

Spring 2012

# Navajo Talking Picture

Randolph Lewis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

Lewis, Randolph, "Navajo Talking Picture" (2012). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 55.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/55>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## NAVAJO TALKING PICTURE

[Buy the Book](#)

**INDIGENOUS FILMS**

*Series Editors*

David Delgado Shorter

Randolph Lewis

[Buy the Book](#)

# *Navajo Talking Picture:* Cinema on Native Ground

RANDOLPH LEWIS

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2012 by the Board of Regents  
of the University of Nebraska

Portions of chapter 4 previously  
appeared as “Questionable Intent:  
Documentary Cinema and the  
Authorial Fallacy,” *Studies in  
Documentary Film* 2, no. 3 (2007).  
Reprinted with permission.

All rights reserved  
Manufactured in the United  
States of America



Library of Congress  
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lewis, Randolph, 1966–  
Navajo talking picture : cinema on  
native ground / Randolph Lewis.  
p. cm. — (Indigenous films)  
Includes bibliographical references and  
index.

ISBN 978-0-8032-3841-1 (pbk. : alk.  
paper)

1. Navajo Indians—Social life and cus-  
toms. 2. Navajo talking picture (Motion  
picture) 3. Bowman, Arlene—Criticism  
and interpretation. 4. Ethnographic  
films. I. Title.

E99.N3L633 2012

791.43'6552—dc23

2011048149

Set in Minion by Kim Essman.  
Designed by Nathan Putens.

Everything comes down, in the final analysis, to taking account of the relations of light which, from the point of view of knowledge, should perhaps be considered in its very simplest ideals.

ANDRE BRETON, *L'Amour Fou*

Are there limits — of respect, piety, pathos — that should not be crossed, even to leave a record?

RUTH BEHAR, *The Vulnerable Observer*

[Buy the Book](#)

## CONTENTS

List of Illustrations . . . . .	viii
Acknowledgments . . . . .	ix
Series Editor's Introduction . . . . .	xiii
Introduction . . . . .	xvii
1. A Brief History of Celluloid Navajos . . . . .	1
2. Navajo Filmmaker . . . . .	49
3. Reaction . . . . .	72
4. Intent . . . . .	88
5. Ethics . . . . .	105
6. Native Ground . . . . .	124
7. Final Thoughts . . . . .	161
<i>Navajo Talking Picture</i> Production and Distribution Information . . . . .	175
Notes . . . . .	177
Further Reading . . . . .	209
Index . . . . .	211

## ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Navajo Bed and Breakfast . . . . .	6
2. Ann Ruth Biah slaughters a sheep . . . . .	57
3. Ann Ruth Biah at the general store . . . . .	59
4. Ann Ruth Biah preparing a meal . . . . .	60
5. Bowman confronts the university bureaucracy . . . . .	61
6. Bowman drives from LA to the Navajo reservation . . . . .	62
7. Bowman looks for a Navajo translator . . . . .	63
8. Bowman shakes hands with her grandmother . . . . .	64
9. Bowman shows herself at work on the film . . . . .	65
10. Frustration in the editing room . . . . .	66
11. Bowman captures a sheep at last . . . . .	68
12. Bowman, her grandmother, and her cousin Emerson . . . . .	69
13. A worried Bowman leaves Biah's house with her crew . . . . .	70
14. Bowman with <i>Graffiti</i> poster . . . . .	169

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have several institutional debts of gratitude going back to 2003. I began thinking about this subject during a year as a research associate at the School of Advanced Research in Santa Fe, where my partner, Circe Sturm, was a resident scholar. During this year I came across some of the sharpest minds that I've ever met: Lawrence Cohen, James Faris, Rebecca Allahyari, Bill Anthes, Gerald Vizenor, James Brooks, Cam Cox, Jessica Cattelino, and Kehaulani Kauanui, the last of whom was a special source of encouragement and insight from which I continue to benefit. I am very thankful for that unpaid but immensely valuable time at SAR, where I wrote much of my book on Alanis Obomsawin and began thinking about a southwestern counterpart.

I was also lucky to have space to develop this project while at the University of Oklahoma, where the Honors College provided research funds and much-needed time to write. I am grateful to President David L. Boren for creating the conditions for my academic labor between 2001 and 2009. On a more intangible level, colleagues such as Julia Ehrhardt, Ralph Beliveau, Karl Offen, Andy Horton, Marcia Chatelain, Carolyn Morgan, and Jane Park sustained my mind and spirit during this period.

