

New Horizons in English Studies 6/2021

## CULTURE & MEDIA



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# Celebrating Indigenous National Cinemas and Narrative Sovereignty through the Creation of Kin Theory, an Indigenous Media Makers Database

**Abstract.** Indigenous peoples have been misrepresented and underrepresented in media since the dawn of cinema, but they have never stopped telling their own stories and enacting agency. It is past time to recognize them on their own terms. To facilitate that, academics, activists, and industry partners can fund, hire, teach, and share more Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) led projects. The uniqueness of 2020 with COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and human rights movements, and the move online by many academics and organizations have deepened conversations about systemic inequities, such as those in media industries. To address the often-heard film industry excuse, “I don’t know anyone of color to hire,” the Nia Tero Foundation has created Kin Theory, an Indigenous media makers database, that is having a dynamic, year-long launch in 2021.

Nia Tero is a global nonprofit that uplifts Indigenous peoples in their land stewardship through policy and storytelling. Kin Theory is being developed to be global in scope, celebrating the multiplicity of Indigenous national cinemas and the power of narrative sovereignty. This paper demonstrates ways in which Kin Theory is striving to Indigenize the film industry through collaborations, coalition building, and co-liberation joy. The projected outcome of this study is to highlight how Kin Theory has the potential to increase access to Indigenous media makers, strengthens relationships, makes media works more visible, and increases support for BIPOC-led projects. This paper discusses the impacts of media misrepresentations and erasure, the foundations of Kin Theory, and introduces the potential for Indigenous national cinemas and narrative sovereignty. By reporting on the launch of Kin Theory at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, strategies for Indigenizing the film industry are also discussed. Throughout it is argued that decolonization is not a salvage project, it is an act of creation, and diverse industry leaders are offering new systems that support this thriving revitalization.

**Keywords:** Indigenous media, BIPOC databases, narrative sovereignty, Indigenous national cinemas, decolonization, Indigenization, film festivals

## Introduction, Aims, Scope, and Key Questions

It has often been said in the film industry that, “it is not what you know, it is *who* you know,” when it comes to getting work. If this is true, how does one continue to develop meaningful relationships in the media industry when most events have moved online due to COVID-19? This is even more salient when many Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)<sup>1</sup> hear “I don’t know anyone to hire” about any under and misrepresented group a film industry leader is discussing. As BidBlack states, “Excuses like ‘there’s not enough’ or ‘I don’t know where to find them’ won’t cut it anymore. Here we are” (<https://www.bid.black/>). When COVID-19 shut things down the online world opened up and databases to access BIPOC media makers and their works increased (visit Kin Theory for a growing list, <https://kintheory.org/learn/>). Alongside this was a deepening public awareness of longstanding systematic inequalities in a year of racial reckoning in the United States. With this shifting world, yet another question facing scholars today is, what does fieldwork and academic research look like in this changing landscape?

These questions influence this project-based research that the author has been engaging in as a visual anthropologist and settler-scholar surrounding the creation of Kin Theory – an Indigenous media makers database designed to “grow, strengthen, and support new and existing media connections” (<https://kintheory.org/>).<sup>2</sup> Data from media industry reports, social media, news coverage, and BIPOC industry leaders’ discourse are woven into an analysis of the launch of Kin Theory at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival. The paper discusses the need to Indigenize the film industry, first by contextualizing impacts of media misrepresentations and erasure, discussing the foundations of Kin Theory, and then by introducing the potential for Indigenous national cinemas and narrative sovereignty.

The launch of the Kin Theory website was announced at the opening DocShop panel at the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in February of 2021, while the database continued to be in development. The robust panel of like-minded industry leaders that the parent organization, Nia Tero (<https://www.niatero.org/>) helped host is reported on in this paper, as well as demonstrating the need for this initiative. Continued erasure and misrepresentation of Indigeneity in the mainstream film industry, alongside robust Indigenous resilience and increasing recognition of BIPOC-led projects,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BIPOC is an imperfect term, but it is used here with the hope that it communicates the value of many distinct communities that have often been historically oppressed but comprise the global majority.

