Telling Otherwise: Settler Colonialism and Indigenous People in Art, Literature, and Cinema

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Introduction

Settler colonialism deploys powerful narratives that render Indigenous peoples invisible or subordinate, and justifies conquest and the transformation of land. As Philip Deloria argues, "the performance of Indian Americanness afforded a powerful foundation for subsequent pursuits of national identity," weaving creative uses of Indianness into their self-understanding while simultaneously advancing conquest and dispossession.[1] From the earliest visual paintings and textual novels to motion picture films, cultural works have reflected and reinforced these colonial myths. Nonetheless, art, literature, and cinema also become sites of resistance, as they expose stereotypes, center Indigenous views, and reimagine alternative futures; however, scholars from multiple or interdisciplinary fields agree that popular culture, or its mediums, is not neutral in this structural process. Lahti and Weaver-Hightower proclaim that film "conveyed a more global story of righteous conquest," making tropes of expansion, Indigenous threat, and settler triumph familiar across a national scene.[2] Simultaneously, they stress that cinema is also a medium of resistance, in which the story of conquest must be "constantly […] recreated and retold" because settler sovereignty is never completely secured.[3] A chronological survey of visual and literary culture, from early settler-era representations to 21st-century Indigenous media, reveals how creative works have alternately reproduced colonial assumptions and challenged them. This paper traces an arc of artworks, novels, films, and television series, first by outlining *Historical Representations* of Indigenous peoples, often seen through a settler lens, then *Transitional*

[1] Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian (Yale Historical Publications Series)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 7.
[2] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers : The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), 2.
[3] Lahti and Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers*, 3.

Periods when narratives began to shift, and finally *Contemporary Interventions* in media that confront or subvert settler colonial narratives.

Settler Colonialism and Colonization

Settler colonialism is a distinct and enduring form of colonialism that centers on the acquisition of land and the displacement, if not outright elimination, of Indigenous populations by foreign settlers who establish a new society. This process, as Bateman and Pilkington articulate, is often underpinned by modernizing narratives and ideologies that serve to justify the settlers' presence and their so-called inherent claim to the tangible land.[4] A key characteristic of settler colonialism is its ongoing nature, functioning as a structure rather than a singular historical event, driven by what Patrick Wolfe terms a "logic of elimination" that seeks to erase Indigenous sovereignty and presence.[5] He writes of logic of elimination of settler colonialism: "it strives for the dissolution of native societies […] it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base […] settler colonizers come to stay."[6] The logic of elimination framework often operates through a binary lens, sharply dividing settlers and Indigenous peoples into separate, individual camps. However, scholarly discourse within settler colonial studies reveals an ongoing debate regarding its precise definition and scope, with some critiques highlighting an Anglo-centric bias and a primary focus on milieu where settlers eventually formed a majority and achieved independence.

In relation to settler colonialism, the assertion that "colonies were responsible for generating new concepts relevant to their own situation or ones which had been occluded or

[4] Fiona Bateman and Lionel Pilkington, *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3, 13, 147.
[5] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 21, 2006): 387–409, 387–88, 390.
[6] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 388.

simply unnoticed in the mother country" rings true across literature, art, and mediums of popular culture.[7] Faced with vastly different landscapes, interactions with Indigenous populations, unique socioeconomic structures, and the challenges of building new societies, settlers and later generations developed distinct perspectives and forms of cultural expression. Literature produced in settler societies often grappled with themes of identity, displacement, and the harsh realities of settler life in ways rarely explored in metropolitan narratives.[8] Similarly, with the emergence of motion picture, "films provide a window to the settler, speak to a common, international, audience, and use a shared 'language' of settler colonialism in doing so: the stories of empty lands, settler civilizations and righteousness, and of othering and elimination" but also "reveal stories of ambiguity, settler vulnerability, and native resistance and agency."[9] Popular culture, from music to everyday customs, also adapted and transformed, as they blended influences and created hybrid forms that spoke to the specific experiences of the colonial setting, thereby bringing to light ideas and realities that remained unseen or unaddressed in the distant mother country.[10]

