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Publication Date

2026-04-14

RETURN OUR ANCESTORS– FINAL PROPOSAL

Producers: Alana Nahglibah Minkler and Raj Paul Ghusar

I. Story Summary

- **Logline:** When their ancestors are kept in museum storage instead of laid to rest, three California tribal leaders embark on a fight to bring them home, a struggle for dignity, spiritual survival, and the right to decide their own future.
- **Synopsis:** Underneath the UC Berkeley Phoebe Hearst Museum, lie the stolen remains and sacred items of thousands of Native peoples. *Return Our Ancestors* follows three journeys of reclamation: the Konkow Maidu tribe, led by Chairman Matthew Sequoyah Williford, who faces a troubling disappearance of ancestral remains at the Autry Museum and a battle to reclaim baskets from UC Berkeley; Isaac Bojorquez, chairman of the non-federally recognized KaKoon Ta Ruk Band of Ohlone-Costanoan; and the Redding Rancheria, led by Chairman Jack Potter, who is haunted by the dreams of his ancestors who are prevented from returning home. Through ceremonies, tense institutional encounters, and moments of cultural revival, the film traces how tribes are reclaiming not only their ancestors, but their right to decide how *they* want to preserve their culture.

- Final Treatment:

Return Our Ancestors

A film by Alana Nahglibah Minkler and Raj Paul Ghusar



Act 1 - Living the Past

A thin mist drapes over Lake Konkow in Northern California. A man moves deliberately and nimbly through the forest, his boots brushing through damp grass. He's layered against the cold and his breath is visible in the pale light. He kneels and presses his fingers into the soil, finding a fresh hoof print. He looks upward at a faint rustle of life ahead. Matthew Sequoyah Williford draws an arrow. The bow creaks softly and he draws the arrow back. This is ritual, communion with ancestors who hunted here long before there were roads, borders, or museums.

The door of Matthew's beaten up green Mustang slams shut as he gets out of his car, wearing jeans and a high visibility vest to conduct a cultural survey in the mountains with his son, little Matt. Over voiceover, Matthew says for decades his tribe has been fighting for the repatriation of several ancestors and dozens of artifacts with spiritual importance through the 30-decade-old law Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. But, the act is flawed. Due to their status as a non-federally recognized tribe, they're not allowed to be involved in any museum consultations and are forced to ask for the help of federally recognized tribes, which have historically not gotten along.

At home, in his cramped trailer, he gently rests a fed-ex box on the table in front of his son. Inside the box lie sacred funerary beads, dug up and held at the Autry Museum until their repatriation to Matthew. For Matthew, it's a relief to be able to rebury the spirits of his ancestors, but it's also a reminder of the demeaning and bureaucratic process of something so spiritual and important to their cultural survival.

On a rainy night at San Jose State University, professors, students and tribal leaders gather for a conversation on sovereignty, NAGPRA and the rights of non-federally recognized tribes. Isaac Bojorquez, Chairman of the KaKoon Ta Ruk Band of Ohlone-Costanoan Indians of the Big Sur Rancheria, has come to make the case that NAGPRA ignores the complex history of California tribes, many of which are not federally recognized and have been stripped of their rights to sovereignty and repatriation.

At home in Sacramento, he listens to a "gambling song," recorded by the infamous UC Berkeley anthropologist Alfred Kroeber. A wax cylinder recording of his great, great grandmother, Viviana Soto plays and Bojorquez's eyes fill with tears as he listens to her laughter. Filled with conflicting emotions, he's grateful for the preservation of a small piece of culture, but at the same time frustrated that Kroeber and the institution he worked under still holds their unrepatriated ancestors underneath UC Berkeley's Phoebe Hearst Museum.