<sup>2</sup> The author has been involved with Kin Theory since its inception in 2019 when Tracy Rector at Nia Tero brought them on as a Strategist and researcher for the project. They actively help organize public panels, aid in database development, and research best practices.

<sup>3</sup> Notable 2021 breakthrough television shows in the US include the Indigenous-led series *Reservation Dogs* (FX) and *Rutherford Falls* (NBC). Theoretically, Gerald Robert Vizenor’s (1994) robust work on survivance highlights Indigenous agency and resilience.

made the DocShop panelist's call for Indigenous national cinemas<sup>4</sup> worthy of deeper consideration.

Central to this argument and hope for Indigenous national cinemas is what trail-blazer Jesse Wenté, the inaugural Executive Director of the Indigenous Screen Office in Canada (ISO), calls *narrative sovereignty* – a term discussed in detail in this paper due to its analytical potential, not only in the context of media and film studies but also in reference to Indigenous autonomy. Wenté said, “when I talk about narrative sovereignty, what I’m really talking about is the ability of the nations to have some measure of control over the stories that are told about themselves” (Nickerson 2019, 7). Narrative sovereignty is a key dimension in understanding the depth and fullness of Indigenous national cinemas. It is argued throughout that decolonization is not a salvage project, it is an act of creation.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Kin Theory is striving to Indigenize the film industry through collaboration and coalition building that prioritizes narrative sovereignty and reciprocity,<sup>6</sup> where diverse people have space and support to tell their own stories on their own terms. The projected outcome of this study is to emphasize the ways in which Kin Theory increases access to Indigenous media makers, strengthens relationships, makes media works more visible, and increases support for BIPOC-led projects. Spaces are being forged for historically marginalized peoples’ sovereignty that projects a future where media and the arts reflect and support the diversity and strength of these communities.

## Dangers of Erasure and Misrepresentation

*“Tired of hearing that #Indigenous filmmakers are underrepresented in mass media?? US TOO. Join us at @BigSkyDocFest to discuss who’s doing the work to support BIPOC creatives, what’s still needed, and how we can work together to get there. #KinTheory <https://bit.ly/2LESKvr>” (@NiaTero, 6:36 PM, February 20, 2021).*

<sup>4</sup> Randolph Lewis’ (2010) foundational proposal of a Navajo national cinema will be expanded upon later in this paper and related to this more recent call for multiple Indigenous national cinemas.

<sup>5</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) and Glen Sean Coulthard (2014) have written about the generative power of focusing on Indigeneity rather than getting caught in colonial tropes often found in decolonizing discourse and reconciliation. However, Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999/2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies* remains paramount. Zoe Todd (2018) also offers a valuable critique of anthropology’s so-called decolonial turn, and Audra Simpson argues for decolonization through generative “ethnographic refusal” (2014, 34).

<sup>6</sup> “Nia Tero views reciprocity as the way of life that centers mutual exchange and sharing amongst all beings, past, present and future, seen and unseen, and the Earth” (Nia Tero 3 Year Report, <https://www.niatero.org/about-us>).

Native Americans were once 100% of the population in America, but now Nielsen reports their television share of screen is less than 1% and people of color are merely 27% (Nielsen 2020). The impacts of colonization and ongoing erasure are felt in communities of color and are reflected in on-screen media practices. However, it is not just the lack of representation that is a problem, but the weighty implications of misrepresentation which actively cause harm and lead to a lack of knowledge about the contemporary vitality of living Indigenous nations. It is worth noting that “what most people in this country know - or think they know - about Native Americans is rooted in myths, stereotypes and half-truths. Information they have received since birth from movies, television, the media and school lessons has created a false narrative (or commonly accepted story) about historic and contemporary Native Americans and tribes” (Reclaiming Native Truth 2018, 4). These research findings from Reclaiming Native Truth, “the largest public opinion research and strategy setting initiative ever conducted for, and about, Native Americans,” have inspired *IllumiNative* to amplify change through robust resources, educational lesson plans, social media, and voting campaigns (<https://illuminatives.org/about-us/>). Their graphics highlight startling facts: “87% of state history standards don’t mention Native American history after 1900,” “27 states make no mention of a single Native American in K-12 education,” and “78% of Americans polled know little to nothing about Native Americans and a significant portion believe that Native peoples must be a dwindling population because they do not see, hear, or read about Native peoples” (<https://illuminatives.org/take-action/>). *IllumiNative* points out that this further has an impact on policy decisions and legislation.