Lastly, when I moved to the remarkable Department of American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin in 2009, I was fortunate to have Steve Hoelscher as my colleague and chair. Not only is he an accomplished scholar of Native American photography, but he also secured a precious 1-1 teaching load for my first year. This time was essential in getting me to the finish line of a tricky project. Along with other colleagues inside and outside of American studies at UT-Austin, he has greatly enlivened my sense of intellectual community.

I would also like to thank the Australian film scholar Deane Williams, editor of *Studies in Documentary Film*, for kind permission to reprint much of chapter 4. I also benefitted from the work of Leighton Peterson, Bennie Klain, Nanobah Becker, and other

filmmakers whose work is rooted in the Navajo Nation. Lorie Lee Sekayumtewa at the Navajo Nation Film Office was also helpful.

Perhaps the greatest debt in a book like this is to the artists who make things worth talking about. Arlene Bowman is a fascinating filmmaker and photographer, and I am grateful for her creative passions as well as her kind support of this project. In addition to sitting for interviews in 2003 and exchanging many e-mails with me in the years since, Arlene was willing to review the parts of the manuscript having to do with her life. But most of this book exists on an interpretative level that is solely my responsibility. With a sobering recognition that independent filmmakers have an unusually tough row to hoe, I have assigned all author's royalties to her. Books such as this do not generate scads of income, but I like the idea of critical revenues returning to the source, as it were.

I would also like to thank David Delgado Shorter, an extraordinary person I met because of *Navajo Talking Picture*. I was mulling over the film in 2003 when a mutual friend, Kehaulani Kaunau, got us on the phone together to talk about our unusual shared interest. Ever since, I have benefited from David's uncommon insights. Working on the Indigenous Films series together has been a pleasure, and though I recused myself from any discussion of whether this book would be included, I am pleased to join Michael Evans and Joanne Hearne, whose fine books on *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* and *Smoke Signals* surround mine in the series.

Also on a personal level, my old friend Norman Stolzoff was a boon companion on several Vancouver trips, including some good conversations with Arlene and other filmmakers. Thanks also to Norman for taking the photo of Arlene with *The Graffiti*. I have benefited from Norman's heartfelt advice and turbocharged anthro-brain over the years. Similarly, I appreciated the encouragement of Jason Baird Jackson, a superb scholar of Native North America. And on the most personal level, I am always grateful for the loving support that Circe Sturm, my good-hearted partner in all things, has provided over the past twenty-five years. Along with our daughter, Miranda, she was a great solace during the years of this project.

My final note of thanks goes to my friend and editor Matt Bokoy. A radical historian/punk guitarist with a formidable Marshall stack, Matt helped me on many fronts in the past few years. In addition to giving the manuscript his own close reading, he found outside readers who treated the manuscript with great care and insight. I took their comments to heart, and am very grateful for their advice. Along with the very helpful Associate Acquisitions Editor Elisabeth Chretien, these folks made it a pleasure to publish again with the University of Nebraska Press. I say “again” because I imagine this book working in partnership with an earlier title of my own, *Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker* (2006), which concerned an important Native artist who worked in the northeastern United States and Canada beginning in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

Although “*Navajo Talking Picture*”: *Cinema on Native Ground* explores a comparable subject at the opposite end of the continent, it also suggests some important differences between Obomsawin and Arlene Bowman. Both of these Native women broke new ground in an unwilling cultural landscape, yet Bowman has been unable to amass the large filmography of her Abenaki counterpart. Nor has Bowman received the accolades and institutional support that Obomsawin has struggled to achieve. Perhaps as a consequence, Bowman’s story has been buried even more than is the unfortunate norm for Native filmmakers. Although in no way do I intend to speak *for* anyone, I still imagine this book as a small act of reclamation, of bringing a half-forgotten artist into contemporary conversations in American studies, film studies, Native American studies, and visual anthropology. As the pages in this book should make clear, I realize that *Navajo Talking Picture* is not a perfect film. Instead, it strikes me as something much more interesting, something from alongside the winding road of cultural expression, where it has been disregarded for reasons both painful and revealing.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps I identify too much with forgotten poets of the screen, but it is to them that I dedicate this book.