Later that night, Bojorquez walks under the stars, exhaling a deep, rattling breath. He explains that as a non-federally recognized tribe, he once had a chance at repatriation; however, he turned it down because he didn't want the funerary objects to be separated from the ancestral remains. Now, due to changes in the federal NAGPRA law, the chance he can ever get them back is out of sight. He feels remorseful, but he's still determined to continue to fight for the right for non-federally recognized tribes to repatriate. There is hope, because ever since state lawmakers demanded a state audit of UC schools, things have been slowly changing.

Act II - The Reckoning

Archival footage of state audits show Bojorquez testifying about his tribe's struggles with NAGPRA. During an audit of UC schools, Jack Potter, Chairman of the Redding Rancheria, orders the leaders of UC schools to face him and look him directly in the eyes. He begins to share a dream he had where the unrepatriated ancestors were calling to him.

In a dream sequence, we hear Potter describe a dream in which his ancestors called to him, unable to rest until they return to the earth they were dug up from. Back in Redding, Jack Potter speaks about the spiritual violence of ancestors trapped in storage. In a quiet moment of ceremony, Jack leads prayer and song, grounding the film in the spiritual dimension often ignored by legal frameworks.

Back in Oroville, the day fades into dusk as Matthew makes calls, files paperwork, and waits for responses that never seem to come. His frustration is sharp, five years of progress undone by shifting regulation and institutional delays. This fight costs time, energy, and spirit. We see him emailing Alex Lucas, head of repatriation at UC Berkeley, as he sets up a consultation to view two baskets in their storage.

Matthew's process takes another unexpected turn, before they can rebury ancestral beads from the Autry, he must ask a neighboring landowner for permission to use a piece of land adjacent to tribal property. A sovereign Indigenous leader forced to ask a private landowner for permission to bury his own relatives, the colonial legacy continues.

Act III - The Return

Matthew reaches out to Chairman Potter to be his federally-recognized partner in order to allow him to view his tribe's basket at UC Berkeley. Potter agrees and they meet Alex Lucas at UC Berkeley's campus in front of the Phoebe Hearst Museum. The discussion is tense but human. Alex describes institutional pressures, timelines, documentation requirements, and what reform looks like from the inside. The conversation is respectful but heavy. Matthew is allowed to visit the baskets, and he grows emotional. Matthew leaves the museum without his baskets.

Weeks pass. Finally, Matthew gathers his community for a reburial ceremony. He dresses his son and granddaughter in regalia, placing shell beads around their necks. Their tribe assembles under an oak tree. Sage wafts into the open air and they sing prayer songs to honor their ancestors who have not yet come home.

The reburial is quiet and reverent. Earth gives way under shovels. Prayers lift into the wind. Tears, relief, and unfinished grief share the same breath.

At dusk, Matthew walks with his bow along Lake Konkow where the film began. The fog has lifted. The purple sky is clear and the sliver of moon shines bright. The battle continues, but dignity has been reclaimed.

We hear the release of the arrow.

The Native American Heritage Month Parade fills Sacramento's streets with drums and song. Bojorquez runs into the Redding Rancheria Chairman, Jack Potter, who is also facing issues with repatriation at UC Berkeley. Potter tells him to keep fighting and they march to Sacramento to celebrate the resilience of Native American culture.

James Ramos, the first and only Native legislator in California, who apologizes for the limits of the law. In an interview, Ramos describes NAGPRA's origins and the resistance museums, including UC Berkeley, have shown. Archival footage reveals hearings where lawmakers demand accountability. The Native American Graves and Repatriation Act was created in response to the desecration of burial sites, the taking of ancestors' remains, and the long-standing injustices stemming from practices like scientific racism that viewed Indigenous people as objects for study rather than people with rights.

However, Ramos sets up the fact that museums, including UC Berkeley have been long resistant to those regulations. An archival montage of legislative meetings shows lawmakers, including Ramos, probing UC Berkeley for their slowness to repatriate, threatening them with withdrawing state funding. Ramos tried to correct the federal law's shortcomings by introducing Cal NAGPRA; however, the federal law still trumps state law, mandating that non-federally recognized tribes must get sponsored by federally recognized tribes in the university's region, many of which they have no relationship or affiliation with. This has further pitted many tribes against each other and put strain on tribal leaders who are working to repatriate their own items before they can help other tribes repatriate theirs.

