of the topic, as well as provide useful approaches for multiple audiences. This, then, lays a practical foundation of how the choices exhibitors make can have a real impact on the films themselves.

Chapter Three – Indigenous Film Exhibition on the Ground

Chapter Three builds on the theoretical foundation of the first chapter and the exhibition practices discussed in Chapter Two by moving the conversation beyond ideas and specific exhibition practices and into demonstrations of these ideas and practices in real life, through case studies of three different exhibitors. The three exhibitors I will discuss are the Sundance Film Institute, The Doris Duke Theatre, and Northwest Film Forum. Each of these examples bring not only different perspectives and priorities, but also highlight the differences in locale, exhibition type, and styles of Indigenous film programming. They include three different types of exhibition spaces - a film festival/large film institution, a museum-based movie theater, and an art house movie theater, which each present a different set of challenges and opportunities. They also represent varied locations – Park City, Utah/Los Angeles, Honolulu, and Seattle. And while all three exhibitors are prioritizing Indigenous film programming, they are doing so in different

ways which provides an interesting sampling of the current state of the field of Indigenous film programming in non-Indigenous film exhibition spaces.

This chapter – while relegated to the last – informs the thesis as a whole. The perspectives from inside film exhibition provide applicable information for exhibitors interested in programming Indigenous film, and it also grounds the theoretical frameworks in real-world practice and examples. This is an important place to end on, as it both brings the previous two chapters into the reality of what is actually happening now in the independent film exhibition industry, but it also provides a jumping off point for further research and case studies of the ever-changing landscape of Indigenous film programming in independent film exhibition.

Chapter One

Visual Sovereignty in the Theater

Introduction

There is extensive academic writing about Indigenous films and the representation of Indigenous peoples in Hollywood films. After centuries of harmful and inaccurate representation, the conversation has naturally progressed to a place of discussing the importance of Indigenous sovereignty within the film industry. This includes works on representation in film, as well as Indigenous-led film production(s). There have also been academic works on the topics of Indigenous production practices. Both of these topics have been written about in the context of visual sovereignty. Additionally, Michelle Raheja writes in her book *Reservation Reelism* about the concept of the virtual reservation, which she defines as "the space in which Native Americans create and contest self-images and where these images collide with mass-mediated representations of Indians by the dominant culture (Raheja, 43)." Scholarship on Indigenous sovereignty in non-Indigenous independent film exhibition does not exist and this theoretical overview chapter will begin filling in that gap, specifically via Raheja's conceptualizations of the virtual reservation and visual sovereignty.

In my thesis, I use an analytical lens focused through Raheja's *Reservation Reelism* to link the concepts of the virtual reservation and visual sovereignty with the exhibition experience. Raheja provides a framework to discuss the virtual reservation in regards to Indigenous film. Indigenous sovereignty in film has been discussed in regards to the films themselves as well as film production practices. When films are then exhibited in non-Indigenous exhibition spaces it creates a dilemma. How can Indigenous films maintain visual sovereignty when being screened in a colonized space? Is it possible for a virtual reservation to exist in a colonized theater? If the

virtual reservation can extend beyond the screen, it can become troubled when a colonized space and exhibition practices surrounding the screen chip away at visual sovereignty of the film, even if this sovereignty exists in the film or in the filmmaking practice.

When considering exhibition, I am specifically focusing on independent film exhibition, typically art house movies and film festivals, which are often (but not always) nonprofit organizations. To this end, I will not be looking at multiplex theaters. I am also focusing on exhibitors which are non-Indigenous. The world of independent film exhibition is largely White and while there are many Indigenous exhibitors (imagineNATIVE, Red Nation Film Festival, etc.), I am choosing to focus specifically on non-Indigenous organizations. For this chapter, it is important to my research that I focus on this specifically, because I want to consider how the eurocentricity of independent film exhibition in the United States has the potential to have a negative impact on the sovereignty of Indigenous films.

Using these ideas as a starting point, I would like to open a conversation regarding how issues of visual sovereignty and the virtual reservation are impacted by the film exhibition experience. Discussing the importance of Indigenous sovereignty in film representation and in production practices lays the groundwork to begin the conversation around an additional facet of the film industry: film exhibition. There are other facets to the film industry which should also be called into question including, but not limited to, sub-industries such as distribution, sales agents, archiving, streaming, etc. As my thesis is not an exhaustive study, I am focusing specifically on the film exhibition experience. As shown above, research addresses Indigenous representation and productions, and leaves Indigenous sovereignty in film exhibition a gap in the literature. With this thesis, I start this necessary conversation in the hopes that more scholars will consider the importance of Indigenous sovereignty across all aspects of filmmaking.

The Virtual Reservation

In *Reservation Reelism*, Michelle Raheja uses the term "the virtual reservation" to discuss the space created through Indigenous film and media. She writes:

> Lorna Roth has discussed "media reservations" as negative sites of segregation, isolation, and the televisual equivalent of the stereotypes structuring representations of reservation/reserve life in North America. However, I suggest that virtual reservations are more creative, kinetic, open spaces where Indigenous artists collectively and individually employ technologies and knowledges to rethink the relationship between media and Indigenous communities by, for example, exhibiting art online or by deciding not to distribute videos to non-Indigenous audiences (Raheja, 205).

Conceptualized this way, the virtual reservation carves out a separate, distinctive space for Indigenous film and media, instead of defining it in relation to mainstream film. Beyond that, Raheja's final statement, "deciding not to distribute videos to non-Indigenous audiences (Raheja, 205)" powerfully acknowledges Indigenous autonomy. If autonomy exists, then a work's creators should have a say in how or why their film is made, **and** where the film is screened and for whom. In this sense, the virtual reservation extends beyond the screen to include finished media texts, filmmaking practices, and the spaces, media, and technologies in which a work is experienced.

Based on Raheja's definition, the goal of the virtual reservation is to create self-representation and autonomy and to share ideas in a way singular to those who do it. If this is the case, then how can this be realized when the space surrounding the virtual reservation does not allow for self-representation, autonomy, or singularity? If a colonial space is attempting to house the virtual reservation, this is indeed problematic.

Exhibition spaces may be steeped in a history of White money and power. In nonprofit settings, these are often run by Boards of Directors who may also serve as the primary donor base. Individual donors are incredibly important to nonprofits, and they also can wield control over the type of programming occurring and the internal structures of an organization. When organizations are intrinsically tied to White money and White leadership, it can be difficult to usher in real changes in order to fight back against the colonial nature of the places and attempt to start anti-racism initiatives. These spaces and the people who run them can then act as gatekeepers - keeping new ideas out and holding on to traditional, White ways of doing things.

Of course, this is not to say that the exhibition space has the power to completely overrun the film or media, or that the film or media have no foundation to withstand opposition. Assuming so would be erasing the films' and filmmakers' autonomy before we even begin. However, it is important to look at what these spaces look like and how they can have the potential to hinder and/or affect the existence of the virtual reservation within the exhibition space.

Visual Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a commonly used word in discussions concerning Indigenous issues because of the history in the United States of the forced removal of Indigenous communities from their land, genocide, and broken treaties. Sovereignty is not limited to land, however. It also applies to cultural practices, artistic expression, personal histories, film, etc.

One problem in exploring these topics has been a tendency to compare Indigenous film to non-Indigenous film, using eurocentricity as the standard by which everything must be compared (Singer, 2). Centering sovereignty can push back against this practice. As Raheja writes,

> I would like to suggest a discussion of visual sovereignty as a way of reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass media but do not rely solely on the texts and contexts of Western jurisprudence (Raheja, 197).

Maintaining autonomy over film creation and exhibition then creates a sovereign space for Indigenous filmmakers and extends sovereignty over their films for the filmmakers.

Film, in general, and the act of filmmaking can act as artistic expression, documentation, self-expression, and self-representation. Based on the above ideas, a conversation surrounding visual sovereignty has emerged. Raheja's reasoning for the importance of this discussion is based on an understanding of the need for self-representation, and the need to create a unique visual style, which is not based out of a Eurocentric sensibility. This moves the conversation beyond a comparison of Indigenous film against Eurocentric film (either to show similarities or differences).

Additionally, these ideas provide space for discussing not just the film itself or the medium of film, but the larger cultural and social context which Indigenous film exists in. As Dowell writes:

> I believe that it is crucial to understand Aboriginal media within a framework of visual sovereignty to link this practice to broader Aboriginal political movements. The impact of this work moves beyond merely an artistic expression to enact a form of cultural autonomy that articulates Aboriginal aesthetics, cosmologies, cultural practices, and self-determination in visual and cultural realms (Dowell, 19).

Visual sovereignty then encompasses the images on the film and speaks to a much broader topic of autonomy and self-governance across many mediums and areas of life and culture. Raheja and

Dowell both discuss films themselves as examples of visual sovereignty (or examples of not being this); both also dip into the production as another means of expressing and maintaining sovereignty.

For example, Raheja utilizes *Atanarjuat* (or *The Fast Runner*) (2001) as an example of production practices which lead to sovereignty on the screen (Raheja, 205). She discusses *Atanarjuat's* entirely Inuit cast and crew as an example of sovereignty behind the scenes of a film's production. By creating a production practice based on self-determination and self-governance of the production process itself, this is a way that sovereignty becomes evident on the screen. When sovereignty exists behind the camera, it can translate onto the screen itself. Dowell also discusses the role of production practices in visual sovereignty, including the roles of the producers, directors, writers, cast, and financial backers (Dowell, 14). All these elements are imperative to the end result, but in this discussion are also imperative to visual sovereignty existing on the screen. How can, for example, a film be considered sovereign, self-determined, autonomous, etc. when the filmmakers creating the work are part of a larger colonial structure?

Groundwork has been laid for discussing visual sovereignty in films as well as in production practices, and so exhibition is the next step to explore this. There are parallels between exhibition space and films and filmmaking production practices. The discussions which exist already relate to similar concerns regarding non-Indigenous exhibitors and the potentially problematic role they may have on the visual sovereignty of Indigenous film within the exhibition space.

The Physicality of Film Exhibition

Beyond the traditions of film exhibition which have become prominent in the United States, there is also the issue of the physicality of film exhibition itself. Movie theaters, film

festivals, and all forms of non-Indigenous film exhibition spaces sit on stolen land. It begs the question of if there can ever be a responsible film exhibition program with Indigenous film in a non-Indigenous exhibition space. This is not to say that White exhibitors should stop programming Indigenous film. However, it is important to recognize as White exhibitors that we are complicit in the systems of oppression in the United States. This, then, should not be motivation to cease Indigenous programming and support of Indigenous filmmakers, but rather be an even greater motivator to attempt to utilize these spaces to amplify Indigenous voices and partner with Indigenous creators to do so in a responsible way.

This is also why land acknowledgements have become utilized as a way to, at the very least, acknowledge which Indigenous nations' land exhibition spaces are sitting on. This could be done by including announcements before screenings, slides during pre-shows, listed on an organization's website, a sign in the lobby, etc. For example, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) includes the following statement on their website:

> As you consider watching a film with us, we encourage you to reflect on the land that you are on, who the traditional keepers of the land are, what the treaty relationship is, or if it's unceded territory [this sentence links to native-land.ca, a website which provides information on which Indigenous land addresses are located on]. TIFF Bell Lightbox is located on the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit and the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, the Wendat, and the Haudenosaunee. The territory is within the lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Today, the meeting place of

> Toronto (also known as Tkaronto) is home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to work on this land.

TIFF additionally included a land acknowledgement during the preshow for their virtual film festival in 2020, as have many other festivals and theaters in recent years (Toronto International Film Festival, tiff.net).

White Audiences

The majority of audiences in independent exhibition spaces are White (National Audience Survey, 2019). Audiences can find themselves naturally falling into different and problematic types of spectatorship when viewing films from perspectives or cultures they are not immediately familiar with. This could include the audience finding themselves approaching the experience as students, in the sense that they are there to learn. While this can be helpful in an audience's understanding that they have a lot to learn, it also can create the dynamic of Indigenous art existing in a White space for the benefit of White audiences to learn from. It is not the job of underrepresented groups to educate overrepresent groups. Through spectatorship, audiences can become voyeurs who examine or observe the "other.". When films and their subjects are "othered" or eroticized in some way, it can make the audience a removed spectator who is attending to ogle at the "other." This hearkens back to the days of ethnographic films, such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). These now infamous films mocked the subjects and presented a primitive and sometimes subhuman representation for a mainly White audience. The gathering of a group of White audience members congregating to watch a film about Indigenous peoples can teeter or dive head first into this type of spectatorship.

