

# MVFF EDUCATION

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## *fancy dance*

A FILM BY QDEWAYĒ:STA'



**CURRICULUM GUIDE**  
GRADES: 10-12

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Instructor Resources

A Letter to Educators	ii
Discussion Questions	iii
Interpretive Essay Prompts	iii
About CAFILM	iv
Standards	v

## Student Handouts

About the Film	1
Contextual Information	2
Viewing Activities	3
Extension Activities	9
About Film Festivals	10



Dear Educators,

Thank you for attending the 46th Annual Mill Valley Film Festival's screening of *Fancy Dance*.

This year, our film selections for school screenings continue to focus on increasingly relevant issues of global empathy and active citizenship, and we believe this film will be a powerful and engaging text to use in your classroom. These curricular materials are designed to get students to engage deeply with film by the common-core aligned skills of developing an evidence-based interpretation of a text.

The discussion questions on the following page offer a variety of options for fostering small-group or whole-class dialogue. If your students are already familiar with a process of writing evidence-based interpretive essays, consider using the suggested essay prompts for a short writing piece. Additionally, individual handouts for before and after viewing are provided as stand-alone activities to be used individually or in sequence, with a particular emphasis on social-emotional learning. We have also included a handout that provides some context for the film festival experience, which may help to introduce your screening experience.

Thank you so much for your tireless work!

Sincerely,

The CAFILM Education Team

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did the film move you emotionally? How did it make you feel? What did the film make you think about?
2. What is the film's central theme? How is the theme developed and emphasized throughout the story? Is the theme expressed in a fresh, unique way?
3. What values does the film communicate? How do you know?
4. Describe a moment or a scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about the scene that was especially compelling for you?
5. Did anything that happened in the movie remind you of something that has occurred in your own life or that you have seen happen to others?
6. Consider the film's title. After viewing, does the title take on any new significance based on the story and the themes?
7. How would different people view this film differently, based on their gender, age, ethnic background, and/or worldview?
8. How does *Fancy Dance* offer insights into a world that audiences seldom see? How does it reveal how the Seneca-Cayuga women feel toward society at large?
9. In the Cayuga tongue, the word "aunt" means "little mother," but even as a tough, resourceful lesbian with a prison record, the system seems stacked against Jax. In what ways does she merit the responsibility the title implies?
10. What is Roki's life like? What conflicts or challenges does she face in her home life, her family, and her social life? What are the sources of those conflicts or challenges?
11. What aspects of Roki's experiences in the film are universal and relatable for all teens, regardless of culture? What about her experiences are unique to her native culture?
12. With a rare, yet purposeful, glimpse into Native culture, how does *Fancy Dance* educate its audiences while also entertaining?

## INTERPRETIVE ESSAY PROMPTS

1. How does *Fancy Dance* address the social, cultural, and political reality of self-governing tribal nations?
2. How does *Fancy Dance* address the effects of colonialism on Native people while simultaneously telling a story of the strength of community, love, and perseverance?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### The Seneca-Cayuga Tribe

<https://sctribe.com/>

More information about the history and heritage of the Seneca-Cayuga Tribe.

### What is a Native American Pow Wow?

<https://www.powwows.com/main/native-american-pow-wow/>

Pow Wows are the Native American people's way of meeting together, to join in dancing, singing, visiting, renewing old friendships, and making new ones.

### Native Hope

<https://www.nativehope.org/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-mmiw>

Across the United States and Canada, Native women and girls are being taken or murdered at an unrelenting rate. This website provides stories and statistics of the epidemic.

### Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Crisis

<https://www.bia.gov/service/mmu/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-people-crisis>

For decades, Native American and Alaska Native communities have struggled with high rates of assault, abduction, and murder of women. Community advocates describe the crisis as a legacy of generations of government policies of forced removal, land seizures, and violence inflicted on Native peoples.

