



Sundance Review: *Aanikoobijigan*??Repatriation of Native Ancestors

Description

Section: NEXT
Runtime: 80 minutes
Country: United States / Denmark
Languages: English, Anishinaabemowin

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Directors: Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil
Producers: Steve Holmgren, Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil, Grace Remington, Jacque Clark, Franny Alfano
Editors: Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil
Cinematography: Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil
Additional Cinematography: Jacque Clark, Shaandiin Tome, Sky Hopinka, Bayley Sweitzer, Samuli Haavisto
Sound Recordists: Jacque Clark, Zack Khalil
Original Score: Leila Bordreuil, Lucky Dragons
Sound Design: Ernst Karel, Eli Cohn
Performers: Alicia Gervais, Elizabeth Young, Jim Fletcher
Companies: Ozhiton Films & Steady Orbits

Aanikoobijigan is an Anishinaabemowin (*the Indigenous language of the Anishinaabe peoples, including Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi nations*) word meaning *ancestor, great-grandparent, great-grandchild*??a single term that collapses generations into one continuous line. In this worldview, time is not linear but relational; past and future touch each other. The title offers the documentary??s first teaching: ancestors are not behind us, nor ahead of us, but with us.

From that understanding, *Aanikoobijigan* opens with an unvarnished truth: ??Our ancestors have been dug up and removed from their graves, and their bones have been in museums for the last 200 years.â?• It??s not a metaphor, not a symbol, but a fact that sits like a stone in the viewer??s throat. A few moments later, Sydney Martin describes walking ??into the bowels of a museum where they keep boxes filled with our ancestors?? remains,â?• calling it ??the most stifling, crumbling feeling.â?• And even these early revelations barely prepare the viewer for where the documentary is about to take them.

They are built, as another speaker bluntly puts it, on the understanding that “these great institutions and amazing collections were built upon the pain of other people.” It’s hard to watch, and its urgency lies in that very discomfort.

Context: A Long History of Desecration

The documentary traces this pain across more than two centuries. We move from Thomas Jefferson’s 1784 excavation of an Indian burial mound through the rise of “scientific racism” in the nineteenth century, when, as one expert explains, “folks were out digging up burials to justify a lot of these early racial categories.” The goal was not understanding but proof: “The assumption would have been that the races are separate species—and we can measure that difference by measuring skulls.”

What we now call “data” was built from Indigenous bodies. Collections expanded under the premise that “the more remains you can collect, the more data points you have.” Native people—especially Native dead—were treated as a “rapidly vanishing resource” to be captured, catalogued, and stored.

This history is not contained in the past. William Johnson, chair of the Michigan Anishinaabeg Cultural Preservation and Repatriation Alliance (MACPRA), notes that “only 30% of eligible remains to this point have been sent home,” even three decades after NAGPRA. The documentary names institutions that still hold thousands of ancestors, including Harvard and the American Museum of Natural History.

The critique becomes even sharper when they turn to the largest repatriation case in U.S. history: the 2014 FBI raid on Don Miller’s suburban Indiana home, where the remains of more than 500 Indigenous people were found among some 40,000 cultural items. Miller liked to believe he was conducting anthropological work, but the documentary makes that fantasy untenable. In reality, he was a racist grave-digger whose compulsion to collect human remains was, as one speaker puts it, “sickening” really, it’s sickeningly weird, awful. “Why on this good earth would you want to do that?” His basement functioned as a private morgue—an unofficial museum organized not by scientific curiosity but by a colonial worldview that treats Indigenous ancestors as trophies. The documentary uses Miller’s case to expose the truth at the heart of the archive: The urge to collect is never neutral; it is a desire to dominate, to possess, to control.

What emerges from these revelations is the argument: museums are not neutral but inherit a colonial worldview; Anishinaabe teachings collapse past, present, and future into a single line of relation; repatriation is both labor and ceremony; and settlers are haunted not by ghosts but by the histories they refuse to face.



Collector Don Miller amassed tens of thousands of cultural objects— as this photograph, taken at his farm in 2014, suggests. Photo from the [FBI](#).

