

Forum

Famalão'an in Film—Women in Film Across Islands

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LOIMATA, The Sweetest Tears. Documentary film, 94 minutes, color, 2020

Directed & produced by Anna Marbrook

Produced by Jim Marbrook, Dr. Tamasailau SuaaliiSauni, and Dame Gaylene Preston

Abstract: These are reflections from a woman producer's perspective on oceanic community-based filmmaking. Below I briefly review the feature length documentary, *LOIMATA, The Sweetest Tears*, screened at the Guam International Film Festival. I share about Ema's quiet activism and reflect on hosting the *wāhine* (female) director Anna Marbrook on Guam. Finally, I include the settler responsibility of revealing the expanding militarisation of the region while highlighting a current *famalão'an* (women) led film project from across the Marianas Archipelago.

The twelfth annual Guam International Film Festival (GIFF) held in October on the island of Guam (Guåhan), a non-self-governing territory of the United States (US), was the first in-person gathering since the pandemic. GIFF is the first (and continues to be the only) US film festival in the Western Pacific. It is a “dynamic source of cross-cultural artistic presence, bridging gaps among the US, Asia, and the Pacific's multi-cultural population and region [and] aims to unify, celebrate, and showcase to the region and the world the collective experience through the universal medium of film” (GIFF 2023). This year, international delegates were able to travel to Guam and were greeted by an enthusiastic audience delighted to return to theatre at the Guam Museum.

Annually, GIFF “strives to capture the passion and spirit of independent filmmakers and their films” (GIFF 2022). This year's theme of “Cinemaolek: Community, Education, Entertainment” includes a clever play on words. For those familiar with Fino' CHamoru, the Indigenous language of Guam, this incorporates *maolek*, meaning “good,” and is commonly phrased as *inafa'maolek*, meaning “to make good, to make peace with someone” (Bevacqua 2020). The prefix “cine” is added indicating the relation to cinema.

Myracle Mugol, GIFF's program manager (as well as artist, entrepreneur, filmmaker, sociologist, and mother of two boys) shared that GIFF's “aim is to celebrate cross-cultural understanding and showcase uniquely local storytelling. The focus of GIFF has always been community, education,

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and entertainment. So we felt like ‘cinemaolek’ embodied those three things that we hope to achieve. We want to reflect the community that we’ve put on the screen, we want to have a bit of an education aspect, which is why we have the panels and discussion series. At the end of the day, films are made to entertain, so entertainment is our focus. Coming back to the [Guam] museum, it was an opportunity to tie in all three things. It’s kind of like how a lot of us, growing up, we CHamoru-icize English words. ‘Cinemaolek’—it’s Guam, it’s good and it’s still film” (Barnett 2022). After being photographed on the red carpet, we (the audience) were encouraged to post with the hashtag: #cinemaolek.

Guided by superb organizers and a social media team, this GIFF event demonstrated how films both connect and create community. The three-day gathering offered a welcoming space for the public to view films (five dollars at the door) and included a Made in the Marianas and Island Spotlight Program, offering films made locally with community members represented on screen (perhaps for the first time).



FIGURE 1. Made in the Marianas with Myracle Mugol
Photograph by Sylvia C. Frain 2022

The feature-length documentary *LOIMATA, The Sweetest Tears* was featured as the opening night film to celebrate the first full day of GIFF programming. Since premiering at the 2020 New Zealand International Film Festival and winning New Zealand On Air’s Best Documentary of 2021, the film is embraced across the South Pacific. However, winning GIFF’s Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary and Best of the Festival demonstrated the ability of the film to be cherished and recognised on Guam and in the Mariana Islands.

This Micronesian premiere, accompanied by the wāhine (female) director, created kinships

across Oceania. The film graciously offered acknowledgment of the significance of Oceanic boatbuilding and seafaring knowledges shared by Micronesian families while visualising the contemporary shared struggles of colonisation. As a story of family liberation, we experience intimate family conflicts and create space to discuss the challenges of intergeneration trauma.

