



Sundance 2026: KimberlÃ© Crenshaw, Ava DuVernay, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Jacqueline Stewart Confront Censorship and the New McCarthyism in *The Story of Us*

## Description

### Partner Event â?? Sundance Film Festival 2026

PARK CITY, UT â?? Sundance opened this year with a gathering that felt less like a festival event and more like a call to consciousness. *The Story of Us Presents: The New McCarthyism â?? Why Authoritarians Fear Storytellers*, presented by the African American Policy Forum, traced the long arc of cinematic storytelling as a site where democracy is contested and where Black artists have borne the brunt of cultural repression. At a time when public art is under attack and censorship resurges under new names, the evening framed our present moment as both familiar and frighteningly contemporary. Under the deft guidance of moderator KimberlÃ© Crenshawâ??legal scholar and co-founder of AAPFâ??Ava DuVernay, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Jacqueline Stewart joined performers to excavate the past and confront the stakes of the stories we tell now.

Crenshaw framed the evening with a question drawn from the legacy of Paul Robeson:

**â??Every artist must decide now where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights.â??**

It was a grounding that refused neutrality from the outset. There would be no pretense of â??just artâ?? hereâ??no safe middle ground. Instead, Crenshaw invited the room to confront what it means to tell the story of â??usâ?? at a time when censorship, erasure, and ideological pressure are not relics of the past but active forces shaping cultural production today.

A black and white portrait of a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a collared shirt, resting his chin (Archival publicity photo of Paul Robeson, 1930s.)

The central question, invoked through Robesonâ??s legacy, was blunt:

## **What does independence require in this moment—and what does it mean to tell the story of us when censorship and erasure are not abstract, but ongoing?**

From there, the evening unfolded as a layered conversation about old and new McCarthyisms, racialized repression, and the role of cinema in either reinforcing or resisting state power.

The presenters reminded us that even when people have heard of the Hollywood blacklist, they tend to know only a thin slice of it: [Dalton Trumbo](#), [Good Night, and Good Luck](#), a few white writers and directors. Far fewer know that [Robeson](#) was once among the most famous Americans on earth—before his name was systematically erased from textbooks, recordings, and public memory. Fewer still know Hazel Scott, Canada Lee, or the full extent of blacklisting’s impact on Black performers and filmmakers.

The provocation was simple and devastating:

**Imagine a future in which no one remembers Beyoncé existed because the apparatus of power successfully erased her.**

That’s the magnitude of what was done to Black artists in the 1940s and 1950s, and what remains largely absent from popular narratives of McCarthyism. From this grounding in erasure and resistance, the evening moved into an examination of how these forces shaped—and continue to shape—the cinematic imagination.

## **Jacqueline Stewart: What became unspeakable on screen**

Film scholar Jacqueline Stewart traced how censorship and self-policing in Hollywood didn’t just silence a handful of individuals; it reshaped the language of cinema itself. She pointed to films like *No Way Out* (1950), Sidney Poitier’s first major role, which begins to gesture toward insurgent Black resistance but ultimately pulls back. The pattern, Stewart argued, is everywhere:

**Films that seemed to engage race head-on always stopped short, never feeling fully authentic to Black audiences because of the fears—industrial, political, and racial—operating behind the camera.**

Stewart linked this to the Hays Code, which policed not only sexual content and criminality but any depiction of interracial intimacy or equality. Even *hinting* at miscegenation could get a film censored or reshaped, forcing storytellers to contort narratives so that Black presence remained limited, legible, and non-threatening.

Crucially, Stewart pushed back against the myth of linear progress. Some films in the 1940s, she noted, went further than films released a decade or two later. Instead of a simple upward trajectory, we inherit an uneven landscape of advances and retrenchments—a push forward followed by silencing or backlash.

As someone whose work is grounded in archives, this landed hard: **we are not only inheriting specific films, but also the gaps they were forced to leave.**

## **Ava DuVernay: Distracting us from the real work**

**Ava DuVernay** brought the conversation squarely into the present tense. She refused to treat McCarthyism as a closed chapter. Artists today, she said, are “encouraged not to talk about” Palestine, not to wear a button, not to show up for a Q&A, not to distribute or even platform films coming out of Gaza—many of which struggle to secure any distribution at all. The consequences might not always look like those of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a controversial U.S. congressional committee (1938–1975) that investigated alleged subversion and disloyalty, especially Communist influence in government, Hollywood, and other groups during the Red Scare hearings, but the chilling effect is familiar.

DuVernay insisted that **racism and ideological smear campaigns function as distractions**. During the reception of [“When They See Us”](#) and *The Exonerated Five* narrative more broadly, she found herself pulled into defending the project against hostile criticisms that had nothing to do with the boys or their families. The conversation kept being redirected away from state violence and toward bad-faith questions about tone, fairness, and “bias.”

**“We’re litigating words,” she said, “while people are being taken from their homes, kids are being arrested, due process is slipping away. The whole conversation gets dragged toward labels. Meanwhile, the harm continues.”**

Her refusal was clear: she will not spend her energy debating terminology when the real work is to tell stories of human beings surviving and resisting structures of harm.

DuVernay also pushed artists to reconsider their relationship to “success.” Blacklisted filmmakers and independent pioneers like [Oscar Micheaux](#), she noted, kept creating for their communities even when the mainstream industry rejected them. They traveled from town to town, screening films in spaces where their work was wanted and needed. The metric was never about awards seasons or studio approval.