To most people, it is widely known that popular culture, which encompasses art, literature, and film, wields immense power in shaping societal beliefs and macro-narratives regarding settler colonialism. Reinterpreting Wolfe's logic of elimination, instead of erecting colonial society on material indigenous expropriated land base, it erects an intangible cultural base on indigenous land. The intangible cultural forms can act as ideological tools, reflecting and reinforcing the dominant perspectives of settler societies, and often normalize the occupation of

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[7] Fiona Bateman and Lionel Pilkington, *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17.
[8] Danielle Taschereau Mamers, *Settler Colonial Ways of Seeing* (Fordham Univ Press, 2023), 29–30, 49.
[9] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers : The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), 4.
[10] John W. Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013) 5, 8.

land and the marginalization of Indigenous histories and experiences. Conversely, popular culture also holds the potential to challenge these hegemonic narratives. It provides platforms for alternative voices and counter-representations that can disrupt and contest the settler colonial status quo.

Historical Representations

Early artistic and literary depictions of Indigenous peoples and colonized lands were often filtered through what is known as the "colonial gaze."[11] Essentially, this colonial gaze, rooted in the ideology of the colonizers, frequently served to legitimize imperial expansion. Early art worked as a medium for this colonial gaze and often portrayed Indigenous lands as either *terra nullius*, thus conveniently available for settler occupation, or as an uncultured wilderness awaiting the civilizing influence of European settlers. Similarly, early literature frequently depicted Indigenous peoples as "savage," "primitive," or inherently inferior to the so-called superior white race.[12] Such colonial gaze through artistic and literary mediums helped reinforce the settler narrative of racial and cultural superiority and providing a seemingly moral justification for dispossession and domination

Colonial Imagery in Visual Arts

From the colonial and early national period, art and literature established tropes of the "savage" and the "vanishing Native" bolstered expansionist ideology.[13] In regard to vanishing

[11] Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 88; Danielle Taschereau Mamers, *Settler Colonial Ways of Seeing* (Fordham Univ Press, 2023), 30.
[12] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 1–2.
[13] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers: The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), 19, 127, 133; Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 9, 36; Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian (Yale Historical Publications Series)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 64–65, 69, 73.

and its meaning, it is a bygone trope that believed in the eventual disappearance or extinction of Indigenous people in North America through cultural or forced assimilation. Famous 19th-century works such as John Gast's painting *American Progress* (1872) literally personified Manifest Destiny: a white angelic figure bearing telegraph wires and book in one hand, carrying American settlers westward, as dislocated Native Americans and buffalo flee below.

Figure 1. John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. (Image: John Gast/Public Domain)

The potent imagery cast westward expansion as divinely sanctioned while portraying Indigenous peoples as obstacles to be overcome or a "dying race." Manifest Destiny and Westward Expansion are analogous with the construction of its perception in western genre. Even before motion film, "filmic images of Indians have many origins, one of which is the

western novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[14] In literature, early novels like James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837) presented Indigenous people of North America within the settler moral universe, either noble yet doomed, or as barriers to civilization.[15] Nineteenth-century photographers often posed Indigenous subjects as cultural "authenticity" but staged against the coming extinction.[16] American historian and scholar of Native American studies, Liza Black, notes that midcentury Hollywood scripts even "create a shorthand for non-Indian depictions of Native people used for non-Indian purposes and need" based on trivial traits and often exploited sensationalized images of Indigenous culture, a sensibility rooted in earlier stereotypes.[17] Early art and monochrome photography thus established a settler way of seeing, per se, that framed autochthonous Native Americans as exotic others or embodiments of the primeval past.