Most importantly, the film allows us to follow a fierce but quiet activist, ocean *waka* (boat) builder and captain Lilo Ema Siope. Under Anna Marbrook’s direction, the film gracefully captures Ema’s spirituality and immeasurable connection to her *aiga* (family) and the significance of returning to the family *fanua* (land) in Sāmoa.

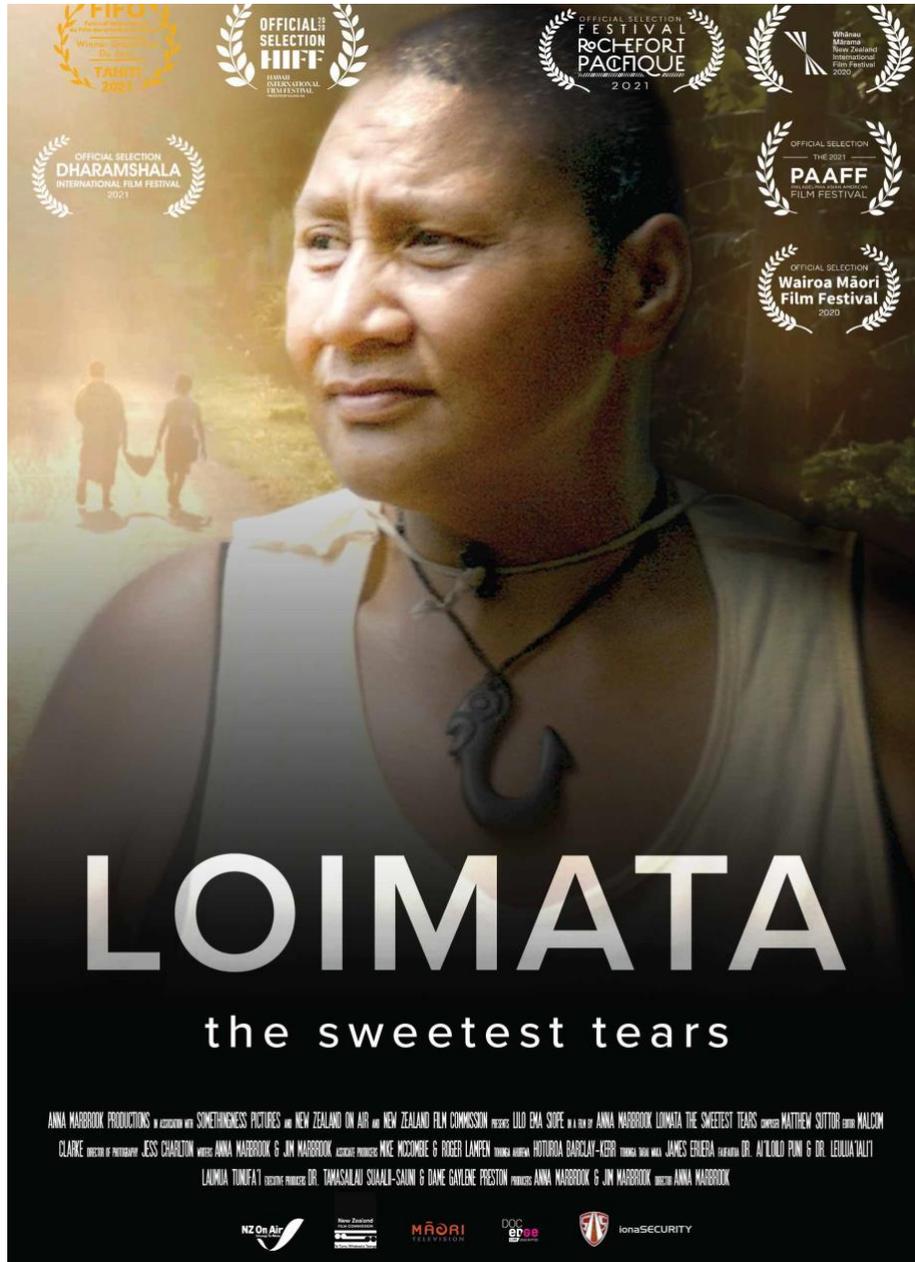


FIGURE 2. Poster for *LOIMATA: The Sweetest Tears*
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LOIMATA: The Sweetest Tears is a multigenerational story of shared Oceanic experiences of migrations and seafaring, intergenerational trauma, as well as kinships and family healing through reconnecting with the land.

