ETHNOPOETICS OF REALITY:

The Work of Sky Hopinka

By Almudena Escobar López

Sky Hopinka's videos have been shown at numerous festivals and art venues worldwide, including the Ann Arbor Film Festival in Michigan, the Images Festival and Wavelengths in Toronto, Projections in New York City, and the 2017 Whitney Biennial. *Visions of an Island: Video Works by Sky Hopinka* was part of the Spring Film Series curated by Tara Merenda Nelson at the Visual Studies Workshop in 2017.

Hopinka's film work scrutinizes the layered structure of identity in relation to homeland, landscape, and language. Like puzzles, his films are constructed with fragmented and superimposed images. Watching them is like experiencing memories inside of a dream, their fragments recomposed without any particular order by the unconscious. This does not make the result less truthful; quite the opposite, it is more real than ever.

Landscapes in Hopinka's films are shown through glances of seas, forests, paths, shores, cliffs, bridges, sky, and roads that do not give any precise information about their whereabouts. Each slice of the landscape contains memories of those who were there before Hopinka and his camera. These stories might be audible through narration, contained in the inflection of language itself, or expressed directly through the camera as a visual construction. In this way, Hopinka explores temporality through communal memory, folding in the past to make it present in a contemporary mode. But this particular temporality is not accessible to everyone. Each of Hopinka's films is made primarily with a particular community in mind, which may have access to information that others do not. It is not about compiling stories, it is about sharing moments that question the very idea of knowledge and its levels of accessibility. As Hopinka describes his practice, it is close to the ethnopoetic approach, a response against the ethnographic gaze that has long objectified indigenous people. Ethnopoetics confronts ethnography through poetry and the capacity of learning from a point of not-knowing, without trying to master culture. It is a process more focused on the sensitive, emergent, and open-ended qualities of exploration, begging for questions rather than answers.

Hopinka's first films deal with language and how communal identity can be traced in interpersonal communications. *Wawa* (2014) centers around Hopinka's experiences while learning and teaching Chinuk Wawa, an almost extinct language from the lower area of the Columbia River basin in the Pacific Northwest. The film slowly builds up, sound and subtitles becoming more and more entangled until it is almost impossible to discern what the speakers are saying, reflecting the unease of communication. Language in the film is both spoken and written, discussing ideas of cultural identity in relation to pronunciation and language learning. Tribal linguist Henry Zenk talks about Chinuk Wawa in his interview with Hopinka, who also reads the transcription of an interview with Wilson Bobb Sr. (an elder Grand Ronde and Yakama national) that Zenk conducted years before. The three of them discuss the interactions between speakers from different cultural backgrounds and generations.

Hopinka listened to the tapes that Zenk recorded of his conversations with Bobb, experiencing their friendship and shared use of the language. Hopinka's films foreground the ways in which speakers learning a language not only access a full set of grammatical rules and usages, but also enter into the social space of the language and its cultural context. Therefore, grammar should not be understood only in linguistic terms, but also as a familial structure that determines the political conditions of its community. Dance, dreams, perception, and other expressive forms are part of this grammar that constitutes the identity of a community. In contrast to the static, standardized concept of grammar, this immaterial spiritual quality of language and culture is in constant movement because it is being lived.

Language and its use also relates to its environment. In *Visions of an Island* (2016), the vital relation between the land and language is further developed when Gregory Fratis Sr. (a Unangam Tunuu elder) describes the landscape of Saint Paul, an island in the Bering

Still from *Kunjkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunjkaga Remembers the Welcome Song* (2014) by Sky Hopinka

The ones we follow in this life, tell of a story about our creation.
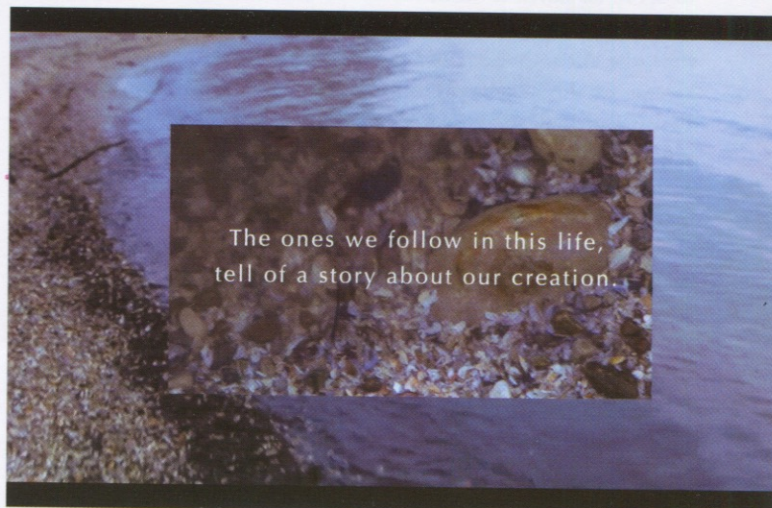
Still from *Dislocation Blues* (2017) by Sky Hopinka

