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Review of *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western* By Armando Jose Prats

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Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western. By Armando José Prats. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002. xxi + 317 pp. Photographs, filmography, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

The relationship between the Great Plains and the Hollywood Western has always been a strange one. The “classic” era of the Hollywood Western, the period between roughly 1864 and 1887, is also the “classic” era of the Great Plains—the era of the pioneer, the gunslinger, the cattleman, and, of course, the Indian fighter. Oddly, the Great Plains are rarely featured prominently in Hollywood Westerns; rather, it is the desert Southwest that is most often depicted. The flowing grasslands and wooded river valleys upon which the events of the “classic” era of the Western unfolded are often shown as rocky wastelands. These are almost non-settings, as if the land itself were merely a backdrop against which action takes place, rather than a central part of the action itself (and land, as we all know, has always been *the* central player in Native American-US relations). The Great Plains are virtually invisible in many classic Westerns, even though they are at the heart of the action being presented.

Armando José Prats makes a similar case for Native Americans in *Invisible Natives: Myth and Identity in the American Western*, arguing that while Native Americans are at the center of the action in the classic Hollywood Western, the way they are rendered makes them

essentially invisible. What Prats contends is that representations of Native Americans focus on their essential “otherness” from Euro-Americans, and that by reflecting only “otherness,” this mode of representation becomes a mode of erasure. Prats suggests that “otherness” becomes absence and absence “otherness.” Instead of Native Americans we often see only their smoke signals or the arrow-ridden bodies and burned cabins left from an attack. In this way, Native Americans are only present in their absence, and indeed their absence makes them more distant and threatening. When we do see Native Americans in Hollywood Westerns, Prats suggests that they are often mute (or if they do communicate, do so in grunts and hand gestures), nameless, sometimes even faceless. They are defined by their otherness, and their otherness is itself defined by absence—absence of a voice, of a name, of a face.

If Prats’s argument sounds a bit convoluted, it is. But Prats does a sound job illustrating his ideas with examples from a wide range of classic Westerns. Each of the book’s six chapters focuses on one or at most a few specific films and provides a detailed interpretation through one element of Prats’s argument. In this way, he builds his case slowly and carefully, so that by the end of the book the convolutions of his argument are reasonably clear.

Invisible Natives will be appreciated by scholars interested in representations of Native Americans, the American Frontier, and by all those who watched Saturday matinees as a child.

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