The impact of erasure has been felt acutely during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Guardian* reported in April of 2020: “Native Americans being left out of US coronavirus data and labeled as ‘other’” (Rebecca Nagle, April 24, 2020), and then nine months later printed a startling headline: “Indigenous Americans dying from Covid at twice the rate of white Americans” (Nina Lakhani, February 4, 2021). The impact of misrepresentation and systematic erasure is costly and continues to be felt. It must also be asked how “less than 0.3% of philanthropic resources goes to Native Americans” and “systematic omission” relate to the fact that “only 0-.04% of primetime TV and film has a Native character” (<https://illuminatives.org/take-action/>).

Additionally upsetting is that these Native characters are rarely created or portrayed by Indigenous artists and end up doing additional harm by leaning into false stereotypes. Wenthe has long pointed out the destruction of misrepresentation and how cultural appropriation can no longer be normalized: “This has created not just false narratives and a false history, but also an industry used to appropriation, unaware of the harm it causes and dismissive of those it excludes” (Wenthe 2019, 42).

Despite the dismal odds, facts, and figures, there is incredible resilience in Indigenous nations,<sup>7</sup> which finds its manifestation also in the form of their creative output.

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<sup>7</sup> Many have survived and are thriving despite all that is systematically against them. Influential to this revitalization research is the work of Indigenous scholars including: Barry Barclay, Eric

Toronto's imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival began in 1999, when more stories were being told *about* Indigenous people than *by* them, but things are shifting. imagineNATIVE has risen to become the world's largest presenter of Indigenous screen content and the first and only Academy Award qualifying Indigenous festival (<https://imagenative.org/>). Throughout COVID-19, imagineNATIVE and the ISO have continued to advocate for sovereignty and self-determination, providing funding, professional development, and mentorship opportunities for the next generation of Indigenous youth in Canada, the fastest-growing demographic in the country (Kirkup 2017). imagineNATIVE and the ISO have published their own reports on the state of the industry.<sup>8</sup> They drew on relationships and experiences from Australia's Pathways and Protocols guide (Janke 2009) while creating their own "On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories" (Nickerson 2019). Indigenous creatives are on the rise, and as Wenthe writes, "it is Indigenous peoples who should be telling our stories, and it should be Indigenous peoples deciding how that is done and by whom. Anything less ensures that media creation remains a colonial practice, one that extracts rather than reciprocates. Anything less means that reconciliation will remain a dream, rather than a reality, for all of our communities" (Wenthe 2019, 43).

### Foundations of Kin Theory

*"'Those excuses can't be made anymore.' Monika Navarro (@firelightmedia) on those who say it's hard to find diverse film creators" (@NiaTero, 4:20 PM, February 22, 2021).*

As a global online directory, Kin Theory is a direct response to addressing industry hiring gaps and continued misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples and media makers by serving as a resource for industry hires and community connections. It is being designed to increase access to Indigenous media makers, strengthen community, and make media works more visible to industry and educators. First the Kin Theory team has created a website with shared resources, second they are developing a digital database of Indigenous media makers, third they are holding panels in a variety of on-line settings to foster connection, and fourth they hope in the future to hold physical gatherings where meaningful relationships can develop and opportunities are realized.

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L. Buffalohead, Amalia Cordova, Karmen Crey, Philip Deloria, Vine Deloria, Jr., Michelle Raheja, Jolene Rickard, Audra Simpson, Beverly R. Singer, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Along with multiple media and interdisciplinary scholars (such as Miranda J. Brady, Joanna Hearne, Kerstin Knopf, M. Elise Marubbio, and Salma Monani), anthropologists are also doing key allyship work around Indigenous sovereignty including Jaskiran Dhillon, Kristin Dowell, Faye Ginsburg, and Eugenia Kisin.

