

MISS NAVAJO

A DOCUMENTARY BY BILLY LUTHER



DISCUSSION GUIDE

How many beauty contestants can say “I competed in a pageant where I butchered a sheep?” Crystal Frazier can. Follow this introverted, self-proclaimed tomboy as she makes bread, weaves a rug, sweats her way through a language quiz—and that’s just the first day—on her quest to be the new MISS NAVAJO.



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INDEPENDENT LENS 

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

I decided to make MISS NAVAJO because growing up as a Native American in a very westernized way, I felt ambivalent about my heritage. I felt connected yet also disconnected and in wanting to make a film about my culture I really wanted to avoid the earnest, slightly reproving tone that almost inevitably seems to become the voice of a minority culture trying to be heard.

What inspired me about the beauty pageant was that here was a crossroads where the western competition met Native influences, and the result was something not gaudy and glitzy like most beauty pageants, but something beautiful and profound, something that really reveals the true essence of beauty and in so doing, I think, provides a compelling insight into what it is that both makes my culture and heritage unique but also relevant to today's world.

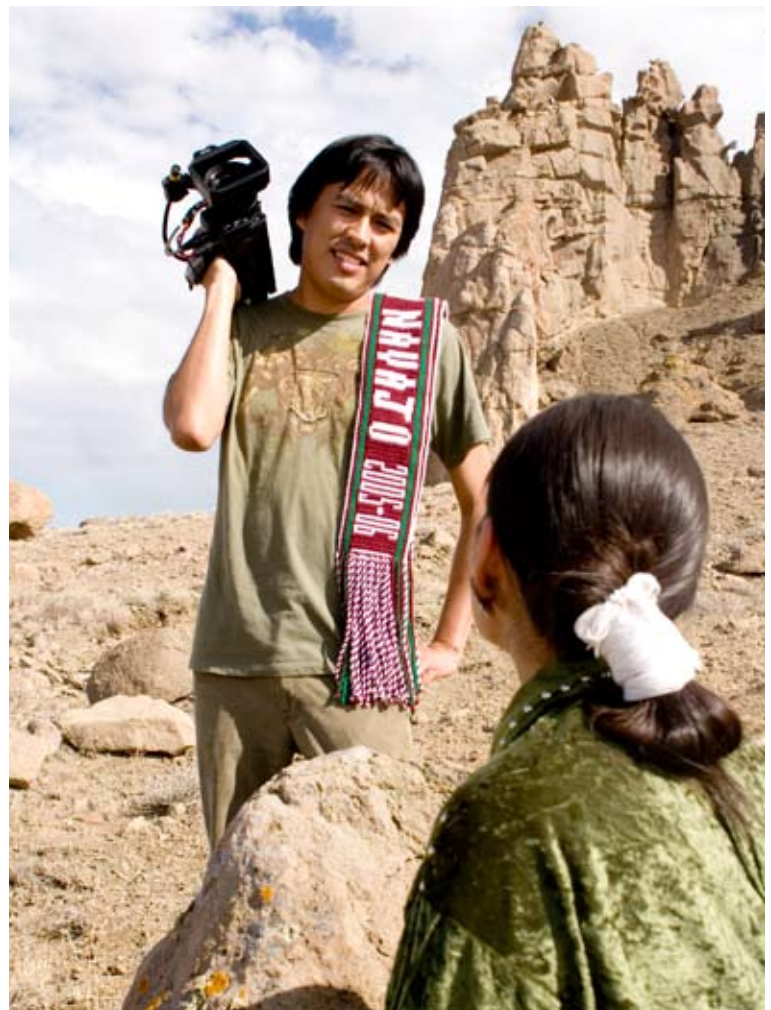
Above all what I learned from the experience of making the film was how beauty is an inner quality and one very much connected to identity. Crystal is beautiful from the outset but she only enters the competition as a kind of joke and feels embarrassed about it. Then as she goes through the competition she realizes how much she wants to win because she ultimately realizes that this pageant is all about her identity. She goes from being a girl to becoming a woman in the film. She embraces her identity. She knows with confidence who she is. Since my mother is in the film and was the winner of the Miss Navajo pageant back in 1966, I felt very connected to it and felt that I too became comfortable with who I was, and my ambivalence about my western life and my roots all became reconciled.