[Buy the Book](#)

## SERIES EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

David Delgado Shorter

I feel an immense amount of joy that our second title of the Indigenous Films series is Randolph Lewis's "Navajo Talking Picture": *Cinema on Native Ground*. Arlene Bowman's film, *Navajo Talking Picture*, was the topic of the first conversation Lewis and I had, and it led to our thinking of the need for such a book series. Dissatisfied with the poor coverage of indigenous films within film studies and other fields, we discussed the need for a series to feature concise books on individual titles. We wanted accessible and rigorous interpretive portals to the indigenous cultures depicted in the films. We wanted books that helped readers understand how these films by or about indigenous peoples inform the contexts of indigenous filmmaking or the contexts of how Native peoples are represented in a variety of media. And lastly, we wanted to be inclusive not only of indigenous filmmakers but on various film forms, including the documentary. The first Native-made documentary in the United States that comes to my mind is Arlene Bowman's *Navajo Talking Picture*.

Arlene Bowman, a Navajo film student at the University of California–Los Angeles in the 1980s, created a lasting impression of an era. Much like *The Exiles* before it, *Navajo Talking Picture* provides a first-person voice of an urban Indian woman working in Los Angeles and attempting to make sense of her separation from both her family and her Navajo homeland, or *Dinéétah*. Learning the skills of filmmaking, and the forms and functions of cinéma vérité, Bowman rehearses for her audience the need to establish authority and narrative tropes for her film, all the while maintaining the "natural" setting of the subjects. And in that simple tension between representing a constructed *and* pristine reality, Bowman brilliantly makes the filmic argument that in another discipline became known as the "Writing Culture" debates. At the same time as anthropologists were recognizing the depths to which authenticity and authority were literary constructions and reacting to

the claim that “the Natives” were now reading and writing back, Bowman proves that they are filming too. Going home, perhaps, to the most photographed people of Indian Country, Bowman soon has the viewers wondering about the objective of not only this documentary but of all documentaries and the social science as well.

Randolph Lewis, the coeditor of this series, has spent over a decade working on the research for this book and as much time crafting the writing. He is, of course, no stranger to film analysis. His *Emile de Antonio: Radical Filmmaker in Cold War America* (2000) is as notably researched as it is finely written: Bill Nichols, one of the leading figures in film studies, claimed that Lewis’s text was “easily one of the most readable books yet written about a major filmmaker and the complex issues of film and society.” Lewis then wrote the first book devoted entirely to a single indigenous filmmaker, *Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker*, which is a companion piece to the present volume. In that 2006 book, also published by the University of Nebraska Press, Lewis introduces Obomsawin’s work to a wider audience by showing not simply how the filmmaker’s work reflects her upbringing but also how that work then goes on to transform society, particularly in regard to indigenous sovereignty within a Canadian context. He was an ideal choice for this series coeditorship because he not only saw the power of film, but he also drew attention to the power of indigenous women who have been instrumental in the growth and development of Native filmmaking. He organically had much to say about Bowman’s work.

As we read the manuscript, the peer reviewers and I were struck by Lewis’s panoramic interpolation of *Navajo Talking Picture* as a Third World cinematic decolonial strategy, as a visual diary of ethical breakdowns, as well as the performative documentation of how, at its core, colonization disrupts kinship. In each of these cases (and others), Lewis speaks to us about possible readings that insist on keeping other readings open, possible, if not concomi-

tantly disjointed. This book in your hands, then, is much like the film itself. They both are provocative, challenging, and polyvalent. Both the film and this book about the film question the underlying assumptions that often go into the creation and reception of indigenous art.

“*Navajo Talking Picture*”: *Cinema on Native Ground* is the second in a promising line of books in the Indigenous Films series. We inaugurated the series with Michael Robert Evans’s “*The Fast Runner*”: *Filming the Legend of Atanarjuat*. We look forward to the series continuing with books on *Smoke Signals*, *Whale Rider*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Black Robe*, *Little Big Man*, *The New World*, *Pocahontas*, and other films made by or about indigenous people. Each book in the series will provide an affordable and accessible companion to an important film that is often taught in courses in history, anthropology, folklore, Native American studies, and other fields but for which there are few existing “supporting materials” or “companion pieces” that can help instructors and students to unlock the key issues in the film. We want each book to be written in an accessible manner and to examine the film from a number of angles that should stimulate classroom discussion, but also engage a larger critical conversation about the power and potential of indigenous media. Our ultimate goal is to challenge the Eurocentricism that often afflicts the study of cinema, and to initiate conversations about the promises and challenges of indigenous media now emerging around the globe.

