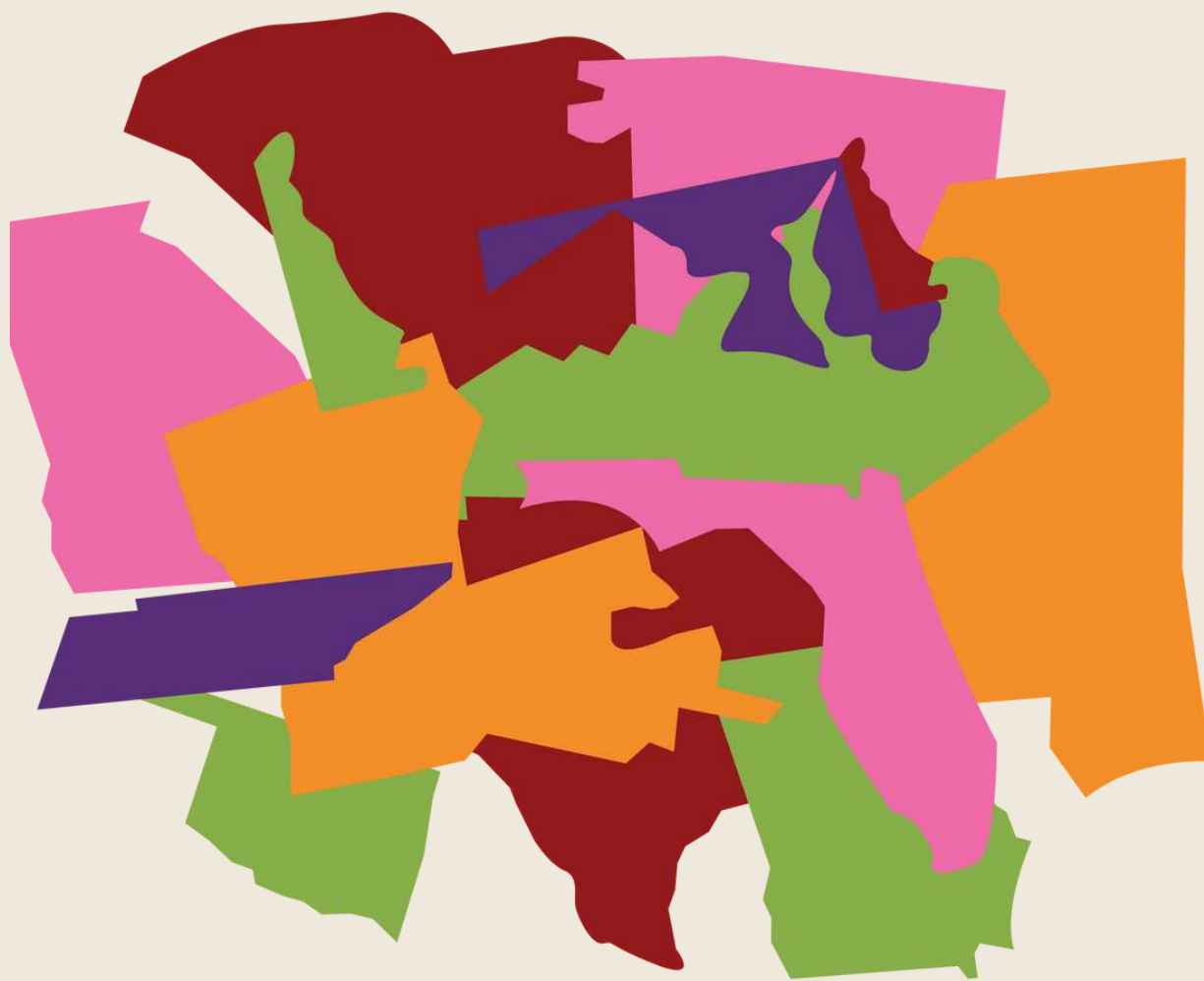


South Summit 2023

The South as Sanctuary



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neworleansfilmsociety.org





[The South]...is my sanctuary. But sanctuary is not one place and it's not always easy to find. It's the deep blue hues of the Appalachian mountains silhouetted against the sky and fog. It's the way the light filters through the poplar trees and onto the dirt path. It's the running river stream with its uncertain and slippery rocks. Although I've spent some time living outside of the region, I choose to make The South & Appalachia home and in a lot of ways this place chooses us...

- Elaine McMillion Sheldon | Tennessee by way of West Virginia

What is South Summit?



South Summit is a convening of Southern filmmakers, storytellers, funders, and institutional stakeholders held in an effort to seed conversation and action around creating, resourcing, and amplifying film & media content in and about the American South.


The American South is an expansive region, replete with storytellers and rich creative practices, and yet its stories are often misrepresented on-screen and in the media, contributing to reductive stereotypes that disempower our communities.

When we look to contemporary art created by Southern artists across disciplines, we can see well beyond dominant narratives that depict a region marred by racial oppression and economic injustice.

Artists often reveal what the media doesn't—resilient communities that embrace progressive ideals and value cultural strength, communities connecting across differences, fighting for social justice, and espousing an increasingly intersectional view of what it means to be Southern.

In our country, power and resources—both philanthropic and commercial—tend to centralize themselves on the coasts, and this is certainly true of the ecosystem of film, as an artform heavily influenced by commercial interests.

But where does that leave filmmakers who live and work in geographic isolation from those centers of power? What about those who create independent film, virtual reality experiences and other moving image artwork that disrupts the status quo? And diverse artists whose voices are less often uplifted by the mainstream film industry?




What do these artists need to continue to tell bold and powerful stories, stories that have the potential to imagine new possibilities for a Southern identity—stories that have the power to reshape the nation's understanding of our region, and to change how Southerners see ourselves?

In its fifth iteration, South Summit 2023 identified the theme of “South as Sanctuary,” and we invited South-based filmmakers to deeply reflect on some of those questions, and to answer what it means to call the American South “home”—and what structures are needed to create sanctuaries here to support a vibrant independent Southern filmmaking community.

Taking place over May 10-11, 2023, South Summit gathered local, regional, and national mediamakers, arts funders, and institutional stakeholders, to engage in robust critical conversations and actions around creating, resourcing, and amplifying film and media that shapes both extrinsic and intrinsic views of the American South. The two-day, all-virtual, all-free event featured sessions that explored how to build sanctuary as a foundational tool in redefining personal—and community—power and success.

In addition to a keynote speech from filmmaker Elaine McMillion Sheldon, the conference featured four panel discussions and four commissioned essay readings and talks from South-based artists, all included in their entirety in this report.



In Search of Sanctuary



Sanctuary as Power

Much of the conversations about power structures and political dynamics in the South center on the black/white racial binary. But the South is, and has always been, home to a spectrum of communities and cultures that have nuanced Southern identity. In a panel discussion entitled “The Shifting South: beyond the black/white binary,” built in collaboration with ITVS, we explored immigrant communities that are expanding southern legacies.

Panelists included ITVS-supported filmmakers Naveen Chaubal, Karla Murthy, and Tim Tsai, and the session was moderated by Noland Walker, VP of Content for ITVS. Here are some of the key takeaways from the conversation:

- Sanctuaries are not only safe spaces for stabilizing and transitional support. For communities to thrive and incubate power, we must first build sanctuaries on which to structure hopes and dreams.
- Sanctuary building through storytelling connects communities and deepens a sense of personal and political power. As Noland Walker stated, “The possibility of sanctuary [is] linked to political power.”
- Stories themselves are sanctuaries.



Pinball, Naveen Chaubal

"One cannot understand the United States if they don't understand The South."

-Noland Walker



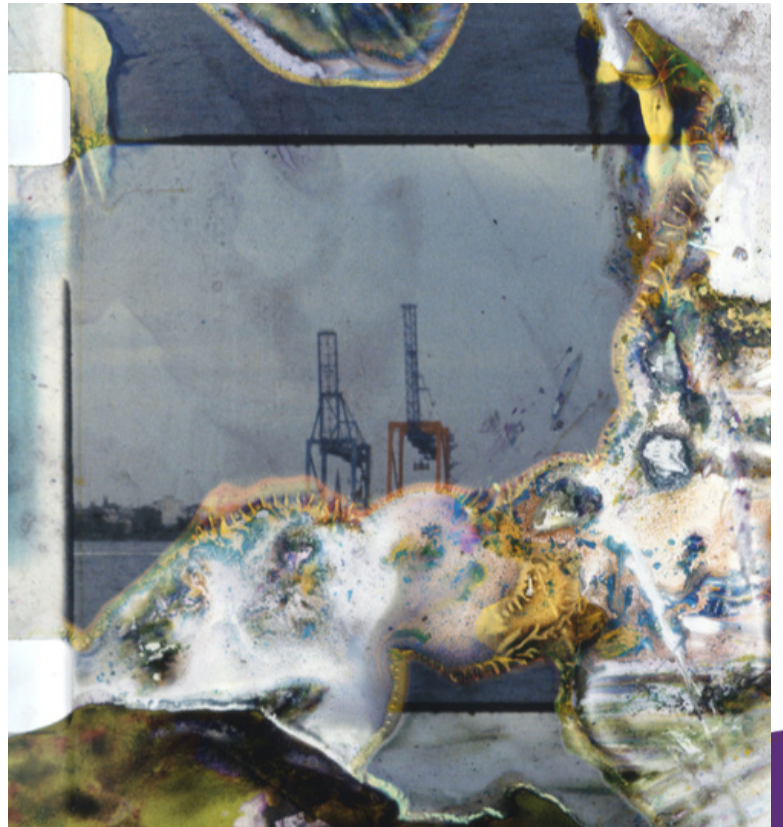
King Coal, Elaine McMillion Sheldon



Ten Leaves Dilated, Kate Hinshaw



The Gas Station Attendant, Karla Murthy



Proximity Study (Sight Lines), Elizabeth Webb

Sanctuary as Memory

The archival legacies of historical movements originating in The South are not only joyous and triumphant, but also fraught and, at times, traumatic. A past still struggling to free itself comes with incomplete archives and at times we must mind the gaps with a leap of imagination. How do we transform sites of pain into portals of possibility?