That's just my personal takeaway from the film. I hope that everyone who watches it will get something out of it, and maybe it's just that this idea of beauty isn't really an external thing at all... it's every internal and profoundly connected to our identity and who we are. I think once we embrace who we are and are at peace with that, we all become beautiful!

People shouldn't watch this film out of a sense of obligation: "Oh there goes another culture and language into the dustbin of history." No, this is a film about a beauty pageant and competition—and there's a winner and a loser. But sometimes—as in *Life*—the winners aren't always the winners and the losers aren't always the losers!

MISS NAVAJO is dedicated to the Navajo woman, which is what the film is all about. Navajo women wear the trousers in Navajo society. They work the land, they raise the kids, and they preserve the culture and traditions. And they butcher the sheep! So you can see they are so much more than just a pretty face. My film isn't just *about* them, it's *for* them.

Billy Luther



THE FILM

The Miss Navajo contest is more than a beauty pageant. Contestants must know Navajo history, culture and mythology, possess an array of traditional skills and speak the Navajo language. They recognize that whoever becomes Miss Navajo has an important role to play in representing the Navajo Nation to the rest of the world.

Crystal Frazier, a participant in the 2005 contest, provides a glimpse into the motivation and preparation of contestants. Living on the Navajo reservation in a house without running water, Crystal helps care for her family's livestock, makes a weekly trip to the well for water and does a share of the cooking. She acknowledges her own shyness and says that participating in the Miss Navajo contest would probably be a good experience.

During the three days of the pageant, the contestants display varying degrees of knowledge and skill in answering questions about Navajo government and history, speaking Navajo and building a fire over which they cook the traditional Native American frybread. A crucial test comes during the butchering of a sheep—one of the required skills—when one contestant is overcome and has to leave the pageant.

Interviews with former Miss Navajo winners reveal some of the hardships and discrimination Native Americans have experienced in the past, particularly being sent to boarding schools where their language and culture were forcibly suppressed. To them and to the current contestants, the Miss Navajo contest is an affirmation not only of the role of women in Navajo culture, but also of the beauty and dignity of the culture itself.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Navajo Nation is a 16-million-acre tract of land in northeastern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico and southern Utah. The largest Indian reservation in the United States, it is a self-governing entity whose laws are subject to review by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In the Navajo language the traditional homeland is called Dinétah (“land of the people”) and the Navajo are called Dineh, which means “the people.” The Dineh are descended from ancient tribes of hunters and gatherers who gradually learned farming and herding from other tribes and from the Spaniards. Over the centuries, from being a hostile group who often raided nearby farms and settlements, the Navajo became a settled, peaceful people.

The Long Walk and the Treaty of 1868

After a period of hostilities between Navajo and other groups in the 1840s and 1850s, the U.S. government ordered the relocation of the Navajos to Bosque Redondo, an area near Ft. Sumner in southeastern New Mexico. Kit Carson was hired by the U.S. Army to conduct the relocation in July 1863. When the Navajo resisted, Carson had their fields burned in order to starve the Navajo off their land. In January 1864, they began the 300-mile journey to Bosque Redondo. Over 8,000 Navajos traveled in separate groups and by slightly different routes, taking more than eighteen days to walk to their new location. As an Indian reservation, Bosque Redondo was a failure. Camp conditions were crowded, raids and hostilities between the Navajo and other tribes living there were a common occurrence, and food was in short supply. In June 1868, the Treaty of Bosque Redondo between the United States and the Navajo was concluded, establishing the current reservation in the traditional Navajo homeland between the four sacred mountains. When the Navajo made the “Long Walk” home, they formed a single group ten miles long.

