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2005

Voices in the Era of Silents: An American Indian Aesthetic in Early Silent Film

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/christina_gishhill/10/
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Voices in the Era of Silents: An American Indian Aesthetic in Early Silent Film

Christina Gish Berndt

From the beginning of the film industry until around 1911, American Indians had significant control over the creation of silent westerns, bringing an indigenous aesthetic to the medium. Native people used this forum to voice dissenting opinions about Euro-American representations of American Indians.

Dès le début de l’industrie cinématographique jusqu’1911 environ, les Amérindiens ont eu un contrôle significatif sur la création des westerns muets, apportant une esthétique autochtone à ce moyen d’expression. Les Autochtones ont utilisé cette tribune pour exprimer les opinions divergentes concernant les représentations euro-américaines des Amérindiens.

If distinct indigenous aesthetic expressions can be discovered in indigenous film and video, this would seem to point to the durability and importance of native aesthetic expression in general.

- Steven Leuthold, Indigenous Aesthetics

This story opens with a white man named Maxwell, who lives alone on the Western frontier. He lives a lonely life, and finally takes an American Indian woman as his wife. Soon she has a child, and he is happy in his home and with his family. Three years pass, and Maxwell receives a letter from his old sweetheart out east, declaring that she is leaving her home and coming to be with him. Maxwell, driven by the memory of his old love, abandons his wife. When she returns to her family with her child and tells them what has happened, her father is moved to meet the eastern woman at the train station and tell her of Maxwell’s family. When Maxwell arrives with the minister, his old sweetheart insists that he marry the mother of his child. Maxwell consents and his family is happily reunited, while the eastern woman returns home. This story line could be the plot of a novel or perhaps the narrative of one moment in an American Indian woman’s life in the nineteenth century. One would not expect it to be the plot of a
modern movie, let alone a film that is almost one hundred years old. But this story is, in fact, the plot for the movie *For the Squaw*, written and filmed in 1911 by the Winnebago director James Young Deer. Because of the newness of the film industry and its working class and immigrant audiences, from the beginning of film’s development until 1912, American Indians created films that reflected Native culture and ideology in a way unparalleled until recently, and Native people both inside and outside the film industry used this forum to voice opinions about their representation in the dominant society.

In *Celluloid Indians*, Jacqelyn Kilpatrick asks whether the stories that Native Americans tell can be accessible to the “economically necessary mainstream audience while privileging the Other, Native voice?” (Kilpatrick 179). She answers in the affirmative, but notes that this has only recently become possible. She agrees with the majority of film historians who argue that the central motif in films about Native people has been the conquest of the West, including the subduing of the savage and primitive Indians, who are doomed to vanish. Interestingly, some of the earliest western films disrupt the view of Native people as primitive savages frozen in the past, to be erased in the face of progress. A number of films with American Indian characters made before 1912 focus instead on problems caused by racism and assimilation. Furthermore, Native people had certain dimensions of authority in the creation and critique of these early westerns, making film a vehicle for American Indian expression. Steven Leuthold has asserted that a Native aesthetic expression in film demonstrated the ability of Native aesthetics to endure through adaptation to new expressive forms. If American Indians told stories in film that reflected their own voices and experiences using aesthetic expression that differs from mainstream film, this would indicate that Native peoples were able to maintain their own forms of expression adapted to a new medium despite the pressures of assimilation. I suggest here that a Native aesthetic appeared in film at a much earlier date than previously understood, that it, in fact, emerged in the earliest silent films.

In the United States, the rebellion against Victorian values during the Progressive Era (1900-1920) created a forum in which Native people could use film to voice their opinions. Film historian Larry May asserts that films between 1900 and 1920 “dramatized the central thesis of the age: the change from Victorian to modern life that was at once so hopeful, so problematical, and so fearful” (May xii). As demonstrated by the emergence of numerous social movements, the Progressive Era manifested the ideal that social and economic progress, as well as exposure to highbrow aesthetics, could elevate all classes of people. This can be observed in the Indian policy of the era, which focused heavily on bringing the American Indian into civilization. American Indians were to be uplifted through the civilizing influences of Euro-American ways of life—private property, government education, and an appreciation of Western aesthetic life (e.g. standards of dress, hygiene, and home keeping). History frequently focuses on this aspect of the Progressive Era, representing the period as coherent and uncomplicated, especially in terms of Native history. Yet, progressive ideals did not reign uncontested, and this was true in Indian country as well. The rebellion against Victorian values that took place during this era created a forum in which many disparate groups, including American Indians, could voice their opinions. This may seem unlikely, as the Victorian era was truly an age of empire, across the world and in Indian country. In the U.S., most Native peoples had been relegated to reservations to live under the federal government’s strict control. A great deal of scholarship about the Progressive Era considers it to be a time when American Indian people had no voice and little power. The Progressive Era was infused with a battle over how aesthetics should be defined. Progressive ideals attempted to flush out Victorian values, but that which would replace them had yet to be determined.

The emerging rebellion of this time against Victorian styles and moral standards inspired creative new art forms, including films. In the earliest era of films, theater owners catered to the tastes of particular audiences. To suit immigrant tastes, theaters showed foreign films and shorts that portrayed their political and economic situation (May 148). The earliest movies, called Nickelodeons, also became one of the many amusements that provided relief for workers from the ceaseless toil of the newly mechanized workplace (May 27). These early films were geared toward working class and immigrant audiences, and most of the first theaters sprang up in vice districts and poor urban areas. These films contained themes that challenged Victorian values. Over half the films released at this time came from France, Germany, and Italy, contained themes that portrayed women and workers rebelling against their supposed betters, and sympathetically presented premarital sex, adultery, and interracial love affairs (May 37). Because these films were successful with their audiences, American filmmakers created films with similar themes. At this early date, the production of films had not yet conglomerated into a corporate industry. In fact, film genres were not solidly established until
the 1920s. Prior to middle class interest in film, creators served multiple
audiences with varied tastes. Coupled with the newness of the industry,
this created a space for experimentation.

All this notwithstanding, complex images of American Indians began
to fade from the silver screen around 1911, in part because, in a dramatic
shift, film audiences no longer responded to stories about suffering racism
and assimilation, but instead desired stories about a mythic and heroic
creation of the American nation. Even after this shift, Native people did
not simply sit by and allow their voices to be obscured. Instead, through
letters and editorials, public speeches, and acts of resistance by American
Indian actors and extras, they protested the more typical representations
of Indians becoming dominant in film. As the movie industry emerged,
middle class men and women who had previously separated themselves
from what they considered low class or ethnic entertainment, “began to
borrow music, dances, and even styles from blacks, Mediterranean Catho-
lics, and other pre-industrial peoples” (May xv). Nonetheless, recognition
of motion pictures as an acceptable middle class form of entertainment
developed quite slowly.

Many historians of silent film have overlooked the medium as a forum
for expressing opinions and affecting change. Andrew Brodie Smith’s
recent dissertation is a breakthrough in understanding the emergence of
the western as a distinctly American film genre, as well as its use as a
vehicle for the voice of the downtrodden during the Progressive Era. He
states that although filmmakers created cowboy films that sensationally
depicted violent crimes, white men were not these movies’ only heroes
(Smith 7). Women and Mexican and Indian characters frequently saved
the day. Furthermore, American Indians involved in the production of
early westerns created sympathetic non-white characters and story lines
that dealt with racism and assimilation (Smith 7). During this early pe-
riod, film production companies were quite small, and actors often wrote
scenarios and created scenery, props, and costumes, so American Indians
working in film had ample opportunity for artistic control. Significantly,
Smith recognizes that Native people played a role in this multivocal
forum. However, he does not completely address the distinctive role that
Natives played, nor does he acknowledge their unique circumstances
as a minority group in the United States. American Indians brought a
distinct aesthetic to film, different even from other ethnic groups, and it
challenged the way they had been previously imagined by demonstrating
the strength, endurance, and uniqueness of American Indian culture and
communities.

Specific images of American Indians have been central to the image
of the United States as a unified nation. When James Fenimore Cooper
first wrote The Leatherstocking Tales, he was essentially “building an
American nationalist mythology through identification with the natural
landscape and its original inhabitants” (Kilpatrick 3). Certainly Cooper’s
Last of the Mohicans intertwines the creation of the United States with
the disappearance of American Indians. Furthermore, Cooper’s Indians
are all savages, either bloodthirsty or noble, either terrorizing whites or
forsaking their communities to help whites. These stereotypes have en-
dured from Cooper’s time, and yet a window opened for a brief period at
the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when Indian people could
challenge these stereotyped images.