### Sundance 2023 | *Fancy Dance*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1toh7tTyCrk>

An 18-minute IndieWire Interview with director Erica Tremblay and actors Micians Alise, Lily Gladstone, and Isabel Deroy-Olson on their involvement in the film.

### *Fancy Dance*: Lily Gladstone, Erica Tremblay & Isabel Deroy-Olson on Murdered Indigenous Women

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jzrf\\_gvkTlo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jzrf_gvkTlo)

A 13-minute panel discussion with Director Erica Tremblay and actors Lily Gladstone and Isabel Deroy-Olson about their roles in the film.

## ABOUT CAFILM

The nonprofit California Film Institute celebrates and promotes film as art and education through year-round programming at the independent Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, presentation of the acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival and DocLands Documentary Film Festival, as well as cultivation of the next generation of filmmakers and audiences through CAFILM Education programs.

### Follow the California Film Institute on social media



# STANDARDS

## Common Core State Standards ELA-Literacy

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2

Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or dram (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

### CCSS.ELA.LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how the author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

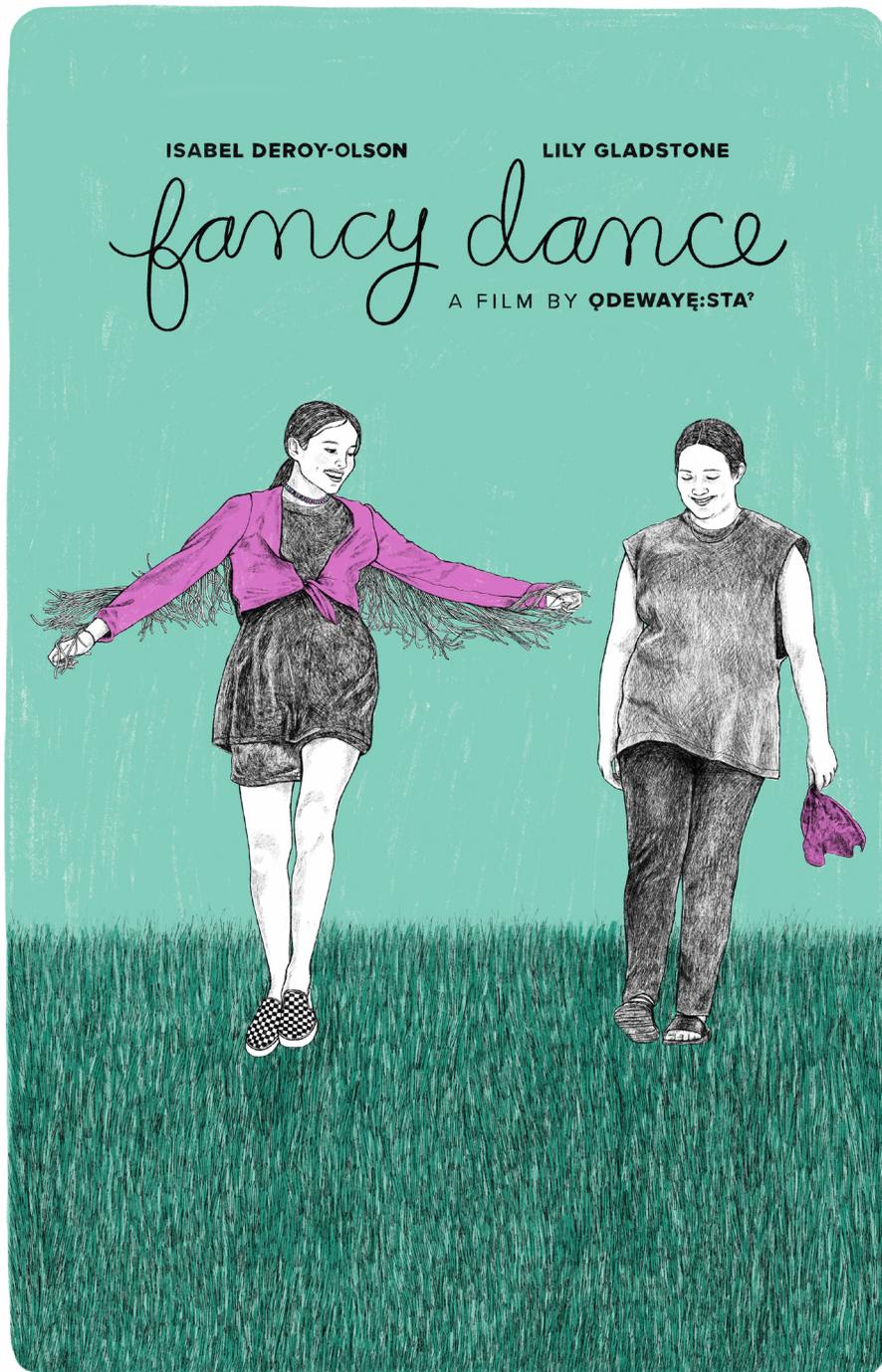
### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.