One of our goals for this series was to encourage teachers to use more indigenous films in the classroom. With his ability to connect Bowman’s film to representations of Navajos, by both Navajos and non-Navajos, and to decolonizing methods and theories across the disciplines, Lewis offers us a model for scholarship that teaches well. He writes lucidly and meticulously about how Bowman stands, however awkwardly, at the forefront of indigenous filmmakers across the Americas and beyond. Her film is not an easy pill to swallow for many. Her style and effect in this documentary are

debatable; Lewis and I disagree about her motives. Yet, we agree that the film is mysterious and perhaps at its best when *seemingly* accidentally ingenious. The film is trickster at her best. I know I am not alone welcoming the due attention this book will renew for both Bowman and her ability to foster conversations about difficult subjects, as is the case with *Navajo Talking Picture* particularly.

## INTRODUCTION

“Could you ask her why she thinks I’m using her?” In a darkened room in a dusty hogan on the Navajo reservation in northern Arizona, Arlene Bowman, a young Navajo filmmaker, is working with an inexperienced translator to make her grandmother understand the question. More than language divides the two women on this day in the early 1980s. Young and urbane, Bowman is one of the first Native women in the film studies graduate program at UCLA. Her grandmother, Ann Ruth Biah, is a traditional woman accustomed to life without electricity and other conveniences, and she does not want a camera crew hounding her while she prepares dinner. Taking turns in the shadows of the poorly lit kitchen, the two women seem to look past each other until finally, after the translation process lumbers forward and shades of meaning seem to disappear between the generations, the grandmother answers her persistent granddaughter. “I don’t like it,” she blurts out in Navajo, referring to the film production with a bitterness that transcends linguistic difference. She describes the cultural prohibitions against such “picture taking” among older Navajos such as herself and then turns to the translator, not her granddaughter, and says, “I don’t know why she keeps bothering me with this.” Not even ten minutes into the film, the audience might be inclined to ask the same question.

Almost thirty years after she first pointed a camera at her traditional Navajo grandmother, Arlene Bowman’s *Navajo Talking Picture* remains a provocative and unsettling work of nonfiction cinema. Even today, tempers flare when film festival audiences have a chance to watch Bowman’s relentless pursuit of her grandmother. The filmmaker is well aware that audiences have a passionate response to the film: “Camps are set up,” she says. “Some people become hostile and shout at one another. But I’ve been told that when a movie creates a lot of emotion, it is a sign of a good film.”<sup>1</sup> Some reviewers commented on the positive qualities of the

film when it was released in 1986. The *Los Angeles Times* praised it as “unsparingly honest,” while the anthropologist Deirdre Evans-Pritchard noted, “The interaction between the two women [Bowman and her mother] is electrifying, creating a dramatic tension rare in documentary.”<sup>2</sup> Other responses were more ambivalent, including an *LA Weekly* reviewer who wrote, “Bowman herself emerges as a sympathetic character from an absurdist comedy as both her ancestry and film goals elude her.”<sup>3</sup> The strongest emotions came from the dissenting camp, which expressed itself with tough words even in academic contexts where more subdued responses are the norm. Writing in the prestigious journal *American Ethnologist* in 2003, anthropologist Les Field seemed to speak for the film’s detractors when he claimed that it represented “less a simple failure than a painful extended disaster.”<sup>4</sup>

Honest? Absurd? Disastrous? In the following chapters, I will provide fodder for both supporters and detractors, offering a blend of criticism and defense of a film that I see as a perplexing work with continuing relevance — and one that has not received the critical attention it deserves. To better understand the complexity, even the paradoxes, embedded in works of indigenous media, I will place *Navajo Talking Picture* not just within the growing tradition of Native American filmmaking but also within meaningful but overlooked contexts related to documentary ethics, visual anthropology, postcolonial theory, avant-garde “family portrait” cinema, and past representations of Navajo people. After making the first real survey of the intersection of Navajo culture and cinema over the past century (the subject of chapter 1), I will suggest a new category of filmmaking called “trickster cinema,” where Bowman’s work might finally seem at home. Doing so requires that I acknowledge the banality of the trickster trope in Native studies as well as the conceptual mayhem that sometimes follows it into the pages of otherwise sober scholarship. Finally, I will end with a look at Bowman’s more recent work as part of a larger wave Navajo filmmaking.