The early twentieth century is often portrayed as a time when the
progressive agenda of uplifting the American Indian allowed Native
people little means of self-representation. However, because the era was
actually a time of negotiating and shifting ideals, Natives could use film
as a powerful tool to disrupt mainstream ideas and develop new ways of
thinking in this disruptive moment. American Indians who participated in
the production and consumption of film used this window to break
down the ideals of progress that were so important to the era and often
so destructive to Native communities.

James Young Deer: A Native Voice in Film
American Indian voices of the Progressive Era, if ever recognized, are
frequently considered to be mediated by Western ideas. Lakota writer
Elizabeth Cook-Lynn asserts that “Indian America has always had its
own quiet word(s) and language(s) which it has used and composed and
clung to in an attempt to assert its own distinction in the age of empire”
(Cook-Lynn 64). One writer more than any other demonstrated the power
of the American Indian voice in this era of empire. In the first decade
of the twentieth century, a young Winnebago named James Young Deer
used a language in the films he wrote and directed that asserted a distinct
American Indian experience. His films addressed issues of racism and
assimilation on Native terms. The tribes and Native characters in his films
confronted invasion and assimilation, but did not let such pressures divide
them from their people or destroy their lands or communities.

Both Young Deer and his wife, actress Lillian Red Wing, grew up on
the Omaha-Winnebago reservation in Nebraska. Young Deer first
worked with the Barnum and Bailey Circus in the 1890s, and then with the Miller Brothers’ 101 Ranch Wild West Show. Young Deer’s career in film began when the Kalem Company of New York hired him as an actor for its popular Indian films. He had only been at Kalem for a short while when the Lubin Company of Philadelphia hired him to act and also write scenarios and direct (“James Young Deer” 999). In 1909, Young Deer acted for Biograph in D.W. Griffith’s The Mended Lute, and for Vitagraph, along with Red Wing, in their film, Red Wing’s Gratitude (“James Young Deer” 999). *Moving Picture World*, a popular film magazine read by both exhibitors and viewers, asserted that *Red Wing’s Gratitude* was “a notable Indian picture” because not only did Red Wing and Young Deer help create the costumes and scenery, they also directed how “Indian customs” were portrayed. The desire of these early directors to create films that would be seen as authentic Indian westerns gave the couple considerable control.

In the beginning, the couple’s control only applied to American Indian material culture and customs. They had little control over the story lines of these particular films, as is evident in the differences between the story line of *Red Wing’s Gratitude* and the later films that Young Deer wrote and directed himself. In *Red Wing’s Gratitude*, Red Wing plays an Indian woman abused and overworked by her father. A band of pioneers prevents her father from beating her to death after she collapses from exhaustion. When the tribe kidnaps a pioneer child to torture, Red Wing reciprocates, saving the child and sacrificing her own life to complete the rescue (*MPW* 1909, 545). Although the film claimed authenticity, it incorporated many stereotypical images of Native people, such as the “squaw-drudge” and the “bloodthirsty savage.” Katherine Weist addresses the representation of American Indian women by Euro-Americans as beasts of burden, noting that they believed that Indian women were forced to bear the burden of unreasonably difficult labor imposed by Indian men (Weist 29-33). The representation of Indian women as beasts of burden aided the Euro-American construction of Indian men as savage because they supposedly brutalized their women. Red Wing’s character fit the “squaw-drudge” stereotype perfectly, just as her father represented the “bloodthirsty savage.” The audience would have recognized the representation of the Indian man as savage in his extreme cruelty towards his daughter and also in the kidnaping and attempted torture of the white child. Such inherent depravity provided justification for the settler’s rescue of the overburdened Indian woman from the cruelty of Indian men. *Red Wing’s Gratitude* draws on yet another stereotype to dramatize its point, that of the “helper Indian” who chooses loyalty to white interests over that of his or her own community. In this film, Red Wing’s connection to her community is tenuous at best. The savagery of Indian men gave the audience an explanation that it could readily accept for the rejection of her home. She has little loyalty to her tribe and thus chooses to give her life for the pioneer child. The film portrayed Red Wing as a victim of a savage culture that could only be redeemed by Euro-American civilization. Although this film allowed Young Deer and Red Wing some control over the representation of Indian material culture, it otherwise reiterated stereotypical Western representations of Indian people. As we shall see, Young Deer and Red Wing’s later films completely disrupted these representations and instead presented a Native perspective on similar stories.

Later in 1909, Young Deer and Red Wing joined a newly formed company, New York Motion Picture, at the request of its producer, Fred Balshofer, who most likely met them when he was also working for Lubin. Balshofer noted the event in his memoirs, stating that “for realism and color, we added two authentic Indians to the cast” (Balshofer and Miller 28). Young Deer and Red Wing held a prominent place at New York Motion Picture because their films did so much to establish the company. In 1909, *Moving Picture World* attributed the company’s success in producing westerns to the couple (*MPW* 1910). In general, Indian westerns were highly popular and brought the company tremendous financial gains. The New York Motion Picture westerns that the couple helped to create were produced under the name and trademark of Bison, which used a buffalo as its distinguishing symbol. Although movie stars had not yet emerged in this early era, Young Deer and Red Wing were advertised in the titles of their films, such as *Young Deer’s Return* or *The Flight of Red Wing*, and the public came to recognize the couple. In fact, they were featured in so many of Bison’s westerns that in 1910 *Moving Picture World* stated that Young Deer’s “face has been familiar in Indian pictures for some time,” and *Moving Picture News* called Red Wing “a favorite with the people” (Smith 100). They were prominently featured in company photographs of the period, sometimes in traditional Winnebago dress. Furthermore, as audiences and critics clamored for realism in Indian pictures, the company encouraged the couple’s creative input. At Balshofer’s request, Red Wing designed and constructed Indian camp sets for the company, and Young Deer helped to write and stage the films in which he and Red Wing starred (Smith 101).
While at Bison, Young Deer was able to create movies that were highly critical of racism and assimilation. The Progressive Era placed a high importance on authenticity, encouraging filmmakers to strive for "truly authentic" representations of American Indian life. Although film was still considered a lowbrow medium, eventually many began to recognize its potential for elevating the lower classes. Films that portrayed other cultures or historical events were considered educational for the public, but they had to be authentic portrayals. Authenticity became part of the progressive agenda. However, bringing Natives into the service of authenticity in films also allowed them a say in defining the authentic Indian. Young Deer was able to draw on the public's desire for the authentic to create films that used, yet simultaneously disrupted, the idea of the authentic.

For example, in *Young Deer's Return*, Young Deer meets a man from the east who has struck it rich in the Western gold fields and is returning home when fate deals him an injury from which he will most likely die. Young Deer saves his life and chooses as his reward not gold, but a pocket watch. Time passes, and Young Deer goes to Carlisle and becomes a star baseball player. There the easterner's daughter meets him and they fall in love, but when Young Deer asks for her hand, the easterner is repulsed at the idea of a marriage between his daughter and an Indian youth. When Young Deer reveals the watch, the man is filled with remorse, but now it is Young Deer's turn to be disgusted. He returns home, shreds his Western clothes, and marries a girl from his tribe ("Young Deer's Return" 830). In this film, Young Deer criticizes the general racism of whites towards Indians that keeps the easterner from recognizing his rescuer. Furthermore, the young Indian gains little from white civilization and, although apparently successful at assimilating, turns from its racism and returns to his home community without the difficulties stereotypically heaped onto the returning boarding school student. As this film demonstrated, Bison gave Young Deer and Red Wing the opportunity not only to portray American Indian material culture as they knew it, but also to create story lines that disrupted stereotypes of the noble and bloodthirsty savage.

In 1910, the Pathé western film company hired Young Deer and Red Wing (Kilpatrick 19; Smith 102; Friar and Friar 99). Both the Friars and Smith suggest that the Pathe Studio hired Young Deer to lend its films an air of authenticity. However, white actors played many of the lead Indian roles in Young Deer's movies. The studio probably hired the couple not simply because they were American Indians but also because they were so popular. For example, Red Wing was marketed in Pathé promotional photos. In fact, as Smith suggests, the Pathé company respected Young Deer's talent enough to send him to Los Angeles to head their West Coast studio (Smith 102). Apparently Pathé gave Young Deer considerable freedom because he would make some of his most unique films there.

While at Pathé, Young Deer wrote and directed *The Squaw Man's Revenge*, a film about a white baby girl who is found and raised by Indians, then grows up and falls in love with a white man. They marry and she moves to his camp, but the other men there make her life unbearable because they believe her to be an Indian. She escapes the abuse by returning to her adopted tribe, and her husband, upset by the treatment of his wife by his companions, joins her in the tribe. The whole tribe then takes revenge on the white settlement by destroying it (MPW 1912, 146). In a reversal of the narrative of *Red Wing's Gratitude*, the white men are the savages and the Indian men come to the rescue of the burdened white woman. The film centers its narrative on the Indian community. The settlers who threaten to disrupt tribal life do not succeed; instead, they are destroyed. Additionally, in a reversal of the assimilation narrative, certain amicable white characters are assimilated into the Indian community. In another reversal of *Red Wing's Gratitude's* narrative, the whites abandon their community in favor of the Indian community. In *The Squaw Man's Revenge*, the Indians maintain control of their territory and reinforce their kinship ties, even in the face of encroaching white settlement. These were not the vanishing Indians who later came to dominate cinematic representations. In fact, such representations reflected an American Indian voice, one that held community as central and successfully incorporated outsiders.