## ABOUT THE FILM

The Native-centric drama *Fancy Dance* is a rare glimpse into the lives of the Seneca-Cayuga people, that focuses on a family continually challenged by the indifference of the world beyond the reservation. When thirteen-year-old Roki's mom disappears and law enforcement proves to be indifferent to the latest in an alarming number of missing indigenous women, she is forced to grow up fast. Native American hustler Aunt Jax (Lily Gladstone) takes on the role of "little mother" and detective in hopes of keeping their family intact. Leading up to a journey to the state powwow, *Fancy Dance* asks the viewer to bear witness to the lived experiences and motivations of indigenous women while acknowledging generations of mistreatment.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER ERICA TREMBLAY

Erica Tremblay is an award-winning writer and director from the Seneca-Cayuga Nation. Her work clearly focuses on crafting authentic, relatable stories that showcase the full spectrum of contemporary Native American culture in a way that is so often not depicted on screen—bringing universality to characters and experiences that mainstream media has so often shown as “the other.” As an indigenous and queer filmmaker, Tremblay is constantly grappling with how to deconstruct the colonized world around her. Storytelling is integral to her culture and making this film offered her a way to honor that responsibility. She is interested in telling impactful stories that create change, specifically within communities in which she resides.



## THE GENESIS OF THE STORY

The story for *Fancy Dance* was born from the director’s yearning to see herself and the Seneca-Cayuga people reflected on the screen. To be Native American women with multi-dimensional identities means facing harsh realities in spaces that are virtually invisible. For centuries, Native families have been fractured by corrupt systems, and yet a vibrant and beautiful community still withstands. *Fancy Dance* is ultimately a love letter to that community and the women and queer folks who hold it together. Erica Tremblay set out to make a film that celebrates Native culture and counterbalances the exploitative depictions of reservation life with the joy and happiness that is also very much a part of the lived experience, which often gets lost in mainstream portrayals of their communities. *Fancy Dance* is ultimately a love letter to the community and the women and queer folks who hold it together.





# DURING VIEWING STORY MAP

**Directions:**

Use the story map to identify the elements of narrative film. Identify the film's characters, plot, setting, problem, and solution as well as important symbols and themes.

**PROBLEM**

What is the main conflict of the film?

**OUTCOME**

How is the conflict resolved in the film?

**CHARACTERS**

Who are the main characters in the film and what is their relationship to each other?

**ACTION**

What actions do the characters take during the film? How do these actions develop the story?

**SETTING**

What is the significance of where the story takes place?

**SYMBOLS**

Are there any important symbolic props used in the film? If so, what are they and how are they significant to the story?

**SETTING**

What are the main themes of the film? These are broader points about society at large.

# AFTER VIEWING

## SAME, DIFFERENT, CONNECT, ENGAGE

### Directions:

Same, different, connect, engage is a thinking routine to nurture empathetic perspective taking and cultural bridge building. After watching *Fancy Dance* think about your relationship to the main character by responding to each of the following prompts.

