Meet the 2025 Diverse Voices In Docs Fellows

*The **Diverse Voices in Docs (DVID)** fellowship is Kartemquin Films' flagship program dedicated to nurturing emerging Midwest filmmakers who identify as Black, Indigenous or another person of color. Over the course of a year, the fellowship provides mentorship, resources, and a supportive community to help fellows refine their craft and amplify their distinctive voices. For 2025, DVID is spotlighting short films, with five talented filmmakers—**Cherrelle Swain, Mariam Atallah, Myron Miller, Obed Lamy**, and **amaranta**—selected for this year's cohort. Their projects explore themes as varied as the connection between salt in Siwa, Egypt, and Chicago, to the joys and challenges of the Haitian community in Springfield, Ohio.*

We sat down with this inspiring group to learn more about their filmmaking journeys and what compels them to tell the stories they do.

Cherrelle Swain: *Ancestral Healing*

Driven by a deep commitment to social justice and community-centered storytelling, Cherrelle Swain's work is rooted in her personal connection to the Rondo community in St. Paul, Minnesota. Swain's film, Ancestral Healing, is a powerful exploration of her family's history and the impact of the destruction of Rondo, a once-thriving Black community, due to highway construction in the 1960s.

Ancestral Healing explores themes of freedom, resilience, and the importance of preserving Black family histories. For Swain, filmmaking is a call to action, a means to spark dialogue, drive social change, and promote systemic equity and justice. She sees her role as not just creating films but also providing tools and establishing connections within communities to foster meaningful change.

Kartemquin: Your background spans education, social entrepreneurship, and philanthropy. What inspired you to add filmmaking as a storytelling tool?

Cherrelle Swain: As an artist, I approach ilmmaking through the lens of social impact and action. I believe this stems largely from my background prior to becoming a filmmaker, as all the work I did involved a call to action. My experience in education, in particular, inspired me to pursue filmmaking. At the time, I was studying a film about the integration of the school system through Brown vs. Board of Education. I was struck by the realization that, 60 years after the integration of schools, the education system in the United States was actually more segregated than it had been in the 1960s. This sparked a desire in me to use film as a tool to facilitate conversations about the intersection of racism and education in America.

've always been inspired to create films and content that spark dialogue, drive social change, and promote systemic equity and justice. Social impact is at the core of my artistic approach—whether it's through developing an educational curriculum, curating meaningful conversations, creating immersive experiences, or building partnerships. To me, this form of engagement is just as vital as the film itself.

KTQ: How has your family's roots in Rondo influenced your storytelling in Ancestral Healing?

CS: The impetus for embarking on the Ancestral Healing journey came as an invitation from my mother's mother, her mother, and the generations before them. They didn't speak to me in words; instead, I felt their call in my bones as I sat on my bed, watching my beloved city burn in the wake of George Floyd's death. This tragedy awakened ncestral memories within me. I wondered: what would have happened if my ancestors had responded in this way to the destruction of their homes and community in the 1960s? Perhaps, if they had, I wouldn't be here today to piece this story together. This project is an ancestral imagining of what it means to be free—and to stay free.

Growing up, hearing stories of Rondo felt like stepping into a dream. Witnessing the pride and joy of my aunts, uncles, grandmother, and cousins as they reminisced about Rondo in its heyday shaped my understanding of who I am. Yet, I often felt a sense of frustration, as if I had missed out on something beautiful. This project embodies the cultural belief of Sankofa—that we must look back in order to move forward.

More than a personal exploration of my identity through the lens of my great-grandmother and ancestors, this project is a dedication to all the descendants of Rondo. It's an invitation to rediscover the power, tenacity, strength, and resilience of those who came before us. It's a reminder of all that we must protect to ensure the injustices of history are not repeated.

This work is an examination of everything we've lost, all that our ancestors fought to gain, and the ripple effects of those sacrifices over time. It's unlocking sacred memories from my family's past and serving as an ode to all Black families to preserve and honor our histories—so they are never erased.