In another Pathé film, *Red Eagle the Lawyer*, Young Deer tells the story of a Quechan (Yuma) Indian, Iron Claw, who owns rich lands that unscrupulous speculators attempt to steal. To save her father, Iron Claw's daughter hurries to her lover, Red Eagle, an Indian attorney. After a few plot twists, Red Eagle, with the help of a government agent, is able to save Iron Claw's land and throw the speculators in jail (MPW 1912, 696). Again, Young Deer's film demonstrates the ability of a Native community to remain intact. Elements of white society threaten to destroy the community at its heart—its land base. Young Deer's American Indian characters fight for their community with sophistication, using the American legal system to their advantage. In this film, Red Eagle has assimilated in a substantial way. Nonetheless, he does not break ties with his community. Instead, he uses what he has taken from white culture to maintain his own
culture. At a time when the majority of Americans considered Indians a vanishing race, eking out their last moments on devastated reservations, Young Deer presented American Indians not simply as props in a story about the creation of the American nation but as agents using what they gained from the whites to fight against the established order and maintain their local communities. The fight that Young Deer portrayed and the relationship of his characters to their land and community reflected an American Indian voice that emerged from a unique historical experience shared by many Native peoples in the United States.

Through stories about interracial marriage and heroes from ethnic and lower class backgrounds, Young Deer’s films presented alternatives to the ideals of Victorian domesticity that shaped the dominant culture of the time. Furthermore, these films were highly successful, begging the question as to what might have accounted for their popularity in what has been considered such a repressive era. Between 1908 and 1911, the American film industry as a whole used Mexican and Indian characters as both villains and heroes, and some firms even specialized in the production of films that featured only American Indian characters (Smith 76). The filmmakers catered to a specific audience—workers, ethnics, and immigrants. It may seem strange that immigrants and workers might relate to stories about American Indians, but Smith claims that in 1909 such films drew a large and enthusiastic audience (Smith 93). He points out that these early westerns rarely presented the themes of empire building and conquest now associated with the genre (Smith 78). Instead, Indians involved in the production of early westerns created sympathetic nonwhite characters and story lines that dealt with racism and assimilation (Smith 7). So, why did immigrants and workers flock to these westerns about Indians? As Philip Deloria has demonstrated, the American Indian has represented the quintessential American from at least as far back as the Revolutionary Era. American Indians, as the original inhabitants of the land, have been used to bolster a sense of true American identity. During the Progressive Era, the Americanness of immigrants and the working class was questioned, and at times denied. It makes sense, then, that these audiences were drawn to stories about another racialized other—the American Indian—who also suffered the pressures of racism and assimilation, but survived and maintained their own communities. The similarities between the situation of workers and immigrants and the first Americans, the true natives of the land, surely comforted and inspired audiences that they, too, could find their place in the United States of America. After all, if immigrants and workers could form a connection to the truest Americans, the original natives of the land, then they could bolster their own claim to an American identity.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has argued that American Indian literature has the power to resonate with all readers, suggesting that “the American Indian voice might ... stir the human community to a moral view which would encompass all of humanity, not just selected parts of it” (Cook-Lynn 64). I suggest that this also applies to stories created by American Indian filmmakers. The theories of literary critics such as Cook-Lynn are applicable to Young Deer’s films because they can be considered visual literature. Just like a literary text, they contain story lines, characters, settings, and devices that propel the story. Just as the aural nature of oral narrative does not exclude it from the realm of story, film’s visual nature does not prohibit it from the category. Furthermore, the performative character of film can be considered an extension of the Native storytelling tradition, grounded firmly in oral performance and listener response. In discussing ideas of an American Indian voice or aesthetic expression, it must be noted that like any group, an American Indian aesthetic is multifaceted. Native peoples have spoken from both personal and tribal experience, as well as from a common American Indian experience and experiences common to oppressed peoples. Therefore, Native voices and their aesthetic expressions are rich, varied, and multilayered. Nevertheless, these theorists maintain that certain themes connect Native expression, which designates it as separate from other groups.

Applying Cook-Lynn’s argument reveals how Young Deer’s work presented a moral view about community and an individual’s place within it. More importantly to viewers of the time, he presented morality tales about a dominant culture that attempted to control workers, immigrants, and American Indians by using tactics such as limiting resources and pushing assimilation. In this way, his stories helped viewers on the fringe realize the common experience that they shared with other marginalized groups. Young Deer showed his audience that they too could stand up to wealthy property owners and others who had power. Essentially, his stories gave power to the downtrodden—a view that could move audiences of immigrants and workers, as well as the middle classes, to see the humanity in those that society had placed on its lower rungs. Such narratives provided audiences of these films with both a perspective on oppression and insight into the particulars of the American Indian experience from a Native filmmaker’s point of view.
Expanding on the power of the American Indian voice, Cook-Lynn argues that Native literary aesthetics must be politicized, pointing to sovereignty as a key issue. Specifically, Cook-Lynn argues that “Indian people have the right to ask of their writers: Where were you when we defended ourselves and sought clarification as sovereigns in the modern world” (Cook-Lynn 83). I believe that Young Deer fought for American Indian sovereignty just as the modern world emerged. At a time when American Indian communities experienced great pressure to assimilate into Euro-American culture, he presented Natives as sovereign people fighting to maintain their own distinct communities. His films supported the preservation of American Indian control of land and membership within Native communities, as well as presented individual American Indians as autonomous agents who controlled their own lives and destinies. In this way, his work illustrates Choctaw critic Lewis Owens’ conception of Native writers as creating work that moves “toward new self-imaginings, continual fluidity, and rebirth ...” and away from “the tragic roles assigned to Native peoples in the American metanarrative” (Owens 28). In his films, Young Deer imagined for his people other destinies different from the mainstream narrative of extinction that was so common at the turn of the century. Yet, he also imagined destinies different from the Euro-American discourse of assimilation. His characters sometimes assimilate, but they also maintain their communities and even assimilate outsiders; they have the power that comes with fluidity. He also imagined for Indian men and women other destinies than that of the “bloodthirsty savage” and the “squaw-drudge” by portraying close knit American Indian families and strong Native women. By challenging the metanarrative through his films, Young Deer encouraged Native people to imagine their communities and maintain their identities on their own terms, not those of Euro-American society.

His films imagined other destinies for Native peoples because they drew on what Steven Leuthold calls an “indigenous aesthetic.” Leuthold argues that an American Indian aesthetic can be found in all Native artwork, including film, emphasizing that an aesthetic experience is not simply abstract and theoretical, but rather is embedded in a set of social practices. Therefore, aesthetics have important links to the social systems to which they are connected (Leuthold 6). In other words, American Indian film tells particular stories using certain styles that emerge from American Indian social and cultural life. As we have seen, Young Deer’s work tells stories of the American West from a distinctly American Indian perspective, linking the aesthetics of his films not only to the Native social system in which he was raised, but also to the experience of oppression common to American Indian peoples. Leuthold also recognizes the social functions of indigenous aesthetics. He argues that Native-produced films increase group affiliation within the community, but also express the community’s values to a wider, non-Native audience (Leuthold 11). In Young Deer’s films, when the hero chooses his or her American Indian community over assimilation into the white world, the Native director was sending a signal of tribal unity to both the Indian community and the dominant culture. Furthermore, the importance that he placed on the community in the face of racism and assimilation demonstrated values that appealed to non-Native groups dealing with similar struggles.

Young Deer used his power as a major director at Pathe to present Indian people as both maintaining traditions and participating in Euro-American society. Leuthold argues that “[a]s a means of expressing identities, the aesthetic emerges as an important aspect of self-representation to the larger non-Native public” (Leuthold 1). Significantly, the 1913 Tournament of Roses parade float that Young Deer was commissioned to create for the Pathe West Coast studio exemplified this type of self-representation. On one end of the float, entitled “Indian Life—Past and Present,” a young Indian hunter stood beside his grandmother seated in front of a tipi, a deer stretched out in front of her, on the other end stood a well-dressed American Indian college graduate (MPW 251). One might argue that the float represented the virtues of assimilation, the tipi the past, and the graduate the present. However, such an interpretation assumes that the past has no place in the present. After considering Young Deer’s films as a body, I suggest that Young Deer’s float portrays American Indians as perfectly capable of success in the Euro-American world, but also of maintaining a connection to the past. The float combines the past and present, neither having prominence over the other. The float is one more example of how Young Deer spent his film career building a language based in visual representation that asserted autonomy, even sovereignty, and inspiring new self-imaginings at a time of forced assimilation.