Silent and Early Sound Cinema

The advent of cinema in the late 19th and early 20th centuries provided a controlling, dynamic new medium for popularizing and romanticizing the settler colonial narrative, especially in the milieu of the American West. It is no surprise that the Western genre, with its archetypal figures of gun-toting, roughneck heroic pioneers and crude "Indians," became a dominant force in shaping public perceptions of otherwise convoluted period of American expansion. Western films frequently depicted settlers as transplanting civilization to a wild and untamed land, with Indigenous peoples often portrayed as obstacles to this progress or as

[14] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 15; Peter Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas: Film and Colonial Encounters in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 136.
[15] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 3–5, 7–8.
[16] Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 34–35.
[17] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 12.

inherently violent threats to the settler way of life. The narrative structure often reinforced the logic of elimination by portraying Indigenous resistance as ultimately futile or as an act of unprovoked aggression against innocent settlers. According to Black, "Westerns are not the only genre in which Indian characters appear, but in western films Indians enter at the height of narrative tension […]."[18] Early Westerns, such as those featuring Buffalo Bill Cody in travel shows, repeatedly presented romanticized and inaccurate depictions of the "Indian Wars," solidifying the image of Indigenous people as a savage impediment to American expansion.[19] *The Vanishing American* (1925), a silent film discussed by Kilpatrick, further exemplified the trope of the "noble but doomed" Native who loses to the Darwinian struggle, as it suggested the inevitable disappearance of Indigenous peoples before the tide of settler colonialism.[20]

Silent and early sound cinema inherited and codified many of these stereotypical images. In the early 20th century, westerns and adventure films routinely portrayed Indigenous people as "evil, as in the bloodthirsty savage stereotype, or good, as in the noble savage" to white heroes, all in reinforcing the narrative of justified conquest.[21] To compound the injustice, non-Indigenous actors usually played Indigenous characters in "redface." American scholar of indigenous studies, Michelle Raheja defines redfacing as "the cultural and ideological work of playing Indian."[22] The reasons behind redfacing work in tandem; first, the performances of redfacing "herald the success of genocidal policies against Indigenous peoples […] ostensibly became necessary in the film industry as the nation rendered Native bodies invisible, vanished, and extinct," with the expected outcome to be "if there were no Native Americans available to play

[18] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 48.
[19] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 19.
[20] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 29–30.
[21] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 33.
[22] Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 20.

these roles […] then white actors were required to perform American Indian characters."[23] Secondly, Hollywood studios routinely cast white actors in Indigenous roles, with makeup and stereotypical costumes to create a visual representation of "Indianness" far removed from the realities of Indigenous cultures, but defined colonial-centric ideal of self-indigenization tied to the continental land.[24] Redfacing practices denied Indigenous actors opportunities and visibility within the expanding film industry, only to reinforce a distorted and often dehumanizing image of Indigenous people in the popular imagination. The most notable example is the career of Iron Eyes Cody, born and christened Espera Oscar de Corti, an Italian-American actor who portrayed Native Americans in countless films and television shows for six-to-seven decades, poignantly illustrates an constructed nature of "Indianness" in popular culture.[25] Cody's widespread acceptance as a Native American actor, despite his absence of Indigenous heritage, divulges the public's willingness to embrace inauthentic representations that conformed to established settler ideology. His iconic role as the "Crying Indian" in Keep America Beautiful's environmental public service announcement in 1971 demonstrates just how this artificially constructed identity evoked specific emotions and promote specific agendas, albeit well-intended at the time, all without genuine engagement with Indigenous perspectives.[26] Decades later, American scholar of Choctaw, Cherokee, and Irish descent, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, critiqued this era, tracing how Hollywood depicted Indigenous people as either savage enemies or noble auxiliaries, rarely as full citizens or protagonists.[27]

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[23] Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 71.
[24] Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian (Yale Historical Publications Series)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 19, 25.
[25] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 79–80.
[26] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers : The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), 132.
[27] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 12, 124.

