

## REVIEWS

### Books and other publications

#### Book Review

**imagineNATIVE. *On Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Metis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts & Stories.* Toronto: imagineNative, 2019, 78 pages.** Retrieved from <https://imagenative.org/publications>

*On Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with First Nations, Metis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts & Stories* is a comprehensive guide commissioned by imagineNATIVE, a non-profit institution based in Toronto, Ontario, that presents the world's largest Indigenous film festival. The guide was prepared by consultant Marcia Nickerson and provides cultural principles, key findings from a national consultation process and best practices for filmmakers, production companies and funders, when depicting Indigenous content on-screen. It also explores how communities, organizations and individuals can act as collaborative partners, while providing practical steps and ongoing resources for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people wishing to engage with Indigenous stories. As the Director of Programming for The Documentary Media Society, a non-profit organization that produces an annual film festival called DOXA Documentary Film Festival, I will reflect on the educational and decolonial potential, as well as the limitations, of this guide through the lens of a film festival curator and non-profit arts manager,

as well as from the perspective of a woman of mixed Icelandic and Métis heritage.

From 2008-2015, the Government of Canada founded the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The purpose of the commission was to document the history and lasting impacts that the Canadian Indian residential school system had on Indigenous students and their families. In 2015, the commission concluded that the residential school system amounted to cultural genocide, and released a final report outlining several “call to actions” meant to improve the lives of Indigenous people, as well as pave the path to recondition with non-Indigenous governments and Canadian settlers. Several of the “call to actions” in final report relate to language, culture, education as well as the media and arts, so it is no surprise that the core funders of this initiative include a range of government funding agencies, including the Canada Media Fund, National Film Board of Canada, Telefilm, Ontario Creates, Creative BC, as well as one private foundation, the Inspirit Foundation. While this guide may begin to fulfil the call of actions as outlined in the final TRC report, its purpose reaches far beyond simply checking a box for government officials.

At 79 pages, the guide is organized in eleven sections: the first few sections outline the purpose of the document as well as guiding principles related to on-screen protocols. The following sections each pertain to a specific area of film and media production, and the guide concludes with two extensive appendices that provide information about the historical context in which this document was prepared as well as additional resources for communities. The guide, inspired by Screen Australia’s protocols document,

describes how decolonizing practices includes developing production models that promote narrative sovereignty and “allow for us to be more indigenous.” Jesse Wenthe, director of the Indigenous Screen Office in Toronto Canada, sums up the significance of narrative sovereignty, and how it relates to the larger project of decolonization:

When I talk about narrative sovereignty what I’m really talking about is the ability of the nations to have some measure of control over the stories that are told about themselves... Throughout the entire history of filmmaking, the overwhelming majority of stories told about Indigenous peoples – both fictional and documentaries – have been told by non-Indigenous people (p. 7).

According to the guide, there are four principles that are fundamental to the execution of on-screen protocols: respect, responsibility, consent and reciprocity (p. 10). Reflecting on each of these principles the DOXA programming team already follows several of the suggestions outlined in the guide. For example, when considering a film about an Indigenous community directed by a non-Indigenous filmmaker, we make an effort to learn as much about the intention and filmmaking process as possible. We do this by asking for artist statements and, when appropriate, testimonials from community members to ensure the process was consensual and collaborative. One of the most important things we do throughout the year is to ask for, and listen to, feedback from Indigenous filmmakers, colleagues and audience members. Some examples of the feedback we have received, and incorporated, include presenting land acknowledgment on

the screen during the introduction of some film events (rather than just reading off a script). We also make sure to ask Indigenous filmmakers if they would like the name of their nation/territory to be listed in the program book and website instead of listing the country of Canada.

While the guide offers an extensive overview of the many complexities involved in developing and implementing protocols, there is limited discussion of how our current economic structure (neoliberalism) creates systemic barriers. Several sections offer recommendations that more funds be given to productions in order to promote proper protocols around cultural safety, consent and respect, however there is very little said about the challenges related to the overall funding structures in Canada. From the perspective of a director of a non-profit arts organization, there are many financial challenges we face that can make it difficult to engage fully with the protocols. Currently, film festivals in Canada rely on a mix of revenue sources from government grants to ticket sales as well as private donations and corporate sponsorship. One thing we have struggled with at an organizational level is whether or not to accept funds from major banks or resource extraction companies. Accepting money from institutions that are often tangled in continued land displacement and colonialist practices would not seem to offer much by way of trust and reciprocity.

While applications for public grants now regularly require detailed descriptions of cultural safety protocols, funding levels remain stagnant, with modest increases at best. Without significant additional financial resources, it can be difficult for organizations to deeply engage with

proper protocols outlined in the document, such as paying for cultural competency training and paying mentors and mentees, for example. The precariousness of funding, and increasing cost of operations, such as venue rental fees, often means that paying for additional initiatives can be difficult, despite remaining entirely necessary. While the guide does not look specifically at funding models, the inherent contradiction between implementing these recommendations and the corporate bottom line of seeking profit by many in the mainstream industry is identified throughout. Acknowledging that protocols are unique and specific to each community, proper consent of sharing stories requires unique care as many oral storytelling traditions stem from a relationship with the land. One poignant example explored in the guide relates to the common practice of signing away story rights when making a deal with a broadcaster or distributor (p. 17), which often goes against community protocol where stories belong to elders, or to the communities at-large.

After engaging with the guide, I cannot help but wonder if it will ever be possible for the mainstream film and television industry to fully embrace these protocols when revenue is their primary bottom line. Non-profit film festivals and other alternative distribution/exhibition markets, on the other hand, offer an environment where protocols can thrive, as they do not require the same legal rights as broadcasters and streaming monopolies. For example, when DOXA screens a film theatrically, we do not require that the artist or filmmaker sign away any copyright to their work. Rather, the film is screened for the public and in exchange for an artist fee, while the artist or distributor maintains the full ownership of their project. Furthermore, the non-profit

mandate of such organizations, including DOXA, is often educational which means that while revenue is an important factor, the end goal of such organizations is to promote arts and education and a social good, allowing space to fold in values such as reciprocity and community responsibility as outlined in these protocols.

While funding remains a challenge, ultimately the development of innovative and decolonial structures as suggested in the guide have the potential to challenge the notion that revenue is the primary marker of success, paving a path towards long-term economic reconciliation. Overall, this guide is necessary reading for media arts professionals across the sector, including students and even audience members. I believe that all non-Indigenous people working in the media arts, regardless of if they are working with Indigenous creators or not, should be encouraged to consult this document. The pedagogical impact of this guide as a tool for folks across the media arts sector would encourage, not only a deeper understanding of the impacts of colonization, but also a flourishing of new narratives rooted in the recognition of Indigenous ownership and control over their rights to their intellectual and cultural property and heritage.

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