Through an oceanic framework, combined with boatbuilding histories from across Oceania, the film uses navigation as both a metaphor (Iosefo, Holman, and Harris 2021) and a material object that moves us along the storyline. We sail along with captain Ema Siope's *aiga* aboard an ocean *waka* built by her hands. We journey with Ema and the Siope *aiga* during her final years and late stages of terminal cancer between Aotearoa (Māori) New Zealand, and Sāmoa. The film visually weaves her contributions to shared Oceanic celestial knowledges and solidifies her legacy of healing those around her through unconditional love.

Despite the attempted cultural erasure by the colonial division of Oceania, separating peoples into regions of Micronesia and Polynesia, the sharing of thousands of years of seafaring and celestial navigation continues. Unfortunately, so do contemporary settler governments and militaries in the Pacific, which exploit the high and deep seas, island resources, water, and even the people for labour and military enlistment. Reckoning with the dark histories of colonisation, exploitation, and extraction, intergenerational trauma experiences often overlap—including the “grave injustice” that Ema suffered of systemic childhood and sexual abuse. Ema's brother's question, “Is there anything you want to do before you put your head to rest?” begins the quest for the truth.

Ema knew to begin by strengthening the kinships within the Siope *aiga* and that deeper healing would be achievable through reconnecting to the family *fanua* (land) in Sāmoa. Ema explains the family history behind the *fanua*, “we named it Loitmata because it was a land that was established with tears.”

The close, family-centred scenes from the point of view within the *talanoa* (discussion) circle during difficult conversations were filmed in New Zealand living rooms and under Sāmoan *fales* (houses). The cinematic approach moves between these intimate scenes to wide landscape shots showing the extreme beauty of the islands—a feeling of giving the family space. The retelling of painful stories—which include both tears and laughter—become narration over birds-eye-view shots of the grey coastlines and green pastures of the North Island of New Zealand and of Sāmoa's black, dramatic shores meeting turquoise, deep blue waters beyond the coral reefs nearly encircling the islands.

To capture such striking imagery while filming on boats, in extreme heat, and over rough roads of Northland New Zealand speaks to the dedication and technical skills of the crew under challenging circumstances. The difficulties of filming on ocean *waka* sailing by the wind on Aotearoa's seas or small motorboats speeding into narrow bays of rough waves should not be underestimated. This includes working in heat so extreme in Sāmoa that the drone would not fly or climbing with heavy, handheld camera gear while keeping up with machete-clearing family members through thick jungles. The immense visuals created the cinematic wonder that filled all the senses. The realness of the film reached a Sāmoan audience member who shared while watching the film, “I smelled my island.”

The experiences of voyaging and returning “home,” to the “homeland” or “home island” for Pacific Islanders is common across Oceania, but returning for familial healing from abuse is a delicate and often private matter. However, Ema knew creating a film was important—a tool to bring folks into gentle spaces to have deep conversations as a form of quiet activism.



FIGURE 3. On the Red Carpet with Director Anna Marbrook with GIFF’s Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary and Local Producer, Sylvia C. Frain

A Bit About Ema—A Quiet Activist

Born and raised in South Auckland as a child of Sāmoan migrants, Ema's upbringing is a shared story for many Pasifika (often those of South Pacific descent) living in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the film, we are included in the Siope aiga homecoming to Sāmoa, Ema's father's first since leaving in 1959. He rode one of the many waves of migration from the South Pacific in the 1950s and '60s to New Zealand for labour opportunities. Today, more than sixty percent of the Pacific population is born in New Zealand, with Auckland considered the largest Polynesian city in the world (New Zealand Government 2018). The histories and contemporary stories of migrations to Aotearoa by folks from Oceania are complex. Only recently has the New Zealand settler government acknowledged the injustices and ongoing systemic discrimination.

