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Sundance Institute Announces 2020 Momentum Fellows and Launch Grant Fund Recipients

Year-Long Fellowship For Underrepresented Filmmakers Enters Second Year, Supporting Eight Visionary Artists

New Launch Grant Fund Empowers Underrepresented Artists to Break Systemic Barriers in Launching First Feature Film

Los Angeles — Sundance Institute announced today two support tracks for artists from underrepresented communities, continuing the Institute’s commitment to fostering inclusive artistic visions. Announced today are the eight members of the second class of the Momentum Fellowship, a full-year program of deep, customized creative and professional support for writers, directors, and producers from underrepresented communities who are poised to take the next step in their careers, working across documentary and feature filmmaking, and episodic content. Sundance Institute also announced the four awardees of the inaugural Launch Grant Fund, a new opportunity for emerging filmmakers from underrepresented communities launching their first feature film.

“Each of the exceptionally talented artists in these two programs brings a bold creative vision to their work, and we are thrilled to support them at such critical junctures – launching their first feature films and building sustainable careers,” said Karim Ahmad, Director, Outreach & Inclusion.

The Momentum Fellowship, which launched last year, evolved from the Women at Sundance Fellowship, a highly successful model that merited expansion for impact across a broader cohort of underrepresented communities. Those eligible for this larger, more intersectional program include artists identifying as women, non-binary and/or transgender, artists of color, and artists with disabilities.

The 2020 Momentum Fellows are: Andrew Ahn, Linda Yvette Chávez, Christina Choe, Deborah Esquenazi, Rodney Evans, Penny Lane, Avril Z. Speaks, and Malika Zouhali-Worrall.

As part of the fellowship, Sundance Institute has partnered with Warner Bros. Pictures again to continue the Sundance Institute | Warner Bros. Feature Film Directors Track granting access to executives and workshops hosted on the studio’s Burbank lot. In keeping with the company’s greater goals of inclusion and commitment to diversity in front of and behind the camera, Warner Bros. is dedicated to helping nurture and grow this new class of Fellows, which includes access to executives and workshops hosted on the studio’s Burbank lot. Sundance Institute gratefully acknowledges each of the contributors to its Outreach and Inclusion Department and Women at Sundance, whose partnership has enabled the Institute to support dozens of bold and underrepresented voices in independent storytelling throughout the evolution of its programming.
Sundance Institute’s Launch Grant Fund will offer three to five artists per year up to $10,000 each in funding, designed to take feature films from the development stage into pre-production and beyond. The Launch Grant Fund was born out of an analysis by Dr. Stacy L. Smith and the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which found systemic barriers for artists from underrepresented communities seeking to complete major works and build sustainable careers.

The 2020 Launch Grant Fund Recipients are: Marion Hill, Meryam Joobeur, Anais Blondet Medina and Kase Peña. More information on both the Momentum Fellows and Launch Grant Recipients appears below.


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**MOMENTUM FELLOWS**

**Andrew Ahn** is a queer Korean-American filmmaker born and raised in Los Angeles. His latest feature *Driveways*, starring Brian Dennehy and Hong Chau and produced by Symbolic Exchange, premiered at the 2019 Berlinale. His first feature film *Spa Night* premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival in US Dramatic Competition. The film’s lead actor Joe Seo won a Special Jury Award at the festival for Breakthrough Performance. The film went on to win the 2017 John Cassavetes Independent Spirit Award and was distributed by Strand Releasing.