Leuthold places Native media productions at the forefront of the struggle for cultural self-determination, but does not see it as emerging until the 1970s, believing that Natives only then began to control production of films (Leuthold 11). It seems evident that Young Deer accomplished at an earlier date much of what Leuthold describes. Discovering an American Indian aesthetic in films at the turn of the twentieth century powerfully demonstrates the durability of Native aesthetic expression.
American Indian Viewers: Voices Calling for Change

Directors and scriptwriters were not the only Native viewers of film who had a say in how American Indians were imagined during the Progressive Era. By 1911, American Indian critiques of westerns demonstrated that Native people considered their portrayal in film to be an important self-representation. Exhibitor journals filled their publications with articles by Natives protesting their representation on the screen and complaining of inaccuracies. After such a golden age of representation of Natives in film, the protest is at first puzzling until put into historical context. In this early period, film had just emerged as a medium, each genre was in its genesis, and stylistic conventions were still developing. The western genre extends back even before early dime novels, and such representations were certainly present in film. Still, because film was such a new medium, the western film genre had not yet solidified. This gave Young Deer and other filmmakers an opportunity to play with the western genre, to create new story lines that disrupted older ones. Over time, the industry solidified and the western genre became less flexible.

The debate over how film would portray the American West was settled by both a shift in audience and the progressive agenda. Because moving pictures were an exciting new technology, members of the middle classes, including young women and boys, began to patronize the theaters, even though most were found in vice districts and poor neighborhoods. In an attempt to hold onto Victorian domesticity in the face of forces that were tearing it apart, around 1908 vice crusaders among New York’s middle class turned their attention to moving pictures—an entertainment that they deemed as corrupting (May 55). In the rest of the nation, producers did not widen their audience to include the middle classes until around 1912 (May xii). Even in New York City, Mayor Gaynor was still attempting in 1912 to “bring a better class of businessmen into the movies” by passing more restrictive laws concerning the motion picture industry (May 56). When movies began drawing a wider, middle class audience, they also drew the attention of progressives concerned with the uplift of American society.

At this time, films entered the battleground over the influence of aesthetic expression on the viewer and what films or aesthetics had the appropriate uplifting influence on the viewer. Again in 1912, trade journals and exhibitors echoed Mayor Gaynor’s concerns through their complaints about both sensationalism and sexual suggestion in westerns that featured Indian and Mexican characters (Smith 77). Because of this criticism, many producers ceased to use ethnic characters prominently. Smith points out that in 1909 almost half of Essanay westerns had racial conflict as a theme, but by 1913 this had fallen to less than ten percent (Smith 78). Removing racialized heroes and racial mixing between characters shifted the racial representations in film, seeking to improve the moral depravity contained within. Films no longer presented the West as an arena of interracial negotiation, but instead relegated American Indians to a nameless, faceless savage stereotype in a predominantly white landscape. In their westerns, for example, the Selig film company’s producers replaced stories of murderous outlaws with films that presented violence as an integral part of nation building and as proof of the “pioneering spirit of whites.” Furthermore, critics praised the new films “for depicting the ‘valid’ kind of western violence that resulted from fighting ‘nature’ and ‘Indians’” (Smith 80). Although the western as a film genre was still in flux in the early silent era, as the middle classes became a significant part of audiences and critics and theater owners began to consider their tastes, the range of representation of American Indian characters in film dramatically narrowed. Euro-American conflicts with Indians came to represent inevitable progress, a value espoused by the Progressive Era’s notions of enlightenment. Not surprisingly, the emerging genre had no space for the kind of films that Young Deer created. Significantly, as fewer films representing immigrant, ethnic, and working class experience appeared on the screen, American Indian control over their own representation became obscured.

American Indians noticed the change in film content, and in 1911, just as westerns began to change, many took advantage of the critical atmosphere to launch their own criticisms of films. Smith argues that the motion picture industry took American Indian complaints seriously because they did not want to encourage the state to interfere in their industry, and reiterates May’s argument that they did not want to alienate their new middle class audience who looked down on sensational Wild West subjects (Smith 111). Neither Smith nor May, however, explain American Indian intentions in airing their protests. Although it is impossible to know the exact thoughts and feelings of Native audiences, Native objections to the portrayal of their people on film were clearly distinct from those of either the middle class or the film industry. They did not want Indians to be excluded from prominent roles in film, but they also sought more representative versions of their own experiences. Around 1911, a proliferation of overwhelmingly negative commentary by American Indians appeared
in trade journals. Although filmmakers created films that presented the American Indian in a stereotyped manner prior to 1911 (e.g. Red Wing’s Gratitude), the multivocal character of the era ensured that more favorable representations of Indians also appeared in film. By 1911, however, films increasingly portrayed American Indians as one-dimensional characters and Native viewers took notice. Diminished Native input in later films resulted in a representation of American Indians limited to the savage stereotype—noble or bloodthirsty.

At some level, American Indian viewers were aware of the problems with these images and voiced their concern in such a prominent manner that it is recorded in film journals of the time. For example, one article in a 1911 edition of Moving Picture World recounted that a group of Indians who recently saw some films “most justly resented the untrue, unreal and unfair representations of themselves and their habits” (MPW 473). In another article, I. Lec, an American Indian viewer from Rochester, New York, commented on a particular picture in which ten or twelve Indians with guns ran away from five pioneers without any resistance at all. “I think it quite improbable,” he wrote. “I know the way of my people and am sure they would resist” (Friar and Friar 5). This film sharply contrasted with Young Deer’s film, which presented American Indians successfully repelling or incorporating pioneer intruders.

Another Moving Picture World article from 1911 declared that California Indians would spend their last cent on films but were confused and grieved by the representations of Indians as warriors and not farmers because they themselves were peaceful farmers. Furthermore, the American Indians “were loud in their complaints of what they termed ‘the white man’s injustice’” (MPW 32). Native viewers may not have described their representation in films in terms of the stereotyped savage, but these editorials suggest that American Indians of many different backgrounds and experiences noticed that their representation in film was one-dimensional and inaccurate. The films that they viewed portrayed their own people and culture, but did not reflect their experience. This was obvious to Native viewers who were not only capable of forming sophisticated opinions about their film representations, they were also vocal about these opinions.

An editorial by John Standing Horse, residing at the Carlisle Boarding School, addressed inaccuracies in films, reprimanding pictures for putting chicken feathers in Indian women’s hair and war bonnets on any Indian man, whether he was a chief or not. Standing Horse wrote:

Have lived all my life in the West and worked for different picture men. The genuine Indian women, there are many in this city who work for the picture. Have been with them and we always laugh and think it a great joke when we see the leading girls in the pictures made up as Indians, with the chicken feather in the hair. … Have also seen pictures with all the made-up Indian men with big war bonnets on their heads. Another big laugh, but don’t think the managers know this; if they did, they would do different (Standing Horse 398).

For Standing Horse, the on-screen Indians did not even approximate the lived and authentic experience of being Indian. In fact, because film Indians were so far from anything that he and his friends understood as Indian, these representations literally became a joke to them. Standing Horse was asking for a representation that he could recognize as Indian, one more akin to his own experience. His solution considered the potential participation of American Indians in his community, Native people who had moved east. He continued:

Then again, they should get the real Indian people. There is about a hundred men, women, and children in New York out of work most of the time, from the reservations out West, and only a few of them get any work. Pathe and Biograph use them more than the other companies … (Standing Horse 398).

Standing Horse wanted American Indians playing the roles of Indians in films because they could better portray them on-screen, suggesting that more Native participation in film would result in a representation closer to his own lived experience. Also, as an American Indian in the city, he advocated for his own urban community by demanding jobs that could bring financial stability. Standing Horse’s letter demonstrates that American Indian people were invested in the film industry at many levels. Standing Horse still took time to close his critical letter: “Always get your Moving Picture World every week, and think it is a great paper” (Standing Horse 398). Native people enjoyed films as viewers, worked for the industry as wage earners, and critiqued their representation in film as concerned members of American Indian communities.

Moving Picture World reveals that American Indians also sought to bring about a change in their image on film through active protest. In
1911, for example, the Ojibwa sent a delegation to Washington C.D. to protest their portrayal in film. They charged film creators with using white men costumed as Indians and depicting inaccurate scenes of Indian life (MPW 581). While there, one member of the delegation saw a movie in which the main character returns from a non-reservation boarding school and is shunned upon his return. In the film, many problems arise between the man and his tribe, and in the end he is killed by his tribesmen. The viewer denounced this narrative as an untrue portrayal of Indian behavior (MPW 581). This inspired the Ojibwa to consider visiting the White House to ask for Congressional regulation of films with Indians in them (MPW 581). Although the delegates were not able to carry out this plan while in Washington, they signed a protest against presenting Indians inaccurately in film.