I. Museums as Colonial Inheritance

Museums emerge in this not as neutral repositories but as theatres of colonial power. Drawers of human remains are framed not as scientific assets, but as evidence of domination. We hear how Europeans once filled rooms with “mineral specimens,” “fossil specimens,” “stuffed specimens of animals,” and “artifacts made by people” and “sometimes” bones of people. That practice, the documentary reminds us, “was less about scientific learning” and a little bit more of a trophy and display practice.

“You cannot divorce it from the notion that there is some innate right to dominate another group in the name of progress,” one speaker insists. The modern museum inherits that logic, even when it calls itself educational.

This inheritance is not abstract. Sydney Martin recalls that when she did repatriation work for her tribe, she “wasn’t afraid to use the F word, the H word, anything to convey how wrong it was to keep ancestors in boxes: “We care enough about our ancestors that we’ll do anything to get them back, and we have to have them back or there will be hell to pay.” Her anger comes from love—love that refuses to accept that “if you stole them, dug them up, bought them, traded for them—they’re not yours, and it’s just not right to keep them.”

II. Indigenous Epistemologies of Time & Relationality

If the documentary stopped at exposing harm, it would already matter. But its most powerful work is epistemic. It asks viewers to reconsider what counts as knowledge in the first place.

“There’s this assumption in the Western mindset that distance in time through years means distance in relationship,” one speaker explains, “and that’s just simply not the case.” In Anishinaabe frameworks, “past, present, and future are always interconnected and touching each other.” Another speaker describes the Potawatomi word for both ancestor and future generation—a word that “means ancestor and future generation simultaneously.”

This is not a poetic flourish; it is ontology. “The bones of my ancestors are my bones—there’s really little to no delineation between any of it.” When you begin from that understanding, the idea of boxing ancestors for study is not just distasteful; it is unimaginable.

The film also offers a devastating critique of the archive itself. At one point, we hear: “If an object is animate, an archive is a prison. If an object is an ancestor, when can the grandkids visit? Who pays for the plane ticket?” The line pierces because it reframes museum storage in relational terms. If these are not objects but relatives, then locking them away becomes a form of captivity.

III. The Work and Weight of Repatriation

Some of *Aanikoobijigan*’s most affecting sequences come when it pauses on the quiet, painstaking work of return. One elder remembers being a child and watching people bring “boxes of bones” to her grandpa and mom: “I’m going on 80 now, and I was this high, and I can remember my mom and my grandpa taking that cardboard box out to the woods, just the three of us burying those people.” The intimacy of that memory cuts through any temptation to keep this conversation at the level of policy.

We also see communities finding ways to repair harm that institutions refused to acknowledge. After Harvard returned ancestors without their burial belongings, Johnson recalls how their tribal community responded: “Our grandmothers and aunties—provided the associated funerary objects for them that they would be buried with—They took the time and the love and the spirit of the Anishinaabe people and created those objects that were withheld from them.” That image—grandmothers and aunties sewing and beading to restore what was taken—is one of the most beautiful acts of counter-archiving the story of offers.

Repatriation is, at its most basic level, a return, as Colleen Rose Medicine notes. But the documentary shows how much more it is than that: a renewal of responsibility, a ceremonial reweaving of relationships across time.

IV. Settler Guilt & Narrative Displacement

Aanikoobijigan does not shy away from the psychic cost of this history for settlers either. Every time something shows up, it reminds those who aren't Native that the Natives were here. And you can't think of the Natives being here without thinking of what happened.

The question follows: How did this thriving population just disappear? Somebody in my ancestry killed them. And while I may not have done it I did profit from it. The documentary connects this discomfort to the familiar horror trope of the Indian burial ground. Instead of asking why we build over Native cemeteries, popular culture imagines vengeful ghosts. That trope, one speaker notes, removes the ethical question about, like, why are you even thinking about any new burial ground in the first place?

America is not haunted by ghosts; it is haunted by its refusal to face history.