KTQ: What excites you most about joining the DVID fellowship, and how do you hope it will shape your journey as a filmmaker?

n **CS:** I am so excited to be part of a thoughtfully designed, year-long program. Each month, the curriculum highlights areas where I can grow as a filmmaker and provides opportunities to advance the story arc. The KTQ team's intentionality is evident, and being part of this fellowship feels like joining a family with beliefs and values aligned with my own. I look forward to the mentorship, bonding with the cohort, and developing a demo reel to bring the Ancestral Healing story to life. *You can learn more about Cherrelle's work here.*

Mariam Atallah: *Breaking Salt*

Based in Chicago, Mariam Atallah brings a unique perspective to her work, seamlessly blending personal narratives with universal themes. Her film, Breaking Salt, explores the unexpected connection between Siwa, Egypt, and Chicago through the lens of globalization and the salt trade. Atallah's filmmaking style centers on authenticity, allowing her to approach stories with cultural sensitivity while crafting narratives that resonate with audiences worldwide. She views filmmaking as a means to highlight the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate places and the dignity of labor often overlooked.

Kartemquin: What's one element of your filmmaking style that helps the stories feel both deeply personal and universally resonant?

Mariam Atallah: An element of my filmmaking style that helps stories feel both deeply personal and universally resonant is authenticity. As someone with a multicultural background, my dual identity shapes the way I approach storytelling. It allows me to approach stories with the cultural sensitivity of someone deeply connected to the context, while crafting narratives that organically invite international audiences into meaningful dialogue.

KTQ: Your upcoming short film about salt connects Egypt and Chicago through a lens of globalization. How did you first discover this connection between Siwa and Chicago and what does it symbolize to you?

MA: *T*he connection between Siwa and Chicago emerged naturally from living between two worlds. While I was in Siwa documenting salt extraction, a worker mentioned that much of their salt is exported to places like the Midwest. Just a few weeks earlier, I had been walking through snowy Chicago streets, completely unaware of this link. It struck me how something as ordinary as salt could connect such distant places. For me, it symbolizes the hidden ways we're all connected, despite the political and economic divides, and it highlights the dignity of the labor behind the things we rarely stop to think about.

KTQ: What excites you most about joining the DVID fellowship, and how do you hope it will shape your journey as a filmmaker?

MA: The fellowship feels like an incredible opportunity to grow as a storyteller while being part of a community of filmmakers who bring so many unique perspectives and experiences. The mentorship and resources will be crucial in helping me develop the story of Breaking Salt and also navigate the practical side of filmmaking, like pitching and finding the right opportunities. *You can learn more about Miriam's work here.*

Myron Miller: *Doors Off*

From his service with Americorps to mentoring at-risk youth on Chicago's Southside, Myron Miller's diverse background has shaped his approach to filmmaking, emphasizing authenticity, respect for diverse perspectives, and community building. His film, Doors Off, explores Chicago's vibrant car club culture through the eyes of the Chi Wrangler Crew. Inspired by immersive storytelling techniques, including VR, Miller aims to break away from traditional documentary styles by incorporating 360-degree shots and dynamic sound design to create a visceral experience for viewers. He believes that this innovative approach will offer a unique perspective on a community often misunderstood.

Kartemquin: From mentoring at-risk youth with Americorps City Year to pursuing an advanced degree in Media Ventures, your career has been multifaceted. How do these experiences influence the stories you tell and your approach to filmmaking?

Myron Miller: My service with Americorps City Year was a transformative experience. For the first time, I worked alongside a diverse cohort of team members representing cultures from Judaism, Ethiopia, Palestine, and Senegal. This dynamic forced me to learn how to navigate conflicting perspectives, foster collaboration, and develop a deeper sense of empathy.

When I joined City Year in 2012, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do professionally. I had just completed an internship at WGCI, a prominent Chicago radio station, where I witnessed the rise of drill music—a raw and authentic subgenre that was spreading across the nation. This unique moment in music history inspired me to document its origins, leading me to purchase a DSLR camera and travel to New York to follow Chief Keef, a young rapper at the forefront of the movement, who was set to perform his first show outside of Chicago.

Upon returning [to Chicago], I partnered with Jonathan Gorczyca, now my co-director on Doors Off, to conceptualize a documentary capturing the early makings of Chicago Drill. Unfortunately, the pace at which Drill music grew—and our conflicting schedules—meant the project never came to fruition. That said, the controversies surrounding Drill culture—particularly its connection to youth violence—led me to make a pivotal decision: mentoring at-risk youth through AmeriCorps would be just as impactful, if not more so, than telling their stories on film.

Years later, while pursuing an advanced degree in Media Ventures at Boston University, I found myself in another highly diverse environment, this time among disruptors and innovators with immigration stories from Somalia, Serbia, and China. These experiences solidified my belief that empathy and collaboration are essential in filmmaking, especially when telling stories about unique subcultures and underrepresented communities.

Today, I approach filmmaking with the same principles I learned through my experiences: a focus on authenticity, respect for diverse perspectives, and a drive to build connections to community.