<sup>8</sup> Many of these reports can be found online at imagineNATIVE (<https://imagenative.org/about-institute>) and the ISO (<https://iso-bea.ca/resources/publications/>).

Through these actions, Kin Theory hopes more BIPOC creatives get hired and fill more industry leadership positions. To achieve that goal, they are actively developing project partnerships, working through design challenges, and implementing multimodal strategies for outreach that include hosting panels with diverse industry representatives and like-minded organizations at film festivals and in academic settings. In addition to fostering a global family, the project's Executive Producer Tracy Rector said of Kin Theory: "in order to break down the system we have to create our own systems, and so the systems don't necessarily have to follow the old rules of patriarchy and capitalism but what we're creating is a system based on relationships and connectivity, family, compassion" (Kin Theory team meeting, March 2, 2021).

As the Managing Director of Storytelling at Nia Tero, Rector brought the team together and has made over 400 short films in collaboration with Indigenous people and communities. The Kin Theory team is collectively responsible for the work conveyed in this article, so it is important to name them as co-creators: Jessica Ramirez (Creative Producer), Julie Keck (Consulting Producer), Eleni Ledesma (Associate Producer), and Hannah Pantaleo (Social Manager).<sup>9</sup> The team works collaboratively on almost every level and has been dynamically influencing everything from web design, written copy, to research and panelist questions. None of this work is done in isolation and is being built on years of hard work breaking down hegemonic barriers. The Kin Theory team has leaned on and reached out to "kin" in a variety of settings, and continues to develop these connections. In 1999 the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) launched *Native Networks*, a resource for Native film alongside their then-thriving Native American Film + Video Festival.<sup>10</sup> However, the festival has been on hiatus since 2011 and has left media makers without this important resource.

The Kin Theory team members have met with Amalia Cordova, the current Digital Curator at Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, who is developing multiple Indigenous Media Initiatives (<https://folklife.si.edu/indigenous-media-hub>) and helps run the impressive Mother Tongue Film Festival (<https://mothertongue.si.edu/>). They discussed language and translation barriers, filmmaker needs, issues of safety, accessibility and sustainability. They have also been in conversation with Canada's ISO and imagineNATIVE, who are co-creating a National Indigenous Talent Database with the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) (<https://nationalindigenoustalentdatabase.ca/>), about reach, identity, networking, and best practices. Many are trying to address industry gaps and increase visibility, and Kin Theory also

<sup>9</sup> As a Kin Theory Strategist, I offer insight into industry practices and work through how academic research can lend itself to BIPOC media industry support. I face challenges in building something that is not intended for me, but a primary intention is to build bridges to new ways of working and living in relationship with a diversity of kin meanings. I also want to extend my thanks to the anonymous reviewers and copyeditors of this paper for their valuable feedback and support.

<sup>10</sup> For background on early Indigenous film festivals in Turtle Island (North American) and NMAI's partnership with imagineNATIVE see Benetiz (2017) and Singer (2001). Karrmen Crey (2017) also offers valuable institutional context and influences on Indigenous media.



engages with additional database initiatives, such as Free the Work (<https://freethe-work.com>) and Brown Girls Doc Mafia (BGDM, <https://browngirlsdocmafia.com/>). Rector has also referenced what an inspiration Indigenous Photographs (<https://indigenousphotograph.com/>) have been when in the *New York Times* they essentially said – we’re here, hire us.

There is acute awareness that Kin Theory is moving through spaces of harm to carve out new worlds for Indigenous and BIPOC connections that are safe, radically supportive, and innovative. When Rector spoke in one of the team meetings about what kin personally meant to her, she referenced her experiences at imagineNATIVE and being in relationship with kin all over the world. She spoke of “real talk,” solidarity, family, and the space for imperfection. Kin Theory’s actions and relations can teach us to recognize kin by contributing to a greater reality through reciprocity and broader connectivity. Rector spoke about valuing the earth, physical surroundings, and all our relations. Virtual and digital technology are pieces of larger points of connection. Kin allows us to be expansive and re-think breaking down systems to build something new based on reciprocity, connectivity, and compassion. In the Big Sky Kin Theory panel, Rector recalled pulling out the bleachers for imagineNATIVE’s early festivals and celebrated how they are, and we hope to be, “unapologetically rooted in community” (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021).