The day turns into dusk in Matthew's office in Oroville, California. As the tribal chairman of the non-federally recognized tribe, the Konkow Band of Maidu Indians, he files paperwork and leaves unreturned voice messages as he tries to get his tribal ancestral remains and artifacts returned through the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act, a law more than three decades old. The frustration is apparent for Matthew, who has been on the brink of repatriation with UC Berkeley for over three years and has had to start the process over from scratch due to shifting legislation and bureaucratic requirements.

Back in Oroville, the day fades into dusk as Matthew makes calls, files paperwork, and waits for responses that never seem to come. His frustration is sharp, five years of progress undone by shifting regulation and institutional delays. This fight costs time, energy, and spirit.

Matthew's process takes another unexpected turn, before they can rebury ancestors from the Autry, he must ask a neighboring landowner for permission to use a piece of land adjacent to tribal property. A sovereign Indigenous leader forced to ask a private landowner for permission to bury his own relatives, the colonial legacy continues.

Through text over a sweeping landscape shot from a drone gliding across the mountains we learn of several key facts. UC Berkeley holds 4,440 ancestral remains and nearly 25,000 items. The remains of more than 100,000 Native Americans are held by prestigious institutions across the country. There are countless others across the world.

Act III - The Return

Weeks pass. Finally, Matthew gathers his community for the ceremony. He posts flyers, makes phone calls, and dresses his son and granddaughter in regalia, placing shell beads around her neck. Families assemble under oak trees, drums pulse, dancers move through the grass, songs rise into the open air. They honor their ancestors who have not yet come home, a ceremony in place of burial.

In the Butte Mountains at dusk, Matthew walks along the ridge where the film began. The fog has lifted. The sky is clear.

The reburial is quiet and reverent. Earth gives way under shovels. Prayers lift into the wind. Tears, relief, and unfinished grief share the same breath.

The battle continues, but dignity has been reclaimed.

Quotes from the three tribal leaders calling the audience to action lays across the screen.

- Artistic Approach:

Return Our Ancestors employs a poetic blend of immersive observational filmmaking and stylized, emotionally charged visual language to honor the spiritual weight of repatriation. The film's earthy yet vibrant aesthetic draws from influences such as *Dahomey*, incorporating centered, locked-off compositions that evoke the perspective of ancestral spirits within reclaimed artifacts, and *The Hunger Games*, whose restrained stillness and natural tension inform our use of expansive landscapes. We will shoot stylized sequences primarily at golden hour, dawn or dusk, using silhouettes, long shadows, and indirect light to create images that feel illuminated from within rather than lit from without. Scenes will often open with wide, centered frames—emphasizing the scale and gravity of tribal leaders fighting to return their stolen ancestors—before transitioning into intimate handheld close-ups to capture moments of frustration, resolve, and spiritual release. Throughout the film, color saturation, organic textures and slow, deliberate pacing will serve not only to immerse the viewer in place, but to mirror the emotional journey of reclamation, ceremony and cultural revival.

- Thematic Statement:

Return Our Ancestors follows non-federally recognized tribes as they fight for dignity, cultural survival, and the return of their stolen ancestors in a system that denies their identity and rights.

- **Intended Audience: Describe the anticipated audience for your film.**

This film is intended for a broad audience interested in social justice, Indigenous rights, and the ongoing impact of colonialism in the United States. It will resonate with viewers who care about history, human rights and accountability, including educators, policymakers, museum and archival professionals, students, and advocates working in cultural preservation and repatriation. The film also seeks to engage general audiences who may be unaware of the existence of non-federally recognized tribes and the legal barriers they face, offering a deeper understanding of what is at stake when communities are forced to fight for the right to honor and bury their ancestors. Through emotionally grounded storytelling and intimate access, the film aims to challenge assumptions, inspire empathy and spark conversation around justice, identity and the future of tribal sovereignty.