By the mid-century, films like *Broken Arrow* (1950) began to show balanced, sympathetic Indigenous characters, such as the Cochise-ally Geraldine Page. In fact, the film is recognized as an early example of Hollywood's developing cultural awareness, partly spurred by resistance to McCarthyism.[28] The film questioned prevalent stereotypes and the righteous concept of Manifest Destiny, and notably attempted to present Apache characters as multidimensional human beings, a surprising departure from the one-dimensional norm decades earlier. The film shifts the focus of villainy from Indigenous people to greedy, violent white men, even making Geronimo's initial resistance understandable by the film's end.[29] Nevertheless, studios, such as 20th Century Fox that produced *Broken Arrow*, still dictated authenticity, as Black observes post-World War II Hollywood, studios controlled scripts and costumes so tightly that Indian actors on set were constrained "on the screen but rarely spoke […] mute sources of violence […] en masse, a silent, anonymous collective" by settler standards.[30] In *Broken Arrow*, the film's use of a voice-over to explain that conversations understood to be in Apache are presented in English, coupled with the ease with which the white protagonist, Tom Jeffords, learns fluent Apache, is criticized as a form of "pseudo-polyphonic discourse."[31] The film's approach marginalizes authentic Indigenous voices despite allowing Cochise to speak articulately and with force. However, *Broken Arrow*'s "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."[32] The film reverts to a common trope regarding miscegenation, as the romantic relationship between Jeffords and Sonseeahray

[28] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 58.
[29] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 59.
[30] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 137.
[31] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 58–59.
[32] Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), x.

(played by non-Indigenous actress Debra Paget) is depicted as deeply loving but is tragically cut short by her death at the hands of white villains.[33] It is also important to note that Indigenous extras sometimes worked on these films as a means of economic survival, but even then they were largely background figures under settler creative control.[34]

Transitional Period

From the 1960s through the late 20th century, cultural representation began to shift under the pressure of decolonial movements and growing Indigenous activism. Unsurprisingly, the Civil Rights era and American Indian Movement inspired some mainstream culture to reconsider old stereotypes, even as many classical tropes persisted. In film, the Western genre underwent "revisionism." Positively received of the sympathetic portrayals of indigenous people*, Little Big Man* (1970) is a satire of white and Cheyenne cultures in conflict, depicting good and bad in fully realized characters.[35] On the other hand, the film struggled to translate satire and exploration of concepts such as the "circular nature of the Native American universe as opposed to the linear nature of the white universe."[36] As a result, the film's satire is primarily effective against white culture, while the Cheyenne characters, though portrayed sympathetically, are seen as less multidimensional. The same year, *A Man Called Horse* (1970), intended as a sympathetic and accurate portrayal of Indigenous people, was intensely disliked by them due to numerous inaccuracies and a fundamentally Eurocentric, paternalistic perspective of the plot.[37] For example, the film portrays the Sun Dance ceremony as a personal, ego-driven test of courage for

[33] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 59.
[34] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 33.
[35] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 84.
[36] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 84.
[37] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 79.

Horse to gain acceptance and a bride, rather than its true significance as a sacred religious rite of humility and sacrifice undertaken for the benefit of the entire tribe.[38]

In later years of the 20th century, Hollywood occasionally cooperated, or make a relative attempt to, with Indigenous actors and historians to improve authenticity. For example, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) cast Lakota actors "in which the Lakota language was spoken with a fair degree of accuracy, and subtitles were used."[39] However, such films often still employed white directors or protagonists, with Kevin Costner playing the typical white savior role. Michael Mann's 1993 film adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* is critiqued for significantly deviating from the source material and previous adaptations, primarily by centering a romance between Nathaniel "Hawkeye" Bumpo (renamed from Natty) and Cora.[40] The movie betrays Cooper's original portrayal of Bumpo as a rough frontiersman motivated by a rebuff of white culture and a desire to be part of the Indigenous world. The film is accused of presenting a "'new age,' sensitive guy" and even "quite white, even aristocratically white" Nathaniel, despite his upbringing, thus continuing to interpret the Indigenous experience through a white lens.[41] While Nathaniel is depicted as embodying a synthesis of his two cultures, he is also presented as superior to his Indigenous counterparts in skills and decision-making, fitting a common trope of the white hero in films featuring Native Americans.[42] Although the film portrays the protagonist's adoptive Mohican father and brother in a positive light and shows them as accepted by white colonists, their roles remain secondary to the white protagonists. The narrative's sole direct commentary on Indigenous people centers on their eventual vanishing, a

[38] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 81.
[39] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 38.
[40] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 141–42.
[41] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 142.
[42] Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*, 142.

theme underscored by the antagonist Magua, whose motivations rely on clichéd greed. As a result, Indigenous characters still function mainly as supporting figures to the white hero.