To bring more people into the development process, Kin Theory has designed launch panels to be productive spaces of connection and collaboration. As Rector said at Big Sky, the Kin Theory organizers wanted to ask their heroes to join them. This event was facilitated by Alana Waksman of Big Sky Documentary Film Festival,<sup>11</sup> moderated by Rector, and the standout panelists included: Molly Murphy (Co-Director, Working Films), Monika Navarro (Senior Director of Artist Programs, Firelight Media), Adam Piron (Filmmaker, COUSIN Collective, Sundance Institute), Jamie-Lee Reardon (imagineNATIVE / Indigenous Screen Office Coordinator), and Colleen Thurston (Filmmaker, 4th World Alum, Assistant Professor at the University of Arkansas). The lively audience asked rousing questions as resources and industry strategies were shared, decolonizing ways of moving in this world were wrestled with, and hopes for what the future can look like were imagined.

Coalition building has been paramount to Rector and during the Big Sky Kin Theory panel, she asked the panelists about how they can better support each other. Navarro was quick to celebrate this call for relationship building and hope to lift up BIPOC festivals while “supporting filmmakers where they are:”

It is radical in some ways for folks to be lifting up each other and the work, and just to see the dearth of talent out there. And I know they’ve always existed in alternative

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<sup>11</sup> Big Sky Executive Director Rachel Gregg was also instrumental in organizing and supporting this panel.

spaces, but I think that to see the database from Brown Girls Doc Mafia,<sup>12</sup> to know that you're building Kin Theory, I think Ava DuVernay just announced ARRAY having a database,<sup>13</sup> those excuses can't be made any more - that always were excuses - but now at least folks are visible and we're making it easy, and folks do have a solid body of work, and they're saying hire me. (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021)

BIPOC collaboration and connection can continue to work outside of colonizing tropes while still creating a space in the industry to be seen and funded. Reardon noted that we are living and working in a new era. "It's going to be a continuation of uplifting each other. Gone are the days of kicking down the ladder after climbing up. It's people on the rise, helping one another out" (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021). imagineNATIVE published that the age of asking for consultants is over in their industry guide "On-Screen Protocols & Pathways" (Nickerson 2019). Partnerships and developing kin relationships go deeper, and as peers in the film industry, they do not always have to stay within colonized systems. Prompted by a question from the audience about how to navigate competing for limited funds, Thurston passed on a new way of working that rejects the "colonial mindset of competition," where "one of my Firelight Fellows, Patrick Lee, said early on in our fellowship that we all kind of erase this - rejecting this idea of scarcity, that we're not in competition with each other... it's this mindset of rising tides, and when one of us succeeds, we all succeed" (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021).

Murphy of Working Films shared how their organization is structuring itself differently at its core to provide new funding models, project partners, and metrics of success. "We're in the process of examining, not just internal policies and protocols - which oftentimes don't spell out explicitly ways to address white supremacy that often is inherent in non-profit structures - so both those internal policies and protocols, but also our entire structure is something that is being examined right now" (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021). Murphy highlights the importance of being a "co-conspirator" as well as knowing when to make room for someone else, especially in leadership positions. "We've actually evolved... to take ourselves out of the final decision making, because in living up to our values, it's the right thing to do" (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021). Working Films is uniquely embodying the necessary change many are calling for but most in the industry are slow to enact.