In our session, "Building on Bones," we invited experimental filmmakers Elizabeth Webb of Virginia and Kate Hinshaw of North Carolina to explore these questions, their creative process, and the importance of "chaos" in the pursuit of experimental storytelling. Both self-described "tactile filmmakers" use 16mm film, developed with natural elements (dirt, river water, and plant materials), to help fully express the emotional through-lines of their work, because as Webb states, "landscapes hold histories that we might not have access to."

- Creatively re-contextualizing archival footage and images can help storytellers subvert its oppressive origins and avoid re-traumatization.
- In experimental filmmaking, artists find emotional structure and freedom of expression within an amorphous creative process.
- Whereas traditional filmmaking focuses on exploring story through characters, experimental filmmaking explores story through the elusive elements of emotionality.



In Beauty It Is Unfinished, Greko Sklavounos

Sanctuary as Safe Space

Queer communities in the South are, once again, at the fiery center of current political debates concerning access to healthcare and safe spaces. In our session, "Southern Queer Sanctuary," we gathered queer-identified filmmakers who reflected on the importance of safe space and who, through their work, create spaces of refuge for the queer imagination.

Panelist Maya Pen is co-director of Studio Lalala, a queer bipoc community production collective based in New Orleans. Other queer artists, such as Greko Sklavounos, build sanctuary within the imagination with his dreamy, experimental short films centering on the queer immigrant experience in South Florida. Vaughn Trudeau sheds light on the after-dark sanctuary building of gay bars in New Orleans with his recent documentary short "Oral History," and spoke to the community building power of joy and celebration. Finally, Trent Farrington, our panel moderator, spoke of building queer space within his film curation work at Out on Film, a queer-centered film festival based in Atlanta, Georgia.

- It is within sanctuary and safe space that the deepest creative imaginations and impulses are most accessible.
- Sanctuary is as nuanced as 'queerness' and so to best build sanctuary, we must be aware how privilege operates in community and storytelling.

"Before you build your own space, [make sure] you are listening to the people who have been building there for years"

-Maya Pen



Sanctuary as Legacy

In our session, "The Great (re)Migration," we gathered Southern born, South-based filmmakers and arts administrators to explore their journey to success in the film industry despite, or because of, their decision to live, work and build a film community legacy in the South.

Abraham Felix, who was born in the South, and still calls Louisiana home, shared insights on building a sustainable commercial directing career. Abe also extolled New Orleans Video Access Center (NOVAC), a community-centered media access center that supports local filmmakers through workforce training programs and alumni services. Stevee Rayne Warren, who heads up these programs, joined us to provide insight on NOVAC's services and share wisdom of her journey towards helping to build foundational support structures for sustainable film careers in Louisiana.

Through conversation, we explored the winding paths to personal success that do not require residency in major filmmaking hubs.

- Community-centered and community-led film & media organizations are the foundational support structures for independent Southern voices
- Generative Southern storytelling comes before, and goes beyond, the Production stages of filmmaking. Building pre-production and post production pipelines support a sustainable local economy and career stability for Southern storytellers.

"The pace of life and the people have kept me here. The South gave me the time to develop myself as an artist."

- Abraham Felix

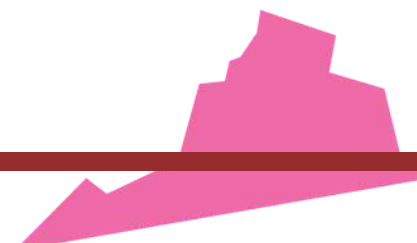


Sanctuary as Diaspora

Threaded through the keynote address and the four commissioned essays were strong tones and themes of diaspora and connection to land.

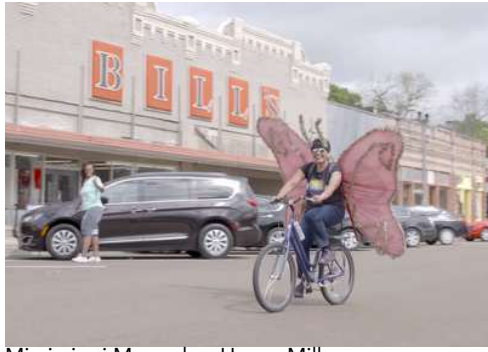
Colleen Thurston, in her essay "Human/Nature," introduced us to the term "Indigenous Diaspora" as a Southern identity in motion, beyond the borders of the regional South. Through all of the commissioned pieces—from Elaine McMillion Sheldon, Angela Tucker, Hanna Miller, and Lo Jackson—along with the conversations that followed their readings, we learned that is the perceived border between human and nature that sever us from our deepest creative selves.

- Activism through storytelling is a rich and longstanding foundation of Southern identity.
- Protection of natural sanctuaries ensures the longevity and vibrancy of Southern storytelling traditions.
- In Southern storytelling, landscape and natural sanctuaries are more than just props, they are dynamic characters that we dream with, root for and protect.
- Southern identity, spirituality and creative storytelling traditions are inextricably tied to the health of land, air, and river systems.





The Trees Remember, Angela Tucker



Mississippi Mercedes, Hanna Miller



Drowned Lands, Colleen Thurston

Action Items

For Artists

- Stories that reflect nuance help to foster sanctuary and safe spaces within the community and within one's imagination.
- Generative Southern storytelling includes empowered Southern voices at every level of the filmmaking process. It is not enough to simply run your production in the South, while relying on major film hubs for pre- and post-production crew. Find opportunities to tap into the talent of Southern thinkers (writers, showrunners, etc.) and creatives (editors, VFX, film scoring) to help combat extractive storytelling in the region.
- Careers outside of major film hubs are made possible with strong community organizing around access to opportunity and sustainability.
- Lean on your local community-run media access center for comradery, support, and career opportunities, especially if you're an emerging filmmaker.
- Although we may encounter archives that are problematic, we can still use the breadth of our creativity to extract meaning without re-traumatizing ourselves or our audience.
- Before you begin production, be clear on your "why" before you explore the "how." As a storyteller with Southern sensibilities, squaring your intentions with the folks who are sharing their story deepens the total impact of your work. What are your goals and how does it align with the communities you're engaging with?
- Before turning to your camera lens, take the time to explore the story with your own eyes. Connecting with the story through your senses may help reveal deeper, more subtle truths about your setting, your characters and, most importantly, yourself.

- For Southern filmmakers who choose to leave the region, returning to tell stories of home, from home and crewing up with folks of the community helps build career pipelines for aspiring and emerging Southern storytellers. This is how we build Southern sanctuary and legacy within the industry.

For Arts institutions + Organizations

- Community-centered and community-led filmmaking entities and other community-supported institutions are the cornerstone of a thriving independent Southern storytelling community. They are instrumental in building a sustainable local film culture outside of mainstream industry spaces.
- Beyond financial support, independent southern filmmaking communities need access to safe spaces, mentorship, lab intensives and other professional development support to help build and sustain careers outside of major media hubs.
- When it comes to workforce development initiatives, funders should resource and support programs that go beyond hiring campaigns. To address inequities within the film industry, there must be investment in training, retaining, and promoting underrepresented Southern storytellers.
- Festivals, film institutions, and funders that center niche communities are powerful and foundational in sanctuary building. Where there is a safe space that unapologetically centers a culture, a community will gather and invariably thrive.
- To combat extractive filmmaking and espouse more subtle and nuanced storytelling, support the storytellers, as well the communities, who are closest to the story.