Throughout this mid-century period, popular media remained caught between reinforcing and challenging settler narratives. Limbrick states that even as studios occasionally, such as the case with *A Man Called Horse*, generated so-called cultural authenticity, they usually framed stories to preserve white heroes or paternalistic plots.[43] Some exceptions appeared: N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) brought Indigenous spirituality and history to American letters.[44]

Music

In the arts, Indigenous artists appropriated mainstream forms to express identity and resistance from settler designs. Popular music saw Indigenous participation as well. Scholar of popular and vernacular music, John Troutman, documents how musicians who fronted bands, or Hawaiian steel guitar virtuosos, transformed settler musical forms into something reflecting indigenous identity. In regards to Hawaiian people's struggle with settler colonialism, Troutman states, "While the U.S. Provisional Government (PG) prohibited the teaching of the Hawaiian language in schools, the musicians' performance of Hawaiian mele, or songs, perpetuated, even proliferated its practice."[45] The steel string guitar, referred to as *kīkākila* in Hawaiian, originated from a thriving guitar culture of Hawaii in the 1880s-90s.[46] In the aftermath of the forced abdication of Queen Lili'uokalani by American capitalists and subsequent annexation by the United States, numerous Hawaiian musical groups formed to avoid hard labor on haole-owned

[43] Peter Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas: Film and Colonial Encounters in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 33, 38–39.
[44] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 180.
[45] John William Troutman, *Kīkā Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (Chapel Hill: The University Of North Carolina Press, 2016), 1.
[46] Troutman, *Kīkā Kila*, 12.

plantations, or employment as clerks in American bureaucracy, but overall "defend their imperiled sovereigns from imperial American designs."[47] Whether their intention or not, they found enthusiastic reception in the mainland U.S. and globe. Masterful players such as Joseph Kekuku of Lā'ie, Sol Ho'opi'i, Dick McIntire, and Eddie Bush, entranced non-Hawaiian audiences by the novel sound of the steel guitar.[48] With musical players entering the forefront of the entertainment industry, in conjunction with the introduction of technological mediums in the form of radio and television that helped disseminate music played by the *kīkākila*, "flooded the public consciousness in the United States […] the rate and the depth of the instrument's diffusion throughout the country is nothing short of astonishing."[49] Indeed, by the 1930s, enthusiasm for the steel guitar led to its universal use in musical genres of all kinds, adapting smoothly with jazz, blues, Southern country, and even ragas of India.[50] Troutman shows that Hawaiian steel guitar, initially a tourist novelty after the Hawaiian monarchy's overthrow, became a potent symbol of Hawaiian culture worldwide to subvert colonial export.[51] Similarly, in blues and rock, some Indigenous artists reclaimed genres to critique mainstream narratives about race and Indian identity. These Indigenous blues and rock groups "represent a wide range of financial and professional success in their acts and in using their talents to engage federal Indian policy on a local or national level."[52] Interestingly, non-Indigenous people viewed Native America as a refuge from the stresses of emerging modern life. They sought to reclaim a fading sense of authenticity, connection to nature, and the idyllic simplicity of a disappearing pre-modern world,

[47] John William Troutman, *Kīkā Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (Chapel Hill: The University Of North Carolina Press, 2016), 1–3.
[48] Troutman, *Kīkā Kila*, 7, 64–66, 71–73.
[49] Troutman, *Kīkā Kila*, 75.
[50] Troutman, *Kīkā Kila*, 7, 124, 132, 156–58.
[51] Troutman, *Kīkā Kila*, 35, 66–67, 220.
[52] John W. Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 202.

as Frances Densmore's "preservation work were explicitly involved in providing this refuge […] to be void of Native peoples and the modern ills of society."[53]