Some examples where Indigenous kin networks have created successful films with unique collaborative structures include the Pacific Islands productions of *Waru* (2017) and its "spiritual sequel" *Vai* (2019), produced by Kerry Warkia and Kiel McNaughton (Barbour 2019). Each film artfully weaves eight stories together from different female Indigenous directors and locations to tell compelling stories that "foregrounds the power of women - artists and as a community - from across the region" (Barbour 2019). Another Indigenous female-driven project is Danis Goulet's post-apocalyptic

<sup>12</sup> <https://browngirlsdocmafia.com/members/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.arraycrew.com/>



dystopian film *Night Raiders* (2021) which premiered at Berlinale and is said to be the first Indigenous international co-production between Canada and New Zealand. “The film is a Canada-New Zealand co-production directed by Goulet, who is Cree and Métis, starring Elle-Máíja Tailfeathers, who is Blackfoot and Sámi. It also features Alex Tarrant, who is Māori, Niuean and Samoan. Notably, the film is executive produced by Taika Waititi, the Indigenous New Zealand director behind *What We Do In The Shadows* and *Jojo Rabbit*” (Simonpillai 2021). Goulet said that “there’s been decades of advocacy that has led up to this point,” and this production is being heralded as expanding collaborative cinematic possibilities (Simonpillai 2021).

Tailfeathers also produced and starred in her own film, *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* (2019), which was picked up by Ava DuVernay’s film collective ARRAY and is streaming now on Netflix. Reardon brought up during the Big Sky panel how Tailfeathers had paid youth mentorships on set, and that Goulet also ran an Indigenous mentorship program during *Night Raiders*, both providing valuable training while building up the Indigenous filmmaking community. Reardon said that this is “more of an Indigenous way of doing things,” and something they also practice at the imagineNATIVE institute, where filmmakers interact directly with experienced Indigenous industry leaders (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021). These models have the potential to change how film industries are structured and define success. From initial funding to on-set mentorships, festival premiers, and distribution, there is expansive room for growth. As BIPOC work expands, Rector encouraged, “each one, teach one” (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021).

## Narrative Sovereignty and Indigenous National Cinemas

“‘We have an opportunity to have our own cinema. Why do we have to make something under the umbrella of ‘American film’? It’s the opposite of how things should go.’ ~Adam Piron, @cousinorg. #KinTheory Panel at @BigSkyDocFest” (@NiaTero, 5:08 PM, February 22, 2021).

When Wenté was asked to give the Hot Docs Industry Conference 2018 Keynote they asked him to speak about cultural appropriation – he spoke about narrative sovereignty instead (Wenté 2018). This shift masterfully reframes Indigenous storytellers and moves away from focusing on the extraction of colonial appropriation to Indigenous power and voice. Appropriation is often followed up with discussions about authenticity, and there have been important industry moves towards “authentic voices” that come with validation from their own communities. While valuable, this can also be problematic when framed with the need to “authenticate” something for an outsider. Through narrative sovereignty, Wenté has shifted the focus to be on the power, potential, and responsibility of Indigenous makers. In 2020 the Toronto International Film Festival and imagineNATIVE followed Wenté’s lead by co-presenting a panel entitled “Narrative Sovereignty” (TIFF Originals).

Indigenous sovereignty is linked to self-determination and shifts away from misrepresentation and erasure in media industries. The term has been mobilized in various ways and continues to evolve. Many Indigenous scholars<sup>14</sup> look to Jolene Rickard's foundational work around a *cinema of sovereignty* and *visual sovereignty* in "Sovereignty: A line in the sand" (1995). Randolph Lewis (2006) adds political elements to a *cinema of sovereignty*, including access, autonomy, and refusal. Michelle Raheja (2010) takes these elements and adds Beverly Singer's (2001) *cultural sovereignty* to her mobilization of the creative act of *visual sovereignty*, "wherein Indigenous filmmakers and actors revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions, at the same time operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions" (Raheja 2013, 60). The ever-sharpening term *sovereignty* is picked up in Wente's more recent call for *narrative sovereignty* (2018), which he also writes about in "Doing all Things Differently" (2019). Narrative sovereignty also brings in the possibility for Indigenous national cinemas, which interrogates the possibilities for what Lewis first gestured to in his article "The New Navajo Cinema: Cinema and Nation in the Indigenous Southwest" (2010). I extend Lewis' argument beyond the Navajo nation to the broader implications of Indigenous national *cinemas*, rather than one monolithic Indigenous *cinema*, as Indigenous media makers are further voicing a call for an epistemological shift in how we talk about, fund, support, and watch Indigenous cinemas.

