



RECOVERING  
**VOICES**

✦ Smithsonian

Mother Tongue Film Festival

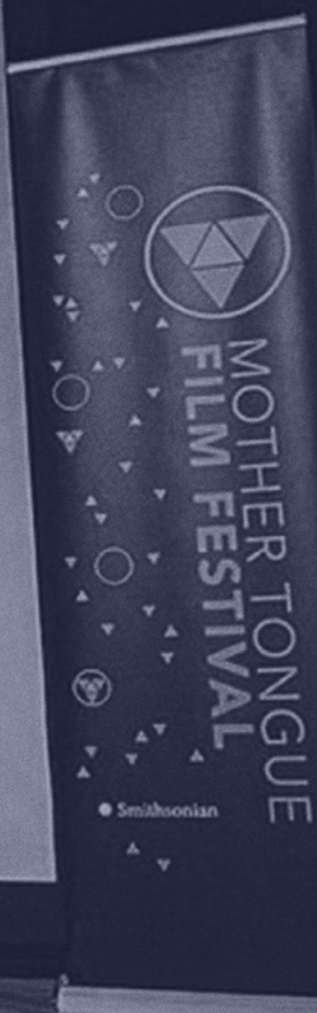
**COMING HOME**

2023 Report



Heemi Eruera, Toby Mills, and Billy Harrison participate in a Q+A after the screening of *Whetū Mārama – Bright Star*.

# MOTHER TONGUE FILM FESTIVAL



Mother Tongue Film Festival

## COMING HOME

2023 Report

# CONTENTS

|                        |    |
|------------------------|----|
| Directors' Remarks     | 6  |
| Festival Overview      | 8  |
| Schedule               | 9  |
| Coming Home            | 10 |
| 2023 Festival Program  | 12 |
| Reaching our Audiences | 26 |
| Partners               | 29 |
| Staff                  | 30 |
| Appendices             |    |
| Languages              | 32 |
| Regions                | 32 |
| Press Coverage         | 33 |





# DIRECTORS' REMARKS



*Cursed Land: Fate*

In 2023, the Smithsonian Mother Tongue Film Festival returned to the National Mall. As we once again started attending events in person instead of virtually, our film program this year reflected notions of return and homecoming; whether it be the journey of a person or a sacred object to its place of origin. Inspired by ideas of home, our theme, *Coming Home*, asked viewers to consider what makes a home, why people remain rooted there, and what it takes to return home after a long time away.

We were delighted to receive audiences in Smithsonian museum auditoriums and to share an incredible array of large and small films from around the world that explore the many dimensions of home. We were pleased to bring back the *Uptown Singerz* to open the festival at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden's Ring Auditorium, where we screened two documentaries about women confronting situations that force them to reckon with the past.

We initiated a new partnership with Planet Word, where we screened a showcase of short films made by students of the Sakha media school, and chilling films from the arctic regions of Canada, Siberia, and the Sakha Republic. We welcomed back Māori canoe carvers, who are collaborating with the National Museum of Natural History and the Asian Pacific American Center to screen films celebrating the enduring traditions of Oceania. We also held the festival in tandem with a hemispheric conference, *InDigital IV: The Americas*, Indigenous Peoples' Engagement with Digital and Electronic Media, which the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage co-organized.

We thank the filmmakers, especially those who were able to present their films for live audiences. We thank our staff, colleagues, and collaborators, who infuse this festival with a spirit of collaboration. And we thank our supporters, sponsors, and the audiences who made every screening a memorable event. It's good to be back in the auditoriums with you all.

Joshua A. Bell

Amalia I. Córdova

# FESTIVAL OVERVIEW

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For the first time since 2020, the annual Smithsonian Mother Tongue Film Festival returned to the National Mall for in-person film screenings and discussions. The festival, hosted by the Smithsonian's Recovering Voices initiative, honors International Mother Language Day, as part of its ongoing celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity. Now in its eighth year, the festival featured twenty-seven films in twenty-four languages from twelve regions across the globe. Included in this line up were ten short films that the festival's website made available online.

The festival is a joint effort across the Smithsonian Institution, organized by Recovering Voices—a collaboration between the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH), National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), and Asian Pacific American Center (APAC). Through the Mother Tongue Film Festival, we seek to amplify and celebrate the use of Indigenous and minoritized languages, and to showcase the work of language revitalization through film and beyond.

As part of the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), this year's festival ran for four days, opening on February 23 and closing on February 26.

All festival programs were free of charge.