### SAME

In what ways are you similar to Roki?

### DIFFERENT

In what ways are you different from Roki?

### CONNECT

In what ways are you and Roki connected as human beings?

### ENGAGE

What would you like to ask, say, or do with Roki if you had the chance?

A Thinking Routine Borrowed from Harvard Project Zero's Think Routine Toolbox:  
<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources>

# AFTER VIEWING RESPONSE QUESTIONS

**Directions:**

Respond to each question, referring to specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your interpretation.

1. What are some of the challenges Roki faces when her mother goes missing? How does she try to cope with being pulled between a life with white grandparents and a life with her aunt on the Seneca-Cayuga Reservation in Oklahoma?

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2. What are some of the challenges Jax faces in caring for Roki since her sister went missing? What choices is she forced to make within the child protective services system?

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3. The film centers around an annual mother-daughter dance at an upcoming powwow. What is the significance of this dance and why is it so important to Roki and her aunt Jax? Why do they risk everything to attend?

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4. While they could be considered relatively “harmless hustles,” how does Jax teaching Roki to steal provide greater insight about what it takes to make it on the reservation?

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5. Roki and her aunt Jax’s quest to get to the powwow puts them into conflict with the law. What are their motivations and how are their actions misjudged? Why is it important to understand their perspective?

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6. Did the film succeed in helping you to understand the cultural beliefs or practices of another group in its own cultural context? How?

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# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## RESEARCH PROJECT & YOUTH JOURNALISM

### Directions:

*Fancy Dance* tells the story of two women struggling to hold out hope when the nationwide crisis of missing Native women is very personal for them. While the case of Roki's missing mom and Jax's sister, Tawi, in the film is fictional, the human costs of missing and murdered Indigenous women and the ambivalence of law enforcement is real.

1. **Research.** Research and investigate the topic of missing and murdered indigenous women in the United States. Start by using the internet and other news sources in order to find similar stories and see how these cases are handled. Make sure to clarify what is unclear or lacks sufficient evidence. Use the reporter's notebook to document your findings.
2. **Facts and events.** What are your findings around the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women?
3. **Thoughts and feelings.** Does your research provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of the people who are affected by the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women? What evidence confirms these?
4. **Clear.** Record what is clear from your research in the column below. These are verifiable facts from reliable sources.
5. **Need to check.** Record what may still be unclear from your initial research. Dig further, if you can, to verify what still seems unclear.
6. **Judgment.** Based on your research and the information you were able to find, make your best judgment on the issue.
7. **Report.** Create your own news story or investigative report. Present your findings in a written article, a video report, or a podcast episode in order to draw attention to the epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous women in the United States. Make sure your report is accurate and unbiased.
8. **Present.** Present your report to the class and consider submitting it to a news organization in your community.



# REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

	CLEAR	NEED TO CHECK
<b>FACTS &amp; EVENTS</b> What are your findings around the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women?		
<b>THOUGHTS &amp; FEELINGS</b> How do the people affected by this issue think or feel about it?		

**My best judgment on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women:**

# EXTENSION ACTIVITY

## FILM REVIEW

### Directions:

After watching the film *Fancy Dance*, write a review of the film.

While a film review is an evaluation of a movie, it is not simply a viewer-response expressing the writer's feelings about the film. Instead, a film review attempts to do three things for the reader:

1. **Summarize** what the film is about (the story)
2. **Interpret** the film/filmmakers' intended meaning (the themes and claims)
3. **Evaluate** whether the film is successful in expressing the intended meaning (its effectiveness in conveying the themes and claims)

A review will support its perspective with evidence from the film, such as descriptions of important moments, characters, and scenes.

## Suggested Structure

### Introduction

- Introduce the film: title, director, and any relevant credentials (award wins for the film, other films by the director, origins for the film's story, etc.).
- Summarize what the film is about - briefly, and without any "spoilers" that give away plot twists and surprises.