A cornerstone for what has come to be studied as sovereign Indigenous cinema came from Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay when he coined the term Fourth Cinema to distinguish the uniqueness of Indigenous media production and film and how it works in the world (Barclay 2003). Also of notable importance is the "Declaration of Indigenous Cinema" (Sikka & Johnson 2011).<sup>15</sup> However, in the film industry, Indigenous cinema is defined in many different ways when it comes to programming works (Cordova 2012; Marubbio & Buffalohead 2013). An ongoing debate exists around if festivals are seeking media *about* Indigenous content or *made by* Indigenous creators (Goulet & Swanson 2013). Again, narrative sovereignty plays a significant role in this context. Industry definitions of Indigenous cinema (and who is Indigenous) vary widely and impact who gets hired, where funds go, and how media gets to audiences. While the categorization of Indigenous national cinemas increases the academic scope of theoretical possibilities, it could also lend support to media artists in gaining more industry resources, refined categorization, and future opportunities (Lewis 2010).

During the Big Sky Kin Theory panel, Piron and Rector specifically called for recognition of Indigenous national cinemas, as has the previous Executive Director of

<sup>14</sup> See also Marubbio & Buffalohead (2013) and Kite (2020).

<sup>15</sup> This declaration can be found online (<https://maorilandfilm.co.nz/declaration-indigenous-cinema/>) and in imagineNATIVE festival programs. The 2021 imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival Artbook states: "Written by Ása Sikka (Sámi), with support from Darlene Johnson (Dunghutti), and accepted and recognized by the participants of the Indigenous Film Conference in Kautokeino, Sápmi, October 2011."

imagineNATIVE Jason Ryle (2019). Rector articulated at Big Sky: “here’s an opportunity to perhaps move more towards Navajo cinema, Lakota cinema, Cree cinema, Mohawk cinema, Afro-Indigenous cinema, from Colombia, Wayuu cinema. I think we’re heading in that direction and it’s exciting. I think it’s going to resonate on a global scale actually. I think these stories are fresh and we’re going to see that people are going to want them more and more. I’m seeing that this year, there’s a big shift” (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021).

Ryle spoke with the Inspirit Foundation during imagineNATIVE’s 20th festival year in 2019. “I think my dream, as I would say it, is for everyone, is that we wouldn’t need an ‘Indigenous cinema’ label. I would much rather have Anishinaabe cinema, or Inuit cinema or Māori cinema. But until we get to that place, I really do think that when we speak about Indigenous cinema, it should be like when one speaks about European cinema: it’s a body of nations telling stories but within that there’s so much diversity and so much depth” (Ryle 2019). In the following years, imagineNATIVE’s festival catalogue and art book created by new Executive Director Naomi Johnson and Artistic Director Niki Little, introduced the film selections by proudly stating, “We come from nations of storytellers” (imagineNATIVE 2021, 20). They go on to express how the nuance and complexities of these different nations add to the strength and beauty of Indigenous cinemas. Piron is also shifting the conversations away from a pan-Indigenous aesthetic. “Our communities are all pretty small and... if you’re making a film, you kind of get to determine what is a Choctaw cinema, what is a Kiowa cinema, what is a Navajo cinema. And I think it’s a really exciting opportunity when you look at it that way” (DocShop: Kin Theory 2021). These industry leaders highlight salient ways about what Indigenous cinemas are and can be and are modeling innovative ways forward.