We thank you for joining us for another year of Mother Tongue. Your support contributes to our continued success and the quality of the festival.

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 6:30 PM

## Returns

Ring Auditorium, Hirshhorn Museum

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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 3:30 PM

**Youth & Language Revitalization: Sakha Media School in Russia**  
Q?rius, National Museum of Natural History

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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 7 PM

**Nomokhtookh sir: Legend and Landscape**  
Friedman Family Auditorium, Planet Word

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 12 PM

## Returning Traditions

Baird Auditorium, National Museum of Natural History

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1:30 PM

## Healing Ways

Baird Auditorium, National Museum of Natural History

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 3 PM

## Faya Dayi

Baird Auditorium, National Museum of Natural History

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 6:30 PM

## Roots of, and Routes to, Home

Baird Auditorium, National Museum of Natural History

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2 PM

## Night Raiders

Rasmuson Theater, National Museum of the American Indian

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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 6:30 PM

## Dreams

Ring Auditorium, Hirshhorn Museum

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MARCH 17-26 (ONLINE)

## AbdzÉ Wede'Ö /

### *Is there a cure for the virus?*

U.S. premiere. Additional programming presented with the Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital.

# SCHEDULE

# COMING HOME

Home may evoke safety, stability, and knowing. For the 2023 Mother Tongue Film Festival, we celebrated the warmth of home and acknowledged the treacherous journey that often accompanies the return after a long time away. The 2023 theme, Coming Home, inspired the questions, what is home—and how do we arrive and stay rooted there?

Whether through a return to traditions, to land and community, to internal elements of the self, or a blending of all of these, we all have a sense of home. In celebration of Coming Home, the festival returned to in-person programming on the National Mall, February 23 to 26.

Every year, we present one program that directly confronts issues of language minoritization and endangerment, and also the ways in which language communities are revitalizing and enduring. This daytime screening always inspires many questions from the audience and is one way that the Mother Tongue Film Festival educates the public directly about language diversity.

This year, we highlighted films created in the Sakha Media School, which is sponsored by the Language Vitality Initiative at CFCH. Sakha is a Turkic language spoken in northeastern Siberia. With global warming, the melting permafrost of the Sakha homelands is disrupting traditional economies and is forcing many families to migrate to Yakutsk, the capital city of the Sakha Republic in Russia. The goal of the media school is to teach middle-school-aged Sakha children how to create and edit videos on their smartphones, and then share them through social media. At the same time, the school creates new media for all Sakha youth to hear their language more often, thereby demonstrating and reinforcing their language's use in contemporary urban settings. We were fortunate to have a Sakha-American intern, Katya Yegorov-Crate, whose background is in cultural anthropology. She worked with us in

fall 2022 and throughout the festival. She co-curated the afternoon program with Mary Linn, rounding out the content with a documentary short about other Sakha language efforts and an art animation-poetry short about the Sakha alphabet. Mary and Katya conducted a Q&A after the film. The audience included members of the Sakha diaspora in the Washington, D.C. area, including a visiting Slavic Studies college class from South Carolina.

On the following pages, find our complete festival program.



*Prairie Flowers*



*Daughter of a Lost Bird* screens at the Ring Auditorium on opening night.

# FESTIVAL PROGRAM





# RETURNS

*New York, Just Another City*

How do we retrace the steps of our ancestors?

For our opening night, we presented two documentaries about women confronting situations that force them to reckon with the past. In the documentary short *New York, Just Another City*, a visit to a museum sparks a Guaraní filmmaker's reflection on questions of cultural property and heritage. In the second film, *Daughter of a Lost Bird*, complicated revelations initiate a journey back home for a young woman reflecting on motherhood.

***New York, Just Another City***  
(Brazil, 2019, 30 min.)

Documentary short directed by André Lopes and Joana Brandão. In English, Portuguese, and Mbya Guaraní.

***Daughter of a Lost Bird***  
(United States, 2020, 65 min.)

Documentary feature directed by Brooke Swaney (Blackfeet/Salish). In English.

# YOUTH & LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION:

## Sakha Media School in Russia

We took a deep dive into Sakha, an Indigenous language of the Subarctic Sakha Republic, Russia, and its ongoing revitalization efforts. The screening featured three youth-directed shorts made in the Smithsonian-sponsored Sakha Media School. Following the films were a pre-recorded interview with one of the students, Baiylaana Popova, her grandmother, and Dr. Daria Boltokova (co-director of the Sakha Media School) and then a short discussion and Q&A with Mary Linn, Smithsonian curator of language and cultural vitality, and Kathryn Yegorov-Crate, a researcher and Mother Tongue intern, and featured a pre-recorded conversation with one of the youth participants in the city of Yakutsk, Russia. The films and the recorded conversation are available on our Mother Tongue Media YouTube channel.