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> - **Mariam Atallah**

KTQ: During your time at Boston University, you explored storytelling for virtual reality. How has this innovative medium influenced your perspective on filmmaking and how do you see your film, Doors Off, breaking away from traditional styles in film?

MM: Virtual reality (VR) storytelling offers an unparalleled immersive experience and allows viewers to step into a world they might never encounter. Though VR in film is still an emerging medium without many early adopters, its benefits for storytelling are intriguing when I think about community-centered narratives.

One VR film that deeply influenced my perspective on filmmaking is Clouds Over Sidra—a documentary where a young girl named Sidra guides viewers through the Za'atari Refugee Camp where her family sought refuge after fleeing Syria. With the VR headset, you follow Sidra through her daily life—visiting her family's home, her school, and the camp's soccer court. The film immerses viewers into Sidra's world, cultivating a deep understanding of her experience. This approach to storytelling inspired me to consider how immersive techniques can impart empathy in audiences, even outside of VR.

Similar to VR, Doors Off will incorporate immersive elements that will break away from traditional documentary styles—allowing viewers to experience the world of the Chi Wrangler Crew (CWC) as if they're riding alongside them. Through 360-degree shots, we will take the audience into the passenger seat, offering a firsthand perspective of Chicago's vibrant car club culture.

KTQ: What excites you most about joining the DVID fellowship, and how do you hope it will shape your journey as a filmmaker?

MM: As the first male in my family's history to graduate from college—and a minority filmmaker, I know my journey will be different from most people in the film business. Joining a program like DVID is a big deal to me because it represents a step towards realizing dreams that, where I come from, often feel out of reach.

Above all, I am a lifelong learner. I thrive on pulling knowledge from those who have already done what I'm trying to accomplish. I'm hoping that DVID will place me in rooms where I can gain invaluable insight into making a full-time career as a filmmaker. This fellowship is not just an opportunity for professional growth but also a chance to inspire others who come from underrepresented backgrounds and dream of telling authentic, impactful stories. *You can learn more about Myron's work here.*

Obed Lamy: *Untitled Haitian in Springfield Documentary*

Haitian filmmaker Obed Lamy's background in journalism deeply informs his work, allowing him to delve deeper into the "why" behind the headlines while maintaining journalistic rigor. His film, as yet untitled, examines the immigration struggles, cultural identity, resilience, and sense of belonging within the Haitian community in Springfield, Ohio. He sees documentary filmmaking as a way to explore the evolution of stories over time, capturing the human experience with both urgency and depth. His work often centers on themes of place, history, home, displacement, and community building, reflecting his personal journey as a Haitian filmmaker and immigrant.

> *As a Haitian filmmaker and immigrant, themes of home, displacement and community building are central to my work.*
> - Obed Lamy

Kartemquin: You're a filmmaker and a journalist. Can you tell us how these disciplines intersect in your creative process, and how they influence the way you approach storytelling?

Obed Lamy: Storytelling has been a part of me since childhood, thanks to my mom, who would share vivid stories every night about her experiences growing up under a dictatorship in Haiti. Those moments sparked my deep curiosity about politics, history, and collective memory. Journalism became my first outlet to explore these questions, giving me a front-row seat to urgent stories. But as much as I loved the immediacy of reporting, I found it limiting—there wasn't always time to go deeper.

That's where documentary filmmaking came in. It allows me to slow down, to truly sit with people and their stories, and understand the "why" behind the headlines. It's a practice rooted in journalistic rigor—truth, honesty, and accuracy are still my compass—but it also gives me the freedom to experiment with cinematic approaches and creative storytelling.

In many ways, these disciplines complement each other. Journalism keeps me connected to the urgency of stories that need immediate attention, while documentary filmmaking lets me explore their evolution over time. Even my video journalism is heavily influenced by the visual language of documentaries, blending compelling cinematography with the precision of reporting. By combining the two, I can beautifully capture the human experience with urgency and depth, telling stories that are true and meaningful.

KTQ: Your work often reflects a deep connection to place and history. How have your experiences going to school in Arkansas and being a Haitian filmmaker shape the way you tell stories?

OL: I will always owe my career as a documentary filmmaker to my time in Arkansas. It's where I took my first documentary classes in graduate school with Professor Colleen Thurston, who opened my to this powerful form of storytelling. Arkansas was also where I first saw my work on the big screen, an experience that solidified my commitment to the journey.