Critical Intervention: The Myth of Objectivity

As a whole, *Aanikoobijigan* dismantles the claim that anthropology and the scientific method are neutral forms of knowledge. Objectivity, it argues, is a colonial performance—a rhetorical strategy used to justify the extraction of Indigenous bodies for study. Data, the film reminds us, often meant skulls taken from graves, ancestors stored in boxes, remains turned into evidence to prove racial hierarchies.

What Western science called neutrality was often desire. What it called research was desecration. Knowledge is never universal—it is place-based. It emerges from context, land, relationship, and responsibility. In centering Anishinaabe epistemologies, the documentary performs a counter-archival act: refusing the archive's disembodiment and demanding a return to relational truth.

This is also where the film's indictment reaches beyond institutions to the nation itself. **United States citizens must reckon with both the historic and ongoing trauma this nation continues to inflict on Indigenous nations striving to reclaim their ancestors from the archives of museums and academic institutions across the country.** *Aanikoobijigan* makes clear that this is not only a question for curators, anthropologists, or university presidents. It is a question for everyone living on this land.

Directorial Approach: Adam & Zack Khalil's Counter-Archive

Crucial to the film's power is the vision of its directors, Adam and Zack Khalil (Ojibway), whose body of work continually pushes against traditional nonfiction forms. Their filmmaking practice attempts to subvert inherited modes of documentary image-making through humor, relation, and intentional transgression—strategies that reject the colonial gaze rather than accommodate it.

Both are core contributors to [New Red Order](#), an Indigenous-led collective that exposes and critiques the structures through which settler society claims, consumes, and commodifies Indigenous identity.

Their work has been exhibited at MoMA, Tate Modern, and other major institutions, yet it consistently troubles the authority those institutions represent. That tensionâ??between visibility and critiqueâ??animates every frame of *Aanikoobijigan*.

Their approach here is both monumental and intimate. Through an essayistic structure layered with vÃ©ritÃ© portraits (observational, immersive filmmaking that avoids staged intervention), the Khalils create a film that behaves like a counter-archive: an undoing of the museumâ??s impulse to collect, categorize, and contain. The aesthetic choices are never merely stylistic. They form a worldviewâ??one grounded in Anishinaabe relationality, in the refusal of distance, and in a cinematic language that mirrors the collapsing of past, present, and future described by speakers throughout the film.

In their hands, *Aanikoobijigan* becomes not just a document of repatriation, but an enactment of it â?? a return of narrative, voice, and presence to communities long spoken about rather than listened to.

Closing: What We Owe One Another Now

Aanikoobijigan left me with a lot of unresolved questions that are as much about policy as they are pedagogy, and responsibility: How do we teach people to respect the sanctity of life after death? How do we help non-Native viewers understand that returning ancestors is not a gesture of political correctness, but an act of love, of sovereignty, of relational repair?

The documentary suggests that the answer begins with a commitment: to understanding Anishinaabe ways of lifeâ??not as an anthropological sidebar, but as a guide to how we might live respectfully. In this worldview, land is kin, not property. Ancestors are present, not past. Knowledge is relational, not objective. Returning ancestors, then, stops looking like bureaucratic compliance and begins to look like what it truly is: the restoration of a sacred bond.

For those seeking a deeper grounding in these teachings, [Robin Wall Kimmererâ??s *Braiding Sweetgrass*](#) is an ideal companion. Kimmerer, like the speakers in this film, insists that knowledge grows from soil, story, gratitude, and reciprocity. Read together, the documentary and the book braid ceremony, history, and responsibility into a single, urgent call: to honor the dead by changing how we live with the living.

Aanikoobijigan is not a film to watch once and set aside. It is a film to sit with, to learn from, to return to. It insists that neutrality has never existed, that archives are never innocent, and that the work of returnâ??of bringing ancestors home, of learning to see all ancestors as kin rather than objectsâ??must continue, here and now.

To learn more about the film and tickets go [here](#)

Portrait of Adam Khalil, a filmmaker and artist, wearing a cap and styled beard, with a blurred background.

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keola06