There are several goals for this book. Although I am sincerely

interested in *Navajo Talking Picture* as a focus, I am also using it as a starting point for a larger discussion of topics that include the problematic nature of documentary film itself, especially in regard to the murky ethics, intentions, and reactions that surround the making and viewing of most nonfiction films. Although these subjects may seem to extend beyond Bowman's film, I think *Navajo Talking Picture* provides a useful entry point into a wider landscape that is worth investigation. If Wallace Stevens could posit "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in his celebrated poem of that name, I suspect there are as many ways of looking at a slender but fascinating film.

In the chapters ahead, I hope to model a healthy degree of interpretative flexibility about this early work of indigenous media, most especially for the benefit of students who too often seek the solitary "correct" interpretation of a text. Instead, I want to show how an interesting film can be opened up in a dozen directions that readers will find provocative. In my experience *Navajo Talking Picture* is one of the ultimate conversation starters in the college classroom. Somehow, this small film unearths deep passions that have been hidden for weeks of silent mutual appraisal, those long hours in which students gaze shyly at one another and try to learn one another's names. Maddening and mysterious to some, raw and honest to others, Bowman's film is unusually rewarding as a teaching tool, with a pedagogical value that exceeds its artistic merits in the opinion of some viewers. Although I hope to suggest otherwise about its creative qualities, there is no doubt that the film provides a welcome occasion for exploring some critical issues in Native American studies, film studies, anthropology, and American studies. More than most of the films that I have studied or shared with my classes over the years, *Navajo Talking Picture* occupies a sensitive place in our imaginations, one where various expectations, assumptions, and prejudices combine to produce something like a small wound in the cultural history of the United States. Picking at the wound is not the most elegant metaphor for this kind of scholarship, but it has a certain aptness.

Let me say something about the wound picker. Unlike many of the writers responsible for the more than seven thousand academic books with the word “Navajo” in the title, I claim no great expertise on Navajo culture.<sup>5</sup> I am not Navajo nor am I an anthropologist with lengthy fieldwork on my résumé. Instead, I am a passionate observer from the realm of visual culture. From the perspective of film studies and American studies, the two fields in which I dig and sift year after year, the intersection of Navajo/cinema remains strangely unexamined. Part of this neglect is due to the slow growth of indigenous media in the United States until quite recently, not to mention the fragility of the critical scaffolding that supports an artistic community in Native America or anywhere else. Although the situation has begun to change for the better in the past decade, Native cinema has often languished in obscurity, often seeming too modern for mainstream audiences looking for more stereotypical forms of indigenous expression. Given the paucity of funding and distribution outlets, it is easy for Native media to fall under the radar of film scholars and general audiences alike.

The situation with Navajo cinema is no exception, even though Navajo creative expression is prized in other areas.<sup>6</sup> Navajo weaving, pottery, sand painting, jewelry, and similar traditional arts have attracted thousands of scholars, collectors, and random enthusiasts, with the consequence that Navajo visual culture has been the subject of obsessive attention and commodification, as scholars including Leah Dilworth, Erika Marie Bsumek, Molly Mullin, Colleen O’Neill, and Elizabeth Hutchinson have shown.<sup>7</sup> For over a century, Western scholars and collectors have scrutinized Navajo art as much as any other indigenous cultural production, turning it into an object of fascination in various commercial and academic contexts. At times this fascination has curdled into something unsavory, such as when an antiquated collector’s mentality has pervaded the interest in Native creativity, resulting in a deeply problematic relationship between artist and audience. To sidestep that particular pitfall as much as possible, I might explain why I am writing about indigenous media at all. It is a chore to account for oneself, to explain why I’m

*here* and not *there*, but it is now incumbent upon cultural outsiders who operate from positions of relative privilege (and because a tenured professorship is one of the last good jobs in the United States, it certainly counts as a fortunate post). Too much mistrust exists between non-Native scholars and Native communities for me to glide past the issue of why I'm interested in the subject.

Much of it is that the topic is inherently exciting and has been largely overlooked from the angles that I am following. The anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has described the "important new arenas of cultural production that have emerged with indigenous media."<sup>8</sup> Despite the groundbreaking research of Ginsburg and others, another anthropologist, Jay Ruby, could complain as late as 2000 that "most anthropologists have ignored the growth of media production among indigenous peoples."<sup>9</sup> While scholars in that discipline have gotten much more interested in the past decade, thanks to important articles in *Visual Anthropology Review* and similar journals, indigenous media remains a minor concern in the fields I know best: film studies and American studies. Neither of these sprawling fields has devoted much attention to the topic, as becomes obvious when one surveys the recent contents of major publications such as *American Quarterly*, *American Studies*, *Cinema Journal*, *Jump Cut*, *Film Comment*, and *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, where it is easy to get the impression that Native media does not exist, let alone that a specific body of work is emerging out of the Navajo Nation in the wake of Bowman's early efforts.