Sea where the Aleut people were relocated from Siberia, Atka, and Unalaska by the federal government of the United States to serve as slaves to hunt fur seals. The camera wanders around the vast empty landscape while Fratis's voiceover talks about the hills, the cliffs, the sea, and their names in Unangam Tunuu. The images of the hills begin to multiply and superimpose, each layer signifying their successive given names in Russian, English, and Unangam Tunuu. Frater's voice also multiplies, repeating itself while naming different local species of birds. A group of students learn the Unangam Tunuu language while the elder tries to unpack the linguistic references of the language in relation to the space of the island. Distances are measured by visual estimations between known geographical points, while numbers are also calculated visually without precision, indicating the ingrained visual embodiment of the landscape in the language. Frater also mentions the seal colonies that inhabited the island once upon a time, and invites Hopinka to hear about it. *Visions of an Island*'s landscape infiltrates the language, and language recreates the landscape when certain sections of it no longer appear.

Language and landscape also connect with temporality in a direct way for Hopinka. In *Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcome Song* (2014), Hopinka visits Red Banks, near Green Bay, Wisconsin, to explore the lives of Ho-Chunk people and the arrival of the first European colonist, Jean Nicolet, to the area. The film opens with images of the road and the surroundings of Red Banks combined with Hopinka's audio recordings of his grandmother's recollections of her visit to the site. Then Winslow White Eagle reads myths and stories from the Ho-Chunk over collage-like images of the landscape. The last section of the film shows text lines from Nicolet himself and from Jesuit missionary Barthélemy Vimont's accounts of Nicolet's travels from 1642, the text moving horizontally over paintings representing Nicolet's arrival in Red Banks. Personal memories from the filmmaker's grandmother intertwine with images of the shore, the sounds of his steps on the shell sand, views of the bay, and letters by Nicolet himself. Language again holds the landscape that no longer exists, linking it to the present, and transforming it into a living archive of personal and collective memories of the space once inhabited.

Still from *Dislocation Blues* (2017) by Sky Hopinka

In *Jáaji Approx.* (2015) Hopinka further explores identity through space and language, combining multiple temporalities and interpersonal relationships. Through audio recordings of his father reminiscing about his life and his experiences as a powwow singer, Hopinka navigates the landscapes of present-day Wisconsin, California, and Washington State in the process of coming to terms with his own identity as a contemporary Ho-Chunk national. Landscape reconfigures itself throughout the film with juxtapositions of two landscapes on top of each other, and a multiplicity of imaging that speaks to the loaded historical significance of space. Hopinka travels by car from one point to another, remembering his relationship with his father. At this point, wandering and traveling become a way of exploring and formulating questions while seeking answers.

Ernst Karel, from the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, describes how "our cognitive awareness—conscious as well as unconscious—consists of multiple strands of signification, woven of shifting fragments of imagery, sensation, and malleable memory."[1] Hopinka's understanding of language and landscape as a space of connection and identity exchange operates in a similar way, exploring fully all human cognitive capacities. Hopinka approaches learning as an ongoing path without a beginning or an end, constantly in flux, and able to trace the connections between events, places, and subjects.

In *I'll Remember You as You Were, Not as What You'll Become* (2016), Hopinka explores this connection in an expansive way, connecting anthropological recollections of Hopinka's tribe, the Winnebago, with the landscape and the work of Chemehuevi/Anishinaabe poet Diane Burns. The film begins with anthropological texts from Paul Radin (*The Winnebago Tribe* from 1923 and *The Road of Life and Death* from 1945) and the ethnographic informant Jasper Blowsnake, which describe the spiritual world and practices of the Winnebago tribe. The typography of these texts is set in the shape of traditional effigy mounds. By reshaping the written word and making it his own, Hopinka also reclaims the ownership of the content transmitted by Radin's ethnographic text. There is also negative film footage of powwow dances, accompanied by traditional choral singing performed by the Sacred Harp Singers of Cork, Ireland, in 2012. The images of

Still from *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2016)
by Sky Hopinka

the dancers are distorted into phantasmagoric beams of colorful light, almost mimicking the aurora borealis. Intercut with this footage is footage of Burns during one of her readings in New York City and nocturnal images of trees partially illuminated by lights of various colors. Burns talks about reincarnation and a return to the earth, while the colorful dance reflects through the light into the dark landscape. The spectacle of the dance is eliminated in favor of the movement of the people as a whole. The negative footage of the dancers creates a communal light that returns to the earth following Burns's words. The film creates a dialogue between texts from 1923, 1942, and 1945; the Burns reading from 1996; the Sacred Harp singing performance from 2012; and a Naimuma powwow performance from 2016. The wandering here is, as Hopinka explains, "a piece about reincarnation and looking at the world, and life and death; it is a way to recontextualize my tribe's beliefs, which seemed so foreign and distant to me growing up, as they do to others looking in. It's about weaving something new together."[2]