It is common for White people in the United States to be considered the standard - the standard audience, the standard consumer, etc. This creates a problem when White audiences and

White exhibitors assume that Indigeneity exists to serve White consumption with no restraint. Exhibiting Indigenous film also includes understanding that not all Indigenous filmmakers may want to share all of themselves to White audiences. As Raheja quotes Turner:

> "As Indigenous people," Turner contends, "many of us believe that we can explain our understandings of the 'spiritual' and that the dominant culture will someday 'get it.' But history has shown us that at least at this time in the relationship, we must keep to ourselves our sacred knowledge as we articulate and understand it from within our cultures, for it is this knowledge that defines us as Indigenous people (qtd. in Raheja, 158)."

Respecting the sovereignty of Indigenous filmmakers also means respecting their autonomy over their cultures, histories, and what they choose to share and not to share. Well-meaning enthusiasm can easily lead to an assumption that all Indigenous knowledge is owed to White audiences because they have shown an interest. However, Raheja then continues:

> Native American visual culture, I argue, provides a field on which the tension between representing the importance of spirituality (without ever divulging sacred information that could be weaponized by the colonizer or stressing its alterity and disengagement with political and cultural movements) and the desire to conceive of Indigenous philosophies unhitched from or critically engaged with the West can be played out (Raheja, 159).

Presenting Indigenous films for White audiences is complicated, but can provide a space to launch these discussions and experiences.

In his book, *Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World*, Houston Wood discusses the idea of "White Shamanism." Wood defines these as "cultural imperialists who appropriate names, concepts, styles, tools, dress, adornment, or practices from Indigenous people without either community permission or training in their proper use (Wood, 77)." He then goes

on to discuss the idea of white shamanism in the context of White audiences of Indigenous films. When White audiences are viewing Indigenous films, there is a tendency to assume that what they are viewing is accurate, and could make audiences feel that they are now an expert on a topic, because they saw a film about it. Raheja's discussion of the virtual reservation as a negative space of voyeurship can also inform this:

> From their creation, reservations have been often-perverse tourism sites where non-Indians would travel to experience a glimpse into a purportedly "vanished" culture. Reservations became living dioramas where tourists could putatively step outside of time and space to see "real" Indians (or what passed for the "real" in the settler nation's mythology). By relocating the Native American experience to celluloid, film became a virtual reservation for a viewing public eager for Indigenous images (Raheja, 43-44).

While Raheja then goes on to subvert the use of the term "virtual reservation," this initial discussion shows how historically White audiences have engaged in a sort of tourism of indigeneity through film. This can have an even more negative impact when the pervasiveness of inaccuracies being consumed by White audiences creates a collective misunderstanding of Indigeneity. Wood offers the example of "medicine men" to discuss this problem. Through many films (he cites *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and *Little Big Man* (1970), but there are many more), the idea that each tribe had one "medicine man" who performed all healing rituals became a commonly held belief for countless White people. The reality is that communities had expansive networks of people who performed different aspects of medicinal care, but the idea of "medicine men" still persists today (Wood, 77-81). It is the responsibility of the exhibitor, then, to contextualize films properly to White audiences. This could include providing context around the inaccuracies displayed in a screening of, for example

Little Big Man, but also encouraging their audiences to go beyond one film screening to understand the history and complexities of Indigeneity. This is an important reminder of the limitations of film screenings and the potential problems that film exhibitors could create when engaging with White audiences.

However, while it is important to consider these things, I do not want to overemphasize the agency of the White audience. This can discredit the weight of the films and the artists behind them. The idea that the White gaze can completely overwhelm a film to make it void of its ability to convey a message or exist as a piece of art gives too much power to the White audience. Raheja discusses an example of this in regards to filmmaking practices when she recounts William Rothman's interpretation of a scene from *Nanook of the North*. In one of the most famous scenes from the ethnographic film about an Inuit family and their culture, the lead actor, Allakariallak, interacts with a gramophone for the first time, and after examining it, he laughs and bites the record. This scene is often used now as an example of the dehumanizing and inaccurate tactics of ethnographic films, but as Raheja points out through the writings of Fatimah Tobing Rony, many of the Inuit actors who chose to participate in the film found the filmmaking process itself as a source of entertainment, and as Rony says "from the Inuit point of view he may be seen as laughing at the camera (qtd. in Raheja, 191)." Rothman builds upon this interpretation, "If we laugh at Nanook [Allakariallak] at this moment, as [Robert] Flaherty's titles invite us to do, if we assume that this gesture reveals Nanook to be more of a child, or more of an animal than we are, that is a mark of our naivete, not his (qtd. in Raheja, 191)." Using this interpretation of the film, it seems that it may not have been such a triumph for White supremacy as we often remember it, and that by fixing it in that place in film history, we are stripping away the agency of the Inuit individuals who chose to participate in the film. Raheja continues with the

idea of “laughing at the camera” as a way of “[confronting] the spectator with the often-absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representation of Native Americans, while also flagging their involvement and complicity in these often disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotype (Raheja, 193).”

We can bring this idea into the exhibition space and call into question both the impact that the White gaze can have on an Indigenous film when it is screening in a colonized space, surrounded by a White audience, but we can also recognize the inherent sovereignty that exists within the film for no other reason than that it exists. Much like making Flaherty an omnipotent power over *Nanook of the North* erases the contributions, choices, and perspectives of Allakariallak, giving White audiences omnipotent power in their viewership and interpretation of the films erases the tireless work which went into creating the films and the filmmakers' autonomy which exists within these films. Well-meaning concern over the impact of White audiences and White spaces can be taken to an extreme where the power of the White space supersedes all else. Both things can exist. White spaces can be unsafe, sometimes violent, spaces developed out of colonization, built on stolen land, and successful as a result of the death and attempted genocides of Indigenous peoples. And, White spaces and White gazes are also not all-powerful forces which can strip away the sovereignty and autonomy of Indigenous filmmakers and the Indigenous lives presented in film.

Types of Indigenous Film Exhibition in Non-Indigenous Spaces

When considering the place of Indigenous film in colonized theaters, I also want to discuss the specific classifications Indigenous programming often finds itself in within these spaces. Each of these have elements which can either reinforce the colonial nature of the theater, or potentially usurp it and provide a space of more agency to the works and the filmmakers

behind them. There are five areas which I have observed Indigenous exhibition to be often categorized in independent film exhibition. These are:

- Education
- Diversification
- Activism
- Humanitarianism
- Art

There are certainly other motivations to programming Indigenous films, and I don't want to make any assumptions about the reasoning behind these decisions, or to make any wide, sweeping statements about what classifications are given to Indigenous films, but these are common buckets that I see Indigenous film programming being allocated to. In the next chapter I dive deeper into specific exhibition practices which can have an impact on the exhibition experience. For the remainder of this chapter, I want to explore how Indigenous programming is often housed in exhibition spaces in a broader sense, and how this can impact the films themselves.

Education

Films as education can be seen in exhibition spaces such as museums, education programs at art house theaters (such as screenings for field trips), or more general community education. These might be specifically earmarked as education if it involves K-12 initiatives. Examples of this could be a film being included as part of a film curriculum or a film highlighting Indigenous programmed for students to view on a field trip. An important note here is that these films may or may not be Indigenous-produced. Films being programmed for the sole purpose of education can be driven by the content. If the film is providing information that is

educationally important, for example, an historical documentary about Indigenous history, the content may check the box of what programmers or educators are looking for, regardless of if it is made by Indigenous filmmakers. For example, showing *Ken Burns: The West* (1996) would be an example of educational programming that is not necessarily from an Indigenous perspective but incorporates an overarching history of Indigenous peoples in the United States into a larger study of the history of the American West. The educational lens can provide education from various perspectives and on differing topics, but this is a category where it is easy to fall into an historical perspective. While not inherently wrong, siloing Indigenous film into historical, educational documentaries can feed into the "vanishing Indian" narrative, reinforcing the wrong assumption that Indigenous people no longer exist and are relegated to history lessons (Raheja, 122).

Diversification

In recent years, initiatives for diversity, equity, and inclusion have become more and more prioritized across arts organizations. One outcome of this is an attempt to diversify programming and offer a wider variety of films and to program more films from underrepresented voices. This could mean different things at different organizations. At some, it might mean programming films about Indigenous experiences, at others it might mean programming films from Indigenous directors, both, or other perspectives.

This becomes complicated in how exhibitors may define diversity in their programming. For some exhibitors, diversifying programming could mean playing a film which features Indigenous characters by a White filmmaker, such as Martin Scorsese's upcoming *Killers of the Flower Moon*. On the other hand, playing *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014), a comedy

mockumentary about vampires, which while it does not look at first glance like an Indigenous film, is directed by Taika Waititi, an Indigenous director.

Activism

Building upon the previous section there has also been an emphasis in recent years on activism. In *Activist Film Festivals: Towards a Political Subject*, Sonia M. Tascon argues for the legitimacy of activism in exhibition, and she also raises many key points to the problematic sides to activism. First of all is the question of definition. While theaters may promote their work as activist, there is a fine line in many exhibitors' definitions between activism and advocacy. Activism in the context of exhibition has been defined as political in nature and something which drives the audience to action (Tascon, 31-48). Advocacy, however, is slightly different. Advocacy is speaking on behalf of another person or group and speaking about an area which the advocate feels needs to be changed (Caldwell, 4). Advocacy, therefore, is much more of an allied position, as it is typically demonstrated by a privileged group attempting to speak on behalf of or in support of a marginalized group and speak against injustices occurring to them. While still important, advocacy is clearly different than activism. For example, if there is a film being screened with nothing surrounding it to give context, simply a screening, and this screening presents information about injustices, or some type of change which needs to occur, this would be advocacy. On the other hand, if this screening was followed with a question and answer session with local activists who are equipping the audience with the knowledge and tools to join a movement, it could be argued that this becomes activism. Screening an activist film, or a film made by activists, does not necessarily mean that the screening itself is activist.

Additionally, the influx of activists/advocates in our present day has resulted in much more "activist" movies which may or may not be helmed by Indigenous activists. Exhibitors can

certainly utilize their exhibition spaces as a place for activism or advocacy, and this is a potentially effective method of usurping the colonial power of the exhibition space and creating a space to not just showcase a diverse array of programming, but to turn a passive experience (filmgoing) into an active one. It's important to keep in mind in these instances, however, the limitations of advocacy. It's easy for well-meaning White allies to take over organizing, or reinvent the wheel in creating action items which already exist. Allyship works when it is truly allyship - supporting the work that is happening already and being led (and has been led for centuries) by Indigenous activists.

Examples of advocacy could be screening the film *Somebody's Daughter* (2020), a documentary about the missing and murdered Indigenous women humanitarian crisis. Attempting to turn this into action could include donating the proceeds to organizations working to address this crisis, bringing in speakers, and equipping audience members with the tools to get involved, all in cooperation with community leaders who are already combating this crisis.

Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism contains elements of activism and education, but differs enough to warrant its own classification. Another point to consider is a term which Tascon uses, the "humanitarian gaze (Tascon, 34)." Inspired by scholarly work by Laura Mulvey and her writings on the male gaze (Mulvey, 833-844), this concept complicates film exhibition's delicate balance between humanitarianism and activism. As Tascon writes:

> Humanitarianism is a powerful discourse and practice of intervention in others' troubles, much of which is informed by an unequal power relationship between giver and receiver, based on both economic and political factors, and is premised on a form of relief that emerges from "suffering" in conditions of immediacy and emergency (Tascon, 34).

Additionally, Wiktor Osiatynski's definition defines humanitarianism as something which "implies a passive victim who needs to be protected and assisted (Osiatynski, 61). Activism, on the other hand, implies that the audience will be moved to act, while also implying that this action will be politically charged in some sense (Tascon and Wils, 6). This distinction is important as exhibitors may identify themselves as activists while engaging in more humanitarian behavior. The humanitarian gaze as a component of exhibition becomes very important when considering these exhibitors and screenings. The humanitarian gaze is grounded in a power imbalance. Thus, when audiences view the images they see on screen as an "other" who is being mistreated or victimized and then feel pity for the subjects, this is the humanitarian gaze at work. Humanitarianism is different from activism in a number of ways, and while it's not necessarily better or worse, it's important to recognize how the uniqueness of its category can lead to specific pitfalls in exhibition.

There are exhibitors which are based solely on human rights, such as the Human Rights Watch Film Festival. Their festivals have included films on Indigenous human rights issues, such as the documentary *Gather* (2020), which explores the Indigenous food sovereignty movement (Human Rights Watch Film Festival, ff.hrw.org/film/gather). Human rights festivals and human rights film series create a natural classification for Indigenous film to often be sequestered into.