Elaine McMillion Sheldon (TN)



Lo Jackson (LA)



Kate E. Hinshaw (NC)



Elizabeth M. Webb (VA)



Trent Farrington (GA)



Maya Pen (LA)



Greko Sklavounos (FL)



Vaughn Trudeau (LA)



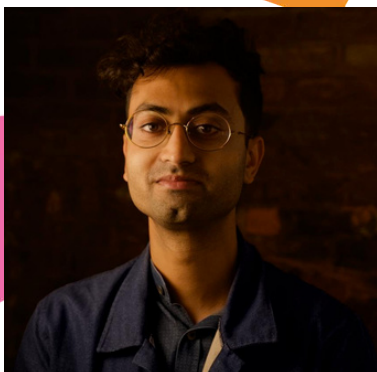
Hanna Lane Miller (LA, MS)



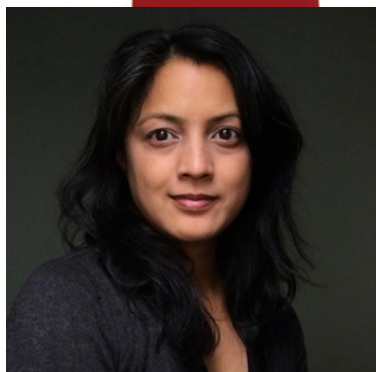
Angela Tucker (LA)



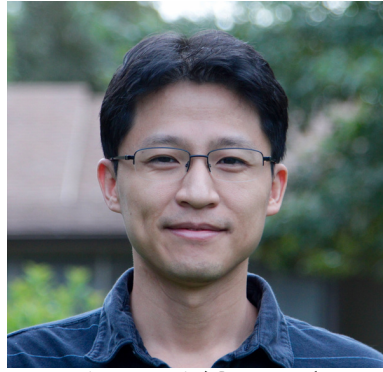
Noland Walker (CA)



Naveen Chaubal (KY)



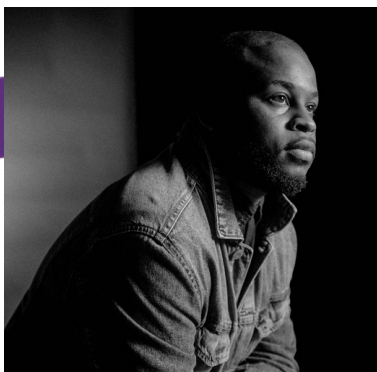
Karla Murthy (NY, TX)



Tim Tsai (CA, TX)



Colleen Thurston (OK)



Abraham Felix (LA)



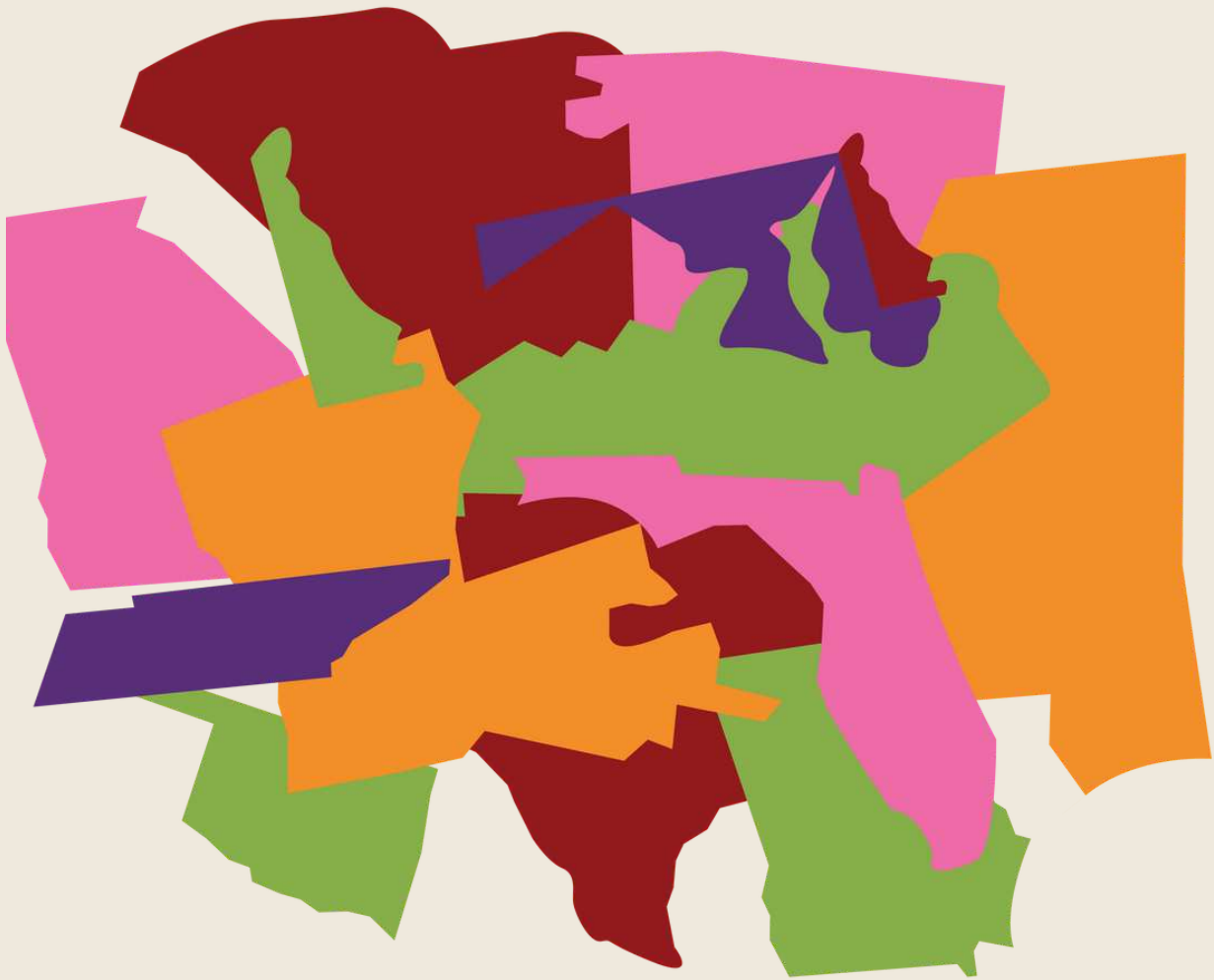
Zuri Obi (LA)



Stevee-Rayne Warren (LA)

South Summit Keynote + Essays

The following five pieces on southern sanctuary were commissioned by the New Orleans Film Society for the 2023 South Summit.



Keynote Address: The South speaks, we listen...

Elaine McMillion Sheldon

It's an honor to join you today. I have great respect for the New Orleans Film Society - a model for the thriving film community - that not only creates powerful work - but supports new talent. New Orleans' film community proves that generosity and success are not mutually exclusive.

Before I fully dive in - I want to give a brief sketch of my life so you know where I'm coming from - both literally and psychologically. I was born in Abingdon, Virginia, but grew up mostly in the coalfields of Logan, West Virginia and later in Elkview, West Virginia. I come from four generations of coal miners. That's not a novel fact where I'm from, but I have come to learn that people from elsewhere find that quite unusual. The people in my family work hard jobs that few people want to, my great uncles tell tall tales, my paw paw plays the fiddle by ear, and my great aunts grow corn and beans that they can for the winter. This is a slightly romanticized view of my family - as we - and the cultures that have defined our mountain life - are dwindling.

Our communities have been convinced to trade what has fed and sustained us for cheap goods from the Dollar General and encouraged our young people to leave and never return. Depression rates are high, educational opportunities are low. Our elders have no one to teach the traditions to. Within my own family exists the pride and pain I feel as an Appalachian. This is not a new story, it's been occurring since before my time. I am a product of it. I was one of those kids that left - matter of fact I don't remember a time as a kid when I didn't want to be Oprah in Chicago or Katie Couric in NYC. For me, the journey was DC in 2009, New Orleans in 2010, Boston from 2010-2013, but since then I have been swinging in and out of Appalachia since I finished my MFA at Emerson College. Ten years of swinging around Appalachia and the South - living in Virginia, West Virginia, and Tennessee. Since 2020 I have found myself in Knoxville, TN. It's here where I make life and work with my family - an immensely talented cinematographer and partner - Curren Sheldon, and our child.

When I graduated West Virginia University, I left Appalachia and the South for "opportunities." And I continue to return for "opportunities." It's funny how that word works - it forces us to constantly reposition our values. Adults tell you to leave, and your own adult-mind later tells you to stay. This place is my sanctuary. But it's not one place and it's not always easy to find - it comes to me in moments.