Also in 1911, Shoshone, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians on their northwestern reservations registered with the Bureau of Indian Affairs their objections against portrayals of Indian life in films, and the commissioner, Robert Valentine, said that he would help them eliminate these unacceptable representations (Spencer 587). In fact, this group of protesters threatened to go directly to President William Howard Taft if no action was taken (Friar and Friar 97). While it is evident that many American Indians saw problems in early films’ representations of Indian people, some Native groups and individuals were taking a public stand. Native groups took political action through petitions and protests to voice their opinions about the problems in film and to work for change. Some American Indian peoples granted the issue such importance that they were compelled to appeal to the president for help. It seems that these Native groups realized the power of their representation to the wider public and turned to the highest powers to inspire change.

As can be seen from these sources, American Indians were sophisticated viewers of film. The editorials of I. Lee and John Standing Horse demonstrate that many American Indians living off the reservations must have viewed films. Native peoples living off the reservation might be considered more invested in the government’s assimilation projects of the era because they had often attended boarding schools or were considered assimilated in other highly visible ways. Therefore, it is easy to understand that they would critique these films. However, Indians on reservations viewed and critiqued films as well, adding further complexities to the simplistic categories of “assimilationist” and “traditionalist.” Ojibwa, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Shoshone, and California reservation Indians all appear in the journals as viewers angered about their representation in films. Native people traveled into the towns on or surrounding their reservations and went to the movies just like everyone else. Perhaps viewing early films that both featured Indians and addressed racism and assimilation created certain expectations in Native viewers for the ways that films should represent them. As these images faded away, Natives responded as experienced viewers and critics, upset that positive images that more accurately reflected their experience were being replaced by one-dimensional portrayals of Indian people.

In Red on Red, Craig Womack (Creek) argues that a Native perspective on literature exists and that it can be seen in Native discussions of texts produced by Native authors. Native perspectives emerge when Natives speak for themselves, and although the voices vary, they all develop out of a historical reality of exclusion from the discourse about their own social and cultural worlds (Womack 4). One might argue that, like the work of other literary critics, Womack’s arguments also apply to film. Previous to 1911, Native viewers had been able to view films entirely about Indians and were sometimes even written and directed by Indians. Natives had enjoyed a moment when their perspectives were included in film and they could use film to present the Native perspective of which Womack writes. This opportunity faded around 1911, making the exclusion more pronounced for Native viewers, but it also presented an opportunity to voice their critical perspectives. Womack argues that “literature has something to add to the arena of Native political struggle” (Womack 11). Film seems to fit in this arena as well. Young Deer’s films were politicized as Womack suggests: they supported the autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty of American Indian communities (Womack 11). Although the language of self-determination was not yet in place, it seems that Young Deer played on this concept in his films, which held an appeal to Native audiences. As these types of representation disappeared, leaving savage, faceless Indians on-screen, Native people became aware that their perspective had been excluded and took action. “[T]here is a link between thought and activism,” Womack notes (Womack 5), and Native viewers came to expect films that presented certain ideas about Native communities. When a more complex representation of Native peoples faded from film, the simplistic film portrayals pushed Natives to act.
The Government’s Input: Voices Supposedly in Concert

When American Indians spoke out in 1911 against more stereotypical portrayals, the government agents working with Native peoples often agreed that films should shift their representation. Although many government officials agreed that American Indians should not be portrayed as bloodthirsty savages, the political motivations behind their assertions were quite different. While American Indians frequently argued that these movies did not represent their lived experiences, the United States government believed that “savage Indian” movies damaged the progressive agenda of that era’s Indian policy. Films about savage Indians warning against pioneers glorified “the old days” and disarmed the assimilation policy, suggesting to American Indians that Euro-Americans wanted them to practice old ways instead of assimilating.

When William Selig wrote to the Office of Indian Affairs in 1911 and asked permission to make moving pictures of life on Indian reservations, the commissioner agreed. The office circulated letters to several reservations, letting them know that Selig would be coming and telling them that the company’s representative had been asked to report to each superintendent “so that their work may, from the beginning, be done with his cooperation and help” (Circular 533). In this way, the superintendent could oversee the topics being filmed. This intention is made quite clear in the letters sent to the superintendents of Indian Schools:

In a conversation with the Office [of Indian Affairs], the representative of this company said that the purpose was to show pictures of an educational character, and it is hoped that the pictures taken will represent the advancement of the Indians, and the primitive features will be eliminated so far as practicable.
I hope that in extending this courtesy to the representative of the company, the Superintendent will use every influence to the end that the pictures shall be of the character indicated (Circular 532).

Ostensibly, such a representation of American Indians lacked the quality of the faceless, nameless, savage stereotype frequently seen in westerns. It conformed to the ideals represented by Native protesters that Indians were not bloodthirsty. These films would portray American Indians in a more realistic manner, reflecting the lived experience of Native peoples at the time. One might even argue that these ideals challenged the vanishing Indian stereotype because the films would show Indians living in the current time.

The Office of Indian Affairs, however, wished these films to portray assimilation, not American Indian community vitality. They supported this project because it would shine a positive light on their work. The films were meant to emphasize the success of the progressive project of uplifting the American Indian through assimilation to Euro-American lifestyles. In a letter to the Selig Polyscope Company, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs explicitly addressed the representations that the government desired to project, and specified the motivations behind these portrayals. The commissioner stated:

I desire to call your attention to the industrial work which the Government is trying to do among Indians, and to ask you to instruct all your representatives when on an Indian reservation, to do everything in their power to emphasize to the Indians this aspect of the work (Circular 532).

The commissioner asked Selig not to portray Indian people as they have often been in westerns—as savages, living in a static past—but instead as on the path to civilization. The government requested that these films portray Indians as part of the progressive present, learning to work and live in the modern world like Euro-Americans. The letter continued to explain why the commissioner felt that it was important to emphasize such a portrayal of the American Indians being filmed. He wrote:

There is a great deal of danger that, through the taking of pictures of Indians in their old dress and engaged in their old time customs, the Indians are led to believe that that is the side of them which interests both the public and the Government; whereas, as a matter of fact, that side is only really interesting to the Government, and I believe is becoming more and more of interest to the public, only in so far as it illustrates what they have come from, as compared with where they are now (Circular 532).

The commissioner feared that performing old ways would encourage perpetuation of those acts. Furthermore, he believed that filming Indian people participating in any aspect of their traditional way of life would
encourage resistance to assimilation, not because they did not want to assimilate, but because they would believe that Euro-Americans did not want them to assimilate. The commissioner’s statement allowed Native people little agency, assuming such malleability that they would simply conform to the wishes of others. This was the great danger of which the commissioner spoke—that by believing that others were interested in their traditional way of life, they would so easily regress. The commissioner told Selig that portraying Indians involved in industrial work would be of “great service to the government” (Circular 532). It was believed that the film industry’s portrayal of American Indians on the reservation would convince Native people of the benefits of participating in the assimilationist project. Furthermore, the general public viewing these films would come to realize how far American Indians had progressed towards civilization, and the government most likely hoped that the Office of Indian Affairs would be credited for such progress. Selig’s project reflected the progressive agenda of uplift by demonstrating American Indians’ ability to be brought into modern America as capable members of the nation.

Not all government agents agreed on the proper use of film for representing American Indians. In 1911, the Ethnologist-in-Charge at the Smithsonian Institution wrote a memo to the members of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian regarding the Selig Polyscope Company’s proposed project. He stated, “This Bureau is desirous of aiding the Selig Polyscope Company in obtaining moving pictures of the more important Indian ceremonies before it is too late, in order that they may be preserved for future students” (“Memo to members of the Smithsonian”). This goal directly opposed that of the Office of Indian Affairs. The Smithsonian encouraged American Indians to don traditional dress and participate in traditional activities that the Office of Indian Affairs wished to discourage. They shared an assumption with the Office of Indian Affairs that traditional Indian life would disappear in the face of civilization, but nevertheless believed that American Indian cultures must be recorded for future study. After all, the Smithsonian’s goal was not to preserve these ceremonies for Indian people themselves, but for future scholars. The memo attempted to recruit Selig as a part of the project of salvage ethnography, which was being practiced to record American Indian customs then thought to be vanishing in the face of civilization. Again, the project reflected a progressive agenda of uplift—not of Native people themselves, but of the general public through education.