Art

Finally, a rather obvious category is simply that a movie is good and exhibitors like it based on taste. This seems like the simplest motivation for booking a film, and in some senses, it is. It is not, however, without its own complications and potentials for being more problematic than it might seem at first. This comes down to the personal/professional taste of a programmer or curator, which can call into question the historically accepted films that are programmed and

respected as good art in these spaces. And, if programmers have not been exposed to many Indigenous films or Indigenous cultures, they may not have the background knowledge or context to gravitate towards films and film industries which they are unfamiliar with. They may also have their own implicit biases which they are unaware of when screening films. This could create a roadblock when the decisions are coming down to a programmer or programming team's individual preference(s).

These are just a few of the programmatic categories that Indigenous films can find themselves in when being programmed, but these categories are malleable and more ambiguous that a list with definitions might imply. Many times, it's probably a combination of many of these considerations which result in a film being programmed. Additionally, films might not be publicly classified as any of these, they may be internal strategies, and often may even be subconscious strategies of exhibitors. Exhibitors may have a vague sense of wanting to diversify, to educate, to spark action, to spark humanitarianism, or to present something that aligns with their taste, but they may not be specifically thinking in these terms. At the end of the day, the decisions of what films to program are made by humans and humans are complicated creatures, and that is not an area I am qualified to discuss. Instead, I want to lay out a few general areas which can, on one hand, create motivation for Indigenous programming and, on the other hand, potentially create pigeonholes in which films may end up being classified.

Conclusion

Exploring the role of exhibition is the next step in the discussion about the virtual reservation and visual sovereignty in Indigenous films and film production practices. When Indigenous films enter the exhibition space, they are often entering a colonized space, sitting on stolen land, run by White leaders, and exhibited for White audiences. This has the potential to

problematize the virtual reservation which Raheja discusses, as the film and filmmaker's autonomy can be opposed by the colonized exhibition space. This is not to say that this is an impossible relationship or that by entering this space Indigenous films are stripped of their autonomy, but exhibiting Indigenous films in colonized spaces can be fraught with complications. Additionally, Indigenous films often find themselves falling into various classifications within exhibition spaces which can also have an impact on the film's life within these spaces, and what expectations are created for the audiences who will be viewing them. With these considerations in mind, it becomes clear that non-Indigenous exhibitors must consider the practices they employ and consider how they impact the visual sovereignty of Indigenous film once they have entered their exhibition space.

Chapter Two

Behind the Screen - the Impact of Exhibition Practices on the Exhibition Experience

Introduction

You decide to go to a movie. So, you google the local showtimes, maybe check in with Rotten Tomatoes' assessment, select a film, show up to the theater, buy a ticket, purchase your concession of choice, and choose a seat. The lights go down, trailers play, the movie starts. Maybe you enjoy it, maybe you don't. It ends, the credits start to roll, you get up and leave. That's the film exhibition experience.

It's an experience many people in the United States participate in routinely or as a common special outing, whether a solo activity, a date, a family activity, etc. But behind the scenes of this seemingly benign recreational activity is an intricate system of exhibition practices which create the final experience the audience has. There are many different aspects and variables which come into play in film exhibition and I have chosen a few specific exhibition practices to discuss, which can have a direct impact on the exhibition experience of the audience.

First, it needs to be noted which exhibition spaces are being considered. For the purposes of this chapter, I'm specifically looking at art house theaters and film festivals. There are, of course, commercial exhibition models such as multiplex movie theaters, but commercial exhibitors primarily play whatever is being commercially distributed so I've yet to find any prioritization of Indigenous film within this industry, hence why I am not discussing them. In addition to the programmatic specificities of these types of exhibitors, there is also specific data on these exhibitors gleaned from surveys conducted annually by the Art House Convergence and the Film Festival Alliance. Both of these organizations offer resources to independent cinemas

and film festivals, respectively. This data is helpful in understanding the specificities of these types of exhibitors and exhibition practices that are unique to these exhibition models.

Because of the emphasis on the community-based aspect of these organizations, films are often presented differently than the way films are exhibited in multiplex theaters. This includes films being presented as part of a thematic or geographic film series (e.g. International Cinema, Black films, repertory films, etc.), eventizing film programs with Q&As with filmmakers or local community members, or with complementary programs such as dinners, music programs, etc. All of these practices set art house theaters and film festivals apart from other exhibition models which have the potential to have even more of an impact on the films that are being screened in these spaces. The uniquely non-commercial exhibiting practices of art house theaters and film festivals allows for exhibition spaces which can prioritize Indigenous films and filmmakers; however, they also come with an array of specific exhibition practices which have the potential to impact the final exhibition experience in positive or negative ways.

The Exhibition Experience

I am defining "the exhibition experience" as the experience an audience member has when entering a physical exhibition space to watch a film and/or films, as well as the way the space welcomes and/or bars access to audiences. This means that it is both about the experience of an individual audience member but also the experience within a space which hinges upon the types of audiences being cultivated, welcomed, or barred (whether subliminally or actively).

Data

In order to find details on some specificities around audience demographics and funding I have turned to the National Audience Survey and the Theater Operations Survey, which have the most useful data I can find on art house theaters. The data for the National Audience Survey is

collected through a survey which is sent to art houses who then share the survey with their audience members. The Theater Operations Survey is sent to art house movie theaters to glean information on the behind-the-scenes of the theaters' operations. All the information is self-reported by theaters who choose to participate. These surveys are conducted annually and survey findings are presented annually at the Art House Convergence conference, which is the largest gathering of independent film exhibitors in North America. Each year's data is then publicly available on the Art House Convergence website (Art House Convergence, arthouseconvergence.org).

Nonprofit Structures

I'm primarily considering nonprofit art house theaters and film festivals. The nonprofit structure has a unique impact on the end result of programs. Art House Convergence defines the art houses and film festivals they work with as "community-based, mission-driven (Art House Convergence, arthouseconvergence.org)." As opposed to institutes concerned with turning a profit, these organizations claim to be driven by a mission, often to provide cultural opportunities to a community. This is why I believe nonprofit exhibition spaces are a good lens through which to consider exhibition practices around Indigenous films. Because of being mission driven organizations, they are more likely than commercial theaters to prioritize exhibiting Indigenous film beyond what may occasionally break through into commercial film. There are also more opportunities for collaboration with the filmmakers themselves, as well as local Indigenous communities, which can create a unique experience within the exhibition industry.

Nonprofits are also overseen by a Board of Directors who are fiscally responsible for the organization and thus personally invested in its success. A Board of Directors can serve to varying degrees in other roles beyond fiscal responsibility, such as developing the mission and

vision of an organization, strategic planning, designing programs and events, supporting staffing, or any number of other roles. Funding often comes from individual donors, corporate sponsorships, and government grants, as opposed to just ticket sales and concession sales. With the ability to seek grant funding, some of these nonprofits also operate media education programs and/or filmmaker services and support. This model is important to keep in mind, as it has a major impact on funding, organization structures, and the strategic priorities of an organization.

Exhibition Practices

With the understanding that most exhibition models in question are nonprofit, I'm specifically choosing to explore exhibition practices which are common within the nonprofit structure. The exhibition practices which I will be focusing on for the purposes of this chapter are:

- film selection/programming process
- community partnerships
- branding/marketing strategies
- target audiences
- funding
- pre- and post-screening discussions/Q&As

This is not an exhaustive list, but this is a starting point in understanding specific exhibition practices unique to the art house and film festival industry. Each of these has the potential to have a major impact on the film and how an audience may receive the film, resulting in the film itself - and the filmmaker's goals in making the film - being potentially impacted, as introduced in Chapter One.

Film Selection/Programming Practices

The selection process indicates the priorities of the exhibitors and reflects back the exhibitors' view of themselves. Whether the film was curated or submitted, the criteria used for choosing a film to be screened can come into play in the final screening experience for audience members. The selection process in many ways speaks to the overarching priorities of the exhibitor. And of course, even more importantly, is the question of who actually is programming the film. It should be questioned who is on the programming committee, what voices are represented, if the programmers are not Indigenous, how are they deciding what films are worthy of being programmed? If exhibitors feel that they are qualified to book films without outside consultation, this could be a sign of deeper problems. The selection process is in many ways the first entryway into the discussion of a colonial theater and the impact its practices may have on the virtual reservation.

Art house theater programmers are often limited (or it's easy to allow themselves to be limited) by the films which are readily available. This brings into play the distribution process. Distributors can also act as gatekeepers to the exhibition process. In theater settings programmers largely rely on the films being provided by independent distributors (Berliner, 60). Many art houses play the same movies that are being provided by the same distribution companies focused on independent film. Distributors act as another gatekeeper in the programming process. Art houses will also often program unique to them film series - e.g. the year-round "African Diaspora" film series at Film Scene in Iowa City (Film Scene, icfilmscene.org) or the "Spirit of '69" temporary film series at the Belcourt Theatre in Nashville (Belcourt Theatre, belcourt.org) - but the overall day-to-day programming at theaters often looks similar as it is reliant on the distributors' offerings.

Festival programming operates in a somewhat different manner. One process is to curate films, typically by festival programmers attending various festivals and looking for films to program, combined with requesting movie screeners for films. Another style is a submission based format, where filmmakers submit their film (typically for a fee) and the festival programmers watch and select from these selections. Many festivals combine both methods while some will do one or the other. Both of these festival programming methods have pros and cons and both can potentially create unique barriers to access for filmmakers and their films.

In the curation model, programmers largely depend on the programming of other festivals (Berliner, 65). The largest festivals become the industry standards and the festivals that programmers worldwide watch closely to keep their finger on the pulse of festival hits. As Todd Berliner writes in his article “Legally Independent: The Exhibition of Independent Art Films:”

> Cannes, Berlin and Venice host some of the most important international film festivals for art films...North America offers many notable festivals, including the Toronto International Film Festival, the Telluride Film Festival, South by Southwest, the Seattle International Film Festival, the Tribeca Film Festival and the New York Film Festival. The largest and most famous festival in North America is the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, which began as a much smaller festival for low-budget independent films but has, over the years, grown into North America’s most important festival for independent filmmakers seeking distribution. Art houses looking to book appropriate films can consult the programs of these and other international film festivals as guides (Berliner, 65).

This model creates a vicious cycle of festivals acting as gatekeepers to other festivals which in turn act as gatekeepers for even more festivals. For example, if a programmer from a regional film festival in Indiana attends Sundance, TIFF, and True/False to scout films, and the

programmers at True/False attend Sundance and TIFF to curate films, then more than likely it is a very small pool of programmers that all other programmers are relying upon to provide a diverse range of films.

Curation is an integral component to exhibition, and its role cannot be overstated. Film curators' taste is often the guiding force behind what films are programmed, which can feed and grow exclusionary practices. Additionally, limiting curation to films which have already been financial successes or have achieved critical acclaim can hold back creativity and make it increasingly challenging for lower budget films or filmmakers without as many resources to break through. As Roya Rastegar writes, "These constricting parameters not only render illegible cinematic sensibilities that flourish on the margins of film culture and wider society, but also obscure how cinema reflects social, economic and political realities (and fantasies), and informs our individual and collective consciousness (Rastegar, 311)." Additionally, every programmer might not be an expert on every type of film, or on the topics being presented. Their own human inadequacies can complicate this process and the ability of lesser-known filmmakers and films to ultimately be selected. This can obviously have a significant impact on Indigenous film, as this is already an area of film which is sorely neglected and which many programmers may be entirely or significantly unaware.

In the submission model, programmers rely on whatever films are submitted directly to the festival. This process creates a new set of challenges as there are financial barriers to submitting to these festivals since most festivals require a submission fee. Additionally, there are limitations to who will submit to festivals based on who the festivals are reaching out to. Beyond posting a festival on FilmFreeway, posting on social media, and trying to crack into MovieMaker's Top Festivals Worth the Submission Fee (MovieMaker, moviemaker.com),

recruitment is necessary to diversify the films being submitted and filmmakers who are aware of the festival.

Film programming has the most obvious impact on the exhibition experience because it's the practice which determines what films audiences will see. It's the ultimate gatekeeping to what audiences will see, as audiences are reliant on the choices of programmers' personal tastes to wade through the mass of available films and access specific titles. The work that programmers do determines what movies audiences have access to, and at times can provide the only space for audiences to see lesser known independent films which may never find their way onto more mainstream streaming services.

Film programming choices can have specific impact on Indigenous film and whether or not these films have an opportunity to be screened. If very little Indigenous film in the United States is being commercially distributed then it falls to programmers to ensure that they are seeking out films by Indigenous filmmakers, even if they are not actively being distributed by distribution companies, or playing in major film festivals. This requires forging relationships with Indigenous filmmakers, attending and seeking out films from lesser-known festivals or Indigenous festivals, and broadening the distribution companies they're working with.