***Video art hөһүр***  
(Sakha Republic, 2022, 2 min.)

Animation directed by Alexander Okhlopkov. In Sakha.

***Sakha Tyla: How to Teach a Machine to Understand Sakha***  
(Sakha Republic, 2021, 31 min.)

Documentary short directed by Maksim Tomash. In Sakha.

***Will the Sakha Language Remain with the Future Generation?***  
(Sakha Republic, 2021, 2 min.)

Documentary short directed by Zakhar Ivanov. In Sakha.

***Inheriting Ancestral Food***  
(Sakha Republic, 2022, 6 min.)

Documentary short directed by Baiylaana Popova. In Sakha.

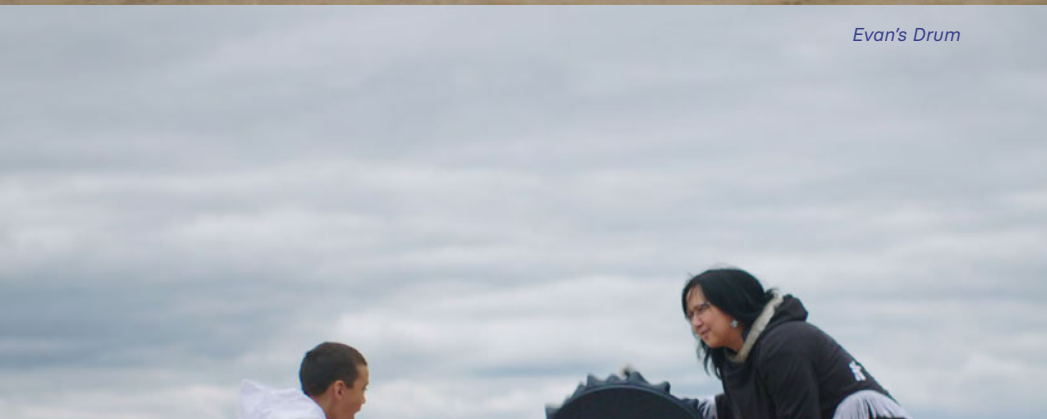
***The Sakha Theater's Invisible Front***  
(Sakha Republic, 2022, 5 min.)

Documentary short directed by Arylkhon Lebedev. In Sakha.





*Evan's Drum*



# RETURNING TRADITIONS

When the tide of first contact and “modernism” hits cultures, there is often a period of adopting new skills and technologies by the host culture. When the churning of waves subsides, there is a focus on going back to the tangible heritage from generations past. These six films examine going back to the source and returning to the traditions of ancestors.

***Evan's Drum***  
(Canada, 2021, 13 min.)

Documentary short directed by Ossie Michelin (Inuk). In English, French, and Inuktitut

***Who We Are***  
(United States, 2019, 5 min)

Dramatic short directed by Alexis Anoruk Sallee (Inupiaq). In English and Iñupiat.

***Nalujuk Night***  
(Canada, 2021, 13 min.)

Documentary short directed by Jennie Williams (Inuk). In English and Inuktitut.

***Identity***  
(United States, 2018, 11 min.)

Dramatic short directed by Alexis Anoruk Sallee (Inupiaq) and Tomás Karamelo Amaya (Yaqui, Zuni, and Tarahumara). Episode 2 of the series *Definition of Resilience*. In English and Ojibwe.

***Prayers in a Song***  
(United States, 2020, 4 min.)

Music video directed by Tall Paul (Anishinaabe and Oneida). In English and Ojibwe.

***Ho'omau***  
(United States, 2016, 15 min.)

Dramatic short directed by Kenji Doughty. In ōlelo Hawai'i.



*Angakusajaujuq: The Shaman's Apprentice*

Legacies of healing are at the heart of this program, whether in revitalizing ceremony, passing a test, or creating ritual. Collectively, these four films—two short documentaries, one animation, and one music video—illustrate how intergenerational transmission of knowledge among women can ensure continuation and revitalization of life and lifeways.

***Witch***  
(Canada/Ukraine, 2021, 3 min.)

Music video directed by Adrian Villagomez. In Ukrainian.

