third edition

NATIVE AMERICAN VOICES: A READER

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Prentice Hall

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with 500 Natives from 300 communities. In keeping with the consensus of consultants from Indian Country, the building includes round interior spaces, exterior water features, east-facing entrances, and many interior details which reference Native symbols from various cultures. The Grand Opening took place on September 21, 2004 with an elaborate morning procession of Native Americans in full regalia, traditional to each of their distinctive Nations. The procession proceeded from the Smithsonian Institution's Castle along the mall toward the U.S. Capitol for the dedication of the new museum.

NMAI is distinctive in that the institution works collaboratively with Native communities to sustain cultural heritage and to promote living cultures. Through extensive educational programs and community outreach, the museum facilitates communication, education and connections with objects, artifacts, art and between people. NMAI is dedicated to not only preserving and exhibiting cultural artifacts from the past, but giving a voice to contemporary indigenous peoples as its exhibitions are presented from a Native perspective and in a Native voice.

Further Reading: http://americanindian.si.edu

WIPING THE WARPAINT OFF THE LENS

NATIVE AMERICAN FILM AND VIDEO

Beverly R. Singer

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important issues facing American Indians concerns the question of identity: What is an Indian? The historical misrepresentations of "Indians" has been outside of tribal control and perpetuated by American cultural, political, academic, and social institutions that promote, produce and communicate information to the public. Indians have been misrepresented in art, history, science, literature, popular films, and by the press in the news, on the radio, and on television. The earliest stereotypes associating Indians with being savage, naked, and heathen were established with the foundation of America and determined by two factors: religious intolerance for cultural and spiritual differences leading to the destruction of Native cultures, and rejection of Indian cultures as relevant subject matter by traditional historians in the writing of U.S. history.

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The demise of the Indian presence, accompanied by the westward movement of pioneers and viewed as a major American victory, was the result of a struggle among whites for economic, political, social, and religious independence. The ideology of Manifest Destiny was the propaganda used against Indians to justify our extermination. Noted writer D'Arcy McNickle (Métis, enrolled by the Flathead Tribe) recalls that "Until the third decade of the present century, Indian policy was rooted in the assumption that the Indians would disappear." The enduring perception of Indians as an enemy pending extinction cleared the way for anyone to create stereotypes of Indians and to exclude any serious treatment or study of us. Challenged by this inimical history, this book, Wiping the Warpaint Off the Lens, builds on scholarship and interpretation by Native people who have worked to share the totality of the American story in our images.

Over the last twenty years, Native Americans have made some outstanding film and videos. My discussion of these films and videos draws on my

experiences as both a Native American and a video maker. As Native American filmmakers, we have faced many struggles in our attempts to make films, competing for limited resources and struggling to overcome popular stereotypes that present us as unintelligent and refer to us in the past tense rather than as people who inhabit the present. What really matters to us is that we be able to tell our own stories in whatever form we choose. This is not to say that whites cannot tell as good Native story, but until very recently whites—to the exclusion of Native people—have been the only people given the necessary support and recognition by society to tell Native stories in the medium of film.

The chance to remedy the lack of literature about telling our own stories is deeply connected to being self-determined as an Indian. It is part of a social movement that I call "cultural sovereignty," which involves trusting the older ways and adapting them to our lives in the present. These rights and traditions include defending our birthrights as agreed to by treaties, speaking our tribal languages, practicing ancestral methods of food harvesting such as spear fishing and whale hunting, gathering medicinal herbs, and using animals and birds for ceremonial purposes.

Our films and videos are helping to reconnect us with very old relationships and traditions. Native American filmmaking transmits beliefs and feelings that help revive storytelling and restore the old foundation . . . The oral tradition is fundamental to understanding Native film and video and how we experience truth, impart knowledge, share information and laugh. Traditional Native American storytelling practices and oral histories are a key source of our recovery of our authentic identity. Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna) believes that the ability to tell stories is a way of life for Pueblo people. She believes that older stories and newer stories belong to the same creative source that keeps the people together. Furthermore, she states that "the Origin story functions basically as a maker of our identity: with the story, we know who we are." Simon Ortiz (Acoma) writes that in his experience the power of stories—such as the origin stories shared among the Pueblo people—is that words take hold of a storyteller and "go their own way." Story making at this instant becomes the language of experience, sensation, history, and imaginations. Today's storytellers continue the practice of an art that is traced back countless generations and safeguard that the stores are being carried into the future . . .