Yet the nexus of Navajo/cinema is a particularly interesting one that should be explored for several reasons. On one side, the interest of non-Native audiences has been intense: the history of western cinema is more intertwined with Navajo land and culture than any other indigenous culture, with sacred Navajo places like Monument Valley serving essential roles in the mythic construction of the American West. On the other side are Navajo visions, slowly emerging since the late sixties in the work of Arlene Bowman and a growing number of later filmmakers: Bennie Klain, Nanobah Becker, Billy Luther, Lena Carr, Zachary Longbo, Norman Patrick

Brown, Ramona Emerson, and Larry Blackhorse Lowe, among others who have been productive since 2000.<sup>10</sup> Their achievement is the culmination of a long journey with many places of origin, not least of which is a famous intercultural media experiment in the midsixties conducted by Sol Worth and John Adair. Under their thoughtful supervision, the first social science project on indigenous media put cameras in the hands of a small group of semi-willing Navajos, whose work could provide viewers with “an opportunity to see through the eyes of people from a different cultural background.”<sup>11</sup> Although none of these accidental filmmakers went on to careers in cinema, a Navajo woman followed this path not too many years later, becoming a pathbreaking figure in the realm of indigenous media in the United States. Beginning in the early 1980s, Bowman was the first Navajo filmmaker, as well as one of the first Native women in an elite graduate program in film production (UCLA), and one of the first Native filmmakers in the United States to see her work in festivals and wide distribution.<sup>12</sup> Even twenty-something years after its initial release, her first film is still distributed in the Women Make Movies catalog, and still appears in the occasional festival in the United States and Europe. It is not forgotten for reasons I will trace out in the following chapters.

Fortunately for minor classics in cinema, literature, and other fields, we live in the era of small things, at least in book publishing where the micro made macro has become a cottage industry. In recent years, clever writers have produced best-selling titles on pencils, bananas, Twinkies, cod, and salt. Other authors have cooked up interesting books devoted to a single album (from Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* to Madness’s *One Step Beyond*) or even a single song (“Strange Fruit” or “Like a Rolling Stone”). Small is useful for scholars as well, who realize that a single film can provide a microcosm of much larger world. With the recognition that such books allow us to develop insights that might be missed in a work devoted to multiple titles, film studies has embraced this trend with entire books on canonical texts such as *Citizen Kane* and *Apocalypse Now*, as well as books devoted to significant but lesser known

films such as Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*, and Carl Dreyer's *Gertrud*. Even modest television shows have been granted book-length treatments in an academic series whose original call for submissions asked for books on *Gilligan's Island* and other programs whose cultural importance might not seem obvious at first glance.

My hope, then, is that a narrow focus does not preclude greater relevance, nor invite solipsism and quietism. The astute cultural critic Russell Jacoby has commented on the deceptive nature of “small” and “large” in academic writing, challenging the tacit assumption that big insights are the exclusive province of big topics. “The tiniest fragments can yield the sharpest insights,” he says, adding that “conversely, the most expansive overview can yield the most banal platitudes.”<sup>13</sup> With intentions that are simultaneously modest and cautiously grand, I have tried to craft a series of chapters that will introduce students to larger conversations in film studies, Native American studies, American studies, and to a lesser extent, anthropology. Although this is not the first book to limn small things now forgotten, it is one of the first to apply this approach to documentary film or Native media, doing so in a way that is to some degree politically motivated. After all, when is Native media afforded the benefit of sustained analysis of the sort that denotes “cultural significance” in the minds of educators and scholars? Asking this question prompted David Delgado Shorter (UCLA) and I to launch the Indigenous Films book series with the University of Nebraska Press. Our goal was to encourage authors to write concise, classroom-friendly books that would illuminate the larger issues in a single Native film for both scholars and students. Although I have taken some liberties in exploring further afield from Bowman's film than the authors of some of the other books in the series, what I have done was written with that template in mind.

