

Journeys in Solidarity

A Review of KDocsFF 2024

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Fig. 1 | A group of KDocsFF 2024 volunteers with Festival Director Janice Morris and Community Outreach Director Greg Chan. Eyes Multimedia, 2024.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary as KPU’s official documentary film festival, KDocsFF 2024 found new life by introducing daily themes to its varied programming. Across five days (Feb 21-Feb 25), this year’s milestone event screened 18 films under the banner of “Journeys in Solidarity,” which recognized a common thread of community-building and the search for connection in each day’s thematic focus: Liberating the Body Politic, Radical Humanity, Decolonizing Power, Resisting Erasure, and Preserving Democracy.

In the process of co-authoring this review, we came to the festival not only as viewers but also as volunteers (Fig. 1). Having co-developed community resources as part of

the Irving K. Barber grant “‘i am here because you are here’: Re-Imagining Intersectional Solidarity at KPU,” we helped run a Community Resources table as one of many exhibitors sharing and discussing our work between each event. Designed to empower the community with Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization (EDID) resources, the Community Resources table functioned as a catalyst for KDocsFF’s chief goals: sparking engagement, dialogue, and community solution-building. Situated near the VIFF Centre’s entrance, our table became an entryway into the kind of discussions that festivalgoers, on their way to see the films and panels, would encounter once they reached the auditorium.



Fig. 2 | KDocsFF 2024 Keynote Speakers and Joint Panelists Afton Quast Saler (*Neurodivergent*) and Ella Glendining (*Is There Anybody Out There?*) answer audience questions. Eyes Multimedia, 2024.

On opening day, festival co-founder Janice Morris welcomed a weekday crowd to the Vancouver International Film Centre with a call to action. All of the films, Morris noted, “embody and inspire” the “spirit of organization and action” at the core of KDocsFF, and how it is our responsibility to celebrate the voices shared in this space “by not looking away.” It was with this shared sentiment that KPU’s Elder-in-Residence, Lekeyten, prefaced the proceedings with a heartbeat song, offering filmgoers a sincere reminder to engage meaningfully with the stories of endurance we were about to witness and to pass on the knowledge we gained as a result.

With that, the festival officially kicked off with a double-feature of Afton Quast Saler’s *Neurodivergent* (2021) and Ella Glendining’s *Is There Anybody Out There?* (2023), two documentaries well-paired for their intimate portrayals of living with disabilities through a distinctly gendered lens.

With a tightly edited 25-minute runtime, *Neurodivergent* brilliantly harnesses the narrative potential of mixed media to capture Afton’s sense of “living as a contradiction,” making the most of visual storytelling to translate one woman’s profoundly personal experience of receiving her ADHD diagnosis at the height of Covid-19 into a short film that audiences could relate to. After all, as the documentary’s director and subject expressed in her keynote speech, “Positive change must

start with connection”—a message that carried over into Ella Glendining’s feature. Fresh off the 2024 BAFTAs, Glendining introduced her critically acclaimed story to Vancouver as “a film about ableism and loving yourself as a disabled person in a nondisabled world.” What begins as a journey to find someone with a body and unique condition just like hers takes on a new dimension as she discovers a surprise pregnancy early into filming. Through the eye-opening process of bringing her son into the world and building a community with other disabled folks, Glendining comes to a beautiful conclusion: “There is no [other] me,” and, most importantly, “The world would be worse off without disabled people.” Both films and filmmakers displayed a touching vulnerability while infusing their stories with joy and humour, and the lively discussion that followed the screenings proved that they succeeded in connecting to the KDocsFF audience (Fig. 2).

In the afternoon, director Jeanie Finlay’s *Your Fat Friend* (2023) premiered in Vancouver to a sold-out audience. Following fat activist Aubrey Gordon’s rise from anonymous blogger to best-selling author and podcaster, the film offers an intimate portrayal of Aubrey’s fight against the systemic oppression of fat people—and of her complicated relationship with her own family. Both deeply personal and deeply representative of the experiences of many feminine-presenting fat

people in the West, Finlay's film speaks to the power of personal stories, and thus of individuals, to resist and reimagine biased narratives in the fight to change the world. And changing the world *is* the goal, as Aubrey's activism goes far beyond self-love: "You can't love yourself out of oppression," she explains in the film.