That the oral tradition is a continually evolving process is apparent in Aboriginal and Native American films and videos, which are extensions of the past in our current lives. Additionally, stories and their telling may also connect us to the universe of medicine—of paranormal and sacred power. Storytellers are highly valued because they have the power to heal the spirit. One of the reasons for making films is to heal the ruptures of the past, recognizing that such healing is up to the viewer.

Poet Luci Tapahonso (Navajo) explains how Navajo stories are viewed as being true by members of her tribe: "A Navajo audience is unlikely to doubt the storyteller's assertion that the events related did indeed occur. It is also understood that the stories or songs do not 'belong' to the teller, but that her or his role is that of a transmitter." Native filmmakers are "transmitters" too! The integrity associated with storytelling or filmmaking in this context remains sincere . . .

DETERMINING OUR SELF-IDENTITY

In 1989, Charlene Teters (Spokane) attended a University of Illinois basket ball game with her son and daughter. After watching a half-time performance by the university mascot named Chief Illiniwek, her life was radically altered. The mascot was a student dressed in Plains Indian regalia wearing an eagle feather headdress and "Indian" warpaint who pranced around the arena to ersatz "Indian tom-tom" music played by the university band. Teters, a graduate student at Illinois at the time recalls seeing her children slump in their seats as the befeathered mascot led a crowd of cheering fans. She was acutely aware that her own and her children's' Indian heritage was violated by the performance of Chief Illiniwek.

Teters questioned the administrators at the University of Illinois about the "Indian" mascot, noting that it was offensive to her American Indian beliefs and practices. University officials were defensive and claimed the mascot was a long-standing tradition meant to honor historical Indians. Teters continued to question the mascot issue and began a personal protest of it, standing on campus with a sign that read "Indians are human beings, not mascots." But instead of receiving support for her efforts to raise student awareness about the unsuitability of having a mascot that misrepresents Indians, she was seen as a threat. The sports fans who upheld the use of the mascot were remarkably hostile in their resistance to eliminate the practice. As news spread of her protest, her criticism produced a backlash of attacks

against her and her family from university students, alumni, local businesses, and state officials. Teters's persistence brought national attention to the mascot issue as other universities and high schools with mascots named after Indians began debating their continued use of them. The University of Illinois Regents voted to retain their mascot tradition with support from the state of Illinois. A bill was passed to protect the mascot, although Illinois governor Jim Edgar later vetoed it.

In 1992, Teters graduated with an M.F.A. from the University of Illinois and vowed to continue her opposition to "the Chief." She is a founding member of the National coalition on Racism in Sports and the Media. In 1998, Teters was featured by ABC News with Peter Jennings as the "Person of the Week" for her advocacy against racism in targeting Native Americans.

Teters's history of public challenge to the commercial exploitation of American Indians is the subject of the nationally televised documentary *In Whose Honor?* By Jay Rosenstein, in which she states, "Our people paid with their very lives to keep what we have left. And we have to honor that sacrifice." . . .

The revolutionary artist role with which Teters identifies with is not unique, nor is the Indian mascot tradition the only mis-education that Indians need to recover from and redress. Another form of mis-education about Indians is their negative portrayal by Hollywood. Victor Masayesva Jr., a Hopi filmmaker, responded to a hundred years of Hollywood movie portrayals in *Imagining Indians* (1992). Masayesva features the personal experiences of Native people who have participated in Hollywood productions from the late 1930s to the 1990s and exposes their manipulation by Hollywood filmmakers, comparing their behavior to early Indian agents who took land from Indians for white settlement. Masayesva translates this historical practice and applies it to white filmmakers who take aspects of Indian culture and use their own interpretation of the culture to make their films.

In *Imagining Indians*, Masayesva views the portrayal of "imagined Indians" found in Hollywood movies and the manufacture of Indian art objects as parallel activities that contribute to the commodification and dehumanization of Native people. One scene in the film takes place at the annual event known as the "Santa Fe Indian Market," where the production of Indian art is strictly commercial and driven by collectors who don't care if a set of Indian Kachinas are exactly alike . . . A collector interviewed at the market admits "We're totally saturated and there's no space to lay these rugs on the floor, and there's no set place to house these dolls (holding up a set of Navajo dolls), but this becomes a disease, one just keeps buying, buying, buying." This replication of popular images of Indians for commercial purposes—whether in films or other forms of culture—contributes to a loss of respect for culture, confused identity, and weakened beliefs about what it means to be a Native American. In a further demonstration of unraveling popular images of Indians, Masayesva turns to his own community of Hopi Indians, who are viewed as a peacefully united people with sacrosanct beliefs. In 1994, a Hollywood film crew sought to film at the Hopi reservation in a place revered by a group of elders who opposed filming there. However the elected Hopi tribal government accepted a payment in exchange for allowing the filming and the matter was dismissed.