Community Partnerships

This also leads into considering the presence – or lack thereof – of community partners as supporters of the screening. As many of these organizations are "community based," they are in an ideal position to partner with local businesses or community organizations. These partnerships can offer a mutually beneficial arrangement where exhibitors can reach the community these organizations work with and the work of the organizations gain increased exposure to whatever causes these organizations may be championing. Examples could include a children's museum

partnering on children's films screenings, a nonprofit fighting for immigration rights partnering on a documentary about immigrant rights, etc. As opposed to sponsorships, where money is exchanged for an exposure, these types of partnerships rely more on relationship building and community engagement.

One consideration in the process of developing these relationships is what the end goal for the exhibitor is. Is it simply a marketing strategy to reach new audiences? Is it an attempt to engage with the community in a more meaningful way? Another aspect to this strategy is the timeline of the programming process. The relationship may shift somewhat depending on when the community organization is brought onboard. It may be that a film seems like a good fit and of potential interest to an organization so the exhibitor approaches them to see if they would like to partner. Another strategy would be to partner with an organization before films are selected and partner in programming films and developing programs together. The latter will potentially have an impact on the previous section programming and film selection, and both models could have an impact on marketing, branding, and target audiences, which will be covered in the next two sections.

The practice of incorporating community partnerships impacts the exhibition experience in a couple of ways. First of all, it provides another point of access to the film, by way of the community organization reaching audiences that the exhibitor might not be able to. It also contextualizes the film with an organization and that organization's mission. If audience members are aware of the work an organization performs and see that they are endorsing, co-hosting, presenting, etc. a film, it can automatically lead to assumptions about the film itself. For example, if Planned Parenthood is a community partner for a screening of the documentary

Trapped (2016), it would be logical that audiences would assume that *Trapped* is a pro-reproductive justice film (which it is).

Utilizing community partnerships can have an important impact on the exhibition of Indigenous film because it has the potential to bring in more authentic and informed voices. If non-Indigenous exhibitors are partnering with Indigenous organizations, or with local Indigenous nations and their leadership, the work of the screenings can be more authentically integrated into the communities being represented. These partnerships can also ensure that the films and programs are having a positive impact and are truly supporting Indigenous communities, as opposed to simply checking a diversity box. Additionally, building these relationships can bring an exhibition space beyond simply a place to watch movies and can become a more integrated part of the community and a positive force for change and relationship building.

Branding/Marketing Practices

Branding of films and film related events and the marketing practices to promote these films and events are also necessary elements of film exhibition. Marketing materials such as social media posts, choice of film stills, website copy, website placement, ebulletins, what trailers play before which movies, etc. all create a context around a film. This is often the first point of access for potential audience members in both learning about the films and events being offered, and also can be the first point of access in learning about the exhibitor as a whole.

This impact is two-fold. On one hand, the context around a film presents the film in a certain light and also showcases which films and events the exhibitor wants to highlight. Even the order that films are listed in an email blast are subliminal messages. The other factor is how potential audience members are accessing the organization and which audiences the organization

is attempting to market to. This will be delved into more fully in the next section on target audiences.

The impact of films' paratexts is helpful in understanding the impact that marketing strategies and supplemental materials become a part of the film itself. Paratexts have largely been discussed around the film itself (Gray, 23) but they equally have an impact on films within an exhibition space, as exhibitors create their own contexts through their unique marketing tactics and through their choices in which filmmaker or distribution sanctioned paratexts to include in the marketing strategies of a specific art house theater or film festival.

These paratexts typically are provided to the exhibitor by the distributor or the filmmaker. If the film has distribution, the distributor will typically provide marketing and social media materials. These might include posters, trailers, film stills, behind-the-scenes photos, cast and crew bios, director's statements, official synopsis, film critics' quotes, etc. If the film has not received distribution, these materials will typically be provided by the filmmakers themselves as an electronic press kit.

It is then up to the marketing professionals at each organization to choose how many of these pre-approved materials they want to utilize and how they want to use them. Even when materials are provided upfront to exhibitors there are still many decisions which the marketers then have to make about how to use these materials and where to use them. For example, which photos are used on websites as opposed to on Instagram, whether or not include directors' statements, which film clips or trailers are shared on social media, etc.

Additionally, marketing departments may decide to create their own supplemental materials. These could include a playlist to accompany a film, such as this playlist attached to a screening of *Mr. SOUL* (Jacob Burns Film Center, burnsfilmcenter.org), a staff member giving a

personal recommendation, or a personal recommendation from a programmer (or any other number of creative ideas). Festivals may also credit film synopsis to the programmer who wrote them which gives an audience member browsing a program guide the opportunity to feel out different programmers' tastes which can help them decide which films they want to prioritize. These marketing materials are an important distinction from distributor and/or filmmaker sanctioned materials as they can have a bigger impact on a local audience. For example, audiences can get to know programmers through their recommendations on the website, or they might personally know a front-of-house staff member from buying tickets from them, and then be more inclined to stop and watch a video on Instagram of that staff member giving a personal recommendation. These materials also can become hyper-localized and potentially offer a very different context for a film than is presented elsewhere. This is another time when the specificities of the work that art houses and film festivals do sets them apart from traditional exhibition such as larger movie theater chains. The marketing strategies at these organizations have the freedom to be more creative and specific to their local community and their audience who they often have a personal relationship with.

The other element to marketing practices are the strategies to get the word out through targeting new audiences. This could include digital marketing strategies such as sponsored advertisements on social media sites, which require identifying desired audiences to target. What platforms these marketers are prioritizing and what methods they are employing is also important. This could include social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, twitter, tiktok, etc., decisions about what time of day email blasts are sent, and which tags are used when promoting sponsored advertisements, which could include demographics, such as age, race, interests, occupation, etc. (Theater Operations Survey 2019).

The impact marketing practices have on the exhibition experience is twofold: first, marketing efforts create an access point for audiences to hear about the programs being offered and to be enticed to attend; secondly, the marketing materials used create a context around the films and events being offered before a potential audience member may even set foot inside a theater space. Both of these are important elements to consider in that how audiences are built and how audiences are prepared both can be traced back to what marketing strategies are employed.

Beyond the marketing strategies for a specific film, event, or film series are the marketing and branding strategies in how the organization as a whole is portrayed. This includes what is shared on "About" pages on website, what public statements on the mission include, and larger public statements about a certain worldview. Following protests in the summer of 2020, many organizations began to include statements sharing their support of Black Lives Matter, or larger issues pertaining to diversity, equity, and inclusion. What the organization chooses to prioritize in its public-facing persona can be a step towards creating an inclusive space, or it can also be a step in creating barriers to access. This can extend beyond public statements and can encompass more subliminal messaging including which photographs and videos are chosen to be showcased. This can include the demographics presented in this media which can create assumptions but who the audiences are at certain organizations. All of these elements have an impact on access and also on creating an inclusive or exclusive culture even before audiences have entered the building.

Obviously then, marketing strategies can have a major impact on whether or not the work of an exhibition space is reaching Indigenous communities. Also, it can impact how well Indigenous films are being promoted. If Indigenous audiences are not on exhibitors' radars, it

can result in Indigenous audiences not being prioritized when marketing films. However, it is a misconception when marketing more "diverse" offerings to assume that the only audiences who will be interested are audiences directly impacted. In other words, the idea that Indigenous films have to be promoted to Indigenous audiences ignores the fact that audiences from all backgrounds should be exposed to Indigenous films and can enjoy and appreciate these films. It also pigeonholes Indigenous audiences into only being advertised to when Indigenous films are being played (this will be discussed more in the next section on target audiences). Additionally, with so many Indigenous films being independent and not always represented by distributors, there may not be the same extensiveness to media assets provided to marketers. This means that marketers may need to be more creative in their marketing efforts and may have to research and utilize new strategies. This requires marketers being willing to learn new skill sets and new strategies and move beyond what may be the status quo of marketing.

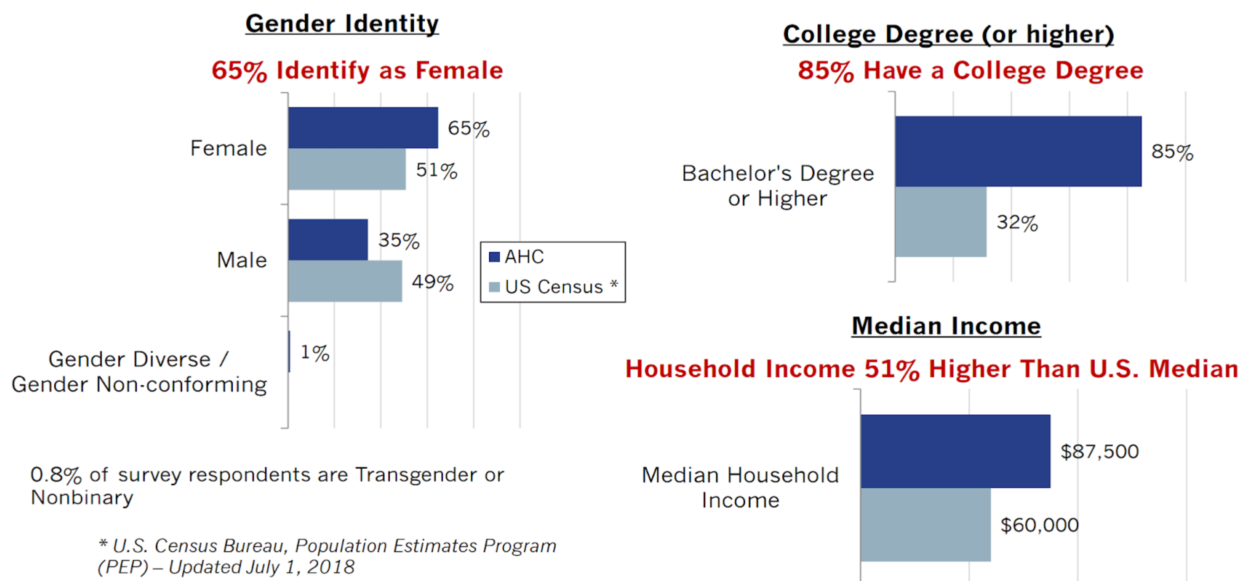
How the film is marketed can alter the original intent of the film and also alter the audience's larger perception of the purpose of Indigenous film. For example, returning to the earlier point about the role of activism in Indigenous exhibition, if Indigenous films are typically promoted as being activist, it could form the opinion that Indigenous films must always be political and never exist as entertainment. However, there is potentially an element of irresponsibility if films which are more socially minded are presented as simply entertainment. Marketing provides both important context for films as well as an access point for the audience.

Target Audiences

Related to this, and as mentioned earlier, is the topic of target audiences. Who the target audience is will impact the aforementioned marketing strategies, but it is a much larger issue that transcends the marketing department and encompasses the mission of the entire organization.

Who has been identified as the target audience(s) will impact everything that happens in an organization, from the films that are programmed to where funds are solicited from to whether theaters are physically accessible. This has a two-fold impact. On one hand, the target audience will dictate who an organization is trying to reach, which will obviously have a direct impact on who the audience is. Additionally, in something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the audience that has been targeted will spread by word-of-mouth to others in their communities, often people of the same demographics, which could further entrench this audience.

The 2019 National Audience Study has compiled data on art house movie theater audiences and the demographics across the United State's art houses. The following are two graphs which provide information on gender identity, education, median income, racial and ethnic background, and age. Both graphs are compared against census data for the United States, highlighting the differences in the demographics of audiences who frequent art house movie theaters and the demographics of the country's population as a whole.