Many ethnographers felt that film could be a tool to record an authentic and traditional American Indian culture before it disappeared. Therefore, they also voiced concerns about what they considered to be inaccuracies in films with American Indian subjects. In 1914, Alanson Skinner, assistant curator of the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, wrote to the New York Times that “most of the picture plays shown are ethnologically grotesque farces,” where “Delawares are dressed as Sioux and the Indians of Manhattan Island are shown dwelling in skin tips of the type used only by the tribes beyond the Mississippi” (Kilpatrick 34). These inaccuracies in films suggest that most directors after 1911 were not concerned with an authentic portrayal of American Indian life. Instead, they were content to present a stereotypical representation of American Indians that assumed that Plains Indians were the quintessential Indian, and that a character in a film would not be recognized as an Indian unless he or she donned Plains-style costume. Still, Skinner was not concerned with accuracy in terms that Native peoples themselves determined, but in terms of representations created by ethnographers. Skinner believed that American Indians in film should appear authentic to ethnographers, and that control of this representation should ultimately be in the hands of scholars.

Many Euro-American viewers during the silent film era accepted the idea that by portraying Indians with ethnographic accuracy, films would be able to preserve knowledge of a cultural heritage doomed to extinction. In 1911, a commentator in Moving Picture World noted that film could be a means of recording real American Indians while they still existed:

In generations to come, long ages after the real American Indian has passed into history, pictures of this most interesting race of people will be enjoyed. While we still have the real Indians with us, why cannot thoroughly representative films be produced, making them at once illustrative and historic recorders of this noble race of people, with their splendid physique and physical powers? (“Make Believe Indian” 473).

Like ethnographers of the time, this commentator assumed that a film could capture American Indian culture with such perfect accuracy that it would allow the viewer the same understanding gained through lived experience. Film would replace what had been lost—the Indian culture itself. Furthermore, through film the general public would have access to
a vanished culture as it had truly been, something that had only previously been available to scholars. Unfortunately, the “real Indian” that this commentator wanted preserved was another version of the noble savage (as betrayed by his use of the adjective “noble” to describe American Indian people). Equally unfortunate was his objectification of Indian people by suggesting that their worth lay in “their splendid physique and physical powers.” This beautiful, noble savage was to be recorded solely for the gaze of the dominant society, not to serve the interests of Native people themselves.

American Indians, government officials, ethnographers, filmmakers, and the general public all voiced opinions about the representation of Native peoples in film. The debate over how Natives should be portrayed reflected a larger debate of the Progressive Era, one connected to the nature of the progressive movement itself. Clearly, the purpose of Native characters on-screen was under debate, providing a space for American Indians to create films that reflected their own experiences and agendas. Because the film industry in the Progressive Era was still new and had not become controlled and conglomerated by central powers, the medium was open to experimentation. For Natives like Young Deer, the agenda was of maintaining culture and community while adjusting to assimilation. For the government, American Indians were to progress through complete assimilation, and this was to be reflected in film. For ethnographers, films of Indians could be used to uplift the public by educating them about a vanishing culture. The Progressive Era has frequently been seen in scholarship as coherent and uncomplicated. However, this debate demonstrates the fractures of the time. Native participation in the film industry disrupted the ideals of the era, forcing a debate about representation in film before the western genre as progressive and nationalist could emerge.

American Indians On-screen: Strained Voices As the Industry Shifts

As the western genre became established, the debate over representations slowly withdrew from mainstream discourse. As the content of films shifted to portraying Natives as stereotypes, racism crept into the production of films, resulting in a notable loss of Native control in the industry. In his 1919 handbook meant to instruct other directors about making films, Ernest DENCH asserted that with clever make-up and a study of Indian life, white actors could not be differentiated from their Indian counterparts on the screen. Besides, he wrote, “to act as an Indian is the easiest thing possible, for the Redskin is practically motionless” (Dench 94). For Dench, white actors could easily play Indians without the need of arduous study because Indians lacked complexity. Such a statement betrayed certain racist stereotypes. The Indian on-screen became little more than a prop, so unlike filmmakers of earlier days, the director needed not be overly concerned with authenticity. Indeed, a detailed and accurate portrayal of Indian people would have detracted from the overarching messages of the western, that of the progress of civilization over savagery.

Even in the face of these difficulties, Indian people continued to participate in the creation of films. A Photoplay article from 1913 stated, “The picture business has proved a veritable bonanza to the Indians of the western reservations” (Photoplay 111). The article stressed that over one hundred Lakota from Pine Ridge were making quite a bit of money working for the Kay-Bee and Broncho film companies, prominent producers of westerns. Even so, Natives working in the film industry after 1911 had much less opportunity to shape their representation than those in the early years. Both censors and audiences had changed, creating new markets for films, but the industry itself had also changed. Film companies began to establish themselves and hire permanent directors. When Young Deer directed films, everyone in the company worked together to create the film, and so the companies welcomed input from their Native members. As the industry grew, however, producers became less welcoming of different perspectives. Furthermore, the emphasis shifted from an authenticity borne of a Native director and writer to one mediated by white directors. Filmmakers still used Native actors to suggest authenticity in their films, but they no longer valued Native input.

Dench’s opinions about casting Natives in films demonstrate Indian people’s loss of power to represent themselves and their cultural and ideological view. Dench argued that although one might think that regular work as an actor would civilize the Indian, it had the reverse effect—they enjoyed the “opportunity to live their savage days over again” (Dench 92). Presumably because American Indian actors wore the clothes and used the implements of their traditional cultures, they would throw off the raiments of civilization that the U.S. had so arduously encouraged them to take up. The main concern was that the Natives would revert to savagery and violence. Implicit in this concern was the idea that Indians were naturally violent, and exposure to such violence would undo all the progress that civilization had imparted. Critics of the Wild West Shows voiced similar
concerns. Furthermore, according to Dench, such enthusiasm caused problems on the set. American Indian actors supposedly got so excited in battles against whites that he claimed that they needed armed guards to protect the set. Indians with clubs and tomahawks once seriously injured a white actor, and sometimes Indians were caught using real bullets in their guns (Dench 93). The veteran actor Iron Eyes Cody noted that in the twenties, when he began working in the film industry, cowboys in the movies were real cowboys and they carried loaded guns (Cody 58). If, in fact, it were common for cowboys to carry loaded guns, there would have been some precedent if American Indians ever did likewise. In their book on westerns, Friar and Friar support Dench’s cautionary words, noting that director Thomas Ince sometimes had problems with violence on his set. The Lakota actors frequently resented having to replay painful memories of past defeat, and sometimes “found themselves carried away by the spirit of the battle” to such an extent that they put too much energy into the fighting. “[B]ecause of this, Ince had their tomahawks and war clubs padded to protect the white actors” (Friar and Friar 123).

Ince’s claim notwithstanding, Kevin Brownlow argues in War, the West, and the Wilderness that this perspective is ridiculous, that such things never happened. He states that Ince’s press agents conveyed the bloodthirsty violence of the Indian actors as a means of captivating the public. In fact, when speaking of Native actors, Ince himself once recounted, “Arousing their anger sufficiently to attack the enemy with any semblance of reality was one of the hardest things I ever had to tackle in my whole career in motion pictures” (Brownlow 261). A 1912 article demonstrates that American Indian actors were not inherently violent on a movie set when asked to perform in battles. The story relates how Essanay Studios came to regard Niles, California as a good location for filming because a tribe of Miwok Indians lived close by. The studio often used members of this tribe in their westerns to “impersonate warring Indians ...” (Essanay Studios Express 1989). The article asserted, “They were gentle Indians who had never laid hands on the Alameda County settlers ...” and that the production crew had to teach them to “daub on war paint, fling tomahawks, and let out ferocious war whoops” (Essanay Studios Express 1989). Unlike the Indian actors whom Dench described, Essanay found it quite difficult to encourage their California Indian actors to play the part of savages. Evidently, the power of this myth created by Ince’s press agents not only affected Dench, but convinced enthusiasts of western films for years. The western film genre used the image of the bloodthirsty savage to underscore the progressive message of these films, that the bloodthirsty savage justified settlement of the West and assimilation of the American Indian. Such an image was even more powerful if it could be replicated off-screen as well.

Like Native viewers of film, American Indians within the film industry spoke out about the changes emerging in the industry. Luther Standing Bear noted discrepancies between the treatment of white and Indian actors during his film career. Having made a career in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show as an actor, by 1912, he hoped to move to the mild climate of California because of ailing health. Standing Bear wrote to Ince, asking to live and work with the group of Lakota Indian actors who lived at his studio near Hollywood and worked in his films (Standing Bear 283). Commenting on the subsequent racism that he witnessed once he arrived, he stated, “As I look back on my early-day experiences, I cannot help noting how we real Indians were held back, while white ‘imitators’ were pushed to the front. All these people [the white actors] have risen in the ranks, but we Indians have been held back” (Standing Bear 284). Standing Bear also felt that many films portrayed Indian life inaccurately. One day, Standing Bear was talking with Ince about American Indian films and told the director that none of the current pictures were correct. Ince took an interest, asking Standing Bear for more details. Standing Bear later related that Ince told him, “some day you and I are going to make some real Indian pictures” (Standing Bear 284). However, Standing Bear discovered that not all filmmakers were as sympathetic as Ince. In his autobiography, he discussed the response that his critiques received:

I have gone personally to directors and stage managers and playwrights and explained [the inaccuracies] to them, telling them that their actors do not play the part as it should be played, and do not even know how to put on an Indian costume and get it right; but the answer is always the same, “The public don’t know the difference, and we should worry!” (Standing Bear 285).

