
Review Essay: **Developing Indigenous Visual Arts Transnationally and Across Genres**

Denise K. Cummings, ed. *Visualities 2: More Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art*. Michigan State University Press, 2019. 284 pp. ISBN: 9781611863192. <https://msupress.org/9781611863192/visualities-2/>

For over a century, the collocation of “Native American” and “film” evoked a cultural imaginary begun in 1914 by Edward Curtis’s *In the Land of the Head Hunters*: the representation of North America’s Indigenous people through settler lenses of ethnography, exoticism, or colonization. Since the 1990s, however, Native filmmakers have been changing the game. In his 2012 history *The Inconvenient Indian*, Thomas King noted that “the history of Indians in Hollywood is more a comedy than a tragedy,” and some of the best contemporary works, according to King, are Native-authored short films and documentaries (50). Indeed, in the first two decades of the new millennium, Indigenous North American film has become a highly prominent genre, as productions and events around the world demonstrate: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Augsburg University in Minneapolis; Edmonton, Ottawa; Chaco, Argentina; Inari, Finland; and even Stuttgart, Germany all host annual Indigenous film and/or media festivals. The imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival in Toronto, founded in 1998, has become the world’s largest of its kind. This development has also been reflected in academic scholarship. While the largest number of available studies still targets non-Indigenous representations of “Indians” as projections of difference, as Robert Berkhofer’s *The White Man’s Indian* began to do in 1978 (see also Rollins and O’Connor 1998; Kilpatrick 1999; Marubbio 2006; Raheja 2010; Howe, Markowitz, and Cummings 2013; Hilger 2016; and Berumen 2020), critics have increasingly addressed Native-authored film: from Kerstin Knopf’s seminal study *Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America* (2008) to Lee Schweningen’s *Imagic Moments* (2013) and Wendy Gay Pearson and Susan Knabe’s collection *Reverse Shots* (2013).

A similar trend on a much larger scale may be noticed in the field of Indigenous art history. Originally framed by European and European-American anthropologists, Native American and First Nations visual arts had long been relegated to the discursive systems of “science” or “history” rather than aesthetics. But curators and art historians—such as Gerald McMaster (Cree), Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), Ruth B. Phillips, and Allan J. Ryan (to name but a few)—and institutions across the continent—such as the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Museum

of Anthropology in Vancouver, British Columbia, the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Québec, the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City, and, of course, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.—lastingly changed the game (cf. Berlo 1992, Berlo and Phillips 1998, Ryan 1999, Rushing III 1999, Phillips 2011).

The two volumes on *Visualities*, expertly edited by Denise K. Cummings, laudably continue this work in both fields of Indigenous film and Indigenous art history across North America, and expand it by dimensions of transnational (or trans-Indigenous, to use Chad Allen’s successful term) connection, of genre-crossing, and of transmediality.

Dean Rader argues in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature* that “Native visual and verbal texts do more than problematize genre, they alter epistemology” (316). Acknowledging this impact and following the success of the first installment (*Visualities: Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art*, 2011), *Visualities 2* highlights the importance of the visual dimension in contemporary Indigenous cultures. In the first volume, ten contributors celebrated and helped to define Indigenous visualities, including films such as Chris Eyre’s *Skins* and *Smoke Signals*, Sherman Alexie’s *The Business of Fancydancing*, Shelley Niro’s *It Starts With a Whisper*, Tracey Deer’s documentary *Mohawk Girls*, Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie’s digital short *Aboriginal World View*, as well as other works of visual art by Hock E. Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Carl Beam, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Fritz Scholder, T.C. Cannon, Larry McNeil, Tom Jones, George Longfish, Teri Greeves, Eric Gansworth, Melanie Printup Hope, and Jolene Rickard. The sheer length of this list already indicates the pertinence of a sequel, and the second volume brings together ten U.S.-based, Native and non-Native experts, four of whom had also contributed to the first volume, in an intriguing and rewarding interdisciplinary project.

Like the 2011 collection, *Visualities 2* is subdivided into two major sections, with the largest (of seven chapters) dedicated to film, a smaller section (of two chapters) exploring contemporary visual art, and an epilogue on social media and the digital realm. Cummings summarizes the purpose and demarcation in her introduction by writing, “[b]esides new scholarship on American Indian creative outputs—the primary focus of the first volume—this second volume contains illuminating global Indigenous visualities including First Nations, Aboriginal Australia, Māori and Sami” (xv). Even if this expansion is exemplary rather than systematic, with one example each from New Zealand and Sweden/Sápmi, the move is as praise-worthy as it is future-oriented, documenting the increasing scholarly interest in trans-Indigenous solidarities and

criticism. Ranging from Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay's feature film *Ngati* (1987) to the collagraphs by Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook, the works analyzed in this volume prominently testify to and celebrate a vibrant and dynamic artistic scene and confirm Thomas King's 2012 assessment that it is at the various sites of visual production that the most exciting interventions into colonial discourse are being created today. The volume also features two overarching themes which, I believe, tie in remarkably well with larger discussions in current Indigenous studies scholarship: the question of genre boundaries, on the one hand, and the nexus between aesthetics and political activism, on the other. Both of these themes reflect the volume's topicality and relevance particularly well.