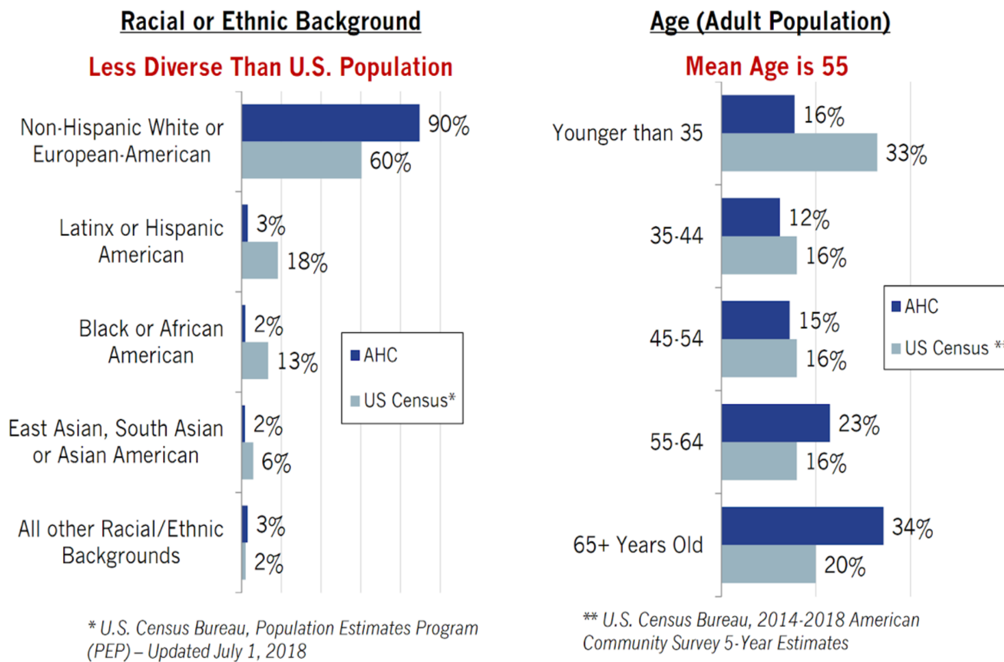


Table 1 - National Audience Survey 2019

Key takeaways from these graphs are that audiences at art house theaters are by and large older, wealthier, more educated, more White, and more female than the population of the United States. It is also important to note that All other Racial/Ethnic Backgrounds is slightly overrepresented in art house audiences than it is in the general population (by 1%), but this is a catch all category which makes the data somewhat unclear. There is no data on Native American or Indigenous audiences (National Audience Study 2019).

This data is important to consider because these are the audiences which are currently being catered to and who have been marketed to and prioritized as the target audiences thus far. It's an easy trap to fall into to recognize the current audience as being loyal and continuing to market to them as opposed to taking the risks of reaching out to new and unknown audiences. This, then, becomes another self-fulfilling prophecy. Audiences who have been the audiences are

prioritized as the audiences and targeted again, which does nothing except solidify that target audiences should stay the same as they have always been. This is further perpetuated by membership programs, which exist at many non-profit theaters (Theater Operations Survey 2019). Loyal audiences are enticed with membership perks, which becomes a revenue line in budgets, and attempting to diversify audiences can easily be seen as a risk to a strong membership base.

This impacts the exhibition experience in a very obvious way, by acting as gatekeeping to a theater and its programming. It also can create a specific type of culture which can often be seen as elitist, wealthy, and White. This has the potential to create an extremely exclusionary environment to new audiences. It also can have an impact on programming choices and the overall mission of an organization. There can be a certain sense of loyalty to audiences, and also a tendency to dismiss ideas because they're "not for our audience." In this way, it is easy to keep the current audience as the target audience and vice versa.

Strategies around target audiences can have a direct impact on the exhibition of Indigenous film, as discussed in the previous section on marketing. Indigenous audiences are not even included in the data on art house theater audiences. We can only assume that Indigenous audiences make up some percentage of the "All other Racial/Ethnic Backgrounds" which is listed as 3%. Indigenous communities are still fighting against erasure in the public's eyes (National Audience Study 2019). This hearkens back to Raheja's definition of the virtual reservation, which acknowledges that oftentimes Indigenous film and media may be made specifically for an Indigenous audience (Raheja, 205). If in the marketing element of exhibition it is unclear how to market to Indigenous audiences, or if relationships have not been forged, then films can trend towards established audiences, who may be non-Indigenous and who the film may not be made

for. This draws on both needs for community partners and also responsible marketing and branding, as well as relationships with the filmmakers to determine who the target audience is as far as they are concerned. If exhibitors program films made for Indigenous audiences but do so for a non-Indigenous audience this could be problematic.

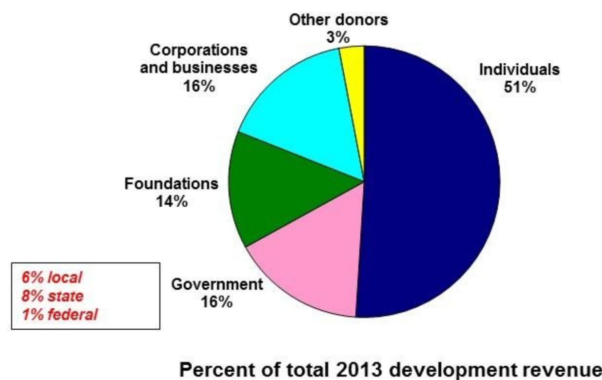
However, as mentioned in the previous section, it should not be assumed that Indigenous audiences are the only audiences interested in Indigenous films. Audiences from all backgrounds can and should watch films made by Indigenous filmmakers. Additionally, a common misconception in building diverse audiences is that audiences only care about films that directly speak to their experience. In the National Audience Survey, respondents were asked “Are there perspectives and voices you wish were represented in the films and programs presented at [audience member’s art house theater]?” If the audience members said yes, they were then asked to write in which perspectives they felt were missing. Of the 23% who responded yes, “Native American” was ranked third, after LGBTQ+ and Foreign Films (National Audience Survey 2019). Additionally, if developing Indigenous audiences is a goal only utilized when an exhibitor is playing an Indigenous film or film series, it is pigeonholing Indigenous audiences based solely on identity and doesn’t allow for these audience members to be fully realized humans who enjoy movies of all genres and helmed by directors from a variety of backgrounds.

Funding

Finally, we come to funding. As my focus is on nonprofits, these come with specific types of funding such as individual donations, government funding, foundation funding, sponsorships, membership programs, as well as traditional theater revenue such as ticket sales and concession sales. Obviously, nonprofits need money to survive and their reliance upon others to provide this funding as opposed to relying on sales creates a unique set of challenges.

The following graph provides a breakdown of where funding comes from in a survey of art house movie theaters. Individual donations lead revenue sources with 51%, followed by corporations and businesses tied with government funding at 16%, then foundations at 14%, and other donors at 3% (National Theater Operations Survey 2015).

Sources of development/fundraising revenue in 2013



Q17/18: What percent of all 2013 development and fundraising revenue came from each source? What percent of government revenue came from each source?
n=57/36

1

Table 2 - Theater Operations Survey 2015

Individual donations can be received anywhere from someone choosing to add a donation at checkout while purchasing a movie ticket to board members being relied on to donate large sums of money each year. These types of donations are clearly the life and blood of many of these organizations and without this funding art houses would lose a significant portion of what keeps them afloat. While extremely important, individual donations also come with their own set of complications, however. Many of these donations are reliant on the organization’s relationships with individuals, and ensuring these relationships are maintained over time to create reliable donation streams. These funding sources also bring in complications by the nature

of them coming from individuals. This practice can result in individual donors wanting to have some say in the programs they are supporting. This could be anything from someone specifying what they want their funding used for (e.g. international film) all the way to donors threatening to pull funding unless a movie they like is programmed, or a movie they dislike is pulled. This can create a complicated and sometimes tenuous relationship between donors and programming, and can potentially create more gatekeeping and exclusionary practices. However, the flip side can also happen. If a donor comes on board who is interested in championing underrepresented voices, their donations can be what causes an organization to begin to prioritize voices they may not have been thinking about.

Corporations and business sponsorships are on the opposite end of the spectrum from individual donations. Instead of relying on individuals' specific preferences and desires to give, these are often more of a business transaction. This could be a trade, for example, a certain amount of money in exchange for a certain amount of advertising. In this way, the obligations of these relationships can be transactional and easier to fulfill. However, they also come with aligning an organization with a corporation or business.

Government funding and foundations are funding sources which are typically reliant on effective grant writing. This is a different strategy and takes a different skill set than the previous two fundraising practices. Grant writing requires telling a specific story to effectively secure funding. This includes many decisions about what pictures to include highlighting certain demographics and what statistics to include on audiences, mission, etc. These funding opportunities often also include sending updates after being approved for grants, in order to prove that the organization is accomplishing what they said they needed the funding to accomplish.

Membership programs, while not represented in the graph above, are also vitally important and more recent surveys have included data on this (Theater Operations Survey 2019). Members' dues are also ways of raising money, with the members receiving certain perks which could be anything from free popcorn to reduced ticket prices to special events programmed specifically for them. Members become a significant part of the audience because their dues are important to an organization's survival. This can result very easily in "members" becoming synonymous with "audience," becoming the most prioritized audience.

Where the money comes from is integral to the success of any organization and funding is extremely important for the survival of nonprofits. Beyond simply ensuring that exhibition experiences happen, where the funding comes from also can have a direct impact on the experience itself. How much say the funders end up having over the programming, the audience outreach, and the mission is what can have an extremely important, though often somewhat hidden, impact on the exhibition experience. Additionally, the role of members in an organization can shift the culture, depending on how members are recruited and how much the member base is prioritized over other audience members, or over developing new audience members. Funders are often the "man behind the curtain," so to speak, pulling levers and making decisions which impact the end product of programs, audience development, and an organization's culture.

This can have specific impacts on Indigenous programming. So much of the identity of an organization and the programming prioritized there is reliant upon the donors who support the organization, which can lead to any number of outcomes, but may not necessarily be led with Indigenous programming at the forefront of their minds. Additionally, contributions from corporations and from government institutes can create troubling conflicts of interest. An

example of this is the Sundance Film Festival, one of whose Presenting Sponsors is Chase Bank (Sundance Institute, sundance.org). Chase Bank was also an investor in the Dakota Access Pipeline (Chappell). Not only did Sundance align itself with Chase and accept money from them, but they also advertised for Chase, on their website and throughout Park City during the festival, and actively encouraged their audience members to also support Sundance's sponsors (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/blogs/keep-it-legit-support-our-supporters). Sundance has actively promoted its Indigenous programming, running a year-round Indigenous Program, and also making a point to program Indigenous films during its annual festival. This conflict of interest in the funding arena is troubling then, as its partnership with Chase is in essence a partnership with a company investing in actions which are actively hurting Indigenous people. Funding can also become problematic when it comes to government funding opportunities. The United States government has historically been incredibly aggressive and violent towards Indigenous communities, from genocide attempts to forced removal to cultural erasure through Indian Residential Schools and the illegalization of Indigenous customs, languages, and ways of life and so on. The United States government is a colonizing force whose presence has created centuries of harm for Indigenous nations and continues to do so. It must be considered then, what impact aligning oneself with the federal government can have on an exhibitor's ability to present Indigenous film. None of this is to say that these funding channels should absolutely not be accepted. Nonprofit exhibitors are not known for their ability to make large amounts of money and they do need to receive funding. However, all of these elements must be considered when attempting to create a responsible space for Indigenous programming, and it must be acknowledged that these funder relations may have an abject impact on the exhibition experience.

Pre- and Post- Screening Discussions/Q&As

Finally, another element to be considered is that of panelists or Q&A sessions. This could include a programmer conducting a short introduction and/or post-screening discussion, a Q&A with the filmmaker, actors, or anyone else involved behind the scenes of the film, or a discussion with an expert on the film's topic, or someone with a vested interest in the film's content. This creates a wide range of voices and experiences which could accompany any given film.

These discussions create a context around a film which can add fun insider knowledge about the behind the scenes of the production, background information to the content of the film, or calls to action based on the film. Eventizing film screenings is a practice which sets independent film exhibitors apart from their multiplex counterparts as it creates once-in-a-lifetime experiences. This can be an added attraction to entice audiences. It's also an extremely important practice that has a direct and obvious impact on the exhibition practice for audience members.

Filmmakers or anyone involved with the film's production (actors, crew members, producers, etc.) can provide invaluable context to a film screening, ensuring that the film is being presented in the correct context and is being understood correctly. They can answer questions provided by the audience to ensure that their work is being consumed the way they intended. This provides a hands-on opportunity for artists to carry their work across the finish line and stay involved beyond production and into the exhibition phase, ensuring their art is properly received in the way they intended.

Another example of a discussion is when a local expert is brought in to provide context and engage with an audience on the topic of the film which they also are knowledgeable on. This provides a more detached type of context. Unlike when a filmmaker engages with a discussion

with the piece of art that they created, this type of discussion is often more content-based. An example of this is the Science on Screen grant program, where theaters receive funding to play a pre-selected program of films and then find a local expert to lead a discussion based on the film's topic (Science on Screen, scienceonscreen.org). This can provide valuable information to an audience who may not be experts on the film's topic, but it also of course comes with the biases and individual perspective of the guest(s).

A third example is a type of community partnership where a local organization who supports the cause presented in the film may engage in a discussion, which can also encourage action from the audience. These are somewhat of a subset of the previous example in that they are experts on the content, but additionally, they can bring a local organization into the conversation, potentially moving the conversation beyond the film's content and into current events which are impacting the audience members and their fellow community members in their day to day lives. This model builds on the work of the filmmaker to, hopefully, bring whatever cause they were championing into local communities. Again, it also must be remembered that anyone participating in these discussions also have their own biases and individual perspectives, as well as individual goals for them and the organizations and causes they represent.