II. Principal Photography Schedule

- Finalized production schedule:
 - **Nov. 8, 2025:** Film the Native American Heritage Month Parade in Sacramento, following Isaac Bojorquez and James Potter as they march to the capitol
 - **Nov. 22, 2025:** Film a sit-down interview with Matthew Williford in Oroville
 - **Nov. 23, 2025:** Film opening scene of Matthew Williford hunting at Lake Konkow and spending time with son.
 - **Dec. 3, 2025:** Film Matthew Williford attending Native American Heritage Commission Meeting via Zoom in Oroville
 - **Dec. 4, 2025:** Film interview and scenes with Jack Potter in Riverside
 - **Dec. 16, 2025:** Matthew and Jack visit UC Berkeley for a consultation with Alex Lucas
 - **Dec. 18, 2025:** Film Alex Lucas interview at UC Berkeley
 - **Jan. 9, 2025:** Film James Ramos interview in Sacramento
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- Gear list:
 - Camera: C200 kit x 2, Drone
 - Lens: 11-16mm, 35mm, 50mm 1.2 , 70-200mm
 - Lights: Godox lights x 2, Fotodox 312 light
 - Audio: Tentacle Sync x 2, Mixpre, Sony Headphone x 2
 - Microphones: G4 Wireless mics x 2, Hollyland Mic, DPA 7217 Shotgun mic, Schoeps Shotgun mic MK41, Sony 77b Wired Lav, Sanken lav mics x 2

- Accessories: Tripod x 2, Monopod, Boom pole, 5 in 1 reflector, 2 spring clips, XLR cable 20ft, XLR coiled, Deadcat, Light stands x3, Extension chord, Mafer clamp, Easyrig, Pelican Case, Ruggard lightstand bag

III. Final Budget

TITLE: Return Our Ancestors							
DATE: 9/16/2025							
DIRECTOR(S): Paul Ghusar & Alana Minkler							
Category	Line Item	No.	Unit	Rate	Budgeted (No. X Rate)	Actual (with receipts)	Notes
Travel							
	Accommodation	4	car	\$140.00	\$616.00		2 nights in Sacramento with 2 rooms for 4 people + tax
	Accommodation	2	people	\$120.00	\$924.00		7 nights in Oroville, 1 room for 2 people + tax
	Accommodation	2	people	\$100.00	\$550.00		5 nights in Redding, 1 room for 2 people + tax
	Parking/Gas/Tolls	1	car	\$100.00	\$510.87		Round trip gas expenses to and from Oakland to Sacramento, Oroville, Redding
	Travel Subtotal				\$2,600.87		

Production							
	Batteries	2	AA	\$50.00	\$100.00		
	Tape	1	roll	\$30.00	\$120.00		
	Public Records	1	fee	\$75.00	\$0.00		
	Production Subtotal				\$220.00		
Post-Production							
Music	Music	1	score	in kind	0		
	Color	1	color	in kind	0		
	Sound	1	mix	in kind	0		
	Post-Production Subtotal				\$2,820.87		

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IV. Scene List

- <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1TVu7EPIGdHI3kgfc-uEouHad43Okm-0r/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=112397631967419612837&rtpof=true&sd=true>

V. Lookbook



Overview

Return Our Ancestors aims to blend immersive and observational scenes with creative and stylized scenes and interviews. The overall tone is earthy yet colorful and saturated. The style will aim to bring out the emotions of our main characters: tribal leaders attempting to repatriate their stolen ancestors and cultural artifacts through their frustrations and celebrations

Our inspiration includes *Dahomey*, which uses centered, locked-off shots with the POV of spirits inside repatriated artifacts. *Hunger Games* serves as an inspiration for scenes that capture stillness and suspense in a charged yet beautiful and natural environment.