In 2017, Ahn directed the entire first season of the Sundance Now original show *This Close* from creators Shoshannah Stern and Josh Feldman. Ahn and the other producers of the show were honored with the Producers Guild of America George Sunga Media Access Award. Ahn's other television directing credits include narrative and documentary episodes for Netflix, FX, and KCET. He has promoted diversity in the arts by mentoring youth filmmakers through programs like Pacific Arts Movement’s Reel Voices, Outfest’s OutSet, and the Sundance Institute’s Native Filmmaker Lab and Ignite Program. He graduated from Brown University and received an MFA in Film Directing from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).
Linda Yvette Chávez is an award-winning Xicana screenwriter and producer. She co-created Netflix’s much-anticipated series Gentefied with Marvin Lemus. What started as a digital series that premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival grew into a TV series at the center of a six-network bidding war that found its home with the good people of Netflix. While working on Gentefied, Linda adapted I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter, a New York Times bestseller, into a feature film for Anonymous Content (The Revenant, Spotlight) and MACRO (Mudbound, Fences). She also spent time in the writer’s room of Nickelodeon’s Emmy award-winning series The Loud House where she wrote an adorable episode featuring the Casagrandes. Linda’s currently writing a top-secret studio film for Fox Searchlight and is focused on investing time into one of her first creative loves: directing. She’s so excited the Sundance Momentum Fellowship will support her in this endeavor.

In a past life, Linda helped form and establish COMEDIVA, a successful digital platform and production studio. As head of programming, she developed, wrote, and produced tons of viral sketches and digital series for clients like Nickelodeon, MiTu Network, Pepsi, and Univision where she was responsible for co-visioning and establishing Univision’s first English-language digital platform, FLAMA. Linda’s work has received millions of views and has been featured on CNN, Good Morning America, Wired, AdWeek, and The Huffington Post.

Christina Choe’s debut feature Nancy premiered at Sundance in the 2018 US Dramatic Competition, where it won the Waldo Salt Best Screenplay Award. The film stars Andrea Riseborough, Steve Buscemi, Ann Dowd, John Leguizamo, J. Smith-Cameron and was produced in partnership with EON Productions’ Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson. Nancy was nominated for two Independent Spirit Awards and named one of the “Best Films of 2018” by Indiewire, The Village Voice and the AV Club, with Choe named one of Indiewire’s “20 Rising Female Directors”. In 2017, her docu-series Welcome To The DPRK, a personal portrait of North Korea, was acquired by First Look Media/Topic Studios and is currently streaming online. Choe is currently developing her next feature film, an original TV series, and recently directed episodes of TV anthologies, Hulu’s The Act, and Jordan Peele’s reboot of The Twilight Zone.

Deborah S. Esquenazi is a film director, screenwriter, and investigative journalist. Esquenazi’s first feature, the critically acclaimed documentary Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four, won the Critic’s Choice Award for Best First Feature, garnered an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Social Issues Documentary, a Peabody Award, and won a GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Documentary, among other distinctions. The film helped exonerate the ‘San Antonio Four’ and is mentioned in the opening passages of the Writs of Habeas Corpus in Ex Parte Anna Vasquez, Cassandra Rivera, Elizabeth Ramirez, and Kristie Mayhugh. Esquenazi’s first narrative feature, Queen of Wands, a gay phantasmagoric coming-of-age, which she wrote and will direct was selected for the 2019 Sundance Screenwriting Lab Intensive. Her latest short, El Vacío, was produced by Concordia Studios/New York Times. Her Austin-based company, Myth of Monsters, is launching an anthology podcast called A Feminist History of Crime, to debut in 2020. Esquenazi has also been a Sundance Documentary Film Fellow, Sundance Creative Producing Fellow, and a Firelight Film Fellow. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her wife and two sons.
Rodney Evans has been making documentary and fiction films for over 20 years. He is the writer/director/producer of the feature film *Brother to Brother* which won the Special Jury Prize in Drama at the Sundance Film Festival. The film garnered four Independent Spirit Award nominations including Best First Film, Best First Screenplay, Best Debut Performance for Anthony Mackie and Best Supporting Male Performance for Roger Robinson. Evans has received funding from The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, The Ford Foundation’s JustFilms Program, The Creative Capital Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, and The Independent Television Service (ITVS). His latest feature-length documentary, *Vision Portraits*, had its world premiere at the 2019 SXSW Film Festival and is currently in theatrical distribution in major cities across the U.S.