Television

Television in the late 20th century also began to feature Indigenous characters, though often problematically. In the 1960s, "sitcoms may have shown only an occasional interest in Indians, but the occasions swirl into a set of fictional and nonfictional cultural discourses on Indian-settler interculturality."[54] One early example was *Northern Exposure* (1990–1995), set in Alaska, introduced a likable, recurring Indigenous cast and occasionally touched on reservation life and cast Umatilla actress Elaine Miles.[55] In the words of Black, Indigenous communities "embraced and enjoyed the show because of her [Miles] portrayal of a Tlingit woman, especially because her character was full of dignity, strength, and humor."[56] Concurrently, comedy shows and cartoons continued to lampoon "plains Indians" stereotypes, or introduce new stereotypes of the modern-day Native. According to Dustin Tahmahkera, a Comanche scholar of interdisciplinary indigeneities, states, "Recent animated sitcom episodes turn to the 'casino Indian' and Indian casino, a dominant representation of and setting for the recognizably Indian," as it replaced "historical and vanishing Indians with modern-day greedy and cultureless capitalists, the casino Indians and their enormous moneymaking casinos surface in *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and elsewhere."[57] Tahmahkera examines sitcoms of this era, noting that even as

[53] John W. Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 162.
[54] Dustin Tahmahkera, *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms* (UNC Press Books, 2014), 48, Apple Books.
[55] Tahmahkera, *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms* (UNC Press Books, 2014), 165, Apple Books; Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 120; Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), xiii.
[56] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), xiii.
[57] Dustin Tahmahkera, *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms* (UNC Press Books, 2014), 29, Apple Books.

Indigenous actors appeared more often, they were still usually comic relief or side characters rather than nuanced protagonists.

Emerging Indigenous Agency

By the 1990s and 2000s, however, a distinct Native film and media scene had emerged. Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals* (1998) was groundbreaking as a feature film entirely written, directed, and acted by Indigenous people; it used humor and contemporary reservation life to upend typical Western clichés.[58] This period saw more Indigenous filmmakers telling their own stories, and a reevaluation of cinematic representation. Michelle Raheja describes this as a struggle for "visual sovereignty," the idea that Native peoples control their own images and narratives.[59] For example, documentaries like *Reel Injun* (2009) explicitly critique the Western genre's stereotypes, and "gives the entire spectrum of historic filmic representations of Native people interspersed with biting and poignant commentary from Native activists and actors […] with Native workers in the film industry newly empowered to create films that not only 'talk back' to Hollywood but also speak to other Native people through Native ways of understanding and worldviews."[60]

Contemporary Interventions

In the 21st century, the relationship between settler colonial narratives and Indigenous representation has grown more complex. Mainstream media has occasionally begun to center indigenous perspectives more fully, often in globally released films and series. Examples include

[58] Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 228–29.
[59] Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 9, 200.
[60] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers : The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), 132; Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 7–8.

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001), an Inuit epic entirely in the Inuktitut language, "subverts the conventional paradigm by refusing a white point of entry for the spectator."[61] In assessing the representation of Indigenous identity in mainstream media, the adult animated sitcom, *King of the Hill*, oddly offers a compelling case of multidimensional Indigenous resistance representation through its portrayal of John Redcorn. As Tahmahkera states, "*King of the Hill* producers attempted to construct Redcorn as a character who knows, supports, and embodies this new Indianness of what Kevin Bruyneel characterizes as 'postcolonial resistance.'"[62] In Hollywood, films like *Wind River* (2017) used a reservation crime story to highlight the contemporary issues of disappearing indigenous women, though critics debate whether it truly challenges or merely appropriates Native suffering as plot.[63] The Canadian comedy series, *Mixed Blessings* (2007), with its parental protagonists a Ukrainian Canadian man and Cree woman, "adeptly and comically contests and reframes sitcom and televisual Indianness and represents variegated postindianness with the intent to alter, or at least expand, non-Native and Native perceptions of Native Peoples on television and to promote intercultural understanding and healing through humor."[64] *Mixed Blessings* works actively to subvert the Eurocentric trope, with Indigenous characters no longer just background or noble savages, but fully realized people with humor and agency.