It's the deep blue hues of the Smoky Mountains silhouetted against the sky and fog. It's the way the light filters through the 90-foot tall leaves of a tulip poplar and onto the dirt path. It's the cold, and swift Cherry River with its uncertain and slippery rocks at Rudolph Falls. A complicated reality I face is that much of my sanctuary is not human-centered. Humans, and all our desires and ways of life, really muddle up the peace I feel when laying on the moss floors of the Cranberry Backcountry. Humans have taken these mountains, and decided they aren't "enough." They have taken that sanctuary and flattened it for the riches that lie beneath it. Those riches float on barges out of here to places unknown - to build steel skyscrapers and provide energy. Humans have buried the streams and cut down the tulip poplars on hunting grounds to make way for "progress." But we all know it's not a simple blame game - there's economics, the environment, politics, race, class and powerlessness all at play - and with that said, I do love the people of this region. They have taught me to love this place. I have spent my life and career listening to them and learning from them - in all their complicated ways. On most days, I feel like an insider/outsider. But having spent some time living outside of the region, I choose to make The South & Appalachia home and in a lot of ways this place chooses us. On the best days, The South speaks to us and we listen...and sometimes we speak back.

Place

Place haunts me. It influences everything I do, say, and believe. It haunts me because it is dynamic. Changing. Nuanced. An impossible idea to hang onto - because a place doesn't belong to us, we belong to

it. I am from what we call Appalachia - a loosely defined region made up of 13 states from southern New York to northern Mississippi - some may argue that Central Appalachia - where the state of West Virginia is the only FULL state in the borders - is not the South. Some may say it is. I don't fuss a whole lot over these details. All I know is West Virginia is not the North and we share more in common - historically, economically, and culturally - with our Southern sisters.

My family has been in a relationship with Central Appalachia for nine generations - land of the Shawnee, Haudenosaunee, and Cherokee among others. Before digging coal, they logged trees, and before trees, they tilled, before that they foraged and hunted the land. At that's not a neat timeline -as all those things were happening simultaneously too. Today, I continue to be part of that messy unfolding, in a place so steep and rugged. What my family passed to me isn't tangible - like property, or heirlooms - but they passed on a feeling, a relationship. A belief that there is life to be lived here that can be worthwhile, teach you something. This legacy is a choice that underlines that I belong to something, it doesn't belong to me.

This is not a simple relationship - at times it is a love/hate relationship. Friend and poet, Crystal Good, and I have often talked about how being from this place is like being in an emotionally abusive relationship. You love it so deeply, but it does not always love you back. Sometimes you feel an outright rejection from this place, even as you continue to show devotion. Appalachia and the South are places of contradictions. No matter how many parachute journalists want to come in and narrowly define us to sell cheap headlines, there is no way to singularly define who we are, and what this place is.

What Appalachia has taught me as a filmmaker:

For the past decade, I have spent my life listening to my community. I have made projects that teach others to document their own lives. I have spent years following the same people with my camera. More importantly, I have been welcomed into the homes and onto the porches of people to just sit and listen - not to document. With previous films - Heroin(e) and Recovery Boys - we aimed to make something that was honest - showing the darkness - but not making people feel completely hopeless about the situation at hand - the opioid crisis that has stolen many loved ones. We did this by showing the full range of human emotions. And quiet moments - the smiles, the laughter, after the dark times. The times that mentally rebalance someone back into a state that allows them to proceed the next day. In being patient, you show the tiny successes - as they are the foundation of hope. Hope does not mean full optimism or pessimism - but a belief that if we keep pushing forward something will come of it. With staying longer and being patient you learn to sit with the difficult times. So we sat longer and deeper with the local helpers. Any filmmaker can tell you that when you sit long enough you learn a valuable lesson. That life, and the stories we tell, are not a constant state of any one single emotion. We have the honor of witnessing ups and downs and therefore accepting the natural order of life - changing. It then becomes our responsibility to let this complexity of life muddle up our stories to tell a more nuanced view.

I am proud of both of these films - and feel they have added more positive impacts than negative to the world - but they were not always fun to make. They were frustrating at times. They were discouraging - another overdose, another person back on the street, back in jail. Documenting substance use disorder - felt like chasing a ghost. So much of the struggle is internal - a turmoil that is difficult and ethically murky to depict. The films also made me grow exponentially as a fellow member of society. I care more - I deeply care. I want to see these films be used for change - change in all its complicated forms, grassroots change, custom-fit for communities in need, not just one prescriptive solution. Our role was always to be compassionate but also to gently nudge a more honest and difficult conversation through cinema.

These two films left me with questions about my role as documentarian. I questioned the parallel roles of the witness and that of the person being observed. I questioned if they - the roles of observer and the observed - would ever collide in my work - where the filmmaker, as witness, was also in some way

being observed. I questioned if documenting joy was just as valuable as documenting pain. I questioned if play and imagination could ever make their way into these heavy topics that leave me feeling frozen most days. It was through these questions I started asking if my nonfiction film could show life as we hope it to be, rather than just the plight of "what is."

King Coal

Speaking of "what is," coal has been king in Central Appalachia for over a hundred years. The resource rules everything. This is the starting point of my latest film "King Coal." The film started in 2019 by documenting coal culture, seen through coal dust runs, pageants, coal shoveling contests, and coal education in the classroom. Some of these things which have been around since I was a kid in the coalfields. Co-Producer Molly Born and I sought these rituals and traditions out - as documenting a living archive. It quickly became clear these coal-related rituals were dying traditions - and many of them traditions born out of people's fears of "the king" dying. So we started to ask, what new rituals do we need in-life and in-film to help us live. This led us to think more about the already-blurred lines between myth and reality - of the power and influence of coal - when it comes to life in the coalfields.

A dream of the future

Documenting coal culture wasn't enough. It was the seed for the film, but not the flower. The idea/the seed needed patience and time. It needed nurturing. Oftentimes our first ideas are too obvious - but this process of germinating is not a passive experience. It is one I lost sleep over. Watering it daily through sitting down and forcing myself to write. Through digging through the archives. Through relearning my own history and seeing the blindspots. Through letting go of what was acceptable and making room for anything else.

We looked to other traditions - poetry, folklore, magical realism, ghost stories, fables, dance and movement, the land itself, sound art, and a percussive score, among other cinematic tools - to help guide the final language of the film.

In fables and fairytales, I started observing the techniques used to progress plot and story, where the magical is metaphorical: where materials are strange (hair is made of memories), supernatural experiences are plot twists (a dead horse heads speak), objects hold magic power (a bed can walk and swim), where ghosts are real, and dreams hold power. Stories that are mischievous, that have desires and low points where the person feels they can't go on any longer, and journeys with strangers that lead them astray - but towards a goal.

Some of these techniques might seem very far from non-fiction, but for the purposes of play we just began to allow ourselves to think of coal in a way removed from our highly divisive and politicized view of it and more into the way a fable might frame the specter of coal. It was through these playful questions that I started asking what would happen if a film models life as we want it to be, and less as "it is." Our ultimate belief and mantra for the film, as producer Shane Boris expressed, is that in order to tell a NEW story we had to tell it in a NEW way. Ultimately the entire film exhibits care work and the final scene - in which we staged a funeral for king coal himself - is a moment to grieve. A moment created for the film but a very authentic and real experience for those that participated and brought their own eulogies. It represents the best of the hybrid form, in our eyes, a staged moment where nonfiction can occur, but otherwise wouldn't. A real and true impact, not after the fact, but during the filming. Through hybrid filmmaking, we could explore and co-create the real and imagined rituals in the kingdom and through ritual we can learn how to move on.

The film itself resists being a tour of despair. It resists just showing you the oddities and laughing, but instead digs deeper to the why. The coalfields have long been seen as having reached their end. But

it's a lack of imagination that is our true crisis. Standing in the way of who and what we can become beyond coal. Leaders and coal barons - sometimes one in the same - stay in power as long as we lack agency to tell our own stories.

The film also models in-ways what civil discourse can look like. It requires a recognition of the pain and sorrow, and the beauty and hope. It recognizes the mistakes of the past, but allows us to free ourselves from fatalism, and the believing that our history is the only thing that determines our future.

The film partially centers the experience of two girls - Lanie and Gabby who are non-actors, West Virginia kids with coal ties in their family. We cast them at local dance studios. They represent in many ways what it is like to be a kid in the coalfields, while also allowing us a new entry - through humor, new life and irony - into this old story of extraction. Through them we are left to ask - what is left for them in the region?

In the end, I learned that I needed to break open my ways of working. Of re-learning how to tell stories, how to add more play into my nonfiction- to get to a deeper - more internal - truth - beyond an observed truth. My community is in need of grieving as a way of moving through the loss and processing the impact coal has had on us. But I also was in need of this. I used this film as a way to grieve with my community and family.

Plenty of films have reckoned with the past. But what about now? Who is dreaming for today, for the future. What will be the next story? The imprint of coal will be with us forever, like the coral in the limestone our souls are rippled with the presence of it. There's more jobs to be had at fast food and wal-mart today than in the mines. But we're holding out hope for a return because to wish for anything new is to be anti-coal here. This robs the people of their dignity to survive and their greatest resource: their imagination.

I want this film to make way for our dream of what's next.