A skeptical reader might wonder if other Native films are better made, tell a better story, or have reached a wider audience. The answer is *yes, of course*, especially in the past decade or so,

when *Smoke Signals*, *Atanarjuat*, *Four Sheets to the Wind*, *Doe Boy*, *Honey Moccasin*, and other indigenous films appeared to limited but enthusiastic audiences in the United States and Canada. Important though these break-out films have been in some circles, none have been located in the southwestern United States, on whose edges I have lived for more than twenty years. Moreover, only *Smoke Signals* and *Atanarjuat* have been small seismic events in the same way as Bowman's first film, which still sends an occasional tremor through the fields of visual anthropology, film studies, Native American studies, and elsewhere, at least if you know how to measure the subtle vibrations. That is what I am attempting in this project: cultural seismology along a particular fault line. I am digging into the early history of indigenous media in the United States, hoping to tease out what the historian Simon Schama has called "the traces of terror or ecstasy" in U.S. cultural memory by giving close attention to a single work of Native art.<sup>14</sup>

*Navajo Talking Picture* may be a flawed work of art, a problematic example of documentary, and a painful record of clashing generations of Native people, but it is more than this. What I hope to reveal is that it is, in fact, not simply the *first* Navajo-produced film but a pathbreaking work in the history of indigenous media in the United States; that it is an important artifact that reflects a particular moment in recent Native American history when "urban Indians" struggled to reconnect with tribal traditions; and that it opens up a number of productive conversations about art, ethics, and identity. Motivated in part by a spirit of feminist reclamation as well as an enduring curiosity about neglected cinema, I see in Bowman not a failed filmmaker with a stunted career but a unique artist with a poetic sense of *estrangement* coursing through her work. I use this word pointedly. In his classic *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*, anthropologist Gary Witherspoon wrote that the relationship between Native and non-Native has always been "characterized by various forms of estrangement," an observation that Bowman both confirms and confounds (as is her custom).<sup>15</sup> As I'll try to demonstrate, Bowman is a filmmaker who moves, often

to our discomfort, in liminal zones, in the gaps between truth and fiction, memory and loss, understanding and expectation. Whether she does it on purpose or not is a fascinating part of the puzzle that is *Navajo Talking Picture* (and is the subject of chapter 4).

For now let me only say that even Bowman's title is a clue that something more than cluelessness is afoot. After all, *Navajo Talking Picture* is such a poetic, evocative, and ambitious name for her project. Why choose such a complex title if the film were simpler stuff? Because these three words open in so many directions, gesturing to the "talkies" of early cinema as much as the latest indigenous media, I am using her title for my book as well. I do so with all modesty: she, not I, came up with this interesting phrase. I could say that I am simply keeping with the format of the Indigenous Films series, in which each book takes its title from the film under consideration, but more than convenience or standardization is at work. I sense the evocative power in these three words, and am grateful to share them with their original author. In this, as in so many other ways, film scholarship remains dependent on the filmmakers.

Let me say something about the structure of the book. Because I hope to offer something more than a meditation on a single film, I begin by exploring the underappreciated intersection of cinema and Navajo culture over the past hundred years. I believe something valuable can be unearthed at this particular nexus, the nature of which I will outline in the following hefty chapter. In "A Brief History of Celluloid Navajos," I survey some overlooked aspects of the western gaze as it has conceived of Navajo land and culture, and do so without belaboring the obvious shortcomings of Hollywood depictions (e.g., elements of historical inaccuracy and racism that are apparent at first glance). Although film scholars have looked closely at myriad aspects of cinematic history, devoting hundreds of books to individual directors, thematic emphases, and emerging national cinemas around the globe, no one has carefully explored the history of a particular indigenous culture in relation to cinema,

and certainly not one as important to cinema as the Navajo Nation. Looking at the Hollywood obsession with “Navajoland” is the goal for this long chapter, while the rest of book explores how Navajos have returned the gaze.<sup>16</sup>

Then at the heart of the book is Bowman’s *Navajo Talking Picture*, one of the most controversial indigenous films ever made. After exploring the relationship between Bowman and her audience, I want to explore a variety of ways of seeing her film, exploring relevant questions regarding indigenous aesthetics, tribalcentric criticism, documentary ethics, family portrait cinema, ethnographic aspirations, postcolonial criticism, and earlier Navajo films.