Penny Lane has been making award-winning, innovative nonfiction films for over a decade. Her most recent feature documentary *Hail Satan?* (2019) debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and is now in wide release with Magnolia Pictures. Her three previous feature documentaries are *The Pain of Others* (2018), *Nuts!* (2016) and *Our Nixon* (2013). *The Pain of Others* premiered at Rotterdam and went on to Sheffield and BAMcinemaFest. *Nuts!* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival where it won a Special Jury Prize for Editing. *Our Nixon* premiered at Rotterdam, won the Ken Burns Award for “Best of the Festival” at Ann Arbor, and was selected as the Closing Night Film at New Directors/New Films. In 2018 Penny was honored with the Vanguard Award at SF DocFest, a Chicken & Egg Breakthrough Award and was admitted into the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. She has been awarded grants from Sundance Institute, Creative Capital, Cinereach, TFI Documentary Fund, Jerome Foundation, Catapult Film Fund, LEF Foundation, NYSCA, and many other organizations. And yes, Penny Lane is her real name.

Avril Z. Speaks is a creative producer, film educator, and director based in Los Angeles. Her goal is creating unique films and sparking a movement of diverse, honest media that represents the multi-dimensional qualities of people around the world. Avril is committed to supporting storytellers, especially women and people of color, whose films tackle the intersections of race, gender, community, social justice, family, and spirituality.

Avril produced the film *Jinn*, which premiered in Narrative Competition at SXSW (2018) and won Special Jury Recognition for Writing. *Jinn* continues to win awards at festivals around the world and gained distribution through MGM/Orion Classics. Avril is a producer on the film *Hosea*, which will release spring 2020, and the South African drama *African-America*, which is currently in post-production. Avril was also an Associate Producer on the TNT docu-series “American Race” in 2018 and worked as a Production Manager for Scripted Programming at BET Networks. Avril has been selected for producing labs with Film Independent, Sundance Institute, IFP, Rotterdam and Cannes, and she is a winner of the 2018 Movie Magic Producer Award. As a former film professor at Howard University, Avril recognizes the value of film education. In conjunction with Film Independent, Avril has coordinated international film education programs such as Global Media Makers and the inaugural Hollywood Foreign Press Association Filmmaker Residency. Avril is a contributing writer for DearProducer.com. Avril has also directed feature films, including *The Round Table* and the award-winning *Sophisticated Romance*. 
Malika Zouhali-Worrall is a British-Moroccan filmmaker based in New York. An Emmy Award-winning director and editor, her directing credits include Call me Kuchu (Berlin Film Festival, 2012), which broadcast on Netflix and BBC World, and received more than 20 festival awards, as well as Thank You For Playing (Tribeca Film Festival, 2015), a POV/ITVS co-production, which was awarded an Emmy for Outstanding Arts & Culture Documentary. More recently, Malika directed the pilot episode of Earn A Living (IDFA, 2018), a documentary series for European broadcaster ARTE that examines experiments worldwide in universal basic income, and she is editing Loira Limbal’s film, Through The Night, which was selected for the 2019 Sundance Institute Documentary Story & Edit Lab.

Malika is currently in development on a feature-length hybrid film, set to go into production in early 2020. Her films have been supported by Sundance Institute, San Francisco Film, Catapult Film Fund, Tribeca Film Institute, Film Independent, Firelight Producers Lab, the Fledgling Fund, as well as the Chaz & Roger Ebert Directing Fellowship and the Garrett Scott Documentary Development Grant. In 2012, Filmmaker Magazine named Malika one of 25 New Faces of Independent Film, and in 2019, she received the year-long Chicken & Egg Award fellowship (formerly known as the Breakthrough Award). Malika teaches filmmaking at UnionDocs Center for Documentary Art in Brooklyn, New York.

LAUNCH GRANT FUND RECIPIENTS

Marion Hill is a New Orleans based director devoted to narratives of queer femininity. A musician since age four, she almost always begins a visual concept with music: what she believes to be the root of cultural expression. Through shorts, music videos, and now her first feature film, her direction of the camera serves to authentically center queer & POC sexuality, and to worship femme power across cultures. Her first short film BIRD OF PREY (2016) screened at festivals including Frameline San Francisco, and Sidewalk Birmingham, Alabama. Her second short GODDESS HOUSE (2018) recounts the beauty of empowering sex work, and screened at Outfest Fusion Los Angeles. Alongside her shorts and music videos, she daylights as Assistant Video Director at WWOZ 90.7FM, New Orleans’ award-winning jazz station. Marion is a fellow of the New Orleans Film Society’s 2018 Emerging Voices Program.