Responses:

More than any other film I have ever made, this film was an incredible collaboration. The contributions of our talented and bold team made this film - a dream I once had - a reality. It's important to acknowledge the people who support this work: Producers, Shane Boris, Diane Becker and Peggy Drexler; Co-producer Molly Born; Director of Photography and Co-Producer, Curren Sheldon; Editor, Iva Radivojevic; Associate Producers, Clara Hazelett and Elijah Stevens; Composer, Bobak Lotfipour; Sound Recordist, Billy Wirasnik; Breath Artist, Shodekeh; Contributing Writers, Logan Hill and Heather Hannah - who blew us away with her poetry at the funeral; Executive Producers, Heather Baldry and Katherine Drexler and funders: Tribeca Film Institute, Sundance Development Fund, Field of Vision, Catapult, WV Humanities Council, Creative Capital, the Guggenheim Foundation and The University of Tennessee School of Art.

The film premiered at Sundance 2023 and has screened at 13 film festivals across the U.S. It hasn't had a wide release yet, but I have received messages from people as far as Ukrainian coalfields and back home in the West Virginia coalfields. This message from a young person who saw the film:

I've been absolutely gutted since moving back to WV. Constant beatdowns and failures, especially in my field of political work. I watched King Coal this weekend because I needed a reminder of why I came back. Watching took me back to my complicated but really great and unique childhood. I spent so much time in near solitude exploring the land. The ghost power of coal influences my day to day work. Its presence is always felt in more ways than I wish to count. Your poetry reminded me that I'm not imagining it. I've not really seen my experience in WV represented until now.

Recent revelations:

A friend recently saw "King Coal" and noted that she was surprised at how hopeful it was. She commended me for finding that hope. For looking into the deep recesses to see what lies there beneath the stories of pain and trauma. But I said something that surprised even me at that moment - I said "hope is sometimes hard to see...actually I found it most when I closed my eyes."

This was a moment of revelation for me. I have come to understand this place differently over the decade I have been making work here. I have aged with these mountains, they have taught me how much I don't know about life. My trajectory in storytelling was quite straightforward - kids from the coalfields can't be artists. So we choose practical things, like journalism. And then for years, I have found my way back to that artist kid in the coalfields who just wanted to tell stories. A kid that believed every word of every fable, not because I was too naive to think it was "real," but because even though it was "made up" it was truer to me about life than anything an adult was telling me. I feel a great sense of freedom these days since making this latest film. I only recently came into ownership of my own voice. If you don't own your voice, all I can say is "give it time." I had to listen to and learn from the voices of others before I discovered what my own voice wanted to say. Don't rush this process. When you find it, you will weep and be grateful for the years it took you to get there.

My hope for southern storytellers - what we bring to the cinematic landscape

I want to encourage you all to be patient in your journey as Southern artists. I also want to tell the young people of the South and Appalachia - that it's okay to leave. OF COURSE, I do want people to stay and fight but maybe your fight for this place is out in the world - an ambassador. Sometimes, there is clarity with distance. And sometimes that clarity will lead you right back here, where you started. I hope you can find your sanctuary here, and help the South build the community it should be. But as both an insider and outsider - someone who has left and returned - I can tell you that there are seasons in our life where we are most useful here or there, and that we carry this place with us, wherever we go, but the South of the future should not be our burden. It should be our blessing - something we choose. Carrying what serves us, and leaving behind and reconciling what has been damaging.

I am excited for new southern storytellers. Stories that aren't like mine held to this place for 9 generations. I'm in favor of more fluctuation. I am in favor of less romanticism, and more honesty - even if that means using fiction to tell the truth. I'd encourage us all to ponder what our stories can do beyond documenting what we can see, but instead to mourn, celebrate, and imagine - to create the world we want to see. I encourage you to ask what role your own visions and dreams play in our Southern cinema? We so often dream of having impact with our films. We make them and then we wait for that change to come. We push and often we don't see results. But what if the making of the film itself could be part of the impact? What if the film in-process, as a ritual, could bring us together before it's even "finished." I encourage you, as my editor Iva Rad did me, to find the one question you seek to answer with your stories. My question today: "WHO ARE WITHOUT A KING?" An unanswerable question at this moment, but a call I sent out through the hills and I patiently await the responses.

Thank you.



Elaine McMillion Sheldon is an Academy Award-nominated and Emmy and Peabody-winning filmmaker. She just premiered her latest film KING COAL at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival. Sheldon is the director of two Netflix Original Documentaries - HEROIN(E) and RECOVERY BOYS- that explore America's opioid crisis. She has been named a Creative Capital Awardee, Guggenheim Fellow, a USA Fellow by United States Artists, and one of the "25 New Faces of Independent Film," by Filmmaker Magazine.

Living on the fenceline

Lo Jackson

From what I remember my childhood was perfect; although like any family we had our struggles my memories are of the good times outdoors with family and friends. One of those memories is of my best friend Trent and I on his grandparents boat jumping from the very top straight into the bayou. Swimming around without a care in the world, falling in love with the murky waters, while joking about the alligators not 20 feet away.

Floating our bodies in these Louisiana wetlands provided us the ultimate beauty in looking at the wide sprawling roots of the huge cypress trees, running our hands through the swamp grass, and catching all the frogs we could get our hands on. We fished, played sports, and were essentially outside every chance we got.

I consider myself a levee kid, that is, I walked or ran on those thin concrete walls with ease, my backdrop being the horizon of the city of New Orleans. I was always exploring the abandoned wharfs along the levee which bordered the Mississippi River, breaking into cut out fences and walking around the old buildings, marveling at all the spray painted walls and 18th century equipment.

For the fourth of July it was always a treat setting off our plenty of fireworks on side of the levee and watching the ones from far on the other side of the Mississippi in New Orleans. Being outside was my church. I practiced it everyday and worshiped the sun. My parents had to peel me off the pavement after laying on it for so long. It gave me solace being able to run around my small town and skateboard the homemade ramps my dad made for me and my friends. We knew when to go inside when the mosquito man made his rounds spraying on the block.

Arabi, in general, is known for widespread fertile farmland. My neighbor next door was a horse pasture with goats, chickens, and too many dogs to count. My parents grew up in St. Bernard, built their house themselves in 2001 and still keep up with the ivy growing on the front walls of their house every weekend. Outside their house you see the horizon of the oldest refinery in the parish: Domino Sugar. My home sits about three blocks away from this ominous dilapidated yet still functional building and I used to love to watch the sun set over its windows, many of them smashed in, creating a mesmerizing golden reflection.

I also always looked forward to the Christmas season when there would be a giant Christmas hat atop one of its stacks. I even looked forward to the sugar fest where we could get free bags of sugar and enjoy all the sweet vendors. The industry never seemed weird or negative, just a part of my home. Even to this day I find peace coming home from the city driving down St Bernard highway taking in the pastures, live oaks, and nature around me.

The refineries have always supported the parish. They sponsor all the fun festivals such as Crawfish Fest, The Tomato Festival, and even the Los Islenos- their logo always on some poster or vendor sign. Even New Orleans local Jazz Fest has Shell symbols on seemingly every stage poster. The schools and local government even gets donations from each refinery as a thank you of sorts for being neighbors.

It wasn't until one night Trent and I were hanging out by the levee next to Domino's refinery that I saw it in an entirely different light. It was around 2 am when we pulled up to our usual smoke spot and as we got out of the car there was a huge fireball that exploded above the refinery. It lit up the entire street and all we could do was run away and it was as if I was noticing the truth of the building in front of me for the first time. This 100 year old sugar plantation that I had admired for my entire childhood was actually an

immediate danger capable of serious damage. It was frightening not knowing what was going to happen next and what shocked me most was the quiet after that loud explosion, as if representative of the silence that surrounds the dark side of industry in my entire community. I never knew what happened and to this day that imagery still haunts me with the fear of what would've happened if the explosion had been bigger.

Since then I've been hyper aware of the detrimental effects of industries on the home that I grew up in. I started to notice dust and sediment on my parents' cars, and a terrible smell that surrounds Chalmette Refinery and wafts throughout the entire parish and even the city of New Orleans when the wind is right. I also realized that the rotten egg smell had always been around just such a constant that I had never connected it with the refineries. Even the workers safety signs out front of the entrances had a more impactful meaning to me after that day.

I was in college when this incident took place and was taking Garret Bradley's Documentary Filmmaking class which sent me down the rabbit hole into making my film, Fenceline. I interviewed historians, longtime residents, and even my own family on their thoughts and fears about the plants. It's still a work in progress, but my ultimate goal is to show all sides wherein my community can make their own cognitive choice: are these refineries viable for another 100 years?

Both Chalmette Refining and Domino Sugar have been around since the early 1900's and have grown exponentially and the community's dependence on them has grown as well. Their presence has become a part of our community. There are oil billboards everywhere promoting the positive they claim to provide the city, either through jobs or through tax revenue directly to local government, schools and even our aquarium. Not only do these industries provide jobs directly, they also provide patrons to many mom and pop shops whose main clientele are refinery workers. The local high school even has a trade program that trains graduates for 6 months and provides them with a job that pays seemingly well, creating a school to industry pipeline. The industry provides money to the town and the town provides a constant supply of workers.