***Angakusajaujuq: The Shaman's Apprentice***  
(Canada, 2021, 20 min.)

Animation directed by Zacharias Kunuk (Inuk). In Inuktituk.

***Prairie Flowers***  
(Mexico, 2021, 19 min.)

Documentary short directed by Mariana X. Rivera. In Amuzgo (Ñomndaa).

***Long Line of Ladies***  
(United States, 2021, 22 min.)

Documentary short directed by Shaandiin Tome (Navajo) and Rayka Zehtabchi. In English and Karuk.

## FAYA DAYI

The Harar region of Eastern Ethiopia once grew a number of lucrative crops for export. Now, the economy is entirely dependent on the cultivation of khat, a psychoactive plant that is deeply woven into the lives of its cultivators. In a trance-like unfolding, *Faya Dayi* explores the complicated nature of this crop in Harar, from the physical to the spiritual.

This is the first feature documentary by Mexican-Ethiopian filmmaker Jessica Beshir and a documented return to her hometown, from which she and her family fled to avoid political strife when she was a teenager. It was a delight to host Jessica Beshir for a deeper exploration of the film in a virtual Q&A following the screening with Dr. Heran Sereke-Brhan.

***Faya Dayi***  
(Ethiopia/United States/Qatar, 2021, 118 min.)

Documentary feature directed by Jessica Beshir.  
In Oromo, Harari, and Amharic.





# ROOTS OF, AND ROUTES TO, HOME

Shaped through ancestral, historical, and contemporary migration, home within Oceania is rooted in place and defined by these routes. The three films within this program explore the ways communities in Papua New Guinea, Hawai'i, and Aotearoa (New Zealand) are calling out the injustices of settler colonialism and resource extraction and asserting their sovereignty. Q&A hosted by Joshua Bell with musician Allan Aufamau (aka Sprigga Mek), director Toby Mills (Ngāti Hinerangi), and canoe carvers Billy Harrison (Te Rarawa) and Heemi Eruera (Ngāti Hau, Ngāti Kaharau, Te Uri o Hina iwi).

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***Dodge the Bullet***  
(Papua New Guinea, 2020,  
5 min.)

Music video directed by Nigel Muganaua with Digital Story Box. In Tok Pisin and English.

***Like a Mighty Wave:  
A Maunakea Film***  
(2019, 15 min.)

Documentary short directed by Mikey Inouye. In English and ōlelo Hawai'i.

***Whetū Mārama – Bright Star***  
(Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2021, 93 min.).

Documentary feature directed by Toby Mills (Ngāti Hinerangi) and Aileen O'Sullivan. In English and Te Reo Māori.



*Whetū Mārama – Bright Star*

## NIGHT RAIDERS



Cree/Metis filmmaker Danis Goulet's debut feature delivers a sci-fi thriller set in the dystopian future, examining the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples and the painful past of forced assimilation on Indigenous children. *Night Raiders'* depiction of Indigenous resilience and hope speaks to the importance of community, culture, and coming home. Goulet joined us after the screening for a virtual Q&A hosted by Cindy Benitez.

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***Night Raiders***  
(Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand, 2021, 97 min.)

Dramatic feature directed by Danis Goulet (Cree-Métis). In English and Cree.



*Vaychiletik/Dreams*

Dreams may serve as aspirations or inner visions, such as longing for love and belonging or knowledge downloaded from the dream state. Encoded into a dream is a responsibility: to see it through. The director of *Vaychiletik*, Juan Javier Perez, joined us for a Q&A session with Amalia Córdova following the screening in the Hirshhorn Museum's Ring Auditorium of the.

*Presented in partnership with the Embassy of Mexico in the United States and the Mexican Cultural Institute of Washington, D.C.*

***Məca***  
(Canada, 2021, 8 min.)

Animation directed by Ritchie Norman Hemphill (Gwa'sala'Nakwaxda'xw) and Ryan Haché. In Bak'wamk'ala.

***Vaychiletik/Dreams***  
(Mexico, 2021, 82 min.)

Documentary Feature directed by Juan Javier Pérez (Tzotzil). In Tzotzil and Spanish.

# ABDZÉ WEDE ´Õ / IS THERE A CURE FOR THE VIRUS?

Special Program

In partnership with the Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital, Mother Tongue was pleased to co-present the U.S. premiere of a documentary chronicling the strategies for preserving life and lifeways in a Xavante community in Brazil's Mato Grosso region. Narrated in the first person by director Divino Tserewahú, the film highlights the desperate struggle of his village Sangradouro to survive the most tragic epidemic known to the Xavante nation. Through archival materials and images captured by Divino during the pandemic, the film connects a traumatic past with the reality of Covid-19 in the Xavante villages.