Also, it must be considered who is moderating these conversations. Moderators often guide a discussion, sometimes interpret audience members' questions, and provide the majority of the questions to the guests. This is an important element to keep in mind, especially when considering the practice of Q&As with filmmakers. It's easy to assume that providing a filmmaker with the space to discuss their own film would naturally create a responsible space for filmmakers to have autonomy over their films, but it's important to remember that these

conversations are still typically moderated by someone associated with the organization, whether a programmer, executive director, board member, etc.

All of these examples have a direct impact on the audience members' experiences watching the film and in how they receive the information the film provides. In a non-eventized film screening, each audience member has their own experience, while sharing the collective physical experience of watching the film in the company of others. However, without the opportunity to discuss the film (aside from natural conversations that occur with friends and acquaintances after shared film experiences), these experiences are often mentally solitary. However, with the addition of a discussion, the audience will often share a collective experience of added understanding and context to the film. When pre and post-screening discussions are added, it creates another piece of the program on top of the film which can have just as much importance and just as much impact on the audience as the film itself. This is one of the most direct and obvious exhibition practices on audiences and their perceptions of the films being exhibited.

Providing discussions can have an important impact on Indigenous film programming. In order to ensure that the voices of the artists are being properly represented and included, one of the most obvious ways to do so is to hold a discussion with the filmmaker before or after the screening. This is one way to attempt to ensure that artists' voices are being centered. However, there are also many strategies in creating discussions, including bringing in the voices of local experts or forging community partnerships to collaborate on making space for thoughtful and responsible conversations.

Conclusion

The exhibition experience is much more complex than simply projecting a movie onto a screen. This chapter begins to outline a number of exhibition practices specific to primarily nonprofit art house movie theaters and film festivals. Obviously, it is not an exhaustive list but it is an introduction to the idea of how specific exhibition practices in nonprofit art house movie theaters and film festivals have a direct impact on the exhibition experience for audience members. Film selection/programming process, community partnerships, branding/marketing strategies, target audiences, funding, and pre- and post- screening discussions/Q&As are each integral to the exhibition experience. While many of these are unseen to the audiences' eyes, the audience will feel the impact of each, from the moment audience members first become aware of an exhibitor throughout the entire experience in the exhibition space, and how the exhibitor then stays on the radar of the audience members. These practices are integral to who the audience is, which audiences feel welcome, and equally important, which audiences are not being reached, what barriers to access there are, and if certain audiences do not feel that the exhibition space is a safe space for them. Additionally, certain exhibition practices create context around films, which alters the audience experience of viewing them, providing unique experiences dependent on the exhibition space and the practices and strategies employed there. This can have an important impact on exhibition of Indigenous film, often unseen by those involved, as is evidenced by the lack of data on Indigenous audiences or films at many independent exhibitors. One of the first steps towards creating a responsible space for Indigenous films to be shown and celebrated is to recognize the impact that exhibition practices have on the exhibition experience.

This is not to say, however, that exhibitors are the only ones with agency in these environments. I do not want to imply that the role of White exhibitors is so all consuming that it can strip away the agency of the films themselves. To assume that White colonial spaces are so

powerful that they can erase the work of Indigenous artists again falls into the false notions that Indigenous nations have been erased by White colonialism. This is not true in the United States and this is also not true in theaters or at film festivals. Rather, I am attempting to start a conversation about the many different practices which merge together in an exhibition space, in addition to the film itself, and how these practices can have an impact on Indigenous films in ways that are not always immediately apparent. This list is not exhaustive nor does it apply the same to every organization. It’s just the opening of a conversation which exhibitors may or may not recognize themselves in, and which they can then build on in ways that make sense for their individual organizations.

Chapter Three

Indigenous Film Exhibition on the Ground

Introduction

Having established a theoretical framework and an understanding of the industry practices in the independent film exhibition world, my next step is to look at exhibitor case studies which highlight exhibitors who have made an effort to incorporate Indigenous films into their programming. I will examine some exhibition practices outlined in the previous chapter to demonstrate how practical application can inform my research and ground it in the current reality of the film exhibition industry.

To do so, I am focusing on three United States exhibition spaces which vary in size and region. These organizations are the Sundance Film Institute, home of the Sundance Film Festival, headquartered in Los Angeles with the festival occurring in Park City, Utah; The Doris Duke Theatre, which is a part of the Honolulu Museum of Art in Honolulu; and Northwest Film Forum, an art house movie theater in Seattle. Across these organizations, I examine their mission statements, film selections, marketing materials, and supplemental programming, such as Q&As. When relevant I will include information on the organizations' larger structures, histories, and funding.

In exploring these case studies, I am attempting to start a conversation about exhibition practices in independent exhibition spaces in regards to the exhibition of Indigenous film. It is important to note that there are many other organizations engaging with Indigenous film programming. My sampling provides an instructive overview of what types of Indigenous programming independent exhibitors are currently engaging with. It is not exhaustive. These examples show how support of Indigenous film can extend beyond just exhibiting a film to

become year-round, robust programming which supports Indigenous filmmakers throughout their entire career and forms communities for these filmmakers and up-and-coming Indigenous filmmakers.

There are many other organizations doing fascinating and important work which needs to be discovered. Furthermore, the exploration of these topics is a surface look at exhibition practices. Next steps I hope to see happen would be seeing interviews conducted with exhibitors, on-site research during festivals and film screenings, research of audience engagement and experiences, and engagement with filmmakers who have had their work screened in these and similar spaces. While these methods exceeded the scope and timing of my thesis, these yield extremely important perspectives that need to be incorporated into this research.

Due to the unpredictable and unusual nature of the film exhibition industry at the time of this writing, most of the examples included are from the pre-Covid area. The influx of virtual programming offers opportunity for research on diversifying film offerings, accessibility, and increased filmmaker participation, to name a few topics, but to give that its due attention it should be researched separately. While I occasionally may offer a brief example of the most current Indigenous programming being offered at these organizations to show where the programming is currently at - which will most often be virtual due to the current state of affairs - for the purposes of this paper I will be primarily looking at pre-Covid, in-person programming.

To conduct this research, I utilized public facing information about each organization's programs including: websites, marketing materials, interviews, blog posts, conference presentations, and industry news sources. I purposefully chose public information to see how these organizations self-report the work they are doing. Textual analysis of an organization's self-presentation turns a mirror on the organization while simultaneously influencing how other

exhibitors may view this information as they consider expanding their own offerings. I am specifically looking at organizations that publicly prioritize Indigenous film through specific series or tracks. For example, a theater that plays a screening of one Indigenous film was not my focus, as instead I examined a festival such as the Sundance Film Festival, which tags a percentage of films as having Indigenous directors, or a theater, such as Northwest Film Forum, which runs a year-round Indigenous film series. Additionally, I am specifically looking at organizations that do not identify Indigenous film as a central part of their overarching mission. For example, I am not looking at ImagineNative Film Festival, as this is an Indigenous run film festival. Instead, I am looking at organizations that are not Indigenous run, but which are attempting to prioritize Indigenous programming. This does not mean they do not necessarily employ Indigenous staff or that their Indigenous programs are not run by Indigenous staff. In some cases, they definitely are. However, I am looking at organizations where this is one component of the organization's mission and not the central identity of the organization. By looking at specific case studies of the mission statements and Indigenous film programming in non-Indigenous exhibition spaces, we can see how the missions and visions of organizations, as well as what type of exhibitor they are, can inform the Indigenous programming they are engaged in.

Sundance Film Institute

Sundance Film Institute is the home of the Sundance Film Festival (Sundance) and year-round film programs and artist support initiatives. This includes Labs, workshops, fellowship programs, community and education programs in Utah, and shorts programs distributed to exhibitors. It also is home to a robust Indigenous program. Sundance's mission and vision statements are:

> [mission:] Sundance Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the discovery and development of independent artists and audiences. Through its programs, the Institute seeks to discover, support, and inspire independent film, media, and theatre artists from the United States and around the world, and to introduce audiences to their new work. [vision:] We believe that a story driven by an individual, authentic voice can awaken new ideas that have the power to delight and entertain, push creative boundaries, spark new levels of empathy and understanding, and even lead to social change. We support independent storytellers and advance the impact of their work in the world (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/about/mission).

These statements do not address Indigenous film specifically and both are quite broad in their scope of the work Sundance aspires to do. From the mission statement it appears that Sundance's focus is on supporting new talent, something Sundance has historically done through the "discovery" of filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, Lynn Shelton, Kevin Smith, etc. (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/about). Their vision statement moves to a more aspirational goal of inspiring positive changes, including social change.

Although not obvious in their missions, Sundance is one of the most well-known exhibitors to begin publicly prioritizing Indigenous film in recent years. Sundance Film Institute was founded in 1981 by filmmaker and actor Robert Redford. It began as a Lab for filmmakers at Redford's resort in Utah. In 1985, the film festival component of the organization started. Throughout the late 1980's the institute continued to expand its Lab offerings and the festival began to achieve more acclaim as films played there went on to become successes. In 1994, an initiative was created to support Indigenous filmmakers and commit to a section of the festival specifically for Indigenous filmmakers. In 1995, *Smoke Signals*, which was supported by a

Sundance Lab, won several awards at Sundance and went on to become the first commercially successful film in the United States by an Indigenous filmmaker. Their work with Indigenous filmmakers continued with Native Filmmakers Labs starting in the 2000's, supporting the creation of films by Indigenous directors and their growth as filmmakers. Over 350 Indigenous filmmakers have been supported by Sundance through a variety of programs. Indigenous filmmakers have been involved in the Sundance Institute from the very beginning of the organization's history, when filmmakers Larry Littlebird (Laguna/Santo Domingo Pueblo) and Chris Spotted Eagle (Houmas Nation) participated in the founding meetings of the Sundance Institute (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/programs/indigenousprograms). These programs have continued to grow over the years and now encompass both annual festival programming and year-round initiatives to support Indigenous filmmakers and provide Indigenous programming to exhibitors.

Sundance Film Institute is headquartered in Los Angeles, but the annual festival is held in Park City, Utah. Because this is both an industry festival and a festival located in a city of only slightly over 8,000, it creates a demographically interesting audience. The following is data from Sundance's 2020 Economic Impact Report regarding the audience:

> About 116,800 attendees filled 215,873 seats at events over the course of the festival. An estimated 62% of attendees were Utah residents (about 72,800 individuals) while 38% came from out-of-state (about 44,000 individuals). About 34% of non-residents came from California, 11% from New York, 6% from Texas, 5% from Colorado, 4% from Illinois, 4% from Florida, 3% from Washington, and 34% from other states. Approximately 1% of non-resident attendees traveled from outside the United States to attend the festival, representing at least 36 different countries. The estimated number of out-of-state attendees

> is approximately the same as prior years. 92% of non-resident attendees reported attending multiple days of the festival, with 67% of non-residents staying between 2 and 5 days. 89% of Utah residents attended only one or two days of events. A majority of Utah resident attendees came from Salt Lake County (50%), Utah County (16%), and Davis County (15%). Out-of-state festivalgoers tended to come from relatively high-income households. 30% of non-resident respondents reported a household income of $300,000 or more, a plurality of those visitors. Though this is an industry event, many attendees are not entertainment industry professionals (48%). 4% of non-resident participants are students, about 1% are press, and 44% work in non-entertainment fields (Sundance Economic Impact Report).

An audience that is 62% Utah residents and 38% from other parts of the country and world is both a very narrow audience in terms of local residents and an extremely broad audience. This provides Sundance with a unique opportunity to significantly impact local communities as well as audiences across the rest of the country, and other countries as well. Additionally, as the data shows, 30% of non-resident attendees had an income of over $300,000. Sundance is an extremely expensive festival to attend for out-of-towners. Both housing and film passes are expensive, and even for local residents, there are barriers to entry. As Nicole Guillaumet, Sundance's co-director from 1985-2002, recently said in an interview with IndieWire, "Attending in person has become an exclusive experience. It is very expensive and excludes many, many young people who cannot afford to pay for travel, lodging, and passes (qtd. in Kohn)." Getting access to films can be a challenge with constantly sold-out screenings and venues spread across the city, and standing in line only to be turned away from a film is a common Sundance experience. Sundance is also held in the winter in a mountainous area and

spread across multiple venues throughout the city, some within walking distance and some accessible by bus. There are many potential barriers to physical access because of this.

Indigenous Programming

Sundance's Indigenous Program includes films at its annual festival, a short film program distributed to exhibitors throughout the year, and artist support services to rising Indigenous filmmakers. The program is led by its director, N. Bird Runningwater, a member of the Cheyenne and Mescalero Apache peoples, who has overseen the successes of many films ushered through the Labs, and has also established new Labs in Australia and New Zealand (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/programs/indigenousprograms).