Personally, my whole family lives in and loves The Parish and has no intention of moving away. I have cousins who work for Dominos sugar and rely on the industry to support their families. Even though my family and neighbors seem to benefit from these industries, I've learned that they affect personal health as well as the health of the land we love and rely on, we don't call it the dirty south for nothing.

One immediate concern of mine is the effects of the runoff and the extended exposure of pollution on the seafood industry. One concerning incident was when I saw on the news that run-off into the Mississippi River turned parts of the river a neon green color creating toxic waste in the same water source we use for tap water. Fishing, crabbing and shrimping provide an income to many people in St. Bernard and seafood also is a cultural staple in the community, almost every gathering includes boiling one or more of our delicious local seafoods. I'm worried about how the quality of life will be affected if industry keeps increasing.

I've noticed the loss of greenland and pastures I used to love to admire, as industry continues to grow, agricultural workers who depend on cheap land are bought out in order to expand the industries. The potential promise of money and tax revenue wins out over the quality of life for the community. As people we are dependent on oil and gas, and I realize it's unrealistic to cut out all production but I am hopeful that changes are possible that improve the situation, for employees, the environment, and the community as a whole.

These companies are extremely profitable and should be encouraged to be as efficient and safe as possible instead of solely focused on profit. The companies know the danger they present and actively cover it up, and so the community, unfortunately, may not shift its mindset until after a tragedy has personally affected them and their loved ones. Until tragedy hits, the refineries are just a normal part of life to many. However, I am not alone in my thinking and am encouraged by the many organizations looking to reduce new chemical production plants and spread awareness about their effects. Some notable organizations are Rise St. James and Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Gulf South for a Green New Deal, and 350 New Orleans, all inspiring grassroots movements working to improve Louisiana.

I love Arabi and even feel a homey feeling when I see the refineries in the backdrop of a beautiful Louisiana sunset. However, I want a future that supports the health and prosperity of all my neighbors and one which shares the abundance throughout the community. As a sister, aunt, and cousin I especially worry about the future children. Will my aunt's 100 year old magnolia tree still be blooming every summer, will those levee walls still be intact, and how much air can they breathe in without smelling nasty, pungent smells?

Nowadays, what brings me peace is riding all the way "down the road," stopping by the snowball stand getting a sweet treat and heading down to what's known as the "end of the world," in Delacroix where the wetlands begin and road ends to watch that beautiful sunset. My home brought me so much joy as a child and I hope it continues to provide that for many generations to come.



Lo Jackson is a filmmaker from New Orleans, Louisiana.

She was born in St. Bernard Parish and graduated from Loyola University with a degree in English with concentration in film and digital media. Her work has been supported by the Climate Story Lab, an initiative of Exposure Labs, the Doc Society, and the New Orleans Film Society.

Propriety & Perversion

Hanna Lane Miller

It was the summer of 2012, and it was either mini skirts or carburetors. A new set of choices sat ahead that, if played right, led to my one goal: getting out of Mississippi.

From the time I could read, I knew other lands, better lands, awaited. A poor person in a poor place, I knew even my dreams were limited by the scant inspiration available. I wanted to see the worlds I read about. Born into a will to survive, I wanted to thrive. I wanted abundance and access to what my family couldn't afford. A preteen, I felt bigger than where I came from.

The dilemma was this — as a young person in a rural town, I had to have an extracurricular, or else I'd die of drugs or teen pregnancy or boredom. Would I go for the unconventional choice, the hobby I'd developed as a child, racing enduro motocross? Or, would I take the path of the pretty girls before me, the ones who I wanted to be like and who I was attracted to? Would I become a cheerleader? The gender roles and their accouterments were prime in this discernment.

If I rode motocross, I could keep being crass, tomboy-ish. Maybe I could still walk around in jorts, chewing tobacco and spitting into dirty styrofoam cups. In a way, it'd confirm the community's concern that I might be at least sort of gay, and that transparency could be nice.

Conversely, if I went the cheer route, I'd have to start shaving my legs. Perhaps I'd need to look into a heeled shoe at some point. The opposite end of the spectrum from the racetrack, being a cheerleader meant leaning into a clearer, more acceptable feminine role, and as my own identity was forming, what was and wasn't a misrepresentation was unclear. Could I be all of it? Could I be boyish in bloomers and padded bras?

I went with the cheer squad. It didn't take much for me to gather that acting or looking a certain way would afford me attention and interest, as well as safety. So, I put on the golden handcuffs that were hair straighteners, make up, and pompoms, and in that, I took a step closer to the state line. But in the years between somersaults and putting Mississippi in the rearview, rather than resist curiosities or deny relationships, I did a funny thing: I accepted it all, I gave in as much as I was relentless, and my Southern, queer sanctuary formed.

We sold my dirt bike, but the trails I'd made through the woods weren't expendable. I still knew where it was quietest and most secret. In a nook there, I had my first kiss: My best friend and fellow girly athlete. In a hidden cranny, I'd sit for hours and write love songs about long hair, pretty smiles, and Victoria's Secret's Love Spell body spray. In those woods, dirtbike or not, no one knew whether I wore a shirt with my jean cut offs. In a world governed by visibility and identity politics, the invisibility of the woods was a necessary reprieve for my forming queer identity.

Eventually, the secret smiles shared between my friends and me grew into conversations and community. When the star football players snuck around on their girlfriends with the token "gay kid," we nodded our heads. That made sense. In lone pastures with bottles of Andre, stepping over cow patties in work boots and high heels, we traded clothes and walked the dirt road runway, car radios blaring Britney to give us courage. We put words to what we could and shrugged at what we couldn't. My queer sanctuary accepted answers in any form of expression.

When I was 16, I moved a few counties away to attend a boarding school, the Mississippi School of the Arts. It was a special, rare place where country teens tried on new identities daily, and we had all the support and love we could ask for in developing and accepting our hopes and desires.

In turn, my teenage years were filled with angst-y drag and poorly rhyming, completely embarrassing poetry. From the visual artists who wore dog collars to the High School Musical re-enactors to the polyamorous goth group, my imperfect, queer sanctuary was a patchwork of outcasts. We were hardly one cohesive group.

Across experiences, our queer sanctuary only asked one thing of us: Don't hold back. Because we at least share being different, we encourage one another to be as bizarre as needed in order to dare to try on genders, sexualities, preferences, and dreams.

On the other hand, I have to acknowledge: Predominant Southern culture demands all of us to jump through hoops. We fearless, experimental teens also knew the measuring stick. Live up to an expectation, good or bad, and a path is formed. As a young person, clarity of any type was a relief, so we very quickly gave into this idea of measuring up and having worth that could be achieved or granted.

The reality is, acceptance is survival in a place with few resources. It's not as easy as choosing another person or place or gas station or grocery store. Usually, there's only one of anything, so there must be many versions of you.

It's this scarcity mindset I know and love that irritated me and everyone I knew. I was a cheerleader. I could change brake pads. I was country. I shared love notes with the girls' basketball team's starting point guard. We all contained multitudes like this, even — especially — the queer kids.

I have never been able to distance myself from holding these two truths, contradictory as they are, at the same time with equal weight. Today, I am as much looking for a measuring stick as I am holding space for the wildest, most boundless ideas and people.

When I finally left Mississippi, my first stop was Tennessee. Ironically, in my tizzy to escape home, I landed across only one state line — at the University of the South, nonetheless. The cheerleader in me would call that a fumble. The southerner in me knew that was not good enough. The queer in me, all too certain I could find a feminist punk movement to join anywhere, thought moving abroad to Russia would be a good idea. Of course, none of this makes any sense, now or then.

Russia was a lot like Mississippi. There was a measuring stick there, too. There were issues of visibility within queer culture, and there were identity politics at play that carried great risk. I think because of the physical distance and the new language and spaces, in that faraway land, I was able to remove myself from judgment — of pious Southern culture, of homophobia, of myself.

One afternoon, I was screening *American Beauty* for a film class I was teaching. I was screening the film in my apartment, only proving to my students and friends I was far too transparent to really make it in this city known as the "Detroit of Russia." Halfway through the screening, I went into my cramped kitchen. The smallest room in this apartment, it always held the most people.

One of my students sat down at the table. She told me about her forbidden love for another woman. I don't know if it was the American naivete or the fact that last week's film had been *Paris*

is Burning, but somehow, I was trusted as a safe place to store this woman's questions, desires, and concerns. As happens in these vibrant but silenced communities, once I made an initial connection, at seemingly every turn, I found a new queer Russian confidante.

Love, community, and acceptance afforded me safety and happiness abroad. I earned my keep with kindness and openness, and with that, I found a queer community in a city as familiar as it was another world. With distance as a tool for clarity, that community confirmed what was so special to me in my Mississippi: Expansiveness. I found it in Russia, and I was honored to share in it while there; but, I knew it wasn't a version that was wholly mine or truthfully part or all of me. I missed home.