In 2021, Jacinda Ardern, the prime minister of New Zealand, apologised for the state-sponsored police "Dawn Raids" carried out in the early morning targeting Pasifika families (New Zealand Government 2021; Smith 2018; Fepulea'i 2005). Between 1974 and 1976, the New Zealand Police were instructed to enter homes and stop people in the street to ask for permits, visas, and passports—an act "almost exclusively applied to Pacific Islanders, even though . . . the bulk of overstayers were from Europe or North America (New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2021).

This shared experience of racism and exploitation of working-class Samoan families continues today, specifically in the economic system. In 2022, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission published the "Pay Gap" Report, highlighting the ongoing inequalities—with New Zealand European men earning \$1.00 while Pacific women earn \$.73 for the same position (New Zealand Human Rights Commission 2022).

I raise these histories and current struggles to contextualise the mightiness of Lilo Ema Siope—her determination to lead her family on a healing journey and to bring as many young people as possible along with her. She is a leader within her family, and her bravery to invite and create a film about abuse, which is often a private family matter—is truly a form of "quiet activism" that challenges the culture of shame associated with systemic abuse.

While the film beautifully demonstrates Ema's larger-than-life presence and visually expresses her love for waka and her family, her work as a trained psychotherapist and experience in the mental health sector as a sexual health educator is less evident. She was "instrumental in training other young Pasifika people, particularly young women, in the ancient arts of sailing and navigation. Queer and gender-fluid, she was also a role model for young people who sometimes struggled to be open with their sexuality in traditional communities" (Brookes 2020). Ema Siope was an instrumental teacher and mentor for hundreds of young people. She passed away in 2019.

Linked to the Ancestors of the Region

While the film is a poetic love letter to the islands of Sāmoa and Aotearoa, it also serves as an invitation into a traditionally private realm of family healing through reconnecting with (is)lands. The film centred around reconnecting to land, *tāno* (CHamoru) and *fanua* (Sāmoan), as a method of family healing.

The film's approach resonated in the Mariana Islands, as access to ancestral tãno' is an ongoing issue for many of CHamorus, the Indigenous people of Guam. This struggle now spans generations, multiple United States federal administrations, and across local agencies. Removal from ancestral tãno' is due to various traumatic histories—including war, occupation, and settler colonialism, with the most confronting occurring now through expanding militarisation (Frain 2017, 2021). Nearly one-third of the island of Guam is restricted by the US federal government through the Department of Defense. For CHamorus, this lack of access constantly regenerates intergenerational trauma and presents tangible barriers to family healing (Borja 2017).

Reciprocal Filmmaking

Director Anna Marbrook's work connects media with social change, seeking to activate communities in both process and presentation (Guam International Film Festival 2022). As she described in the Cinemaolek Discussion Series panel entitled "Representation in Film," held at the University of Guam, her guiding practise in oceanic community-based filmmaking reflects a responsibility of engagement as a reciprocal process.

Anna began her talk with recognition of Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr (Tainui), a Māori navigator and captain of the oceangoing waka Haunui who often serves as a "compass" through their collaborations in filmmaking (Marbrook 2019). The very first step in a community process is to seek the permission of *tangata whenua* (in Te Reo Māori, the Indigenous language of Aotearoa, meaning "people of the land"), Indigenous people of the (is)lands upon which you will be creating. It is a complex process of real engagement and develops through enduring partnerships. Each stage and step must be thoroughly discussed well before the project even begins.

Anna shared how in seeking this dialogue, the overall project and lives are enhanced, an experience she considers "one of the greatest treasures" (Marbrook 2022). This demonstrates the notion of reciprocity and relationships within filmmaking and highlights the responsibilities in capturing a story. She acknowledges that the use of a camera can be very confronting, with concerns of those participating questioning "How will I be represented?"