While Masayesva relied on historical parallels and real-life events to expose some of the effects on Indians of the years of stereotyping, Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) confronted stereotypes by turning them on their heads and getting people to laugh with Indians rather than at them. His serialized novel *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven* (1993) became the basis for his screenplay for *Smoke Signals* (1998 Miramax), directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho). The film is about two young men, Victor and Thomas, who grow up in the shadow of a family tragedy that sets up the undercurrent of their uneven relationship at a reservation in the Northwest. The plot focuses on Victor, the recent death of Victor's father, and the journey the young men take to revisit their past while recovering the father's remains. Alexie's writings creatively explore the range of experiences found in any community that shares values and traditions. Histories are not an exhibition of Native or Indian culture, but a rendering of the feelings of Natives today . . .

The decade of the nineties produced an abundance of Native media about the changes that took place in the 20 years since Deloria called for Indian self-representation. Filmmaking, print journalism, radio programming, and the Internet are compiling our individual stories into the larger story of Native survival and continuance. The result is a growing sense of unity about our place in history and the role we have in helping shape the future . . .

All filmmaking is a risk taking venture, but too often the rationale given by funding organizations for rejecting Native American film proposals is that

they are not as good as other proposals and that as filmmakers we lack experience. The underlying attitude is that we as Native filmmakers are unconventional in our approach to filmmaking and too often personally invest to a fault in wanting to make films about our people. But it is only through our participation in filmmaking that we can help to create mutual understanding and respect.

The comprehension of culture as it relates to Native filmmaking comes from the storytelling approach that always pays homage to the past but is not suspended there. The currency of our experience is energized by self expression that validates and comforts our desire to participate in the world of ideas. The process also works to detox our own ingrained stereotypes of Indians that block our creativity. Creating films and other visual art is a dynamic within Native American life that, according to art curator and scholar Rick Hill (Tuscarora), "comes from our ancestors to which we are bound to add our own distinctive (traditional) patterns." Hill's reference to art as a part of life also affirms Masayesva's perspective that filmmaking is not a separate activity but an integral one.

As a general rule Hollywood "Indian" movies are set in the late nineteenth century America. This time frame, according to Navajo filmmaker Arlene Bowman, is a problem when "the average American cannot accept Native Americans' present realities and always look at Indians in the past; I am not putting the past down but we are for real and living today." Bowman, who has a degree in motion pictures and television from the University of California at Los Angeles and has produced two major films, has not been able to access mainstream media in part because the accomplishments of Native American filmmakers are not recognized as valid if they do not conform to expectations of how Indians look and act in movies.

Following the enormous popularity and financial success of *Dances with Wolves* (1990), several new film and television projects were announced, including Kevin Costner's own TIG Productions documentary titled *500 Nations*, which was shown on prime-time CBS-TV in 1995.

Two years before, in 1993, Ted Turner held a press conference to announce his Native American media initiative. This was at the height of the controversy over his ownership of the Atlanta Braves baseball team and his endorsement of the "tomahawk chop" by Braves fans, an arm gesture that is offensive to Native Americans. Turner's project, the Native American Series, was comprised of TV documentaries, a book, and several historical dramatic films, which were broadcast on Turner Network Television.

Both the Costner and Turner projects were seen by Native filmmakers and writers as hopeful opportunities to be hired as writers, producers, and directors and to promote new images and current views held by Native peoples. I was disappointed, after watching only portions of the Costner and Turner programs, to see that they were merely recycled images of historical photographs of Indians taken by white photographers with emphasis on the social problems facing Indians.