The volume begins chronologically with Taos Pueblo scholar P. Jane Hafen's analysis of Kent Mackenzie's 1961 sixteen-millimeter semidocumentary *The Exiles*. Whereas the film—about Los Angeles-based Native Americans in the late 1950s—was written and directed by a non-Indigenous director, it is prominent as one of the earliest realistic depictions of urban Natives, and it was restored in 2008 to reach a broader audience. Discussing the mixed reception of the film's restored version and its problematic circumstances of production, Hafen reads *The Exiles* through its similarities to N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn*. With a particular focus on two sections from the novel, "The Priest of the Sun" and "The Night Chanter," she argues that Momaday "anticipated the circumstances of post-World War II dislocation of Native peoples" and, in some passages of his text, even "sounds like he is writing a narration to *The Exiles*" (16-17).

Whereas Hafen reads the 2008 restoration of Mackenzie's non-Native film through the lens of a Kiowa perspective from the 1960s, another fictional text from the so-called Native American Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s served as the basis of a 2013 feature film by non-Native brothers Alex and Andrew Smith: James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974). In her contribution, Joanna Hearne combines a framing of the film (which borrows the novel's title) within Barry Barclay's concept of "Fourth Cinema" with an interview with the directors as well as Blackfoot/Nez Perce actress Lily Gladstone, who plays the character of Marlene. The term of "Fourth Cinema," which is Indigenous-authored and situated outside of a nation-state logic, also informs later chapters by Lee Schwening and Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. and is arguably a useful background from which to develop further methodologies for Indigenous visualities. Hearne's conversation, then, focuses, among other topics, on the declared goal of the filmmakers to reach a mass audience for Native American issues, and it reveals the challenges that arise in a production which the Smith brothers designed as "an

inverted western” (48). The film’s position between aesthetic and political aspects, as emphasized by the participants, also highlights one of the central themes of the entire volume: the role of political activism in contemporary Indigenous studies.

This theme also plays a dominant role in Channette Romero’s discussion of Catherine Anne Martin’s (Mi’kmaq) documentary *The Spirit of Annie Mae* (2002), which is the subject of the following chapter. The question of political activism does not merely occur in the obvious topic of the film, since Annie Mae Aquash was one of the most prominent Native women involved in the cause of the American Indian Movement, but, as Romero argues, through the form of privileging “tribal storytelling techniques and optics to resist imperial images of Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women” (61). Contextualizing the female activist’s biography within a long-standing history of colonial violence, and giving a voice to the women who knew her, Martin successfully questions the gender politics within AIM and highlights Indigenous women’s activism without exploiting the sensationalism of Annie Mae Aquash’s murder. Romero reads the film in the context of other approaches, such as Joy Harjo’s poem “For Annie Mae Pictou Aquash” or Paul Chaat Smith’s and Robert Warrior’s *Like a Hurricane*. However, for an even broader perspective on these cultural reflections, a consideration of Yvette Nolan’s play, *Annie Mae’s Movement*, would have been a fruitful addition. Romero’s argument—that the film’s reliance on “mainstream film genres” (such as true crime or biography) eventually “limits its effectiveness” (79) and fails to connect its subject to ongoing Mi’kmaq activism—may be disputed, but it certainly adds to a differentiated view on the complex case of Annie Mae Aquash’s legacy.

Also focusing on colonial history and activism in Canada, Penelope Myrtle Kelsey zooms in on Cree director Tasha Hubbard’s animated short, *Buffalo Calling* (2013), and her documentary, *Birth of a Family* (2016), in a relatively brief discussion of “buffalo as a site of Indigenous knowledge and renewal” (86). In both films, the migration of Canadian plains bison is read in the context of colonial violence and connected to the Sixties Scoop, in which Aboriginal Canadian children were forcefully removed from their families. While Kelsey notes that the conflation of the decimation of buffalo and of genocidal practices may be seen as problematic, she convincingly foregrounds Hubbard’s emphasis on the shared experience, and on the foregrounding of Indigenous cosmologies in both films.

The traumatic historical complex of removal, forced adoption, and boarding schools is a shared experience among Indigenous people around the world, and both Diné filmmaker Blackhorse Lowe’s feature *Shimásání* (2009) and Swedish/Sami filmmaker

Amanda Kernell's *Sami Blood* (2016) effectively translate traumatic history into "texts of desire and agency" (99), as editor Denise K. Cummings argues in her chapter. Cummings's definition of "visuality" for this purpose, as "the interplay of visual images with lived personal identity" (98), further enriches and contextualizes the volume's coherence and re-reading of contemporary Indigenous visual art. Her close reading of the films' intergenerational conflicts as trans-Indigenous examples of identity formation "as it relates to federally sponsored systems of forced assimilation and internalized oppression" (99) powerfully reverberates throughout the volume and sets a convincing leitmotif for the book's transnational range—convincingly placed at the literal center of the volume.