There are always a certain number of films by Indigenous filmmakers at the Sundance Film Festival. In 2020 there were five films made by Indigenous filmmakers at the festival:

- *Charter*, which played in the World Dramatic Competition
- *Little Chief*, a narrative short
- *małni – towards the ocean, towards the shore*, which played as a part of New Frontiers
- *Lichen*, a documentary short
- *Now Is the Time*, a documentary short

While there are always films by Indigenous filmmakers at Sundance, with only two Indigenous-made feature films playing at Sundance 2020, this means that Indigenous films make up about 1.7% of the overall feature film programming at the festival. It is also worth noting that programming tracks (e.g. World Dramatic and New Frontiers) these films are playing in may impact both how audiences perceive the films and what audiences access them. As explored in

the previous chapters, these types of categories can provide a context to a film through which audiences will view the film conceptually before they ever see it on the screen.

Sundance's Indigenous program extends beyond the festival. The Sundance Indigenous Shorts Program partners with theaters, museums, and Native organizations across the United States to bring Indigenous films to audiences outside the scope of the Sundance Film Festival. The collection includes shorts from a variety of genres and from Indigenous filmmakers from around the world. The current Sundance Indigenous Shorts Program includes the following short films:

- *This Is the Way We Rise* (Ciara Lacy, 2021)
- *The Fourfold* (Alisi Telengut, 2021)
- *Little Chief* (Erica Tremblay, 2020)
- *Fainting Spells* (Sky Hopinka, 2018)
- *Now Is the Time* (Christopher Auchter, 2020)
- *Lichen* (Lisa Jackson, 2020)
- *Fast Horse* (Alexandra Lazarowich, 2018)

Fellowships are also offered specifically for Indigenous filmmakers. There are two different types of fellowships which fund multiple fellows each year. The Full Circle Fellowship is specifically for Native youth from New Mexico, Mississippi, and Michigan. This fellowship provides on-set production experience. The Merata Mita Fellowship is for Indigenous artists who identify as women. This fellowship supports the filmmakers in directing a feature film (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/programs/indigenousprograms).

The Native Filmmakers Lab is another program of the Sundance Institute which extends the work of supporting Indigenous filmmakers beyond exhibition. These Labs have existed since

2004 and provide a space to support Indigenous filmmakers in creating and showing their work (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/programs/indigenousprograms).

Sundance's website also includes a robust database of articles and news stories centering Indigenous film and filmmakers. This is an important resource for other exhibitors looking to keep up on what is happening in Indigenous film. These pieces range from industry updates on film to advice for Indigenous filmmakers looking to apply for the Sundance Labs to bigger picture writings on racial issues within film (Sundance Institute, sundance.org/programs/indigenousprograms).

The Sundance Indigenous Program receives support from multiple foundations and organizations:

- The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- WarnerMedia
- Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
- Nia Tero Foundation
- Indigenous Screen Office
- SAGindie
- New Zealand Film Commission
- Indigenous Media Initiatives
- Several individual donors

This provides an example of the types of funders which an exhibitor will align itself with, as discussed in Chapter Two. These funders range from well-known foundations to industry companies to individual donors to organizations focused on supporting Indigenous art. All of these funders then become one part of a relationship with Sundance, which Sundance will need to maintain in order to continue its work. Maintaining these relationships can both create new

potential opportunities for Sundance to expand the work they do, but it can also create funders which Sundance is then beholden to.

Sundance is important in the field of exhibition of Indigenous film not just because it has made an attempt to prioritize it but also because of its status in the field. Exhibitors and programmers from all over the country, representing a vast number of exhibition spaces, attend Sundance to curate programming for their own theaters and festivals (Berliner, 65). Sundance can then act as a gatekeeper or gate-opener in the independent film exhibition industry in regards to Indigenous cinema. Because it has reached some level of status as being a champion of Indigenous film, and because it presents itself as such, exhibitors may look to Sundance as the leader in the field and defer to whatever they program (and don't program) to make decisions about their own Indigenous film programming.

Doris Duke Theatre

The Doris Duke Theatre occupies a unique exhibition space as it is housed within the Honolulu Museum of Art, as opposed to a stand-alone art house movie theater or a film festival. Museums offer a different type of exhibition. Movie theaters which exist as a part of a museum are beholden to the larger mission of the museum which can bring in another set of priorities and strategies which may not exist in art house theaters or film festivals. Museums may want to focus more on education or history, or they may want to align what is screening with current exhibits within the museum. The history of this particular museum also provides a unique set of challenges when it comes to exhibiting Indigenous film.

The Doris Duke Theatre operates year-round. Unlike an art house theater, it does not play many first-run movies, but instead focuses on series based around different cultural experiences, programming in cooperation with the museum's other programs, as well as events and

performances beyond the scope of just film (Chang). The theatre is run by Taylour Chang, who also leads a group of exhibitors looking to diversify their programming called Alliance for Action, which is a:

> diverse group of individuals and organizations committed to undoing systems of oppression in the independent film industry by identifying root causes of inequity, shifting our power dynamics, unlocking access to opportunities, and reallocating resources to underrepresented artists and audiences. We understand that the realities of inequity are intersectional and recognize that the roots of inequity must be addressed on multiple levels: within our collective, our own organizations, our programming, our communities/audience, our networks, and within ourselves (Art House Convergence, arthouseconvergence.org/index/affiliatedgroups).

The work of Alliance for Action was partially born out of the work of the Doris Duke Theatre and Taylour Chang's leadership in this arena (Art House Convergence, arthouseconvergence.org/index/affiliatedgroups).

The Honolulu Museum of Art

The history of the museum itself, instead of just the theatre, is important to note, as it serves as the home of the theatre, and the larger organization the theatre is a part of. The mission of the museum is "to create relevant and transformative experiences through the study, preservation, presentation and creation of art," and its guiding principles are "to present our audiences with relevant programs, exhibitions and events from within facilities that support and enhance their experiences [and] to pursue these principles in a manner that ensures long-term financial viability (Honolulu Museum of Art, honolulumuseum.org/about-us)." The mission of the Doris Duke Theatre is:

> Doris Duke Theatre, at 280 seats, is Hawai‘i’s largest independent arthouse theatre. Serving as one of the museum’s gathering places, the theatre screens independent, documentary, and international films, and hosts lectures, performances, and concerts by local and visiting performers. Programming is dedicated to addressing relevant, impactful issues and to cultivating transformative experiences within our community (Doris Duke Theatre).

The two missions align, with the theatre adding “impactful issues” to the museum’s mission statement.

The Honolulu Museum of Art was founded in 1927 by Anna Rice Cooke, a woman born to Christian missionaries in O‘ahu in 1853. Cooke was married to a prosperous businessman who also was from a missionary family. She was a prolific art collector who worked with several other women to obtain a charter to open Hawaii’s first art museum, building the museum on her own property. She stated at the dedication ceremony:

> That our children of many nationalities and races, born far from the centers of art, may receive an intimation of their own cultural legacy and wake to the ideals embodied in the arts of their neighbors….that Hawaiians, Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Northern Europeans, South Europeans, and all other people living here, contacting through the channel of art those deep intuitions common to all, may perceive a foundation on which a new culture, enriched by all the old strains may be built in these islands (Honolulu Museum of Art, honolulumuseum.org/about-us).

There seem to be good intentions behind the building of the museum on Cooke’s part, but a museum built and run by White colonists in a location where Indigenous people were being oppressed is inherently problematic.

Since its inception, the museum has gone through more transitions. In 2011 it received its new name of the Honolulu Museum of Art and shifted to attempt to emphasize local art more specifically. The museum began hosting film screenings in the 1930's and has continued since, opening the theatre in 1977. The theatre was named after Doris Duke, a White billionaire and philanthropist who spent winters at an estate in Hawaii in the 1930's. The Doris Duke Foundation, historically and in the present, provides monetary support to the theatre and provided money for renovating the theatre in 2000 (Honolulu Museum of Art, honolulumuseum.org/about-us).

The museum's history as the brainchild of missionaries and colonists provides a unique challenge for the Doris Duke Theatre and their efforts to elevate the voices of Indigenous filmmakers. The history of missionarism in Hawaii is an integral part of the colonization efforts which were utilized by white invaders to attempt to erase Indigenous cultures, languages, customs, and religions. Furthermore, white colonists such as the Cooke's participated in the trend of White business people moving to Hawaii and using colonialism to become rich. The history of the museum and its place in the larger Hawaiian community is both representative of and a direct result of the rampant colonization of Hawaii. This complicated history has the potential for even more challenges than usual for a theatre to attempt to subvert the history of colonization through its current programming.

Indigenous Programming

In 2016, the Doris Duke Theatre programmed a film series highlighting a different culture every month. These included Bollywood film, an African American film festival, women in film, Jewish cinema, European cinema, a Filipino Film Festival, LGBTQ cinema, Korean cinema, Japanese cinema, and Chinese/Hong Kong/Taiwanese film. In May of 2017 they

highlighted Pacific Islander and Indigenous Cinema through the ‘Ōiwi Film Festival, which is a program of the Honolulu Museum of Art. As part of these programs, 9 feature films, plus shorts programs and other events, were played over the course of 27 days, with an attendance of 1269. This program was put on with the support of an advisor (who is also the co-founder of the program), two sponsors, and thirty community partners. The community partners were:

- Sierra Club Hawaii Chapter
- The Trust for Public Land
- Earth Justice
- Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation
- Pacific Islanders in Communication
- NETPAC/USA
- Social Sciences at UH
- Hawaii People’s Fund
- Indigenous Politics at UH
- Hawaii Women in Filmmaking
- Hawaiinuiakea School of Hawaiian Knowledge
- Oiwi TV
- Tamara Moan and Arts Retreat
- Hawaii SEED
- Malu ‘Aina Center for Nonviolence
- KEY Project
- Aha Aloha Aina
- Sam Kapoi Productions
- Civil Engagement for College of Social Sciences
- Hawaii Peace & Justice
- Na Maka o ka Aina
- Hoa Aina o Makaha
- Ka Lei Maile Alii Hawaiian Civic Club
- Halau Ku Mana
- Several individual donors

This is an extremely robust amount of community partners for a single series and it offers a very diverse range of support. Heavily represented are environmental organizations and many Indigenous organizations. The number of Indigenous organizations supporting this series is much greater than that of Indigenous organizations supporting Sundance. This also speaks to the Doris Duke Theatre's ability to engage with their community and forge partnerships with like-minded organizations (Chang).

The films and events played as a part of this series included *Embrace of the Serpent*, *The Tribunal*, *Mauna Kea: Temple Under Siege*, Sundance Native Lab Shorts, Moʻolelo Storytelling Festival, *Kumu Hula: Keepers of a Culture*, *The Price of Peace*, *Ever the Land*, Mana Wairoa Māori Shorts, *Hōkūleʻa: The Past*, *Hōkūleʻa: The Future*, and *Maisa*. These offerings range from feature length films--both narrative and documentary--to shorts programs, and events. Some films played multiple times throughout the month but most were one night only. Q&As and events were programmed alongside certain films in the series. The following graphic gives an example of the marketing materials and the schedule for the ʻŌiwi Film Festival in 2016

(Chang).

ʻŌIWI FILM FESTIVAL
+ PACIFIC ISLANDER AND INDIGENOUS CINEMA

MAY 2016

Honolulu Museum of Art
Doris Duke Theatre

Photo by Naʻalehu Anthony © 2016 Polynesian Voyaging Society and ʻŌiwi TV

MAY 2016

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
1 1pm + 4pm + 7:30pm Embrace of the Serpent	2	3 1pm + 7:30pm Embrace of the Serpent	4 1pm + 7:30pm Embrace of the Serpent	5 1pm Embrace of the Serpent	6 4pm Wild & Scenic Film Festival 2016 Reception and Screening	7 7pm The Tribunal
8 1pm Mauna Kea: Temple Under Siege 7:30pm Pele's Appeal	Embrace the Serpent		11	12 6pm Sundance Native Shorts Lab Reception and Screening: The Works of Danis Goulet and Lucas Leyva	13 7:30pm Moʻolelo Storytelling Festival	14 7:30pm Kumu Hula: Keepers of a Culture
	Hōkūleʻa		18 7:30pm Music of Hawaiʻi: Pomaikaʻi Lyman	The Price of Peace		21 6pm Aotearoa New Zealand Film Showcase Opening and Screening: Ever the Land
22 1pm The Price of Peace and post-screening discussion 4pm Ever the Land 7:30pm Mana Wairoa Māori Shorts	23	24 1pm The Price of Peace 7:30pm Ever the Land	25 1pm Mana Wairoa Māori Shorts 7:30pm Lopaka Kapanui: The Living Ghosts and Legends of Hawaiʻi	26 7:30pm Hōkūleʻa: The Past	27	28 7:30pm Hōkūleʻa: The Future
29 1pm Spotlight Micronesia: Maisa	30				Stolen Waters	

Image 1 - ʻŌiwi Film Festival 2016 (Chang)

The Doris Duke Theatre's emphasis on Indigenous film is continuing today. From July 28-30, 2021, they are playing the virtual world premiere of the short film *Moho*, followed by a Q&A with the filmmakers. *Moho* explores an Indigenous perspective on surfing. The Doris Duke Theatre continues to offer Indigenous film in various series and through a variety of formats, but this section gives an introduction to the work they do and are continuing to do (Doris Duke Theatre).