If we say we are storytellers, she suggested, then we have to strip away the fantasy that validation will come from the very institutions invested in our silence.

## **Viet Thanh Nguyen: Capitalism, confession, and the cinema industrial complex**

**Viet Thanh Nguyen** widened the frame, arguing that the “true American religion” is capitalism. He connected the repression of Robeson and Dr. King to state fear not only of civil rights, but of critiques of American militarism and capitalism itself.

He described programs like the [Chinese Confession Program](#) of the 1950s, where Chinese immigrants were pressured to confess to immigration “fraud” and name others, underlining how racialized surveillance and forced confession become tools to discipline communities.

The pattern, for Nguyen, is familiar:

- Yesterday's "communist" and "subversive" is today's "terrorist" or "woke."
- A global conflict becomes justification for criminalizing domestic dissent.
- Marginalized communities are forced into performances of loyalty just to exist.

When it comes to cinema, Nguyen was unsparing. Hollywood, he argued, is effectively *the propaganda arm of the American empire*. It doesn't always need explicit government directives because the ideology of American exceptionalism is deeply internalized. Films like the 1958 adaptation of [The Quiet American](#) transformed a critical, anti-imperialist novel into a story that ultimately vindicated U.S. intervention in Vietnam—a cinematic "revenge" on dissenting literature that echoed across decades of war films.

Hollywood *can* eventually admit uncomfortable truths, he said, but often only when it's safe, when the bodies are already buried, and the geopolitical winds have shifted. That's why he places his hope not in studios, but in writers, independent filmmakers, and community-based storytellers who can risk telling the truth **on time**, not twenty years late.

A smiling woman with curly hair plays the piano, wearing a floral-patterned blouse. The image is black and white. Piano virtuoso Hazel Scott, 1950. Getty Images/ Gilles Petard/Redferns.

## Hazel Scott and the violence of quiet erasure

One of the night's most searing sequences featured a performance by [Kara Young](#), written and directed by [Justin Emeka](#). The result was a visceral, finely crafted intervention—a part reenactment, part embodied memory—that anchored the evening's themes in lived experience. It was a moment that crystallized what the event truly was: a gathering of creatives, thinkers, and changemakers committed to telling the story of us with courage and clarity. The reenactment centered on Hazel Scott—the first Black woman to host her own network TV show—as Kara Young delivered Scott's testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Scott's words rang out:

**"This is the day of the professional gossip, the organized rumor monger! The years of preparation, sacrifice, and devotion are killed."**

The reenactment then walked us through what happened next. Her show was canceled. Her image was framed as dangerous. And in a chilling detail, the tapes of her television show—evidence that a Black woman had once sat at a piano and addressed the nation as an equal—were reportedly dumped into the Hudson River.

No announcement. No apology. Just reels disappearing into water and silence.

The sequence made visible a key point of the night:  **censorship is often bureaucratic and quiet**. It does not always arrive with sirens or burning books. It can look like a contract not renewed, a show not archived, a project mysteriously dropped from a catalog, a film that never gets distribution.

And yet, as the performance reminded us:

“You do not throw something into a river unless you are afraid of what it might say.”

Watch the archival footage here:

## What “the story of us” asks of us now

Leaving the event, I felt less like I had attended a panel and more like I had been given a set of instructions. For those of us who write, teach, make films, or curate archives, “The Story of Us” was a reminder that:

- **Storytelling is not neutral.** Every narrative participates in either widening or narrowing who counts as “us.”
- **Archives are not neutral.** What is preserved, destroyed, or quietly neglected has everything to do with power.
- **Censorship is not just a past event.** It is happening now, in decisions about what gets funded, platformed, reviewed, distributed, or even safely named.

DuVernay’s challenge stayed with me: awards, reviews, and institutional permission cannot be the horizon of our work. If our stories are accountable to communities rather than to markets, we will often be out of sync with what the industry wants.

Nguyen’s insistence that we name capitalism and empire as core forces—not just background noise—reinforced that point. Stewart’s archival expertise grounded it in a century of film history: we are already living with the afterlives of prior erasures.

If McCarthyism gave us one lesson, it is this: **erasure is never a one-time event.** Its effects echo across generations, shaping what seems normal, what seems “too risky,” what never even gets imagined.

So when we say “the story of us” now, at Sundance or anywhere else, the question is not just *who is on stage*, but:

- **Whose stories have been made unthinkable or unspeakable?**
- **Who is being discouraged from speaking now?**
- **And who are we, as creators, willing to stand with when the cost of telling the truth rises?**

For me—as a critic, teacher, and researcher—the night reclarified something I already suspected but needed to hear out loud: There are no impartial observers. There are only those who benefit from silence—and those who refuse to be quiet.

Stream this talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lr9GZED4V40>

Portrait of KimberlÃ© Crenshaw, a law professor and executive director of the African American Poli

## Backtalker

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## An American Memoir: On presale now

By [KimberlÃ© Williams Crenshaw](#)

Cover of the memoir 'Backtalker' by KimberlÃ© Williams Crenshaw featuring a childhood photo of a  
[Author Photo \(jpg\): KimberlÃ© Williams Crenshaw](#)

Photograph (c) Annabel Clark



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