Before the screening, SFU and UBC-Okanagan lecturer and documentary filmmaker Layla Cameron reflected on Aubrey's article "In Defense of Fat Sadness," which confronts the dehumanizing binary of representations available to fat people. On the one hand, Cameron explained, anti-fat rhetoric demands that fatness be portrayed as something to resist, resulting in what Aubrey deems the "Sad Fatty" narrative. On the other hand, the desire to disprove the "Sad Fatty" narrative creates pressure to depict fatness as always joyful. Both approaches are dehumanizing, denying fat people access to the full range of human emotion.

Your Fat Friend refuses to be confined to these narratives, instead insisting on Aubrey's complex personhood. Finlay's subversive gaze is both frank and caring, embracing Aubrey's body as it is and joining Aubrey in moments of joy, fear, and sadness. And the film makes clear that Aubrey's sadness never derives from her body, but rather from the people who want to change her body.

Closing the day was Susan Sandler's *Julia Scotti: Funny That Way* (2021), a film of happy returns—to comedy, yes, but also to family. Unflinching in its depiction of Scotti's journey as a trans woman and comedian, the film invites us to sit with the uncomfortable truths of her past, from off-colour, self-revealing stand-up routines to loves lost in the pursuit of a true identity late in life. Throughout the film, we see her find new success on *America's Got Talent*, undergo a near-fatal medical emergency, and reconnect with her once-estranged children. As was the case for the rest of the day, this film showed a deep preoccupation with community and connection, with Scotti coming to the hilarious conclusion that "if you're independent, you're an asshole." After all, who are we to deprive those who love us of the gift of caring for us when we need it?

Rather than hold the traditional Q&A following the movie, Scotti treated the packed audience to a fantastic stand-up set, which lived up to the film's promise of a seasoned comedian making a triumphant return to the stage with newfound pride and authenticity. Ripe with self-aware humour, Scotti's set basked in the comedy of being old while touching on the harsh political reality of transphobic legislation in the United States. Fearless and bold, Scotti is one to watch.

Day two's theme of "Radical Humanity" manifested across three deeply moving films. In the morning, director Karl Malakunas' *Delikado* (2022) told the story of three environmental crusaders in the Philippines who risk their lives defending the island of Palawan from corporate and political greed. In the afternoon, director Henna Mann's *Rails, Jails and Trolleys* (2022) examined the sweeping reach of the Indian farmers' protest, focusing in particular on its manifestation amongst the Canadian diaspora. And in the evening, director

Nisha Pahuja's Oscar-nominated *To Kill a Tiger* (2022) tells the story of Ranjit, a poor farmer who refuses to back down from seeking justice when his 13-year-old daughter is gang raped in their small village in Jharkhand, India. As the tale of a father's refusal to deny his daughter's humanity in the face of a patriarchal culture and a community of opposition, the film testifies to the power of one man standing against gendered violence and injustice. "Your courage will give others courage," a supporter tells Ranjit near the end of the film. "Your story is an example for other men to follow, they'll learn to also fight for the girls and women in their lives on the issues of violence and justice."

The third day, "Decolonizing Power" placed the spotlight on Indigenous stories, activists, and decolonial ways of learning. Starting us off was a double-feature connected by a shared focus on environmentalism, which began with a short documentary by educator Cam Douglas and filmmaker Rodney Fuentes: *ReWilding the Classroom* (2023). The film spotlights a group of young students from the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board's integrated curriculum based out of Trent University as they take part in the semester-long Youth Leadership in Sustainability initiative (YSL). The program takes education out of the classroom by incorporating the environment into their standard programming, enabling them to build a personal connection to the sustainability movement. Next up was an intimate account of Indigenous stewardship with *The Klabona Keepers* (2022, dir. Tamo Campos and Jasper Snow-Rosen), which sees non-Indigenous storytellers collaborate with Indigenous elders to bring their 15-year-long fight to defend the Sacred Headwaters, also known as the titular Klabona, to the big screen. *The Klabona Keepers* offers a platform for the unwavering matriarchs of the village of Iskut to share their stories of healing and resistance—set against the colonial frameworks of the Canadian government, mining corporations, and generational trauma.

Continuing the thread of Indigenous resistance, on its fourth day, KDocsFF 2024 brought Navajo filmmaker Ivey Camille Manybeads Tso to the stage to introduce *Powerlands* (2022), an award-winning portrait of the director's investigation into the loss of land—both in the form of displacement and environmental devastation—inflicted onto Indigenous communities across the world, from the Philippines to Mexico. Meeting with Indigenous women whose fights mirror her own, she learns from their fierce struggles and leadership and brings these lessons home to the Navajo Nation, where the resistance continues. Like many of the day's films, *Powerlands* urges viewers not just to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples at the forefront of environmental protection, but to take direct action with them.