Next to political activism, as noted above, the volume also aptly reflects on larger questions of genre, and Jennifer L. Gauthier elaborates on these questions with reference to Aboriginal Australian filmmaker Rachel Perkins. By renegotiating colonial history through a variety of genre traditions, including adaptations of plays, melodrama, musical drama, comedy, utopia, and political commentary, Gauthier argues that Perkins effectively Indigenizes Western formats in her films *Radiance* (1998), *One Night the Moon* (2001), and *Bran Nue Dae* (2009). Her reading aptly differentiates conventional delimitations of genre and effectively complements, in its analysis, the transnational perspective of the overall volume.

Similarly picking up the question of genre by addressing, once more, Barry Barclay's "Fourth Cinema," Lee Schwenger develops an Indigenous film aesthetic from the example of Barclay's first film, *Ngati* (1987). He emphasizes the importance of geography and land, of borders and border crossings, and of community to argue that the dense connections between politics and aesthetics are characteristic of contemporary Indigenous cinema—touching again upon the volume's key theme of political activism. "The very fact of a Māori-made film is already political, is already an instance of resistance, and already offers an opportunity for a reversal of the gaze," Schwenger claims (177). The political dimension of contemporary Indigenous film, however, goes far beyond a mere reclaiming of presence, and it also transcends the binary construction of representation and reversal.

This is also substantially underlined by the collection's second (and unfortunately much shorter) section on contemporary Indigenous art, which Laura E. Smith opens by discussing Ehren "Bear Witness" Thomas's video, *Make Your Escape* (2010). In the short video, the Cayuga artist subverts and Indigenizes practices of settler memorialization by putting Vans sneakers—remodeled into moccasins—onto

monuments in downtown Ottawa. Demonstrating once more the political impact of First Nations aesthetics, Thomas—also a member of the collective A Tribe Called Red—cleverly combines music, popular culture, and urban landscapes into a revisiting of memorial culture.

The second article in this section, by Anishinaabe scholar Molly McGlennen, introduces readers to Inuit artists Annie Pootoogook, Jamasie Pitseolak, and Pitaloosie Saila to argue that “we can look to the visual cultures of Inuit expression as a way to more deeply understand the continuum of violences that colonial incursion instigates to this day” (224). Works such as *Pitseolak’s Glasses* (Pootoogook 2006), *The Day After* (Pitseolak 2010), or *Strange Ladies* (Saila 2006) use the domestic, everyday sphere or the history of colonial violence to foreground Inuit agency and liberate Inuit culture from hegemonic representations “frozen in time” (235).

Concluding the rich offering of scholarly perspectives on contemporary Indigenous visual art, Sihasapa Lakota critic Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr. circles back to the question of representation and genre. In the long history of Hollywood-produced images, Indigenous people remain affected by stereotypes and tenacious questions of “authenticity,” but increasingly dismantle these images by deconstructions, counter-histories, and Indigenized discourse. Van Alst sees a particularly strong movement in the field of “digital territory” and social media, arguing that Indigenous people have effectively made these “their home in ways unique to their communities” (246). Combining strategies of humor, “an almost-constant activist component,” and “a sense of shared community,” Van Alst argues that Indigenous people around the globe are effectively using these digital “new lands” for reflections of Native “people and spaces as contemporary, evolving, and forward-looking/thinking” (247-248).

In the growing interdisciplinary field of Indigenous studies, such emphases on visual and digital media, presence and futurity are direly needed. As P. Jane Hafen reminds us in her chapter on *The Exiles*, “what we do is not merely an intellectual enterprise,” but instead, “all of us must be careful to be precise, exact, and thorough. As scholars of American Indian literatures, we bear a responsibility beyond other literary scholars” (20). This responsibility is born exceptionally well by the volume’s editor and contributors. In addition to the themes of political power, activism, and genre, the connective fabric that firmly holds together *Visualities 2* is formed by questions of agency, sovereignty, and artistic representation. Whereas the previous volume had more of a quantitative balance between the sections of “Indigenous Film Practices” and “Contemporary American Indian Art,” the second installment is more clearly

focused on film, also showing the rapid developments that this genre has undergone since the release of Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* over twenty years ago. Indeed, as Cummings writes elsewhere:

the current climate for Indigenous American cinema demands that efforts be undertaken to close the digital divide, to insist on full telecommunications access for Native Country, and to stay alert to the more than a decade of post-*Smoke Signals* Indigenous creativity and transformations of film in the media landscape that have spurred all the small and varied screens to come alive with Indigenous-created content (2014, 295-96).

Given the book's successful application of Cummings's agenda, it is not easy to find room for improvement in this excellent collection. In terms of editorial elegance, one may wonder why some chapters use parenthetical citation and others work with endnotes, but besides such formal trifles, *Visualities 2* powerfully upholds the important aim of changing "the current climate" in scholarship—not only of Indigenous American cinema, but of Indigenous creativity at large.

Molly McGlennen writes toward the end of this volume that "it can be the incremental but persistent work of everyday action and language that can help open the minds of people. But, in the end, I still wonder if that will ever be enough" (McGlennen, 235-36). This collection makes a profound, diverse, and laudably transnational contribution to the persistent work McGlennen describes, and it will be a valuable addition to any Indigenous studies scholar's bookshelf.

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