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***AbdzÉ Wede´Õ / Is there a cure for the virus?***  
(Brazil, 2021, 54 min.)

Documentary featurette directed by Divino Tserewahú (Xavante). In Xavante and Portuguese.





Uptown Singerz perform at the closing of the 2023 festival.





# REACHING OUR AUDIENCES

The Mother Tongue Film Festival returned to an in-person festival after the COVID-19 pandemic demanded digital offerings in 2021 and 2022. The pandemic changed how in-person events are now conducted, requiring adaptations to new sets of changes. In the process, we transitioned away from the fully virtual festival and toward our presence on the National Mall and at new venues such as Planet Word. Our four-day festival drew 1,207 attendees across nine events at five venues.

The variety of venues led to novel challenges around promotion and ticketing. We discovered that different Smithsonian units use different online promotional and ticketing systems; for instance, NMNH used ETix for its programs, while all other units used Eventbrite for their programs. Ultimately, we were able to accommodate many walk-in museums visitors in screenings that appeared to be sold out.

Though filling a venue is always the goal, we found that in this post-pandemic moment, roughly half of audience members who reserved virtual tickets in advance to a free event often failed to attend. Our sold-out and even over-sold events, were actually attended at about half-capacity. With Covid precautions, ticketing for all events was still mandatory. However, as COVID policies change across the Smithsonian, we may return to a first-come, first-serve ticket model to lessen ticketing-related attrition.

To better understand the impact of our efforts, we conducted audience surveys after each program via QR code. Although we presented the QR code onscreen at the end of each program, only 20 percent of attendees answered our survey. Ages ranged from sixteen to late sixties. Below are highlights from comments we received:

“The filmmaker captured a life and slice of a culture I would never have experienced without him and his artistry.”

“The festival is a fantastic way to learn more about the world we live in and helps me to appreciate all of the diversity in this world and its people.”

“They [the films] were each thought-provoking, educational & inspirational. I thoroughly enjoyed each one & learning about the language, traditions, music & culture. Since the filmmakers weren’t on site, I’ll go back & research the communities & learn more about the cultures after the festival ends.”

“Pacing was amazing. We all need to learn from cultures everywhere in order to survive the consequences of narrow mindedness. Thank you to the program supporters for making this possible.”

The transition back to in-person programming raised the question of how to have a digital impact beyond our local audiences. This year, we prioritized inviting the public back to Smithsonian museums for in-person screenings, with a limited digital program, which impacted our overall reach, including to underserved audiences. We acknowledge that our ability to produce accessible online programming—which had



Intern Katya Yergorov-Crate and curator Mary Linn speak to the audience during the Youth & Language Revitalization: Sakha Media School in Russia program.



grown in previous years—diminished this year, and we are aware that we must expand our offerings through more accessible programming. However, we were gratified to hear that our audiences appreciated the return to on-site and in-person programs:

“I’m so happy to have it back in person! Love that there are a few films available online as well. Well done!”

We also updated our evaluation to inquire what our audiences wanted to see more of, which will allow us to open our eyes to other films for future festivals:

“More stories of just people being people. More stories of Indigenous people everywhere. More stories of First People.”

“Films that highlight social justice work and community organizing work as it relates to US diplomacy so we as viewers can be allies.”

“Continued culture, customs, language use, traditions, music & interpersonal relationships in various communities that we aren’t readily exposed to.”

Overall, we acknowledge that the transition back to in-person events is taking place gradually for our audiences, while there is still a demand for online content. Moving forward, we hope to align our public’s accessibility needs alongside our capacity to serve our live and digital audiences, creatively exploring venues to respond to the new forms of public engagement of post-pandemic life.

# PARTNERS & SPONSORS

The Mother Tongue Film Festival is a public program of Recovering Voices, a collaboration between Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, National Museum of the American Indian, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and Asian Pacific American Center. Find related resources through Folklife’s Mother Tongue Media and Language Vitality Initiative.

This program received support from the Americas Research Network, the Embassy of Mexico in the United States, Ferring Pharmaceuticals, Georgetown University Department of Anthropology, the Mexican Cultural Institute of Washington, D.C., New Zealand Embassy to the United States of America, Planet Word, Whitney and Elizabeth MacMillan Fund, and Wick and Bonnie Moorman.