The evening then moved into the Vancouver premier of *Who She Is* (2022), an animated short by filmmaking duo Jordan Dresser and Sophie Barksdale with art direction by Ojibwe artist Jonathan Thunder. With their first animated film in their eight years as producing partners, Barksdale and Dresser wanted to challenge the traditional narrative of Missing and

Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) in the media, wherein racialized victims—as opposed to their white counterparts—are typically portrayed using the colonial language of violence and tragedy. Inspired by their experiences living in a border town in Wyoming, USA, and the deep connections made with Indigenous community members in the process of producing a film about the residential schools in America, the two questioned: “How could we tell a story about the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women epidemic in a different way, to have people connect with the issue?”

In our interview with Barksdale, who came to the festival as a visitor on Thursday prior to her Friday screening, she spoke of their desire to encourage audiences, who may easily dismiss statistics about MMIW as not personally resonant, “to care deeply” about the four women whose stories the film tells in the first-person. While the film does not shy away from the ugly parts of these four stories—each from a different decade and developed in close collaboration with the victims’ families—its main goal is to humanize these women and to give ownership over the narratives of their lives (and deaths) back to them. As Barksdale explains, “We’re not here to make victim porn. We wanted something beautiful, and we wanted it to reflect each of the women.” To that end, Thunder’s eye-catching watercolours certainly succeed.

Following the short was *Twice Colonized* (2023), a film that may be described in the broadest of terms as showing what it means to be Indigenous in the modern world. And, that, it does—but far more intimately than that description suggests. Much like its subject, Inuit lawyer Aaju Peter (Fig. 3), *Twice Colonized* doesn’t pull any punches. What director Lin Alluna achieves is a film that seamlessly transitions from sweeping cinematography that captures the stark beauty of the Arctic to close-up portraits of an Inuit/Greenlander woman’s lifelong battle against colonial cycles of violence. The film, while ultimately hopeful and justifiably reverent of Aaju Peter’s relentless advocating for the rights of the Inuit, is also held together by a thread of barely contained anger and loss. What we see is a colonial subject moving through an empire and its altars, determined to bring it all down. It is at times harrowing, and other times triumphant, staying true to the complexity of a life lived with the burden of trauma, but also an unshakeable drive for justice. As the credits rolled, the audience undoubtedly left the theatre with a deep respect for Aaju Peter, and also a sense of awe. With a heart-pounding score, honest storytelling, and effective pacing, *Twice Colonized* is nothing short of triumphant.

On Saturday, the day’s theme of “Resisting Erasure” saw films honour marginalized communities grappling with an increasingly uncertain sense of place. As a whole, the day’s programming advocated for solidarity and joint action by diverse communities routinely marginalized by gentrification, beginning with an honest look into the lives of four Black transgender sex workers in Atlanta and New York City. *Kokomo City* (2023) is a triumphant feature directorial debut by D. Smith, who paints an electric and playful portrait of the



Fig. 3 | KDocsFF 2024 Keynote Speaker and Panelist Aaju Peter introduces *Twice Colonized*. Eyes Multimedia, 2024.

intimate experiences of Daniella Carter, Koko Da Doll, Liyah Mitchell, and Dominique Silver. Into the afternoon, KDocsFF continued the day’s theme by amplifying the voices and stories of unhoused people, members of a population subjected to repeated attempts at erasure by a state that criminalizes their existence and a society that denies their humanity. In a screening of director Zack Russell’s *Someone Lives Here* (2023), the festival depicted Canada’s housing crisis through the work of carpenter Khaleel Seivwright, who quit his job at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic to build life-saving tiny shelters for unhoused Toronto residents.

Keynote speaker Alexandra Flynn, an associate professor at UBC’s Peter A. Allard School of Law, prefaced the screening with what she admitted was a radical assertion for a law professor: the idea that the right thing to do is not always the legal thing to do. In the film, Khaleel, driven by the life-or-death urgency of sub-zero winter temperatures, persists in building and distributing tiny shelters even as the City of Toronto begins the legal process required to restrain him. Until our governments take responsibility for solving the current housing crisis, Flynn said, “I hope we have more people like Khaleel who have the capacity to do what is right.”