As Ema's friend first, Anna recognised the "strength that we [filmmakers] get being alongside those who hold that wisdom" (Marbrook 2022). Both Anna and Ema agreed it was important for families to support families. Anna produced and wrote the film with her filmmaker brother, Jim Marbrook. This intimate invitation offers a rare opening to document a family's journey, and comes with a huge obligation in telling of things that are very precious and important.

While Anna has a highly collaborative approach to story and has partnered with key community leaders to develop rich storytelling projects (Guam International Film Festival 2022), she concluded with issues that challenge her and assist her growth as she continues to decolonise her lens. Specifically, she raised how "we all bring a lens to work and have to continue to decolonise in cross-cultural partnerships." She offered advice to the aspiring *famalão'an* ("women" in CHamoru) filmmakers and creatives: "as women, ask a lot of questions and listen a lot!" (Marbrook 2022).

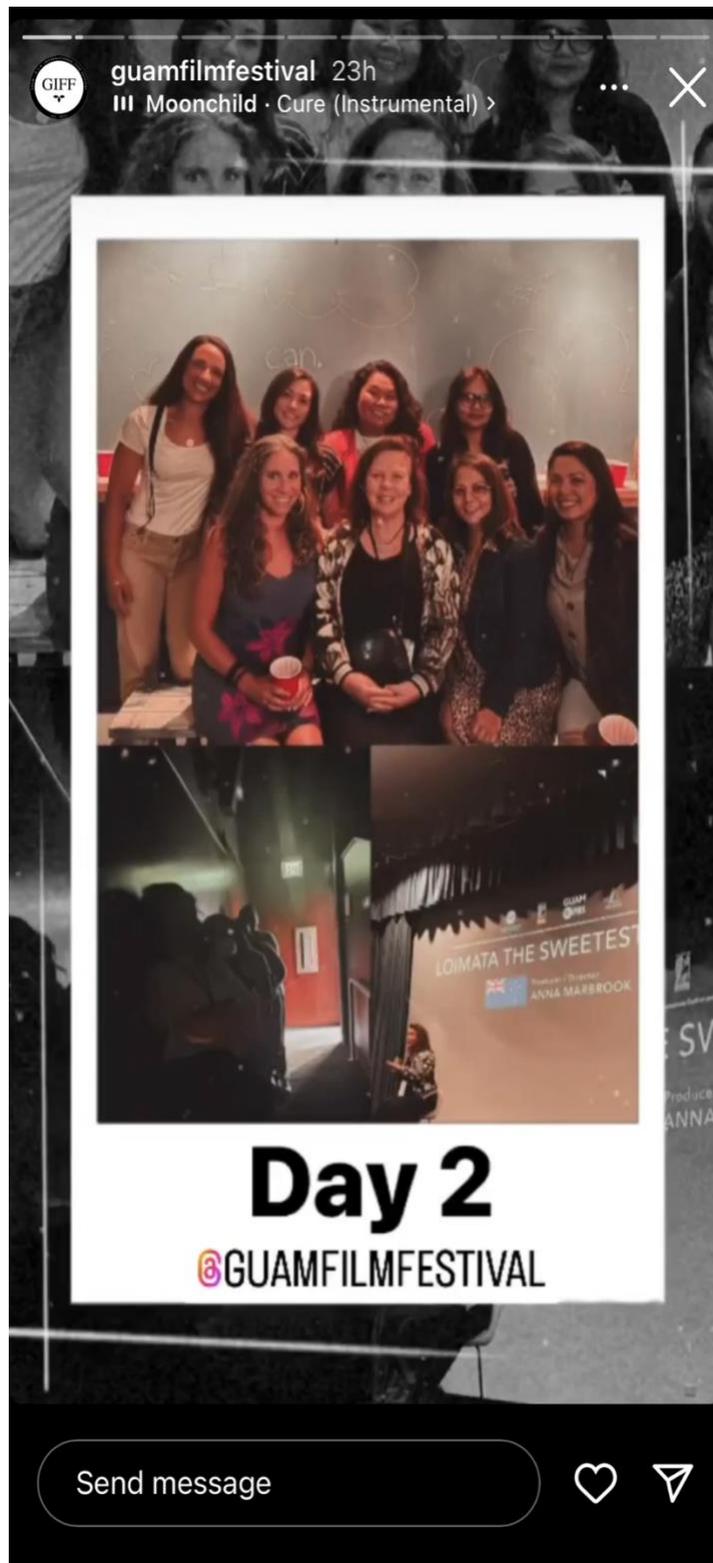


FIGURE 4. Famalão'an and Wāhine Filmmakers Post-Screening. Post shared with permission @GuamFilmFestival Instagram stories

Oceanic Community-Based Filmmaking

The experience of hosting an Aotearoa New Zealand-based *wāhine* (female) filmmaker on Guam was a privilege grounded through my settler responsibility (Garrison 2019). From a producer's approach, I aspired to have Anna meet with the right people and organisations working in similar spaces of family healing and LGBTQ+ rights. I knew she needed to see the beauty and sacredness of ancestral *tāno'* stolen for current military expansion. I sought to present diverse avenues for her to share and connect with *famalão'an* (women) by participating in interviews with local women journalists, artists, and activists and the Arts Council.

While my intention to organise meetings and sightseeing was successful and scheduled efforts did present opportunities, it was not during these tightly curated and controlled gatherings that the reciprocal relationships flourished. It was the Mariana Islands' matriarchal style of hospitality that became a catalyst for oceanic styles of engagement. Uniting over funny stories around food-packed "fiesta" tables covered in local BBQ and with jokes as our currency, oceanic community-based filmmaking was born.

The screening of *LOIMATA: The Sweetest Tears* brought people together. It was Ema's story and quiet activism and Anna's reciprocal directing that connected local *famalão'an* across experiences, histories, and islands. Further, the filmmaker question and answer session after the film offered a space for difficult conversations and sharing. While logistically the audience had to leave the Guam Museum due to time constraints—the film had fulfilled its purpose. Through witnessing Ema's heroic approach to life through love, her story resonated locally while strengthening connections with Sāmoans who consider Guam home.

