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RESERVATION REELISM

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MICHELLE H. RAHEJA

Reservation

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Reelism

Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and
Representations of Native Americans in Film

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Preface

Reel and Real Worlds

Stemming from a long tradition of staged performances such as the Wild West shows that were themselves informed by American literature's obsession with Native American plots and subplots, film and visual culture have provided the primary representational field on which Native American images have been displayed to dominant culture audiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[1] But these representations have also been key to formulating Indigenous people's own self images. Spokane and Coeur d'Alene writer and filmmaker Sherman Alexie recalls watching western films on television as a child: "I hated Tonto then and I hate him now. However, despite my hatred of Tonto, I loved movies about Indians, loved them beyond all reasoning and saw no fault in any of them."[2] For many Native people, it has been possible to despise the numerous abject, stereotypical characters Native Americans were forced to play and deeply enjoy and relate to other images that resonate in some way with lived experiences of tribal peoples or undermine stereotypes in a visual field that otherwise erased Indigenous history.

The often excluded or undervalued stories and acts of "survivance" of Native American spectators, filmmakers, and actors, and the memories of their descendants have inspired me to imagine the early half of the twentieth century as an era of heartache and happiness, poverty and prosperity, loss, revitalization, and creation of traditions.[3] Because most twentieth-century cinematic images of Indigenous peoples often either reflected important pressures that Native communities were facing or completely elided Native concerns in ways that demonstrate deep-seated cultural anxieties, film scholarship provides a useful framework of analysis for

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considering how Native Americans have responded to change and persisted in keeping and improvising traditions from the silent film era to the present. Analyzing cinematic images of Native Americans produced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists of the early film period is also vital to understanding how contemporary Native American filmmakers and visual artists engage and critique this field of discourse.

Paul Chaat Smith has argued, "The movies loom so large for Indians because they have defined our self-image as well as told the entire planet how we live, look, scream, and kill."[4] The plotlines of most westerns feature Native Americans living outside of their historical, geographical, and cultural context, situated in the past with no viable future. Native Americans are often hypervisible in North American films, especially in films produced during the first half of the twentieth century; at the same time they are rendered invisible through plotlines that reinforce the trope of Indigenous people as vanishing or inconsequential, they receive few speaking parts, and they are often uncredited.

Certainly one of the more insidious effects of Hollywood's racial optics regime was that, despite intentional and unintentional inaccuracies, the films served as pedagogy and knowledge production for spectators. These films have been highly influential in shaping perceptions of Native Americans as, for example, a dying race that is prone to alcoholism and is inherently unable and unwilling to adapt to change. Even in films that express admiration for Native Americans, such as Cecil B. DeMille's *The Squaw Man* (1914) or Delmer Daves's *Broken Arrow* (1950), seemingly respectful and balanced representations are often rooted in uncritical, problematic racial ideologies that reflect unexamined notions of Native American culture on the part of the director and on the part of North American society as a whole.

As Alexie's discussion of the figure of Tonto suggests, narrative film has provided a space in which to critique the often fantastic

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and surreal images of Native Americans. But these cinematic and televisual experiences also enable Indigenous spectators to engage critically with the artifacts of imagined cultural knowledge produced by the films and their long political, narrative, and historical context, stretching from at least 1492 to the present, particularly as film viewers intuited that those images were the partial products of Native actors. These reactions to films are complicated because Native American spectators neither wholly identified with the representations onscreen nor did they entirely reject them. This viewing practice is similar to what Rey Chow calls "ethnic spectatorship," a critical examination of the often intractable and egregious stereotypical spectacles of racialized popular images.[5] Ethnic spectatorship, according to Chow, also involves a politics of identification that radically re-reads the viewing practices of ethnic and racialized spectators as a "suturing" exercise predicated on a sophisticated understanding of what Teresa de Lauretis terms narrative "illusion" rather than one that creates a split or duped self.[6] Narrative film provided a space in which to critique the often fantastic and surreal popular culture images of Native Americans. For spectators like Alexie, films with Native American plots and subplots capture the imagination by signifying at least some sort of *presence*, however vexed, in a representational field defined primarily by *absence*.

