

YESTERDAY'S ISLAND



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"Ās Nutayuneân"

by Sarah Teach

"Loss" isn't a word we use often on this paradise of an island. Rather, our everyday vocabulary is much more apt to include words like "breathtaking," "wonderful," and "spectacular." It is easy to forget that this picturesque land hasn't always been ours. The true natives to Nantucket are the Wampanoags, better known as "the Thanksgiving Indians" who saved the Pilgrims from starvation. This year's [Nantucket Film Festival](#) brings us an extraordinary documentary about the 100-year-long loss of the native Wampanoag language and its recent, groundbreaking exhumation. In native Nantucket tongue, "Ās Nutayuneân" literally means, "We still live here."

We Still Live Here was directed by Emmy winning director Anne Makepeace, who has been crafting award-winning films for more than 25 years with her company, Makepeace Productions. The film has already garnered critical acclaim at several film festivals across the nation; it was awarded the "Moving Mountains Prize" at Telluride's MountainFilm, and it took the "Full Frame Inspiration Award" in Durham. Makepeace was drawn to the Wampanoag story because of her own ancestry as a descendent of the Puritan pilgrims who settled in coastal New England. "The Wampanoag's ancestors ensured the survival of the first English settlers in America, and lived to regret it," explains Makepeace. "We tend to remember these people once a year and then forget them." Noam Chomsky, esteemed MIT linguist, was also very much taken by the Wampanoag case, stating that he has never known anything like it. He astutely noted, "Language is not just words. It is culture, tradition, unification of community, a whole history that creates what a community is. It's all embodied in the language. So it's really the revival of a culture and a way of life."

We Still Live Here is the kind of film that causes even the harshest of skeptics to ponder the existence of mystical elements. Let's go back to 1994, a time when the Wampanoag language had essentially disappeared; it had not been uttered in more than a century. A native Wampanoag woman, Jessie Little Doe Baird, began having strange dreams. She saw people who appeared familiar, yet she couldn't understand them. Through extensive research, Baird discovered that they were speaking in native Wampanoag and saying, "We were killed by the yellow thing." This ominously pointed to the yellow fever brought by 17th century European traders that eradicated two-thirds of the entire Wampanoag population. Baird then propelled herself down a path that had never before been taken: the resuscitation of a long-dead Native American tongue. Her determination to recover the language her people had lost many generations ago led her to a Master's in Linguistics from MIT, and an entire community of Wampanoags who also wished to restore their native tongue. However, Baird is adamant that the film is not about her, but rather, Wampanoag heritage as a whole. Nonetheless, it is through her work that an entire people are trading the word "loss" for "rebirth." Makepeace expertly conveys this while giving appropriate honor to Baird's efforts.

The most overtly impressive aspect of the film itself is its unique mastery of graphics. Ruth Lingford's animation is staggeringly meaningful in its ghostly, eerie display of cultural death. Paired with Makepeace's skillfully symbolic editing, the film weaves a powerful tale with a message that cannot be ignored. Makepeace Productions has boldly given justice to this peculiar but remarkable story of a forgotten language revived by dreams. History buffs, lovers of linguistics, individuals interested in Native American issues, and fans of all things Nantucket: you've got to see this documentary. It is important to be aware of the history of the land upon which we tread. After all, without the Wampanoags, none of us would be here enjoying this breathtaking, wonderful, spectacular island today.

The film will screen in Bennett Hall (62 Centre Street) at 3 pm on Friday, June 24. Screening concurrently will be the premiere of another film made to honor Nantucket, Kit Noble's Nantucket by Nature. Both Makepeace and Noble will be present at the screening, so this is your chance to meet the masterminds behind two significant films in Nantucket's history. Tickets to see both films are \$13 and can be purchased at www.nantucketfilmfestival.org.

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