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*Our Fires Still Burn: The Native American Experience* dir. by  
Audrey Geyer (review)

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*Deadwood* represents a lively and varied populace of pioneers and non-conformists, building an unconventional community based, for good or ill, on individualism and anti-establishment ideals.

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NOTE

1. Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 147.

*Our Fires Still Burn: The Native American Experience*, dir. Audrey Geyer (2013).

*Our Fires Still Burn: The Native American Experience* is a documentary that was produced and directed by Audrey Geyer, an independent filmmaker from Michigan whose non-profit production company, Visions, is based in Detroit. Released in 2013, this one-hour film was screened at various United Methodist churches in the Grand Rapids region and shown on the World Channel in November 2016 during Native American Indian month. Its close focus on local American Indians from the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe near Mount Pleasant, Michigan, was praised by the University of Michigan, Native News Online (editor Levi Rickert appears in the movie), and SAY Magazine (a Native American-focused magazine distributed mainly in Manitoba, Canada, and several Midwest states).

Thematically sectioned into chapters such as “Betting on the Future” and “Calling on the Ancestors,” this film focuses on the present situation among a very diverse group of Ojibwa from Isabella County. Geyer presents their struggles as clear consequences of colonial and genocidal policies, such as the 1880s Indian Wars and the Indian Boarding Schools. The documentary then concentrates on methods for healing. Teaching Anishinaabemowin (the Ojibwa language) and values to Native youth is presented as the priority of every member of the community, including tribal council member Louanna Bruner, veteran and head dancer George Martin, and Scott Badenoch, CEO of a technical and scientific innovation company.

Throughout the movie, viewers hear from educators, tribal leaders, entrepreneurs, and family men and women about their histories and person-

al experiences as Native people in today's Midwest. They all insist on the importance of adapting to the modern world while maintaining the moral code of their ancestors: maxims that include truth, humility, generosity, and love. By teaching the language and Sacred Fire ceremonies to Ojibwa youth, these educators help tighten the relationships within their community, and transmit their cultural pride to teenagers at risk for alcohol abuse, drugs, unsafe sexual practices, and/or lateral violence. From basketball analogies to language immersion classes, they truly illustrate the motto of "Culture as Prevention."

The title *Our Fires Still Burn* refers to the spiritual and cultural importance of maintaining the Sacred Fire in the wabano. The word "wabano" means the twilight sun, and it is used to refer to new beginnings. It also designates the dedicated place where Ojibwa would celebrate births, prepare burials, discuss disagreements, and make decisions as a group. Today's firekeepers, Bruce Hardwick and Duanne Kinnart, are maintaining this tradition, and they act as cultural teachers for the community. The fire itself is their spiritual leader. It is connected to the Medicine Wheel, a circle comprised of the four directions, representing the four different human races, sacred medicines, and stages of life. Interviewees also suggest the need for unity and equality between different groups in the United States and abroad. By linking local groups from the Grand Rapids area to tribes in Michigan, in addition to other tribes throughout America and even non-Native groups, Geyer stresses the importance of working together despite the multiple layers of difference that comprise our modern societies. Youth Advocate Lee Ruffino tells viewers that the great diversity of the Midwest and the greater diversity within the entire American continent both need to be recognized and embraced for everyone to move forward.

The soundtrack for the film was composed by Warren Petowskey, an Odawa/Lakota musician from the Sioux reservation of Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Petowskey is the great-great-grandson of Chief Ignatius Petoskey from Little Traverse Bay, Michigan. Because the documentary does such a great job of localizing the people interviewed and placing their stories within the history of their geographical and cultural area without simultaneously erasing the greater impact that national genocidal policies had on them, it can at first seem surprising that the director uses such a stereotypical trope as "the Indian flute." This recurrent element employed by non-Native cinematographers can be found in numerous movies and has been labeled by Indigenous scholars and activists as a crude way of fabricating pan-Indian

content. The flute is, however, part of Anishinaabe music, and here it accompanies the stories of the Ojibwa participants. While occasionally overwhelming, it is a great addition nonetheless. It provides the viewer with one more localized, culturally-appropriate example of Ojibwa practices.

Research on Native groups by non-Native academics, journalists, or film crews tend to either dismiss the genocidal practices of the government as historical reasons for generational trauma or focus only on negative social indicators of indigeneity, such as rates of suicide, drug addiction, or incarceration. *Our Fires Still Burn* manages to link people's situations back to what too often is deemed "past" events, but without commiserating. Instead of dwelling on vague ideas of American history and generalized Native American stereotypes, it allows people to tell their own stories of trauma, but also of resilience and strength. It will hopefully be a source of inspiration for local non-Native residents of places such as Mount Pleasant to meet their Native neighbors and participate in cultural activities to further mutual understandings, thus allowing them to bridge the gap of difference and promote community.

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