The turn to Indigenous-led storytelling, in contrast to a colonial gaze, represents a form of, I shall call, "reclaiming the gaze." As Lahti and Weaver-Hightower point out, cinema, and by extension television and literature, is never neutral in a settler environment, as it can reinforce

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[61] Michelle H Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 209.
[62] Dustin Tahmahkera, *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms* (UNC Press Books, 2014), 113–14, Apple Books.
[63] Liza Black, *Picturing Indians* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), 232.
[64] Dustin Tahmahkera, *Tribal Television: Viewing Native People in Sitcoms* (UNC Press Books, 2014), 154, Apple Books.

and challenge the legitimacy of settler sovereignty.[65] Contemporary Native filmmakers and authors are deliberately challenging colonial narratives by producing stories that foreground Indigenous experiences and critique past depictions. Indigenous directors like Shelley Niro and Chris Eyre explicitly play with cinematic tropes, sometimes even including redface actors as symbols, to draw attention to representation politics.[66] As Raheja argues, this work of "visual sovereignty" is essential, because by taking control of their representation, Native peoples dismantle the old binary of indigenous-white paradigm.[67] The novel interventions create a dialog with older narratives, as they often reference classic Eurocentric imagery only to twist it. *Prey* (2022), while not discussed in either of the scholarly literature, but still pivotal when examining contemporary films featuring Indigenous people, turns a sci-fi, action Predator movie into a story about a Comanche heroine.

Throughout these developments, scholars note the continuing tension: as long as colonial structures exist, representations can slip back into old patterns. The Cinematic Settlers anthology reminds us that colonization is an ongoing project, requiring constant narrative work: "one cannot fully understand settler colonialism […] unless one understands how film was and is a medium of both settler invasion and resistance."[68] Thus the very persistence of Native-focused art and film is itself a direct challenge: by "telling the story again" from below, Indigenous creators undermine the narrative of "conquest completed" and assert that Native peoples and cultures are vital and present.

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[65] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers: The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), 6–7.
[66] Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 188
[67] Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*, 209–10.
[68] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers: The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), xiii.

Conclusion

Over the past two centuries, art, literature, and film have played a dual role in settler colonial milieu, as instruments of colonial ideology and vehicles of resistance. Early representations, from Manifest Destiny paintings to frontier literature and silent westerns, largely reinforced settler myths. The early cinema films depicted Indigenous people as obstacles or exotic relics of a bygone age that would soon fade from existence; they helped normalize settler expansion and the erasure of Indigenous sovereignty. However, even within those traditions came cracks. Occasional sympathetic characters or reformist creators hinted at the injustice of colonization. In mid- and late-20th century, as decolonial movements gained force, cultural production began to shift. Revisionist westerns, masterful Indigenous musicians, and emerging Indigenous entertainment professionals challenged then resisted stereotypes and outdated tropes, while calling attention to Indigenous voices previously silenced. In this transitional period, media reflected wider and more inclusive socio-political changes but, to a degree, still retained white centers.

The scholarly literature accentuates that artistic or cultural mediums cannot be separated from the colonial conditions that produced them. The chronology of art, literature, and film examined in this paper demonstrates a persistent pattern, that each generation "plays Indian" or reimagines the frontier or settler society wholly in ways that serve either settler or Indigenous interests. Yet, with each telling, new perspectives, interpretations and reinterpretations emerge. Contemporary works explicitly reference how earlier narratives were constructed. For example, by including Western genre footage only to critique it, fulfilling Lahti and Weaver-Hightower's

insight that settler stories must be constantly "recreated and retold" through cultural means.[69] People see that cultural representation is never merely entertainment after examining specific case studies in light of settler colonial theory; it is part of the struggle over land, memory, and identity. Ultimately, art and film have the power to both uphold and undermine colonial narratives, and today's critical and creative works are actively reshaping the story of the settler-Indigenous encounter.

[69] Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, *Cinematic Settlers : The Settler Colonial World in Film* (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2020), 3.

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