# STAFF

## Curatorial and Organizing Team

**Joshua A. Bell**  
Festival Director  
Curator of Globalization, Department of Anthropology, NMNH

**Amalia I. Córdova**  
Festival Director  
Supervisory Museum Curator, World Cultures, CFCH

**Cynthia Benitez**  
Festival Curator  
Program Manager, NMAI

**Kālewa Correa**  
Festival Curator  
Curator of Hawai'i and the Pacific, APAC

**Mary S. Linn**  
Festival Curator  
Curator of Language and Cultural Vitality, CFCH

**Claudia Foronda**  
Festival Project Manager, CFCH

**Cecelia Halle**  
Communications Manager and Graphic Designer, CFCH

**Laura Sharp**  
Program Assistant, Recovering Voices, NMNH

**Maddie Van Oostenburg**  
Research Assistant, CFCH

## Production Team

**Elisa Hough**  
Web Developer and Editor, CFCH

**Charlie Weber**  
Video Editor, CFCH

## Interns

**Paloma Catalan**  
Festival Intern, CFCH

**Camila Abbud**  
Latinx Museum Studies Program Intern, CFCH/NMAL

**Katya Yegorov-Crate**  
Festival Intern, CFCH

**Anna Farronay**  
Festival Intern, CFCH



The Mother Tongue team gathers on closing night.  
L-R: Kālewa, Claudia, Josh, Cecelia, Cindy, Maddie, Laura, Katya, and Mary



# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Languages and Regions

### 23 Languages

- |              |                   |                  |
|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. Amharic   | 9. Iñupiat        | 17. Russian      |
| 2. Amuzgo    | 10. Karuk         | 18. Sakha        |
| 3. Chulym    | 11. Mbya Guaraní  | 19. Spanish      |
| 4. Cree      | 12. 'Bakwamkala   | 20. Te Reo Māori |
| 5. English   | 13. Ojibwe        | 21. Tok Pisin    |
| 6. French    | 14. Ōlelo Hawai'i | 22. Tzotzil      |
| 7. Harari    | 15. Oromo         | 23. Ukrainian    |
| 8. Inuktitut | 16. Portuguese    |                  |

### 12 Regions

- |                         |                     |                   |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Aotearoa/New Zealand | 5. Hawai'i          | 10. Siberia       |
| 2. Brazil               | 6. Mexico           | 11. Ukraine       |
| 3. Canada               | 7. Papua New Guinea | 12. United States |
| 4. Ethiopia             | 8. Qatar            |                   |
|                         | 9. Sakha Republic   |                   |

## Appendix 2: Press Coverage

### Articles Produced by the Mother Tongue Film Festival

["Mother Tongue Is Coming Home: Highlights and Themes in This Year's Film Festival,"](#) Folklife Magazine, February 13, 2023.

["Sakha Cinema: Worldviews from Northeastern Siberia on Film,"](#) Folklife Magazine, February 21, 2023.

### Complete Press Coverage

["These upcoming Washington film festivals showcase stories from around the world,"](#) Washington Post, January 19, 2022.

["Dodge the Bullet to Screen in US,"](#) Papua New Guinea Post Courier, January 27, 2022.

["PNG rapper's music video to be showcased on world stage,"](#) ABC Pacific, January 31, 2022.

["Smithsonian Presents the Mother Tongue Film Festival, 'Coming Home,'"](#) Smithsonian Newsdesk, February 7, 2023.

["Application closing soon for the Indigenous Community Media Fund,"](#) Rising Voices Newsletter, February 10, 2023.

["Aida Rodriguez, Mother Tongue, and More Best Bets for Feb. 16–22,"](#) Washington City Paper, February 16, 2023.

["Expanding Narratives,"](#) Film Fatales, February 17, 2023.

["11 Things to Do Around D.C. This Week,"](#) DCist, February 20, 2023.

["11 Things You Can Do on International Mother Language Day,"](#) Cultural Survival, February 21, 2023.

["13 Virtual and IRL Things to Do Around D.C. This Weekend,"](#) DCist, February 23, 2023.

["Everything Fun You Can Do in DC This Weekend,"](#) Thrillist, February 23, 2023.

["Enjambre at Union Stage and More Best Bets for Feb. 23–March 1,"](#) Washington City Paper, February 23, 2023.

["Night Raiders Review: Mother Tongue Film Festival,"](#) Loud and Clear, February 28, 2023.

["And the Oscar for best international film rarely goes to ...,"](#) NPR, March 10, 2023.



Rapper and festival participant Sprigga Mek stands outside the Smithsonian Castle.





