

“Reel Navajo”: The Linguistic Creation of Indigenous Screen Memories [Abstract]
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Popular cultures are key sites for Philip Deloria has called the “production of expectations,” and as a major form of popular culture, film has figured prominently in the circulation and reproduction of expectations about Native American peoples since the early twentieth century. This paper explores the ideologies and practices involved in the process of Navajo directors making films in the Navajo language, engaging in- and out-group language ideologies, social choices, and the political economy of indigenous media. Building upon Faye Ginsburg’s notion of “screen memories,” this work illustrates how the (mis)use of Navajo communicative practices can be (de)legitimizing for audiences and integral to the creation of indigenous screen memories, and—when appropriately deployed—how the use of Navajo creates social intimacy through the representation of shared sociality and linguistic realities. The filmic site of production—during casting, rehearsals, shooting, and editing—is where cultural producers often have a heightened awareness of representational and linguistic practices. Furthermore, for some contemporary Navajo filmmakers, there is a compulsion to create films in Navajo, both challenging and augmenting the linguistic competencies of a multitude of participants. Film is a nexus for linguistic vitality as filmmakers negotiate their cultural productions with an eye toward authenticity, global expectations, and “keeping it real” for themselves, their Navajo speaking audiences, and for historical accuracy.

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