Northwest Film Forum

Northwest Film Forum is a year-round operating, two screen independent art house movie theater in Seattle, Washington. Founded in 1995 by filmmakers Jamie Hook and Deborah

Girdwood, Northwest Film Forum initially functioned as a collective for filmmakers seeking post-production support. The group expanded into film exhibition the following year, taking over programming for a local theater, and eventually acquiring their own space. They continued to support both exhibition and production during this period, before moving to their current space in 2003 and expanding their exhibition offerings. The theater screens "over 500 short and feature films through annual festivals, curated series and local premieres (Northwest Film Forum, nwfilmforum.org/about-us/mission-history-nwff)," including regional film series, series focused on film music, and many other topics. They also are home to several film festivals, including ByDesign Festival, Cadence: Video Poetry Festival, Children's Film Festival Seattle, and Local Sightings. Along with film programming, Northwest Film Forum also provides over 100 different educational programs for adults and young people including workshops, classes, and camps, some of which are specifically designed for young female and nonbinary students, as well as queer students. They also provide filmmaking classes for adults and artist services for up-and-coming filmmakers. Their mission statement reads:

> Northwest Film Forum incites public dialogue and creative action through collective cinematic experiences. A nonprofit film and arts center located in Seattle, Northwest Film Forum presents hundreds of films, festivals, community events, multidisciplinary performances, and public discussions each year. A comprehensive visual media organization, the Forum offers educational workshops and artist services for film and media makers at all stages of their development. Artist services include access to space, gear, fiscal sponsorship, and an edit lab. Northwest Film Forum is a member-based organization (Northwest Film Forum, nwfilmforum.org/about-us/mission-history-nwff).

Northwest Film Forum is unique amongst the exhibitors discussed in this chapter as its mission statement leads with their aspirations for what will happen as a result of their programmatic offerings: public dialogue and creative action. They then explain how the work they are doing will result in this. The theater also includes a land acknowledgement on their website, listed under "Values." It reads:

> Based in the city currently known as Seattle, we acknowledge that we are located on the ancestral lands and territories of the Coast Salish people, including the Duwamish Tribe (Dkhw Duw'Absh), who are still present among us and leading much of the important cultural and societal work in the region.
>
> In recognition of the role of the arts as a vehicle for social change, we are committed to undoing systems of oppression in our work and lives. We are working every day to learn and dismantle racist, sexist, and inequitable systems in our lives and organization (Northwest Film Forum, nwfilmforum.org/about-us/mission-history-nwff).

Not only is there a land acknowledgement (which is still a new concept to many, and not found on every exhibitor's website), but this moves beyond just acknowledging whose land the theater sits on and then moves into the action the theater is taking to confront and undo systems of oppression. An additional line in the land acknowledgment which is worth noting is "who are still present among us and leading much of the important cultural and societal work in the region." Again, instead of just acknowledging the rightful owners of the land, they are providing an important reminder that Indigenous communities not only still exist, but are also the leaders of the work in their community.

Northwest Film Forum is managed by Executive Director Vivian Hua, who originally worked with the theater as the co-founder of the Seventh Art Stand, an initiative to encourage

theaters across the country to play films from the countries included in the Travel Ban put in place by the Trump administration in 2017. Northwest Film Forum has been actively involved in encouraging action from other theaters in initiatives such as this, and in co-founding the Alliance for Action with Taylour Chang (Seventh Art Stand).

Indigenous Programming

Northwest Film Forum runs an Indigenous Showcase, which is an ongoing bimonthly series. The theater partners with Longhouse Media, an Indigenous media arts nonprofit, to present this series (Sheehan). Longhouse Media and Northwest Film Forum write joint grant applications to apply for funding for the series together and they split the box office revenue evenly. The showcase receives support and funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Washington State Arts Commission, the Office of Arts and Culture's Civic Partners Grant, and 4Culture's Artist Sustained Support Group. Some individual films also have specific partnerships for just those screenings, such as the film *Out of State*, which was sponsored by the ACLU. The screenings include a mix of both ticketed and free screenings and events. Most screenings include a film as well as a post-screening Q&A, music, and traditional rituals organized by the Indigenous partners (Sheehan). In addition to the screenings that typically play at the theater as a part of the Indigenous showcase, they also incorporate Indigenous films into their annual Local Sightings Film Festival and Children's Film Festival Seattle. Alongside the screenings, they also incorporate production workshops for young people as a part of the Indigenous Showcase (Northwest Film Forum, nwfilmforum.org/series/indigenous-showcase-native-american-films).

From 2014-2020, 31 films have played as a part of the Indigenous Showcase:

- *Vai*
- *The Mayors of Shiprock*

- *Young Lakota*
- Misty Upham Tribute Screenings (*August: Osage County* and *Frozen River*)
- *Princess Angeline*
- *Maria Tallchief*
- *Yakona: Journey Through the Eyes of a River*
- *Children of the Arctic*
- Sundance Native Lab Shorts
- *K2 and the Invisible Footmen*
- *Songs My Brother Taught Me*
- *Following Kina*
- *Nemo Hadeest'ii* (Navajo Finding Nemo)
- *The Seventh Fire*
- Indigenous Showcase at the Children's Film Festival Seattle
- *Awake, A Dream from Standing Rock*
- *Out of State*
- *The Resistance Saga part 1 - When the Mountains Tremble*
- *The Resistance Saga part 2 - Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*
- *The Resistance Saga part 3 - 500 Years*
- *Through the Repellent Fence: A Land Art Film*
- From the Zapatistas and Beyond
- *Tribal Justice*
- *Indian Horse*
- *X yəhaw̓ – Mosquita y Mari*
- *Embrace of the Serpent*
- *Words from a Bear*
- Sundance Indigenous Shorts 2019
- *Moroni for President*
- *małni—towards the ocean, towards the shore*

These include feature length films and shorts programs, documentaries and narratives, and films which represent Indigenous communities from across the United States and around the world. Many of these films also included post-screening discussions with any combination of filmmakers, members of cast and crew, and/or other guests from the local community. Other films screened in cooperation with community partners' events, such as *X yəhaw̓ – Mosquita y Mari* (2012) playing in conjunction with an art exhibit at a local gallery. Films were also eventized in various ways, including hosting receptions after certain films, or in the example of *Yakona: Journey Through The Eyes of a River* (2013), which, in addition to both the director and film's composer being in attendance, also included a live score accompaniment performed by local musicians. *Nemo Hadeest'ii* (Navajo *Finding Nemo*) (2003) is a Diné (Navajo) language dubbed screening of *Finding Nemo* which played as part of the Indigenous Showcase. Northwest Film Forum had previously played a Diné dubbed screening of *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (1977) as well, seeing a considerable turnout of Navajo audience members. Some of the films incorporated discussions even when no filmmakers were available. An example of this is *Awake, A Dream From Standing Rock* (2017), which featured a panel of Indigenous women from Seattle who had recently traveled to Standing Rock. The shorts program which played as a part of the Children's Film Festival Seattle is an interesting example of bringing Indigenous programming to children's audiences. This program featured shorts by Indigenous children and also by seasoned adult filmmakers, exploring a variety of moods and themes through animation, live action, and documentary. The program was recommended for ages 9 and up (Northwest Film Forum, nwfilmforum.org/series/indigenous-showcase-native-american-films).

The Indigenous Showcase is a current program of Northwest Film Forum. The latest two films screened as a part of the program, *Moroni for President* (2018) and *małni—towards the*

ocean, towards the shore (2020), played virtually due to the pandemic. The series is ongoing and appears to be continuing indefinitely.

Conclusion

Looking at a sampling of independent film exhibitors who have begun to prioritize Indigenous film programming is the first step in moving beyond theory and looking at applicable practices. There are many differences between a large festival such as Sundance and a small theater such as Northwest Film Forum or a museum-housed theater like the Doris Duke Theatre. By looking at these different organizations alongside one another we can begin to see how the differences in locale, size, mission, and the organizations' histories can inform the work being done to highlight Indigenous voices and films. Seeing examples of the work happening in the field right now can also lay a groundwork for exhibitors who are interested in expanding their own offerings surrounding Indigenous film.

Conclusion

Moving the conversation regarding sovereignty in Indigenous film into the world of film exhibition is an important step in discussing how to honor the visual sovereignty that exists within Indigenous film. The colonized space of an exhibition space and the consumption by White audiences has the potential to problematize the sovereignty within Indigenous films. "Potential" is a key word here, however. While colonized spaces run by White people for White people can certainly be problematic, they are also not an all-consuming force which strips away all of the filmmaker's autonomy.

The practices of exhibitors can have a significant impact on the final exhibition experience, and these practices are important to keep in mind when attempting to prioritize Indigenous film programming. These can include practices such as film selection/programming process, community partnerships, branding/marketing strategies, target audiences, funding, pre- and post-screening discussions/Q&As, but they also could include many other practices which still remain to be explored. All the decisions that exhibitors make can have an impact on Indigenous films and, as a result, how the audiences experience these films.

Finally, bringing the conversation beyond the theoretical and beyond the practical and into the reality of the current industry landscape is an important final note. By examining three different exhibitors who have, to varying degrees, begun to prioritize Indigenous film programming and/or Indigenous filmmakers themselves, we can see how many of these ideas are being brought to fruition within exhibition spaces. Each of these exhibitors face different challenges and opportunities based on their location, size, mission, and the type of exhibitor each is. It was not my goal in presenting this information to provide an evaluation of the level of work

being done, but rather to demonstrate examples of work that is happening right now within the exhibition industry.

By looking at theory, practice, and case studies, we can begin to ground the conversation regarding these exhibition practices, the opportunities and challenges which exist at the intersection of Indigenous film and independent film exhibition, and how this conversation can continue to grow as we look towards the future.

Future Research

My goal with this thesis was to open a conversation about the role of exhibition practices in regards to Indigenous film. Because of the lack of scholarship in this area, this was an initial laying of the groundwork and an attempt to fill a gap which currently exists in academia. Future research to build upon this foundation could include taking a closer and more in-depth look at specific exhibitors, including a deeper analysis of the differences between different exhibition styles (theaters, festivals, museums, academic settings, etc.) as well as nonprofit vs. for profit, exhibitors of different sizes, and exhibitors of different regions. It would also be valuable to start a conversation about theaters which are not independent exhibitors, such as multiplexes which are corporate entities. Surveying what Indigenous film programming currently exists in these types of theaters and if there are any initiatives to expand this would be a good starting point.

It would also be beneficial to conduct interviews with the key players in these circles, including Indigenous filmmakers whose films have been screened, exhibitors, and audience members. Hearing from Indigenous filmmakers will be extremely important to add to the conversation as their perspectives will bring the research beyond conjecture and into lived experiences. The feedback and thoughts they have will be very valuable to exhibitors to gain a better understanding of what is helpful and unhelpful for them to be doing. Interviewing

exhibitors will give a behind the scenes look at the challenges and opportunities exhibitors are currently grappling with. Finally, audience perspectives are also important to consider, as the audiences are the consumers within film exhibition and hearing how different exhibition experiences have impacted them will be valuable in gauging impact.

Another area of future research is distribution. Distribution is the link between completed production and exhibition and is an important side of the industry which must also be considered. Many exhibitors are beholden to what distributors offer them and distributors can act as gatekeepers to content in this way. Distribution of Indigenous film certainly warrants its own research to fully understand this topic.

Moving forward, I would also like to see this conversation extend beyond academia and into the exhibition spaces themselves. It was my goal with this thesis to use both theoretical and practical lenses, in the hopes of creating accessible literature for exhibitors who are interested in expanding their own offerings of Indigenous films. Both scholars and exhibitors have the opportunity to expand upon this work with future research and with future action, which, if done in complementary ways, can hopefully lead to a greater understanding of the impact exhibitors have on Indigenous film, and also lead to a more thoughtful form of action from exhibitors as they begin to prioritize programming Indigenous films in their own spaces.

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