Someone Lives Here opens powerfully with the voice of Taka, an unhoused resident of Toronto who recalls the brutal winter of 2021, which she survived by living in one of Khaleel’s tiny shelters. Taka’s narration, striking in its strength and humanity, arises intermittently throughout the film, forging a coherent narrative of community action and support.

As the film depicts Khaleel’s relentless, day-by-day pursuit, aided by a growing team of volunteers and a GoFundMe campaign, Russell expertly contrasts the absurd bureaucracy of the City of Toronto’s response to Khaleel’s shelters with the immediacy of freezing to death on the Toronto streets. In these depictions, the film makes clear that the City’s priority is maintaining control of and authority over so-called public land, and in this objective, unhoused people become undesirable burdens. Taka gives voice to this experience of being marginalized and erased by the State, claiming that she has become a “refugee” in her own city.

Taka's story in particular dismantles the notion that housing can or should be merely structural, instead emphasizing the human need for home, for a place that is physically and mentally safe and that, ideally, engenders community. And as winter thaws to spring, Taka effortlessly speaks to the communal nature of Khaleel's temporary, life-saving intervention: "I have survived the winter . . . I can't believe we did it." *We* did it, Taka says: Khaleel, the volunteers working with Khaleel, the people who donated money or materials, outreach volunteers, and unhoused residents like Taka. *Someone Lives Here* makes evident the community of care that goes into Taka's (and others') survival. Community and care are at the heart of it all.

Russell does not let viewers forget, however, that the State is ultimately responsible for perpetrating—and thus for solving—the housing crisis. Spring becomes Summer, and the City of Toronto carries out a 1.9-million-dollar encampment clearing campaign in three city parks. Footage of heavy machinery destroying one of Khaleel's tiny shelters juxtaposes ensuing footage of locals enjoying one of the newly cleared parks, highlighting the insidious ease at which governments erase the unhoused—erase people like Taka. *Out of sight, out of mind*, the concluding shots seem to say, made even more insidious by the text overlay, informing viewers that 92% of encampment evictees remain without permanent housing three months post-clearings.

The post-film panel, composed of Flynn, CRAB Park advocate Fiona York, housing activist and former CRAB Park resident Drew Hirschpold, and Khaleel Seivwright himself, offered both expertise and lived experience. BCGEU Executive Vice President Kari Michaels moderated a Q&A session that perfectly complemented the film's sombre ending, extending hope and suggestions for concrete policy changes (Fig. 4).

Playing to a sold-out audience in the evening, *Big Fight in Little Chinatown* (2022) is director Karen Cho's "love letter to Chinatowns"—those of her childhood, and also those that have been woven through her life and career. Highlighting businesses and activists fighting to protect racialized neighbourhoods across North America, the documentary and its accompanying panel were odes to placemaking and represented Chinatown as "a living, breathing organism" that serves as "a sanctuary for marginalized communities." Covering the years before, during, and immediately after the world was forced into quarantine by Covid-19, *Big Fight in Little Chinatown* showed the immense resilience of the people most affected by the pandemic, be it financially or in the form of anti-Asian hate. Ultimately, this was a story about "staying where you belong" rather than bucking beneath the pressures of systematic racism and gentrification. Beautifully crafted, this documentary was a standout in this year's stellar programming.

Unsurprisingly, the Q&A (Fig. 5) was panelled by several Chinese-Canadian community leaders, like moderator Henry Yu from the Centre for Asian Canadian Research Engagement; Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Hua Foundation, Kevin Huang; and Chinatown Legacy Stewardship Group co-chair, Stephanie Leo. But that was not all—the panel



Fig. 4 | KDocsFF 2024 Panelist Khaleel Seivwright discusses *Someone Lives Here*. Eyes Multimedia, 2024.



Fig. 5 | KDocsFF 2024 Panelists Jag Nagra, Karen Cho (director), Kevin Huang, Stephanie Leo, and Djaka Blais discuss *Big Fight in Little Chinatown*. Eyes Multimedia, 2024.

also emphasized a common spirit of resistance across different Vancouver neighbourhoods by bringing Hogan's Alley Society's Executive Director Djaka Blais and Jag Nagra of the Punjabi Market Regeneration Collective to the table. The resulting discussion was a rich, intersectional celebration of the "interconnected" histories and struggles that make up cities like Vancouver, where community solidarity and cross-class relationships enable us to fight against erasure. "What does it mean," the panellists invited us to question, "for us to have collective power?" And whom exactly does the possibility of joint action threaten? Needless to say, an entire day could have been dedicated to the lively dialogue sparked by the film and Q&A.