Nevertheless, I continued to run from where I came from, despite missing its richness everyday. It took years for me to put on my big girl helmet and rev the motor right back to Collins, Mississippi. The thing was — I had to return home on my own terms. I had to find a place that'd fit me and every contradictory identity choice I'd made throughout the years, which was hard, as I'd found too much comfort in extremes.

In this consideration, the second trademark of my queer, Southern sanctuary became apparent: Choice. From the preteen dilemma of visibility to the young adult admittance into another culture, I had been exercising choice, vehemently pushing for more options, in search of a place for my own agency, not just a stage for my performative surrender.

The queer South taught me how to try things on for size, to examine and ponder, and to say yes or no — or, more often, an in between yes-no that afforded some type of leverage for some type of access or resource at some great, but vague, price.

One day, I came home for a visit. I could not will myself to leave. It was early spring, and the blackberries were starting to grow by the train tracks. The community pool was about to open. The mosquitoes were getting ready for another year of flying us all away. The humidity was just about to set in, and I wanted to be there for all of it.

I missed walking back and forth down the same dirt roads, going over to the softball fields to see who was there, riding up to Sonic for some ice cream and a little gossip, if I was lucky.

I missed dropping lines about abortion, praising my favorite drag queens, saying "partner" in reference to my romantic interests to see if I could raise any eyebrows or — better yet — questions.

The choices I'd made about my own visibility as a queer Southerner had created a paradox of propriety and perversion. I had grown comfortable being one way and looking another. I even felt joy in heels and earrings, wiggling my way into laced up groups, watching reactions when the most exclusive of folks realized they were friends with a queer, un-Christian white girl who had tattoos and an accent.

Wearing the jersey of the opposing team, making a mockery of convention by being the epitome of a flawed system felt honest — and hilarious. As an adult, I was able to settle into the massive gray area between the binaries I'd been bouncing between. Somehow, within each compromise and opposing reality, I had been able to realize my full self. The queer South has always let me be everything that I am, and because of that, I feel emboldened to accept who I am — and that, at any point, I could become even more.

The queer South, my home, isn't a perfect place. It's messy, and it's peaceful the way the last day of revival week is peaceful; there's a whole journey to landing on a saving grace.

The people who compose this culture aren't all alike. What we share is that we have a story. This amalgam of rambunctious, contemplative, colorful, binary, non-binary, and completely zany folks is where I learned to take on too many things, to want to be everything I am.

Finally, over a decade after leaving, I returned to Mississippi and stayed in my tiny hometown for almost a year. Now in New Orleans, and being so close to family and memories, every wound has reopened, every dropped conversation has come right back up, every hardship distance muffled now blares.

I am right back in Mrs. Jones' biology class, passing notes filled with cheap internet homoerotica and new vocabulary. I am telling secrets about what we found in a friend's parents' bathroom. I am offering an ear to a friend; it's her second marriage to an abusive man and third child — and just another time she's cheated with a woman. "Wasn't that just a phase?"

Certainly, there's plenty here that's hard to return to, and there's no defense for the relentless, compounded miseries. There's nothing redeeming about a silenced group. There's nothing acceptable about never accepting another human being as anything but full.

Knowing who I am and where I stand, though, gives me clear purpose and direction. My home and my sanctuary are the earth that grounds me. I didn't return and I don't stay in acknowledgement of the burdens and pain. Having been gifted expansiveness and choice, I want to be here in gratitude of what you never hear: The South is queer, the South is bigger than you can imagine, there is and always will be space for us all because you can't stop dirt bikes from clearing a path or cheerleaders from kissing in the woods.



Hanna Lane Miller is a documentary filmmaker from Collins, Mississippi, who has partnered with the New York Times, Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Rolling Stone, POV, Independent Lens, and more. Her Op-Doc "We Became Fragments" was IDA-nominated and won Best Documentary at an Oscar-qualifying festival. In 2020, Hanna won the Best Cinematography Award at Georgia Shorts Film Festival, and in 2021, she won an Edward R. Murrow Award. She is working on her first feature documentary, a film set in a small Mississippi town.

Hanna has a BA in Russian and a Masters of Journalism from UC Berkeley. She is also a Fulbright Scholar.

Trending New Ground

Angela Tucker

Spanish moss choking live oak trees is one of the most recognizable images of Louisiana's landscape. A plant that lives in a tree without any contact with the ground, Spanish moss is an epiphyte and causes no harm to the tree itself. It was given its name by French explorers. Native Americans of course called it something else.

When I was 15, I participated in an outdoor education program for kids called Outward Bound. I was on a solo expedition on a small island in Maine. It was a time when, for better or worse, kids were allowed to be left alone. They gave me a bag of gorp (good old raisins and peanuts), water, and a block of cheese and left me completely alone in the forest for three days. When I got there, I could hear the other kids in the distance. Some were banging on trees with their canoe paddles just to end the silence. I just wrote in my journal and stared at the sky. It is still one of my most peaceful memories.

My mother grew up in a small town deep in the Laurel Mountains of Pennsylvania. Most years we would drive eight hours to spend Christmas there. The last hour was the toughest, straight up a steep mountain in a car with old tires. One Christmas we couldn't make it all the way up and had to spend Christmas Eve in a sheriff's station at the mountain's base, eating cookies with salt. I'll never forget that Christmas. It was a reminder that nature can always intervene.

My parents knew that growing up on the Lower East Side of New York City might limit my connection with nature and so, at a young age, my Dad took me fishing with our family in Kentucky and my Mom taught me to swim. Survival skills that I barely use today.

They died before I was 30. Their loss provided a real understanding of the impermanence of life.

There are many pragmatic reasons why I moved to New Orleans after a lifetime in New York City but honestly, this one pushed me over the edge. At the time, I was emotionally all over the place. I was 37 and as I looked ahead to my 40th year, I couldn't help but notice that it was looking a lot like my 30th year. I was stuck.

One night, I went to a party in Brooklyn and there was a fortune teller who offered to read my palm. Upon examining my hand, she had one clear vision. She knew I was thinking about a place I wanted to move to but was unsure if I should go.

For a while, a friend had been working on me to move to New Orleans. She informed me that I had traveled there six times in the last two years. I didn't have a job or even a place to live there but I had a hunch, a feeling that this place might give me something I was missing. The fortune teller didn't know the name of the place but she said I should absolutely go. It would change my life.

Every time I direct a project set in Louisiana, I always come upon the challenge of finding visual imagery of the landscape that doesn't feel overused. It is stressful.

Sofia Coppola's film, *THE BEGUILED*, for example, takes place right after the Civil War. It is set in Virginia but filmed in Louisiana. The film has at least 25 shots of Spanish moss. It is a movie featuring Nicole Kidman and Colin Ferrell as Southerners. In terms of authenticity, it skimmed the surface.

Live oak trees, Spanish moss' landlord, feel too obvious and yet they are gorgeous. As complex as the South itself, they are indescribably beautiful and were used to cause indescribable pain. This

contradiction lingers in the air. Bringing it up is a buzzkill but the American landscape is as stunning as it is complicated. Running away and toward it is what you want to do.

Nature was a tool used during slavery. It acted as an accomplice who could not be hidden. The vestiges of slavery are implanted in the soil, move through the Mississippi River, and hang from the branches of the trees. The vestiges of lynching are everywhere as well, but that's all over this country, not just in the South. Lynching is a form of social control that doesn't just happen from trees.

I was drawn to spend that solo summer in the woods all those years ago because I never felt totally safe outdoors. I was 14 when The Central Park Jogger Case happened, a criminal case concerning the assault and rape of Trisha Meili, a white woman in Central Park, Manhattan. My Mom told me not to go to the park at night. I knew those boys didn't rape the white jogger lady. I knew this because they were arresting many of my Black friends, grasping at straws to find any Black kid who might fit the bill, a true skimming the surface.

At the time, I thought my Mom was afraid that I would be raped. I now know she was afraid of something else.

Upon rewatching THE BEGUILLED, I discovered that Spanish moss only appears in the film three times. Also, Colin Ferrell is supposed to be an Irish man who emigrated to the South before the Civil War, a historically accurate representation. That movie is still trash but maybe it is more complicated than I allowed it to be.

We have an oak tree in my backyard and its branches are descending. Trees have to be maintained and my husband and I have to do it as we own the land. I never imagined I'd own land and I honestly wonder if anyone actually does but the importance of me as a Black woman playing this role is not lost on me.

As I complete my first decade here, I continue to be struck by this place. Here there is this ability to see the best and the worst of things at the same time. You can not delude yourself. Life is not fair. It is the most intense combination of feelings, dark and light, feelings that force me to dig deeper and deeper into myself and into the stories I tell.