Although Standing Bear voiced his opinion about the portrayal of Indian people on stage and in film, like those of many other Indian actors at this time, his complaints were met with little interest.

Native communities that were approached by the film industry, seeking to use their people or scenery, were also frustrated. As early as
1909, stories appeared in film journals about the difficulties of filming within American Indian communities. In that year, *Nickelodeon* stated that of the films produced about Indian life in the Southwest, "popular interest centers most strongly in the strange tribal dances of the Indians" (*Nickelodeon* 41). The article stressed the difficulty in gaining access to sacred dances, particularly anyone with a camera, and speculated that some dances such as the San Domingo corn dance might never be filmed. In this way, American Indians attempted to control their representation by preventing the filming of certain aspects of their culture. Non-Natives may have believed that they were preserving a record of Indian life, but American Indians often did not trust the kind of record that whites produced about them. For example, the same article described films of Snake Dances as "queer, grotesque pictures ... with their weird distortions faithfully thrown upon the screen" (*Nickelodeon* 41). This kind of record of Indian life did not present Native people as they saw themselves, but instead presented exotic versions that titillated white audiences by emphasizing and exaggerating difference. Native communities believed that they had no other choice than to ban the filming of dances, for this was the best way to control their representation. In 1915, the Cuauhtemoc film company attempted to film the Snake Dances at St. Xavier, but the dancers fled upon seeing the cameras. The cameraman tried in vain to induce the dancers to perform (*MPW* 2373). The *Moving Picture World* article offered the following explanation for the filming ban: "one of the chiefs said that if the camera eye caught them they could never die" (*MPW* 2373). The article suggested that this Native understanding of the ban on filming made sense in a cultural system different from that of the cameraman, but the reason given in the article was nevertheless suspect. Even if a Pueblo man gave out this explanation, it is impossible to know the motivation behind his words. Perhaps he was simply trying to get rid of the cameraman by providing an explanation that the intruder would expect and accept. It is not likely that the Pueblo man’s explanation arose from a superstitious fear of the camera. It is evident from the participation of Natives in the early era of film that they were much more sophisticated in this area than has been previously suspected.

D.W. Griffith’s relationship with the Pueblo people while creating his film, *A Pueblo Legend*, demonstrates that Native people had a sophisticated understanding of the effects of their lack of control over their representation on film. In an effort to demonstrate authenticity in his film, Griffith filmed on location at Isleta Pueblo. His attempt to use authentic Pueblo materials angered the Pueblo people whom he was trying to portray.

The Native accessories that had been borrowed for *A Pueblo Legend* from the Museum of Indian Antiquities included garments reserved for sacred ceremonies, the use of which prompted the Isleta Pueblos to insist that Griffith cease filming. He managed to complete the last few scenes in the pueblo by engaging the Indian leaders in a discussion about the filming while his crew shot the scenes (Kilpatrick 24). Griffith was intent on creating an authentic picture of American Indian life, which is frequently seen as a positive attempt to portray a realistic image of Indian people. Despite his determination to capture a true portrayal of Pueblo life, Griffith not only ignored the people’s suggestions, but also deceived them to get the shots that he wanted. He disregarded the fact that Pueblo peoples have traditionally felt very strongly about keeping their sacred materials secret and would have considered it offensive to allow such things to be seen by the general public. Furthermore, Griffith portrayed these religious beliefs inaccurately and disrespectfully. The members of Isleta Pueblo became offended soon after the filming started “because they sensed that the film might be a parody of their culture” (Kilpatrick 23). Griffith depicted the Isleta religious beliefs as innocent and primitive, which encouraged the idea that mainstream American society had to care for and save the souls of these primitive and noble first Americans (Kilpatrick 23). In this case, the attempt at an authentic picture offended the people portrayed because the film took certain religious materials out of their sacred context and disrupted important traditions. Portraying Indians in an authentic manner was not enough. Native people themselves needed to have a say in how they were portrayed.

Like Standing Bear or the people of Isleta, many Indians concerned with the silent film industry attempted to affect a change in the representation of their people on-screen. Buffalo Bill Cody’s film, *The Indian Wars* (1914), is an interesting example. Cody presented his idea to create a historically accurate film about the Indian Wars of the late 1800s to both the Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Interior. At the first showing of the film before government officials in Washington, Cody insisted, “My object and desire has been to preserve history by the aid of the camera with as many of the living participants in the closing Indian wars of North
America as could be procured" (MPW 1370). The government agreed to assist with the filming as long as Cody promised to produce a historically accurate film that told both the story of The Indian Wars and the progress of the Indian up to the time that it was filmed (MPW 1370). They sent cavalry troops and uniforms to Pine Ridge, as well as cavalry officers who had fought in the Indian Wars, including General Miles, who was the commanding officer of the troops at Wounded Knee. In an interview about his participation in the filming, General Miles stated:

They want me there to make sure that everything they do is historically correct... The idea is to give the whole thing from the start—the Indian dissatisfaction, their starving condition, the coming of the false “Messiah,” who stirred them to revolt; the massing troops, the death of Sitting Bull and, finally, the surrender. All of these incidents will be gone over just as they happened... We expect this will be one of the finest records in the government archives (MPW 362).

Miles’ statement indicates the degree to which the creators of the film believed that they were creating a historically accurate film. Because Miles commanded the troops in these Indian Wars, he was chosen to be the expert advisor to the film. Miles was not actually at Wounded Knee when the massacre occurred, nor did he witness many of the events to be portrayed in the film. The creators of the film, however, regarded Miles' absence as unimportant. They deemed him to be an expert because of his involvement and most likely because of his rank as commander at the time of the events. Both the governmental sponsors and the creators of the film believed that it would portray events as they actually occurred, as if watching the film could replicate the experience of witnessing the events.

The Lakota were understandably suspicious when the cavalry arrived with Hotchkiss guns, rifles, and ammunition, but Cody was well regarded and able to enlist important veterans of the Ghost Dance wars, including Short Bull and Iron Tail (Brownlow 230). However, Cody’s ability to negotiate was tested when General Miles insisted that they film the mock Wounded Knee battle where the massacre had actually occurred and where its victims were buried. The Lakota protested. Supposedly, Chief Iron Tail told Cody that some of the young warriors planned to use live rounds to avenge their families. This rumor frightened the film crew, so Cody called a hasty conference to convince the warriors that the film would benefit them by recording their resistance, and that it was useless to use rounds with cavalry right there (Brownlow 232). Of course, it is impossible to know the motivations of the young Lakota men or even whether they planned to use live rounds in the filming. It is hard to know who started the rumor, but it seems to be the kind of material that would excite journalists and film promoters. Most likely, they picked up the information to use for their own sensationalist purposes, given that the same tactic had been used with other films of the era.

The men took part in the mock battle, endangering no one, but the Lakota still staged protests over the desecration to their burial site. Brownlow quotes a Moving Picture World article from 1913 that asserted:

During the entire taking of the picture, the squaws chanted their death song as they did years ago when they saw the brave warriors fall under the rain of bullets. Many of them broke into tears as the vividness of the battle recalled that other time when lives were really lost and everything was actual (Brownlow 232).

Although the trade journal demonstrated the pain that Wounded Knee represented for the Lakota people, it implied that these women simply mourned the memory of their loss. Furthermore, the article supported the idea of Wounded Knee as a battle that killed only men, not women and children, because it implied that the women were able to watch from a safe distance during the original incident. Perhaps the singers meant to remind those present that Wounded Knee was a massacre, not a battle. Although the journal recognized the sorrow in the song, the report disregarded the Lakotas’ contemporary anger at desecrating such a sacred site. After all, why sing the death song if no one has died? Perhaps the song was meant to remind people that Lakota had been killed at this battle and lay buried on the spot where they filmed the reenactment. In this way, the Lakota women made known their views about the use of the gravesite to create a film.