While every event brought difficult conversations and realities forward, the final day of KDocsFF 2024 was perhaps the most weighty in the subject matters it covered. Is it that, as we approach crucial elections around the world, from Russia to Canada and the United States, the tenuous hold of democratic leadership over global affairs and the growing fragility of journalistic freedom fill us with an unbearable sense of doom? If so, the relevance and complexity of these issues were certainly



Fig. 6 | KDocsFF 2024 Keynote Speaker and Panelist Katrina vanden Heuvel introduces *The Price of Truth*. Eyes Multimedia, 2024.

reflected in the day’s self-explanatory theme: “Preserving Democracy.” Pessimistic as recent discussions around this topic may be, the title suggests an ongoing battle. And that is the uniting principle throughout all the films shown on this day—that the fight does, and *must*, continue.

Starting Sunday with a bang, *Manufacturing the Threat* (2023) was nothing short of a political thriller. Following the disturbing case of John “Omar” Nuttall and Amanda “Ana” Korody, whose impoverishment made them the targets of an entrapment plot by undercover law enforcement agents, director Amy Miller takes audiences through the RCMP’s and CSIS’s histories of infiltrating social movements, inciting violence, and breaking the law “in the name of national security.” Moving through decades of history and complex legal proceedings without ever losing its sense of urgency, *Manufacturing the Threat* calls Canadians to attention with an echoing question from keynote speaker Alexandre Popovic, the man whose nonfiction book inspired this feature-length documentary: “Do you feel safe?” Deeply unsettling, the film is a must-watch precisely for *how* it disturbs us. How could any of this happen? Who have we charged with protecting us—and what or whom, exactly, are they protecting us *from*? Unrelenting in its dissection of the endless self-justification of covert government agents to operate with impunity, Miller’s film is both sharply informative and ripe with tension.

What followed was a riveting debate on policing and the logical fallacy of national security. Rather than a unified front, the panellists offered a range of opinions about the current state of democracy in Canada and the controversial role of the RCMP and CSIS in preserving it; while some held more optimistic hopes about the possibility of—and need for—police reform, others were not so sure that organizations built on foundations of racism and genocide could be changed from within, nor that they have shown any real interest in attempting to do so. Regardless of where audience members fell on that spectrum, KDocsFF held space for an open and informed conversation on the subject, reminding us exactly *why* we must continue the difficult work of preserving democracy.

The festival concluded with a double-feature screening that embodied this day’s theme: directors Emilie Gambade and Malibongwe Tyilo’s short documentary *Section 16* (2022) and director Patrick Forbes’s feature-length *The Price of Truth* (2023). The complementary films confront threats to the freedom of the press in different contexts while exploring why some people continue to report the truth despite severe risks and consequences.

After *Section 16*, which examined the cyber misogyny and death threats faced by four female South African journalists, Katrina vanden Heuvel—editor and publisher of *The Nation*

magazine—delivered a keynote address live on Zoom (Fig. 6). Though *The Price of Truth* focuses on authoritarianism in Russia, vanden Heuvel argued that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange’s ongoing persecution highlights that independent media, and democracy itself, are under threat in the West, too. To protect democracy, the need for major systemic change is clear—for how can we fight authoritarianism without a media that holds people accountable? And the subject of *The Price of Truth*, vanden Heuvel added, has a spirit that keeps independent media alive: Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov “refuses to be a stenographer for the powerful.”

The Price of Truth follows Muratov, editor-in-chief of Russia’s only independent newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, as he and his team face increasing danger in their fight to defend truth and openness in Russia. The power of independent journalism as a weapon against authoritarianism is the pulse that propels

the film—and Muratov—forward: “I’m not an observer,” Muratov reflects in one particularly resonant moment. “I’m a participant.”

Altogether, the addition of daily themes to KDocsFF 2024 was a welcome step toward more nuanced engagement with the topics at hand. From body autonomy to the political imaginary, this year’s festival empowered visitors and filmmakers to tackle complicated issues with real stakes. At the same time, throughout the festival, fellow staff commented on the nature of the event as a safe space, putting into practice the meaning of “Journeys in Solidarity.” Having had the privilege of moving through each event as both volunteers and attendees, we felt a rare sense of being part of the city and its rich cultural tapestry. This, then, is the power of a festival like KDocsFF: to honour existing communities and inspire the creation of new ones. ■

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