Native American Education and Boarding Schools

In the mid-nineteenth century, people began to take notice of the poor conditions under which Native Americans lived. A reform movement arose to improve the lives of Indians by teaching them practical skills and assimilating them into mainstream American society. Much of the impetus for this movement came from Protestant missionaries, who felt that Christianizing the Indians was necessary to assimilating them.

Indian boarding schools were established in the late 19th century and early 20th century to educate Native American youths according to white American standards. Native American children who were sent to boarding schools off the reservation suffered the trauma of being separated—often involuntarily—from their families. At the schools students were given new haircuts, uniforms and English names. They could no longer speak their own languages, even between each other, and they were expected to convert to Christianity. For the young students, life often took on a Dickensian character of grueling chores, punishments, poor food and overcrowding.

The first federally-sponsored school was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in central Pennsylvania. It followed a philosophy of “assimilation through total immersion” and became the model school for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. By 1902, the Bureau had established 25 federally funded non-reservation schools across 15 states and territories, which were in addition to those run by religious organizations and social agencies.

Code Talkers

Navajo was the language of secure communications used by the Marines during World War II. An unwritten language without alphabet or symbols, Navajo’s extreme complexity of syntax and tonal qualities make it unintelligible to anyone without extensive exposure and training. It is spoken only on the Navajo lands of the American Southwest. For these reasons, Philip Johnston, the son of a missionary who grew up on the reservation and spoke the language fluently, felt it would be a good idea to use Navajo to create an undecipherable code. Johnston, a World War I veteran, presented his idea to the Marines and staged tests under simulated combat conditions demonstrating that Navajos could encode, transmit and decode a three-line English message in 20 seconds. Machines of the time required 30 minutes to perform the same job. The code talkers were deployed in the Pacific theater, transmitting information on tactics and troop movements, orders and other vital battlefield communications over telephones and radios. The Japanese, who were skilled code breakers, remained baffled by the Navajo language. While they were able to decipher the codes used by the U.S. Army and Army Air Corps, they never cracked the code used by the Marines.

Role of Women

Navajo society is matrilineal, and clan identity comes from the female and not the male. In a traditional introduction, a Navajo person first introduces himself or herself by naming the maternal clan and then the paternal clan. Women occupy a strong position, one derived from Changing Woman, the Navajos’ principal deity. Women are the potters and weavers, crafts they have been practicing for centuries. Also, women have traditionally owned the land and livestock, passing these possessions down to their daughters, who have been trained to manage them. One of the most important and sacred rituals among the Navajo people is the kinaalda ceremony—an elaborate four-day event which marks the passage of 13-year-old girls into womanhood.

The Creation Story

There is some variation in the Navajo creation story, but it basically goes like this:

Humans emerged from a series of underworlds, where they existed as insects or animals. The deities, or Holy People, include Holy Supreme Wind, who gave life to all the other Holy People, and Changing Woman, who taught the people how to live. She married the Sun, and her twin sons, Monster Slayer and Child of the Waters, used lightning bolts to slay the monsters who were killing the new Earth People.

Talking God taught the people how to make the first hogan, where the people first met to arrange their world. They named the four sacred mountains that became the boundaries of their homeland: San Francisco Peaks in the west, Mt. Blanco in the east, Mt. Taylor in the south and Mt. Hesperus in the north. Then the Holy People put the sun and moon in the sky and were carefully arranging the stars. But Coyote, the Trickster, grew impatient and took the blanket containing the stars and flung the remaining stars into the sky. The Holy People also created the four original clans, and Changing Woman created four more clans to keep her company when she visited her husband, the Sun, every evening. They traveled from the west and joined the other clans already living at Dinetah.