The pandemic strengthened my connection with the outdoors. Like everyone, I would put on a mask and roam around the park, City Park in New Orleans to be exact. My preferred nature activity is hiking. (I really just like to walk but when walking happens outside, it somehow becomes hiking.) Due to my fear of heights, I like to hike on flat ground so the flat landscape of New Orleans suits me. The beauty of the Earth remains no matter how bad things get.



Angela Tucker is an Emmy and Webby-winning filmmaker working in scripted and unscripted film and television highlighting underrepresented communities in unconventional ways. Recent work includes **BELLY OF THE BEAST** (dir. Erika Cohn) a NY Times Critics Pick, **THE TREES REMEMBER**, a series for REI and **A NEW ORLEANS NOEL**, a Lifetime film starring Patti LaBelle. Films in production are **THE INQUISITOR**, about political icon Barbara Jordan and **STEAM** (w/t) about a global alternative health treatment. She is a recipient of the 2023 Chicken and Egg Award and a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences.

Human/Nature

Colleen Thurston

The last time I was in New Orleans, while pitching the documentary I'm currently making, someone attending the pitch asked me "what do you mean when you talk about an Indigenous diaspora?" Which was an identifying phrase I used in my pitch. I suppose to some, those words are diametrically opposed. Diaspora meaning the dispersion of people from their homelands. Indigenous meaning being native to a specific place. But to the majority of Indigenous people in my state, Oklahoma, diasporic is the definition of our existence. We were — and still are — Indigenous to our homelands — now the American South, but we were forcibly removed from those homelands to the land that was then called Indian Territory. Okla Homma. Okla, meaning people, homma meaning red. In the Choctaw language, Land of the red people. When we got there, we named it as our own after ourselves, and then began the long process of making it home. Not homelands, but home.

In a timed pitch session, I didn't have the capacity to explain in detail the complications of existing as a dispossessed Indigenous person in a Nation within a Nation in a region known as the South.

"But is Oklahoma the South?" is another question I've had directed towards me, too many times to count. Said with a "Southerner than you" inflection. Sometimes from people who live in our homelands and who identify as Southerners themselves. But before Okla Homma was home, we were the original Southerners. The Choctaw — my people, the Chickasaw, the Seminole, the Muscogee, the Cherokee. Our Nations and reservations encompass nearly half of Oklahoma, but our presence blankets the South still. It's the Choctaw culinary knowledge that provides fillee powder for fillee gumbo. The southern staple of cornbread comes from Indigenous cuisine. Our language is slow and spoken with a drawl. Our place names dot the southern landscape. Atchafalaya, Tuscaloosa, Tallahatchie. Oklahoma is far from the only place we named. But the places named by us with our language in our homelands, are the ones from which we've been forced to disconnect.

Just as I've been asked, I have asked my own questions about Southern and diasporic identities. Is that land really the South, or is it the old Nations? Are Nations land based? What happens to national identity when an entire nation moves? What if the United States — its people and government — was suddenly forced to move elsewhere, to someone else's land? How would US Citizens' identity change if their land base suddenly changed?

So am I a southerner if my peoples' identity was only based in the South since time immemorial?

How can the South be sanctuary if it's a place we were forced to flee?

A sanctuary is a place of refuge, of safety. Where you're held close, and in comfort. It's a complicated term, when you belong to the land, when you define yourself not just by where you live, but by where your Nation is and maybe also where your homelands are.

Reflecting on these questions and considering how the land can define identity, I think perhaps it's just as much about where you're from, and where you live, as it is about how these places affect our physical bodies, and the stories we tell about the places, and ourselves within these places. Some Indigenous people define themselves by their water source. In introductions, and as an actual, Indigenous land acknowledgement.

Presently, I am of the Arkansas River. It's what makes up my physical body and it's where I live and where I was born. But my DNA holds memory of water from generations back. I don't know the words for the generational water that made me — that knowledge was lost or not passed down. Maybe it was Caddo Creek. Maybe seven generations ago it was the Tallahatchie River when we lived near what is now Greenwood, Mississippi, before the Removal. Greenwood — named for a Choctaw chief, Greenwood LeFlore. Tallahatchie — named from the Choctaw words Tvli, meaning rock, hvcha meaning river. River of rocks. I'd guess more people know it for its relationship to the fictional Billy Joe McAlister who jumped off its bridge in Bobbie Gentry's country song or for the horrific lynching of 14 year old Emmett Till, whose body his murderers threw in the Tallahatchie. I don't know the Choctaw stories of this river though. Were they lost when we were separated from it? Is the river the only one who holds that knowledge now?

Illi hvcha. Illi meaning death, Hvcha meaning river. River of death. Identities can change though. The river once, and always, provides life. Okchaya, meaning life.

I'm making a film about rivers. One river in particular — the Kiamichi. This river exists wholly in the Choctaw Nation — the new Nation, in Oklahoma. One of the film's protagonists, Sandy told me "when we were removed as Choctaw people to this country, when they got here and they saw this river, they must've felt better because they knew there was water."

Was this when they — our ancestors- began to identify themselves by this new river? As people of the Kiamichi? Just as in the old Nation, in this new one, the rivers provide for us and define us.

Water provides hope, and comfort. Water provides clarity, and cleansing. Water is a sanctuary. Rivers are places of beginning, they are life sources. With Sandy, I visited the spring fed headwaters of the Kiamichi in the mountains of Southeastern Oklahoma, in the Choctaw Nation. The water trickles out of the earth there, a tiny bubbling that moistens the clay and creates a small furrow that ever so gradually widens as the trickle becomes a stream. Here, the headwaters resemble a birth canal. It's where the community and the ecosystem of the river valley are born of the Kiamichi. The river is the matriarch of the area.

I don't have the knowledge of the ancestral waters that made me. When we were removed from our homelands, we stopped passing down some of our knowledge. Dealing with the trauma of removal, of genocide on the Trail of Tears, some stories and oral traditions were lost — or halted. With the disconnection from the land came a disconnection from cultural knowledge, from the language that belongs to that place, and from place-based identity.

In Oklahoma, we were re-born as people. We are resilient, but the trauma did inform the stories we tell ourselves. And colonization shaped our cultures. We lost our focus on our traditional matriarchy, and centering life sources — mothers, women, water — as the creators of us as people. To know who we are, we must know who made us.

For as long as I can remember, I've been a water person. That first immersion in an Oklahoma lake in the summer brings a full body sigh of contentment. A refuge from the stifling heat and humidity. It's when the water in me is balanced by its surrounding liquid kin. I'm most at ease in water. Water composes me and comforts me — it is my sanctuary. Water is alive. It holds memory. It creates us, it defines us, and it holds our histories and stories. It's the stories that we tell ourselves about place, about identity, about who we are as cultures, as humans, that bring us a sense of communal self

awareness. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are can be as self-assured as a free flowing river, winding its way through the land, knowing where to go and where it comes from. So in stories, we claim our being.

Diasporas are free flowing and while disconnected from homelands, diasporic communities give birth to new ways of being. New streams off of main waterways.

When we were removed to Oklahoma, we brought our seeds with us to grow food to provide for us and future generations. Seeds grown for generations in Choctaw — southern — soil. Seeds born of a life giver, that create and sustain life. We plant our seeds — corn, squash, beans, tobacco, peas — in the land wherever we remain and we nourish them with the water of the land. Right now, I have corn sprouting from heirloom Choctaw seeds in my backyard in Tulsa. My son helped my plant our Tanchi Tohbi: Tanchi meaning corn, Tohbi meaning white. This is the corn that is used to make cornmeal for my favorite — cornbread. These are the seeds that made the trek from the old Nation in the South with us, and that have survived their own displacement. Though the soil and the water may be different, we grow where we are planted. We create and sustain life.

I don't know if I'm Southern, but I do know where I'm from — I'm born of the Arkansas river, and seven generations removed from the Mississippi River delta. The water that ran through my grandparents bodies now runs through mine. And the stories I tell, the language I use, about place, about history, will run through the next seven generations as well.

As we are, water is alive. It holds memory. It creates us, it defines us, and it holds our histories. Histories that are made up of our stories.

Stories that provide for us, stories that we tell ourselves — over generations, about who we are. Like water, stories define us. It's the stories that we tell ourselves about place, about identity, about who we are as cultures, as humans, that bring us a sense of communal self awareness.

The stories are passed down, but not the questions. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are are as self-assured as a free flowing river, winding its way through the land, knowing where to go and not questioning where it belongs. So in stories, and with language, we claim our being.



Colleen Thurston is a documentary storyteller and film programmer from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her films explore the relationships between humans and the natural world and focus on Indigenous perspectives. Colleen has produced for the Smithsonian Channel, Vox, and museums, public television, and federal and tribal organizations. Her work has screened at international film festivals and broadcast nationwide.

Colleen is an Assistant Professor at the University of Oklahoma, the project coordinator for the Indigenous video series, Native Lens, and is a programmer for Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival.

She is a Firelight Media doc lab alum, a Sundance Institute Indigenous Film Fund Fellow, and a citizen of the Choctaw Nation.



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