Bridging what is being articulated in the industry to academic theory further queries unknown implications for media makers. Lewis articulated a sovereign framework for recognizing Indigenous national cinema in relation to “New Navajo Cinema” over ten years ago while highlighting the work of then-emerging Navajo filmmakers Larry Blackhorse Lowe, Nanobah Becker, and Bennie Klain (Lewis 2010). Lewis referenced Jennifer Gauthier (2004) who begins to look in this direction, but ultimately stays within the confines of larger national cinemas when discussing the vibrancy of the Indigenous feature films *Atanarjuat: the Fast Runner* (2001), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), and *Whale Rider* (2002). Gauthier writes, “do these successes suggest a new direction for national cinemas? It seems possible that indigenous cinema might help to re-imagine national cinema in the new millennium” (2004, 63). There are benefits for a country to recognize all the Indigenous cinemas within their colonized borders while shaping a larger national identity. One benefit of these multiplicities existing within colonized borders has been the unique national screen offices in Australia and Canada now devoted to Indigenous media. Their existence greatly enhances the grants and funding available to Aboriginal and Indigenous filmmakers, but are limited to contemporary colonized maps, not traditional Indigenous territories. There are also com-

plications in regards to ownership, distribution rights, accountability to funders, and digital geo-blocking when operating under colonial national structures (Dowell 2013).

As important as it is to make space for Indigenous cinema within a national context, Lewis (2010) makes a strong case for more specificity by calling for a new Navajo national cinema to enhance and support Navajo political sovereignty and their own imagined communities (Anderson 1983). “I argue that a national cinema is a powerful concept in an indigenous context: it is a form of strategic essentialism that benefits Navajo filmmakers on symbolic and practical levels, but it also focuses attention on Navajo lives in a way that may sustain the political sovereignty of the vast Navajo Nation” (Lewis 2010, 50). Wente also links narrative sovereignty to political, physical, and spiritual sovereignty (2018).

Suzanne Kite further extends the conversation to new media and *sovereign technologies*: “We cannot avoid it. Every discussion about Indigenous art looks toward ‘sovereignty.’ Indigenous knowledge is made and transmitted through our art forms, which encapsulate and enact our sovereignty” (Kite 2020, 137). Anthropologist Kristin Dowell points out in *Sovereign Screens: Aboriginal Media on the Canadian West Coast* that with Indigenous cinema, the “off-screen production process,” also contains critical formations and processes (2013). Sovereignty in its many forms embodies Indigenous ontologies, on and off-screen, and by putting it in conversation with national cinemas, how and why stories are told and shared are connected to larger sovereignty movements.

## Conclusions

Stories build worlds beyond the final film or printed script. Within these complex frameworks has risen an opportunity to re-imagine how Indigenous cinema and Indigenous national cinemas can be discussed, and how they move in society and mobilize communities. Indigenous industry leaders are embodying sovereignty in a way that could also be useful to the intersectional work of diverse artists in the global majority, including Black, Latinx, Pacific Island, and Asian creators, as well as people who are undocumented, femme, trans, nonbinary, LGBTQIA+, Two Spirit, people with disabilities, and otherwise underrepresented media artists. People are telling their own stories. The powerful potential of Wente’s use of narrative sovereignty is worthy of further study and greater discourse in industry and funding institutions. Working together to support distinct narrative sovereignties could offer an alternative to the hegemonic systems that seek to separate oppressed peoples. By embracing the sovereign nature of diverse stories, there are opportunities to uplift together, collaborate, and build new forms of capacity without turning into a multicultural melting pot. Perhaps these tensions and opportunities have potential to expand in generative ways.

Even while the stakes remain high and the harms longstanding, there are also calls for joy and celebration, which can be regarded as powerful moves in their own right.

At the Seattle International Festival Film, 2021 Film Forum panel, “Kin Theory: Indigenizing Film Industry Spaces,” Rector discussed that it is time to reawaken co-liberation joy. With the next generation rising, Indigenous cinemas’ definition and discourse are deepening even as its horizons are broadening. Crafting the language to recognize the many Indigenous national cinemas on their own terms is being led by Indigenous media makers in the field. Kin Theory is striving to make visible the diversity and strength of these Indigenous national cinemas across the globe. The initiative hopes to support local communities, provide access to the larger film industry, and increase hires while supporting narrative sovereignty. What Kin Theory will look like has yet to be fully fashioned, but as Creative Producer Jessica Ramirez often states, “let’s build the world we want to live in.”

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