This book is my attempt to see an alternate vision of Native American representation and spectatorship as products of a complicated and sometimes discomfiting history with a vibrant, equally complex future rather than only as abject repositories of the victimized. In it, I retrieve and decipher Native American representations in mainstream feature-length films and examine how these images have been reanimated and subjected to scrutiny by contemporary Indigenous narrative and experimental filmmakers. I suggest an Indigenous film theory that focuses

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on what I call "redfacing," the process and politics of playing Indian; the "virtual reservation," the imagined and imaginative sites produced by the cinema; and "visual sovereignty," a concept specific to visual culture and aesthetics, but rooted in thinking about sovereignty in other contexts. The book begins with an analysis of early feature-length films with Native American plots and then engages these images of Indigenous peoples in conversation with more recent visual culture production by Native American artists. I argue that early Hollywood cinema had more Native American "presences" than subsequent eras in the history of the studio system. It is these presences that allow Native American actors and representations to enter the public memory and take on their own social life, even if in sometimes racist and stereotyped fashion. As such, the representations from early Hollywood are now the basis, sustained over generations, for contemporary Native American narrative cinema, characterized by Indigenous-centered aesthetics and grassroots filmmaking.

The violence of invisibility has plagued Native American communities primarily through its contradictions. Native Americans remain hypervisible in commercial fields such as advertising and consumerism, but virtually invisible when it comes to most everything else of substance.[7] One of the consequences of this contradiction is that Native Americans stand at the center of the dominant culture's self-definition because Euro-American identity submerged and formed upon the textual and visual culture register of the Indigenous "Other."[8] This Manichean binary required the rendering of Native Americans as invisible through the rhetoric of the vanishing Indian.[9] Euro-Americans, therefore, desired a highly controlled, mass-mediated, and virtual Native presence at the same time that Indigenous peoples were deemed threatening, excessive, savage, and less-than-human. "We are shape-shifters in the national consciousness," Smith writes, "accidental survivors, unwanted reminders of disagreeable events."[10]

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Historically, it has perhaps been better to be represented in some way, however problematic and contradictory, than to remain invisible, a body that did not register in any important way in the national imagination. Filmic images, taken alongside the range of other visual artifacts circulating in the twentieth century, therefore instilled some "life" through recognition and presence on the virtual reservation as moving pictures (in the sense of film's affective economy and its ability to animate communities that non-Indians perceived as dying or dead) for Native people who were considered doomed, defeated, vanished, or ghostly. This was particularly true in the early-cinema period when Indigenous-themed films were often set in the present, even as they simultaneously operated to homogenize very distinct tribal communities and portrayed tribal peoples along a "savage-noble" continuum.

Filmic images provided a kind of shield that protected Native American spectators from the burden of representation that would have forced them to lay bare often-private cultural practices (practices that for many were already marginalized within a marginalized field that privileged Southwestern and Plains Indian cultural identities as an Indigenous norm). While Native American spectators ambiguously empathized and identified with the caricatured portraits of Native Americans onscreen, these images flagged a broader, offscreen reality by the mere fact of their existence. They took some pressure off individuals to explain "Indian culture" to people who would have had a hard time understanding experiences that fell outside the hegemonic images of stereotyped Native Americans. The "reelism" of film resides in its ability to function as a placeholder: as a representational practice it does not mirror reality but can enact important cultural work as an art form with ties to the world of everyday practices and the imaginative sphere of the possible.

The very thing that makes early twentieth-century filmic Native American images so offensive to contemporary sensibilities was,

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ironically, what made them relatively unproblematic, even perhaps comforting, for spectators who were offered few alternative mass media self-representations. They could be visible in a culture that invested in the rhetoric of the vanishing Indian, given the western film genre's ubiquity and excessive, if highly vexed, attention to Native Americans. They could also remain anonymous behind the screen that the stereotypical images offered. These seemingly contradictory desires—to be both visible in a nation that had already written Native America's obituary and to be hidden from further violence in the face of overwhelming ignorance by non-Indians—coalesced around an understanding, through the liminal, physical space of the cinema, of Native American identity as a placeholder for visual sovereignty. This space could simultaneously screen some issues of importance to Native people as creative engagement rather than sociological effect and could connect with the critical work of sovereignty and decolonization that occurs offscreen (and often in spite of Hollywood).

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This book owes its existence to the courageous Native American filmmakers and actors who participated in films from the silent

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