To film creative and stylized scenes, we will shoot only during golden hour, dawn or dusk, except when a pivotal scene has to be conducted during the day. Many shots will tell a story through shadows and silhouettes, making the appearance that things are glowing rather than being cast in direct light.

We will demonstrate the heaviness of repatriation by starting scenes with a wide shot centered on our main character, followed by intimate, handheld close-up shots.

OPENING SCENE



See image 1.1

Bow and arrow cinematic shot

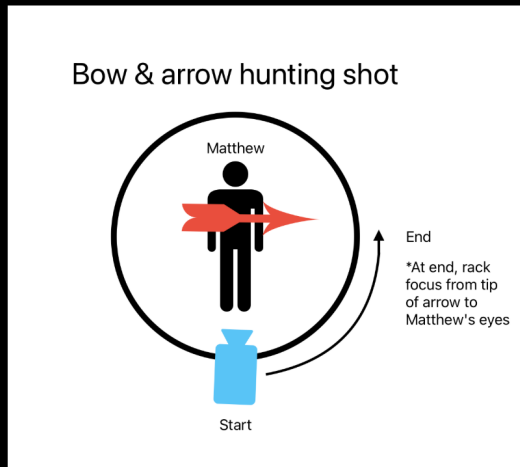


Image 1.1





SCENE: Artifacts and ancestors in the Phoebe Hearst Museum



Theme of captivity - *Dahomey* (2024) uses shots behind glass casing



Artifacts are centered to tell their story

REPATRIATION CEREMONY SCENE

Wide, expansive, warm tones



INTERVIEW SETUPS



Camera 1:

24mm prime, 2.8 f-stop

Wide, centered with background objects visible

Purpose: Centers subject to give them more power while showing their environment



Camera 2:

50mm prime lens, 1.2 f-stop

Close-up, motivated lighting in background

Purpose: Captures emotions in their facial expressions

See image 1.1

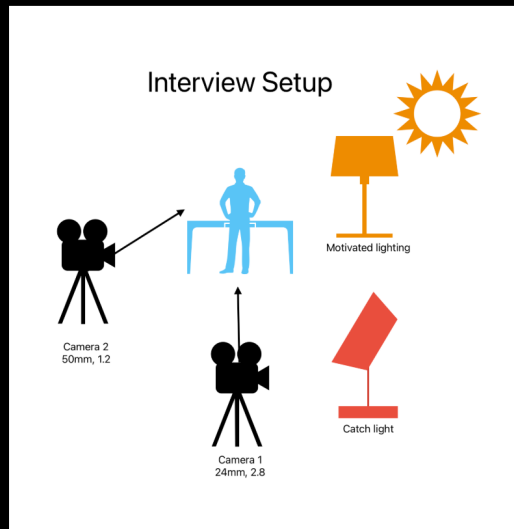


Image 1.2

LOCATIONS

UC Berkeley



- Rigid
- Institutional
- tripod shots with structured framing

Sacramento



- Dynamic
- Mix between institutional and organic
- Handheld and tripod

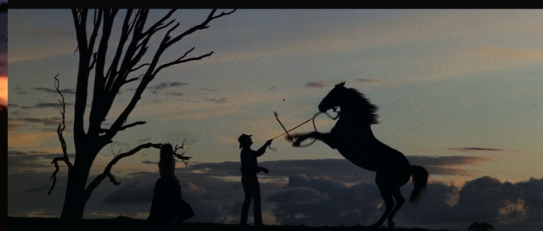
Oroville/ Pit River



- Organic
- Vast
- Handheld, drone and tripod

NATURAL LIGHTING INSPIRATION

SILHOUETTES AT DAWN/DUSK



NATURAL LIGHTING INSPIRATION

TELLING A STORY WITH SHADOWS



COLOR PALETTE

Vibrant, earthy tones