Next for the Marianas Archipelago

My work supports Oceanic filmmaking—particularly the aspiring filmmakers on Guam and the wider Mariana Islands. I seek to support the creation of films and production of documentaries as a community-centred practice while ensuring that the next generations are mentored. This is possible through supporting projects that offer practical opportunities to upskill young Micronesian filmmakers in the Mariana Islands and beyond. I work within spaces that amplify the inter-island film collaborations that extend across Oceania and that demonstrate the issues impacting the trans-archipelagic Indigenous filmmaking community. This process of sharing filmmaking knowledge empowers local storytellers, creates new artistic bridges across the archipelago, and expands and deepens the culture surrounding the sharing of the Indigenous experience in the Marianas to Hawai'i, Aotearoa, and across Oceania.

Specifically, I am working to create an impact documentary film grounded in over a decade of my academic research, project development, and publishing and four years of on-the-ground visual documentation and community reporting by CHamoru Berkeley doctoral student and filmmaker, Sophia Perez. While we are submitting applications to fund specific stages of production, we see the entire filmmaking process, both technical and spiritual, as a trans-archipelagic development opportunity for the entire Marianas Archipelago. While Guam has a more established filmmaking community, as demonstrated through over a decade of GIFF, aspiring

filmmakers in the Northern Marianas Islands have limited access to sophisticated camera equipment and outside mentorships.

As 2022 Wāhine in Film Lab fellows, supported by Hawai'i Women in Filmmaking (2022), Sophia, Sheila Babauta, and I co-founded the nonprofit, Fāha' Digital Media. Fāha' is the “heart, juicy kernel, found inside a coconut that has sprouted” (Paleric, 2012). This naming represents the coconut tree of life and the new sprouts of possibilities. We seek to support the development of films, nurture Oceanic filmmakers, and promote their stories. Currently, we are inviting industry leaders and filmmakers who can assist with creating a film industry in the Northern Mariana Islands while strengthening the film community on Guam and across the Marianas Archipelago. Specifically, those who could offer guidance and advice for developing the film industry in the US Affiliated Pacific are encouraged to reach out. We are continuously looking to grow and connect, specifically in spaces for/by famalão'an and wāhine filmmakers amplifying stories from across Oceania.