Meryam Joobeur is a Montréal based Tunisian filmmaker. Her short films Gods, Weeds and Revolutions (2013) and Born in the Maelstrom (2017), starring Sasha Lane, screened in dozens of national and international festivals including REGARDS, Winterthur International Short Film Festival and Guanajuato International Film Festival. Her recent short Brotherhood (2018) premiered at TIFF where it won ‘Best Canadian short’ and went on to screen at 70+ festivals including, Sundance, Clermont Ferrand (Jury ‘Special Mention’), Aspen International Film Festival, Winterthur (Audience Award) and Cairo International Film Festival (‘Best Short Film’). Meryam is an alumni of TIFF talent lab, Med Film Factory, Rawi Screenwriter’s lab and Berlinale Talent Lab and recently opened the production company INSTINCT BLEU with Tunisian producer Sarra Ben Hassen.
Anais Blondet Medina is a Peruvian multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker living and working in New York City. Feminism, magical realism, absurdist dialogue, and the use of music as a narrative tool are the staples of her cinematic language. Anais studied Social Science and Communications at the Universidad Católica del Perú before returning to New York to obtain her BFA in Film Directing from the School of Visual Arts. Her thesis film, NOW THEY KNOW ABOUT MY MADNESS was an official selection at the 2009 Max Ophüls Preis Film Festival. After SVA, Anais attended the Sorbonne University's Masters program for Film Research. During her four-year stay in France, she founded her first band, developed her stop-motion animation and illustration skills, and directed music videos for experimental artists as part of the legendary Lyonnais underground art collective, Grrrnd Zero. Anais returned to New York in 2012 and began working as a freelance director and editor. Her work has been featured on CNN, MTV, OWN, Canal+, Great Big Story, The Travel Channel, at the American Museum of Natural History, The Smithsonian Museum, and at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival as an editor on the queer comedy series, STRANGERS. Anais was selected as a finalist at FEST - New Directors New Films Pitching Forum in Portugal, winning the Film Lab prize and was named a 2019 NALIP Fellow.

Kase Peña is a Trans Latinx Woman from the Bronx, New York and of Dominican descent. The recipient of some of the most prestigious Fellowships in the industry, including Film Independent Project Involve, the Latino Lens Narrative Shorts Incubator, the Half Initiative among others, Kase is the first Trans Latinx Female to join the Writers Guild of America and the first ever to get hired as a Staff Writer on a scripted show. Earlier this year, Kase shadowed Emmy Award Winner Director/Showrunner Jill Soloway. Two of her shorts films, Trabajo and Full Beat, have been picked up by HBO for distribution. Sony Pictures Entertainment named Kase their 2019 Diverse Fellow.

Sundance Institute
Founded in 1981 by Robert Redford, Sundance Institute is a nonprofit organization that provides and preserves the space for artists in film, theatre, and media to create and thrive. The Institute's signature Labs, granting, and mentorship programs, dedicated to developing new work, take place throughout the year in the U.S. and internationally. The Sundance Film Festival and other public programs connect audiences to artists in igniting new ideas, discovering original voices, and building a community dedicated to independent storytelling. Sundance Institute has supported such projects as Sorry to Bother You, Eighth Grade, Won't You Be My Neighbor?, Hereditary, RBG, Call Me By Your Name, Get Out, The Big Sick, Top of the Lake, Winter's Bone, Dear White People, Brooklyn, Little Miss Sunshine, 20 Feet From Stardom, Beasts of the Southern Wild, Fruitvale Station, I'm Poppy, America to Me, Leimert Park, Spring Awakening, A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder and Fun Home. Join Sundance Institute on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube.

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