In some small way, this book extends the indefatigable research of James Faris in his *Navajo and Photography: A Critical History of the Representation of a People*.<sup>17</sup> Controversial for its polemical tone, Faris’s book deserves our attention for its unusual depth of archival research and theoretical insight. In limiting himself to still photographs of Navajos, a monumental task in itself, Faris mentioned in passing the need for another project, an encyclopedic look at Navajo cinema that would utilize the more than one thousand videos in the Navajo Office of Broadcast Services, more than fifty documentary films noted in the Navajo Nation Library, and the “great numbers” of films that were produced in Navajo land, as well as “the plethora of advertising photographs and videos.”<sup>18</sup> I hope this book is one small stepping stone to the epic task of tracing the complete history of Navajo/cinema, though that is not my destination. Rather than a systematic exploration of Navajo cinema, this book is a more modest reconnaissance of one spot on a vast landscape that others can someday annotate in more detail. Like Faris’s, my method will combine close textual readings of often obscure images alongside some better known ones, with theoretical concerns that might resonate across several disciplines (film studies, Native American studies, anthropology, etc.). What I hope is that this book will complement what other scholars are now doing on the subject of Navajo media. In addition to James Faris, the anthropologists Leighton Peterson and Sam Pack

have written entire dissertations on Navajo television and radio, respectively. I highly recommend their work to anyone interested in indigenous media in the American Southwest, and hope that I am moving forward the discussion that Pack, Peterson, Faris, and other scholars have initiated in the past decade.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever this book is, I hope it finds an audience of filmmakers, students, scholars, and other readers who are interested in a relatively underdeveloped area of inquiry. Moreover, I hope that what I have to say is beneficial to anyone who is resisting the hegemonic vision of settler colonialism in the American West and working to replace it with something approaching the democratic vistas that Whitman once envisioned for his homeland during Reconstruction. “All the objective grandeurs of the world, for highest purposes, yield themselves up, and depend on mentality alone,” the poet wrote in 1871 about the importance of ideas in a wider culture that was increasingly disappointing to him. “Here, and here only, all balances, all rests,” he added, before warning, “We must not say one word against real materials; but the wise know that they do not become real till touched by emotions, the mind.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1949 the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey said something similar on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, when he famously remarked that “democracy begins in conversation.” I suspect that today, in the hypermediated age of the screen, Dewey might allow for a modest amendment. It seems that nowadays democracy begins not in face-to-face conversation but in a process of representation that occurs on various monitors and screens as much as in our minds. What we would like to believe starts in the way that we conceive of one another, then flows to our faces and bodies and screens (a not so distant appendage), before coursing into our collective lives as a fractious, violent, and occasionally harmonious nation. The cultural work that I have attempted here is focused on the ways in which we talk, imagine, and envision one another across cultural, spatial, and temporal divides for the following reason: it seems to me that most of the cruelty and barbarism of the world has begun in an idea, usually a very poor one, with what the singer Warren

Zevon calls “lawyers, guns, and money” following soon thereafter.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, I am trying to illuminate the representational past (and present) in its darker recesses, distant and repressed though it may appear, with the faint hope that our cultural history will someday look quite different than the one that we now remember. It’s an immodest task for a modest little book, but at some level it explains why these pages exist at all.

As I move toward the perplexities of *Navajo Talking Picture*, I must take a circuitous route through a very complex “back story,” one that lies behind any work of indigenous media in the Southwest. What I am referring to is Hollywood’s century-old obsession with “Navajoland,” as it is sometimes known, and the native people who have lived there for nearly a millennium. For much of the twentieth century, Hollywood was fixated on the beautifully desolate land of the Navajos, usually (but not always) striving to remake the land for European American “civilization.” Not until the heresies of New Hollywood in the early 1970s would the prospects for “remaking” Navajoland dim, when the land was depicted as irredeemable in ways that questioned the trajectory of settler colonialism and its aftermath. But that is getting ahead of the story I have to tell, which begins in the early twentieth century and progresses through many films, some well known, some forgotten, including the symbolic failure of Robert Redford’s *The Dark Wind*, in which Arlene Bowman had a role. Then I begin tracing Hollywood’s Navajos from the arrival of Zane Grey’s Model T in Monument Valley in 1913 to the Chinese director John Woo’s contemporary twist on Navajo codetalkers in the South Pacific. It’s a long, dusty ride that has usually left Navajos at the side of the road, but it explains a great deal, most especially why Bowman and her peers would want to kick-start something very different for the screen.