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

- Butchering a sheep, making frybread and other traditional skills are featured in the Miss Navajo contest—what is the value of knowing these skills today? Are there traditional skills from your heritage that you would like to learn? Why?
- One of the former Miss Navajo contest winners says, “When a language is lost, a culture is lost.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- The Indian boarding schools mentioned in the film were part of a policy of forced assimilation of Native Americans into white American culture. Assimilation of new immigrant groups is a topic of ongoing discussion and debate in the U.S. Is there a difference between assimilating new immigrants and the assimilation of Native Americans? Should there be parameters on the extent to which any group is assimilated into American culture, and if so, what should those parameters be?
- Would you consider the contestants in the film to be good representatives of Navajo culture? Why or why not?
- Do you think Crystal was as prepared as she could be for the contest? If you were in charge of Crystal’s preparation, what would you have had her do?
- Even though the Miss Navajo contest isn’t a beauty pageant in the traditional sense, is there a possibility of it being misinterpreted by the general public? Are there other ways in which Navajo culture could be promoted?
- Given that the Miss Navajo contest isn’t a “beauty” pageant, do you think it should be re-named to emphasize what it’s really about, that is, Navajo culture?
- What is the purpose of beauty pageants in general? Do they have a place in today’s world?
- Should there be parallel contests for young men in Native American cultures, that is, contests where they display traditional skills?
- What qualities of womanhood are most important for you to celebrate within yourself or within your female family members?
- With whom do you identify most in this film?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Find out if there are any Native American tribes in your area. Educate yourself about their culture and about conditions in their community or reservation.
- Contact your representative or senator and ask where he or she stands on issues such as improving educational opportunities for Native Americans or drug and alcohol abuse on reservations.
- If there is a Native American school near your community, volunteer to tutor once a week.
- Organize a community service day to work on a specific project on a local reservation.
- Organize a community service project in which Native Americans and others in the local community work together on a local issue.
- Arrange a community forum to discuss an issue of importance to local Native Americans. Be sure a wide range of viewpoints is included.
- Read some selections of poetry by Native Americans, such as Louise Erdrich’s poems dealing with conflict between Native American culture and the dominant white culture, or the poetry of Navajo poet John Hershman (See www.hershmanjohn.com.)
- Find out how you can become involved in SNAP—Student and Native American Partnerships, whose goal is to bring Internet access and other technologies and training to Native American schools. More information at <http://studentorgs.vanderbilt.edu/snap.about>.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.itvs.org, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

RESOURCES

Information about Navajo History and Culture

www.navajo.org – The home page of the Navajo Nation contains links to Navajo government, history and culture, including the Miss Navajo Nation web site: www.missnavajo.navajo.org.

www.americanwest.com/pages/navajo2.htm – The “Explore the Navajo Nation” web site contains descriptions of traditional and contemporary Navajo culture.

www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faqs61-4.htm –The U.S. Navy History Center web site contains the Navajo Code Talkers' Dictionary.

www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a-f/erdrich/erdrich.htm – The link “About Indian Boarding Schools” provides a history of the schools as well as a photo gallery.

<http://navajo-arts.com/navajo-culture.html> – This site contains a comprehensive list of links to all things Navajo—culture, language, legends, arts, crafts and more.

www.collectorsguide.com/fa/fao64.shtml – “A Brief Social History of Navajo Weaving” provides a historical context for the traditional Navajo art of rug weaving.

www.bairsindiantradingco.com/Navajo-rug-weaving-styles.htm – This site provides a picture gallery of Navajo rugs, pottery and other crafts, along with explanations of the designs and materials used.



General Information about Native American History and Culture

www.nmai.si.edu – The web site of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, which is dedicated to the preservation and study of the literature, arts, languages and history of Native Americans.

www.aimovement.org – The web site of the American Indian Movement (AIM) provides information and links to Native American political issues and events.

MISS NAVAJO WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON November 13, 2007. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS. MISS NAVAJO was produced by Billy Luther. The Emmy Award winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.itvs.org/outreach.