Phil Lucas (Choctaw) was hired to direct one of the documentary programs, and Hanay Geiogmah (Kiowa/Delaware) was listed as cowriter for the Native American Series, but it was obvious that they did not have decision-making power, given the revival of stereotyped images of Indians in many of the programs. Ruth Denny, a journalist for the Circle, an independent Native newspaper published in Minnesota, wrote an editorial about the Costner and Turner projects after she received no response to her request for information from their production companies on how Native Americans could apply for jobs on these productions. In hindsight, her criticism was justified when she wrote, "Native Americans do not need any more Kevin Costner's, Billy Jacks, and John Wayne's . . . The need for the Indian experts is over." Denny is referring to America's history of Indian experts who are white and male.

Directing, producing, and writing for films and television are professional careers not typically associated with Native people, but there have been some refreshing changes in Hollywood of late. A new generation of Aboriginal and Native American actors have appeared in title roles in movies that feature Indians. The nineties have seen a number of Native Americans pursing acting careers in film and television in Canada and in the United States, including Adam Beach (Ojibwe) and Evan Adams (Cree), who were in *Smoke Signals*; Irene Bedard (Inupiat/Cree) who was in the title role of *Lakota Woman* (1994), was the voice of Pocahontas in the Disney production of *Pocahontas* (1995), and was also in *Smoke Signals*. More seasoned performers who also need to be acknowledged include Tantoo Cardinal (Métis/Cree), whose credits began in 1975 with projects in Canada and who was highly acclaimed in the United States after her appearance in *Dances with Wolves*; Gary Farmer (Cayuga), who became a Native cult hero for his role in *Powwow Highway* (1989) and was

in *Smoke Signals*; Graham Green (Oneida), who received an Oscar nomination for his performance in *Dances with Wolves*, Steve Reevis (Blackfeet), who had a unique role in *Fargo* (1996) and was featured in the independent film *Follow Me Home* (1997), directed by Peter Bratt; Wes Studi (Cherokee) who portrayed *Geronimo* in the contemporary remake of *Geronimo* (1993), a role he earned after his performances in the most recent rendition of *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and *Dances with Wolves*; Sheila Tousey (Menominee), who was cast as a key role in *Thunderheart* (1992) and was featured in the HBO film *Grand Avenue* (1996), written by Greg Sarris (Coastal Miwok).

Although most films and videos produced and directed by Native people document actual life stories, some are narrative films. Native fiction reveals insights familiar to Native people through characters acted by Native people who identify with these roles as belonging to their peoples experiences. An early one of these was *Return of the Country* (1983), written and directed by Bob Hicks (Creek/Seminole) as his graduate thesis film in directing at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles. The film's plot revises all historical assumptions by having Indians discover America and establish a Bureau of Caucasian Affairs, a twist on the actual Bureau of Indian Affairs established by the U.S. federal government. Hicks used his creative license to reverse the dynamics of white and Indian relationships throughout *Return of the Country* by having white children abandon English, shed their European-Style dress, and turn away from Christianity.

Another early narrative film is *Harold of Orange* (1984), written by Gerald Vizenor (Ojibwe). The film is about Harold, an indigenous Indian from the reservation, who applies for a grant to open coffeehouses on the reservation. Harold and his friends, nicknamed "the warriors of Orange," travel to the city in a school bus to present their proposal to a foundation. Their visit, which is an adventure for Harold and his buddies and an education for the whites at the foundation, is very humorous to audiences who know the underlying themes associated with the paternalistic attitudes toward the Indians shown in *Harold of Orange*, such as the myth that all Indians are alcoholics and the insensitive display of ancestral Indian remains in museums. *The Honor of All* (1989), directed by Phil Lucas (Choctaw), is a reenactment of the debilitating effects of alcoholism in an Aboriginal community named Alkali Lake and tells the story of the cultural and spiritual recovery of an entire community. *Tenacity* (1994), directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapahoe), was completed while Eyre was enrolled in the M.F.A. filmmaking program at New York University. The film opens with two young Indian boys about ten years old playing combat on a rural road and their encounter with two white males in a truck who have been partying. *It Starts with a Whisper* (1993), codirected by Shelley Niro (Quinte Bay Mohawk) and Anna Gronau, as about a serious young Aboriginal woman who is unsure of herself and is taken for a joyride by her amusing spirit aunts. *Haircuts Hurt* (1993), directed by Randy Redroad (Cherokee), is a short film about a Native Woman's decision to have her young son's hair cut at a "redneck" (bigoted) barbershop.

As this sample of films shows, Native American filmmakers have many stories to tell about themselves and their culture. If they can be given opportunities to share their work, we just need to sit back, watch and listen.