As a storyteller, I'm deeply influenced by a quote from Sam Wineburg: "To place ourselves in time is a basic human need." For me, storytelling is about placing events in their historical and geographical context in order to understand their deeper meaning. Places are never neutral-they reveal what's remembered, forgotten, or reshaped, especially when it comes to marginalized communities. One of my first projects explored a community in northwest Arkansas that commemorates three enslaved men lynched in 1856, challenging the myths the place tells about itself and confronting its history of racial violence.

As a Haitian filmmaker and immigrant, themes of home, displacement and community building are central to my work because they reflect both my personal journey and the lives of the people I document. I've experienced what it's like to navigate new landscapes, redefine "home," and build community in unfamiliar places. These themes give my storytelling depth and purpose, allowing me to connect past and present, exploring what shapes our collective identity.

KTQ: What excites you most about joining the DVID fellowship, and how do you hope it will shape your journey as a filmmaker?

OL: What excites me most about the DVID Fellowship is the opportunity to connect with a community of filmmakers who are as passionate about storytelling as I am. Filmmaking is not something you can do in a vacuum - it's all about collaboration. Some of my best experiences have come from working with people I've met in spaces like this, and I can't wait to build relationships that will hopefully last far beyond the fellowship.

I'm also really looking forward to learning from the other fellows. Hearing their stories, seeing how they approach their work, and getting their feedback will give me fresh perspectives to push my project in new directions. The mentorship sessions, the film festival trips, and just having a regular space to share ideas makes this journey incredibly exciting. As someone who has made Chicago my second home, it feels special to be a part of Kartemquin, which is such a big part of Chicago's film community. This fellowship is definitely a meaningful way to grow as a filmmaker and deepen my roots here. *You can learn more about Obed's work here.*

amaranta: *We Are Seeds*

As a first-generation Mexican-American filmmaker, amaranta's personal experiences of reconnecting with her heritage have a profound influence on her work. amaranta's film, *We Are Seeds*, explores themes of community, resistance, and ancestral connection within diasporic communities. She hopes her film will shed light on the complexities and power of diasporic communities while inspiring viewers to engage in community building and cultural resilience. amaranta emphasizes the importance of documenting the stories of people of color to preserve collective memory and history.

Kartemquin: Your film We Are Seeds explores themes of community, resistance, and ancestral connection. As a first-generation Mexican-American filmmaker, what inspired you to tell this story, and how did your own experiences influence its development?

amaranta: In 2022, I started filming my friend Zaza, thinking it'd be cool to follow her journey in community organizing toward environmental sustainability. Her rich conversations across generations of Arab Americans helped me understand the deep, ongoing work it takes to cultivate community. I admired how she's deeply committed to her hometown, and came to terms with my own distance because I didn't grow up in a tight-knit Latino diasporic neighborhood. Around this time, I started to intentionally reconnect to my homeland. These themes of resistance, celebration, ancestral knowledge & memory kept popping up both in filming in Dearborn and my journey of reclaiming my Mexican heritage. Naturally over the years, our priorities have shifted and grown, but at the core of We Are Seeds is cultivating community with the values and knowledge we share as a diaspora.

KTQ: What do you hope viewers take away from We Are Seeds in terms of understanding the struggles within diasporic communities?

a: The incredible diversity of cultural identities, generations, and political stances within our diasporic communities makes them so powerful but also reflects a difficulty in organizing towards long-term goals across so many different types of people. Organizing toward environmental sustainability, cultural resilience, and political liberation essentially transforms our culture. It's changing the stories we tell ourselves and changing our collective behaviors- shifting the needle forward in a huge way because it's a long road ahead.

The passionate leaders in this film are able to build community because they want their home to be a better place for everyone. I'd love for viewers to feel empowered to join the larger liberation movement by seeing that anyone can start at home and there is room for everyone!

KTQ: What excites you most about joining the DVID fellowship, and how do you hope it will shape your journey as a filmmaker?

a: I'm so grateful to learn from, and with, other emerging filmmakers who are values-aligned and intentional about their stories' impact. As someone without formal filmmaking training, I've learned everything through trial and error. Thanks to this fellowship, I feel less alone in that experience and build up my skills with my cohort!

I think now more than ever, it's important to document our stories as people of color in the U.S. Our collective memory and history will be overwritten if we don't document and continue sharing our lived experience, especially at this time with the incoming administration. Not only is it critical to document and defend our stories, but we also need to collectively catalyze our shared pain, joy, and lessons in community with our loved ones. *You can learn more about amaranta's work, and adventures, here.*

Read more about the fellow's short film projects here.