### Body

- Offer an interpretation of what the film/director is trying to say through this story. In other words, what is the film's theme, message, or primary claim?

### Conclusion

- Evaluate whether the film is successful or not in conveying its intended message.
- Identify who the intended audience is and how effective the film is in meeting their needs. Is the film for a particular age group or social group?

Final Tip: Make sure to include some critical appraisal of the film in the first and last sentence, but try to weave it throughout the review as well.



# ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS



An opening night screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

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## What is a film festival?

A film festival is an event in which multiple movies are presented over the course of one or several days. Depending on the size of the festival, all of the screenings may take place in a single theater or may involve multiple venues throughout a city. Festivals also include special events like panel discussions with filmmakers and actors. Typically, filmmakers submit their works to a festival, where a team of curators selects the best entries for inclusion in the festival. For independent and international filmmakers, festivals are often an important way to raise awareness of a film, generate an audience, and/or attract a studio to purchase the rights to distribute a film in a wider release. Acceptance into a major festival can add significant prestige to a film, with some festival awards (such as the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or) considered among the highest honors a film can receive.

There are many film festivals through-

out the world, with some focusing on particular themes, such as highlighting LGBTQ films/filmmakers, specific cultural groups, or particular genres. While some of the more famous festivals may be in distant locations, there are hundreds of small festivals spread through every corner of the world and, increasingly, festivals are using streaming access to make it easier for the public to view their curated programs.

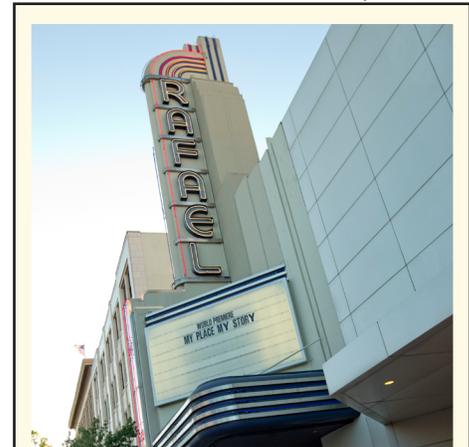
## History of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Since founding the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1977, Executive Director Mark Fishkin has shepherded this once small, three-day showcase into an eleven-day, internationally acclaimed cinema event presenting a wide variety of new films from around the world in an engaged, community setting.

The festival has an impressive track record of launching new films and new filmmakers, and has earned a reputation as a filmmakers' festival

by celebrating the best in American independent and foreign films, alongside high-profile and prestigious award contenders. The relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere surrounding MVFF, gives filmmakers and audiences alike the opportunity to share their work and experiences in a collaborative and convivial setting.

Each year the festival welcomes more than 200 filmmakers, representing more than 50 countries. Screening sections include world cinema, US cinema, documentaries, family films, and shorts programs. Annual festival initiatives include Active Cinema, a forum for films that aim to engage audiences and transform ideas into action; Mind the Gap, a platform for inclusion and equity; and ¡Viva el Cine!, a showcase of Latin American and Spanish-language films.. Festival guests also enjoy an exciting selection of Tributes, Spotlights and Galas throughout the program.



The Smith Rafael Film Center, home of the Mill Valley Film Festival

## Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of a film festival? What are the benefits for filmmakers? For the audience? For the community?
2. How might the films at a festival differ from the films available to watch at your local movie theater?
3. What qualities do you think festival curators might look for in a film? If you are watching a festival film with a class/school group, what aspects of the film do you think made it appealing to the curators?

## Get Involved!

Many film festivals, including the Mill Valley Film Festival, have student film categories. If you are a filmmaker, explore FilmFreeway ([www.filmfreeway.com](http://www.filmfreeway.com)) for a database of worldwide film festivals where you can submit your film. The call for entries for MVFF opens in late February and closes in June. Youth filmmakers do not have to pay an entry fee. MVFF also offers many opportunities for volunteering. Find out more at <https://www.cafilm.org/volunteer/>.