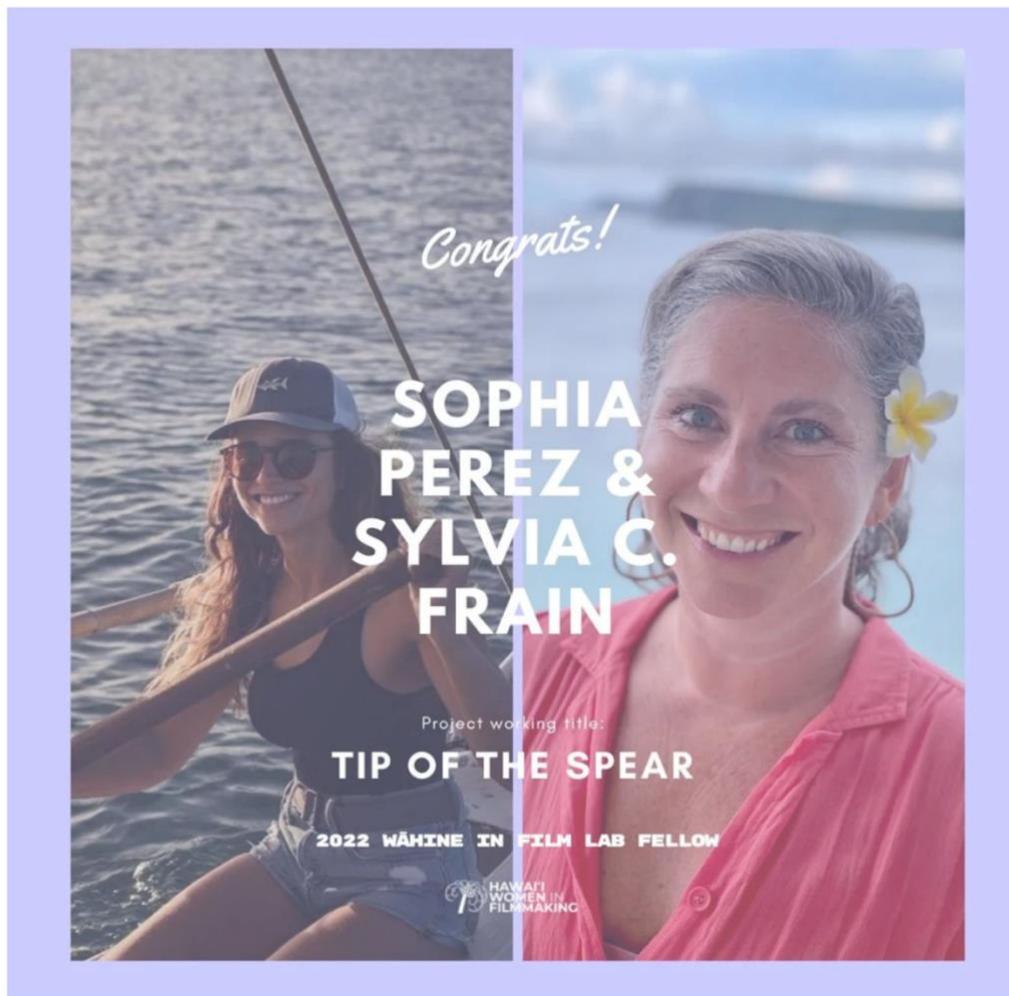


FIGURE 5. 2022 Wāhine in Film Lab fellows, Sophia Perez and Sylvia C. Frain. Screenshot from <https://www.hawaiiwomeninfilmaking.org/wahine-in-film-lab?pgid=15ii611n-ac3ea293-c6f1-43c6-933e-d709e05da21c>

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