In *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2016) Hopinka explores learning in relation to objects by means of the idea of the "anti-object" developed by the architect Kengo Kuma.[3] According to this concept, parts of matter, as well as individuals, are not clearly delimited objects, they are "interconnected and intertwined," open and relative in relation to each other. Hopinka applies Kuma's understanding of objects to landscape and temporality in relation to the Chinookan people and their native land. Their intertwined memories reflect onto the landscape by means of audio recordings of one of the last speakers of Chinuk Wawa, the Chinookan creole language. Hopinka, who studied and taught the language in the city of Portland, Oregon, searches in the landscape for the traces of what Chinuk Wawa transmits in its articulation. The filmmaker wanders through two specific locations in the Portland metropolitan area: the Cathlapotle Plankhouse in Ridgefield, a house that is used both as an interpretation center and as a ceremonial space for the Chinook people; and the Tilikum Crossing, named after the Chinook word for "people," situated between the Marquam and Ross Island bridges. With each of Hopinka's steps, the borders of the structures become more ambiguous, while the action of wandering itself becomes central. By walking, Hopinka interconnects the anti-objects, opening them to the environments that surround them and the people who inhabited the area first. In this way, the filmmaker imagines a new temporality where as he notes in a description of the video, "time affects experience, and experiences are activated through remembrance. This video is an activation of access."[4] The wandering opens up the spaces beyond their assigned close meanings. Hopinka argues that "if Tilikum Crossing hopes to truly function as a tool for inclusion and access, it must be looked upon not as a monument to past Indigenous presence, a 'compression of history,' but rather as a merging of memory and utility."[5] *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* explores how meandering operates as a personal journey toward alternative ways of learning. But how does this wandering learning process connect with the community and the interpersonal relationships that develop within it?

Hopinka's latest work, *Dislocation Blues* (2017), addresses this very question. The film is a personal account of the 2016–17 Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests. Instead of addressing the political urgency of the protests, Hopinka focuses on the creation of community that occurred. Fragmented footage of Standing Rock is intertwined with two interlaced interviews. In the first, Cleo Kehana, a two-spirit member of the Pillager Ojibwe and Meskwaki tribes, reflects on his experiences at Standing Rock in the past tense through an online interview conducted after the protests in which both his image and Hopinka's image are visible on the computer screen. Kehana's interview is interlaced with a second—audio only—conversation with Terry Running Wild from the Oglala Lakota Nation in South Dakota, who speaks

Still from *I'll Remember You as You Were, Not as What You'll Become* (2016)
by Sky Hopinka

Still from *Dislocation Blues* (2017) by Sky Hopinka

about the Standing Rock protests in the present tense during one of Hopinka's visits to the camp. Two different generations—a younger one represented by Kehana and an older one represented by Terry Running Wild—inhabit the same space, experiencing the same solidarity and connection. Hopinka is not interested in the spectacle quality of the protests that the media widely reported. Instead he focuses on the filial spirit of solidarity experienced in the settlement that "needs to be told by multiple people" as Kehana claims in the film. He describes the settlement as a safe space where everyone was "having the same dreams, the same pieces; [their] stories were different, but they seemed to fit together." By limiting the story to two voices, Hopinka eliminates the presumptions of totality found in mainstream media. We won't know everything about Standing Rock, but isn't the reality of life always incommensurable and relative? Hopinka films children sliding down the hill, people talking to each other, gathering around the fire dancing, or simply sitting on one of the hills surrounding the settlement. Again, wandering becomes the path to knowledge. Instead of certainty, there is experience

and intuition, a personal journey toward alternative learning processes that accept starting from a point of non-knowledge. Hopinka's films are part of the "reality-based community" that Erika Balsom reclaims to face the old narratives of domination and totality by offering a glimpse of the ambiguous complexity of the world.[6] Hopinka's videos don't "teach" anything; they are about being, and explore knowledge as a process arising from lived personal and collective perspectives that interrupt the colonial idea of totality.

ALMUDENA ESCOBAR LÓPEZ is a curator, archivist, and scholar currently pursuing her PhD in the Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester.

NOTES **1**. Ernst Karel, "Ernst Karel," interview by Mark Peter Wright, *Ear Room*, February 14, 2013, https://ear-room.wordpress.com/2013/02/14/ernst-karel. **2**. Sky Hopinka, "Sky Hopinka: Interviewed by Adam Khalil and Zack Khalil," *Third Rail* 10 (March 2017), http://thirdrailquarterly.org/sky-hopinka. **3**. See Kengo Kuma, *Anti-object: the Dissolution and Disintegration of Architecture* (London: Architectural Association, 2008). **4**. Hopinka, "Anti-objects: Or, Space Without Path or Boundary," *Design Week Portland: The Journal* 8, www.designweekportland.com/journal/access/anti-objects. **5**. Ibid. **6**. Erika Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community," *e-flux* 83 (June 2017), www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community.