Many Lakota who participated in the film also made their views about the film known through passive forms of protest. In a film about the defeat of the Lakota in the wars on the Plains, Lakota found ways to emphasize their survival. Moving Picture World described a “difficulty” during the filming: “The Indians refused to remain ‘dead’ after being ‘killed’ unless they were absolutely without ammunition and then they would roll over
that they might get a better view of the antics of their brother” (MPW 1370). Such an action could be simply explained as a misunderstanding of the director’s instructions, but disregarding the director and disrupting the filmmaker’s plans might have been a form of passive protest. Instead of allowing the whites to direct them and therefore determine the course of the mock battle, the Lakota men might have decided when they would “die” on camera. Unable to affect the ultimate outcome of the filmed battle, these men could, in part, affect the representation of the Lakota warrior on-screen. Apparently, they endured the onslaught of the troops longer than the directors wished. Although we cannot know the actual intent of these actions, the film already represented Wounded Knee as a battle and not a massacre, so it seems that the Lakota men attempted to represent themselves as brave warriors holding their own in the fight. Disobeying the director when told to die in a scene might have been one way that the Lakota attempted to emphasize the survival of their community in the film.

Although the Lakota involved in the creation of Cody’s film had little say in the way the film was produced, they still found ways to express their thoughts of the film. Dewey Beard, a man whom the Lakota considered a hero of this battle, appeared in the film in his Ghost Dance shirt, which was marked with five bullet holes (Brownlow 232). Because of their interest in the film’s accuracy, most likely those in charge of the filming saw the shirt as an authentic touch. However, its meaning for the Lakota was probably quite different. Beard’s wearing this shirt could be seen as a powerful symbol of Lakota survival—not simply personal, physical survival, but also tribal and cultural survival. The owner of the Ghost Dance shirt, which was believed to protect the wearer from bullets, survived despite being hit. Wearing this shirt in a reenactment of the massacre was a means of demonstrating that The Indian Wars extinguished neither the Lakota people nor their culture.

Although The Indian Wars intended to strive for authenticity, it failed to present the events of Wounded Knee accurately. As usual, the film meticulously sought accuracy in the material details. The creators secured the correct uniforms, famous personages, even the exact location, yet the film did not reproduce the spirit of the massacre. During this time, most Americans regarded Wounded Knee as a battle, not a massacre, a view that was so powerful that even Euro-American men who had participated in these battles neglected certain important details. Most importantly, only men fought in the mock battle; women and children were not involved, even though the actual Wounded Knee massacre involved Lakota women and children. Furthermore, the film portrayed armed men in a fair fight against the United States Cavalry. It neglected the fact that most Lakota men had been disarmed prior to the massacre. This film’s representation, therefore, portrayed only a Euro-American understanding of events.

Euro-Americans saw the Indian Wars as the American Indian’s last gasp—it represented the closing of the wild frontier. Many believed that the Indians had passed away under the onslaught of white civilization. Furthermore, most believed that the passing of American Indian ways of life benefited Indian people. They could now live a civilized—and therefore better—life. Cody’s film sent this exact message. Moving Picture World described the final moments of the film as “more peaceful scenes where Indian boys and girls in the uniforms of the schools which they attend are seen saluting the American flag, Indian farmers bringing in the results of a season’s work, the schools, agencies, and other modern buildings, and we may even see the last word in civilization, a seven passenger touring car” (MPW 1370). Cody’s message was clear: losing the Indian Wars brought Indian people into the civilized world. The film justifies the battles and loss of life by presenting the Indian Wars as necessary to bring American Indians a civilized way of life. Cody’s film clearly projected an interpretation of progress as the betterment of all, demonstrating how film could juxtapose the savage with the civilized and use progressive notions of enlightenment to represent Native peoples.

Interestingly, Cody’s closing scenes were quite similar to the kinds of scenes for which many Native people had asked the motion picture industry. However, it is quite evident that those involved in the picture felt misrepresented. It was not enough for films to show Indian people as more than savages. Cody’s film still presented a clear message that earlier Native ways of life were savage and inferior, and that white Americans essentially saved Indian people from themselves. At this time, the shift from nomadic Plains life to reservation life in the Euro-American style was seen as progress and advancement. While the Euro-American creators of the film felt that they were creating a picture so accurate that it could be added to government archives, the Lakota disagreed about its success. Ben Black Elk, whose father was in the picture, asserted, “It was made exactly as it happened” (Brownlow 228), but not all those involved in the film shared his perspective. Survivors of Wounded Knee later gave statements about the film’s inaccuracy. Edward Owl King stated that the Lakota all agreed that the picture’s presentation of the massacre was
Berndt, "Voices in the Era of Silents"

completely wrong (Friar and Friar 72). Owl King intuited that the film portrayed the events from a Euro-American perspective of the time. If the survivors had been properly consulted, the movie might have been more accurate, but then, as Owl King suggested, Wounded Knee would not have been portrayed in the way that the whites wanted it to be preserved on film (Friar and Friar 74).

Many Lakota people used this film as an opportunity to voice their own view of the historic relationship between the United States and the Lakota. For example, Chauncey Yellow Robe, a Lakota, deeply criticized The Indian Wars in a speech to the Society of American Indians. He attacked Cody and Miles, implying that they only used the memory of the tragedy at Wounded Knee to make money and become film heroes. He told his audience:

Women and children and old men of my people, my relatives, were massacred with machine guns by soldiers of this Christian nation while the fighting men were away. It was not a glorious battle and I should think these two men would be glad they were not there. But no, they want to be heroes for moving pictures (Brownlow 235).

Most of the Lakota interviewed felt that the deepest inaccuracy was the portrayal of the Wounded Knee massacre as heroic. The Lakota did not deserve the treatment they had received by the United States government. The massacre was the culmination of suffering that the Lakota endured at the hands of what Yellow Robe bitingly described as a Christian nation. Many Euro-Americans of the time saw progress as heroic, but did not necessarily see the killing of women and children or unarmed men as a reasonable means of attaining this progress. The Lakota pointed out that the film omitted government injustice towards their people.

Conclusion

Although Indian westerns like those that Young Deer created had faded from the industry by 1914, Natives involved with film continued to criticize how they were represented. Many different groups used early silent film as a forum to critique Victorian values and give a voice to the downtrodden, including American Indians. Before 1911, Native people gained considerable control over such films because film companies were small, because audiences were made up of immigrants and the working class who loved melodramatic westerns, and because American Indians were valued for lending authenticity to the industry. The stereotypes of the savage Indian were still a part of film in this early era, but its multivocal nature also allowed other images of Natives to emerge. These images, controlled by Native people within the film industry, reflected portrayals of Native life more representative of an American Indian lived experience. In this way, certain films of the early silent era reflected what Leuthold has termed an indigenous aesthetic. As his story lines demonstrated, Young Deer's films in particular emerged from American Indian social and cultural life. His films sent a message concerning the autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty of Native peoples in the United States. Early American Indian film not only reflected an American Indian aesthetic, it also demonstrated that from the start of the medium American Indian people utilized both Euro-American technology and representations of Indians to create a space for self-expression. Furthermore, the representations that American Indians put forth in film disrupted progressive notions of the era, critiquing the tactics of Euro-American progressives and government officials that were meant to uplift savages and bring them to civilization.

The window for this critique provided by the instability of the Progressive Era was open only briefly. Even as the political and social climate that encouraged films like Young Deer's began to shift, Native peoples fought to maintain their voice in film. With the shift in content after 1911 came an outcry on the part of American Indian viewers for a more accurate representation of their experiences in films. While American Indian viewers protested, Natives working in the film industry also fought for control of representation by asserting their own opinions as actors, extras, and community members confronted by directors. By the 1920s, Native people had lost much of their control over the creation of films, but to reiterate Cook-Lynn's perspective, Indian America has always had its own quiet words and languages, and it continues to voice to them. Although Native voices had been stifled, Native viewers, actors, and extras were still speaking out—to directors, to their friends, to anyone who would listen. More recently, as the political climate shifted yet again, American Indians again began to create films more reflective of their own lived experiences. Although the film industry has changed dramatically since the silent era, moving away from small-scale production companies to large incorporated industries, the independent film industry has provided
opportunities for Native writers and directors with visions similar to those involved in early silent film. As Natives have regained control over film making, an indigenous aesthetic has begun to reemerge in film. Hence, uncovering the American Indian voices in early silent film demonstrates not only the continuity of an indigenous aesthetic, but also its ability to survive in times in which we once thought silence prevailed.

Note
I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and support of those who made this article possible. Thanks are extended to Larry May for lending suggestions when I was just beginning, and for introducing me to the Margaret Herrick Library. The archivists at the library had a vast knowledge of their collections and were a great help with sifting through these materials. I would also like to thank David Grey for our conversations about the Progressive Era. His insights made this article stronger. Many thanks also go to Philip Deloria for his continuing support of my work on film and for his challenging questions that forced me to consider my theoretical stance in greater depth. I also owe a debt to Carol Miller. Her patience, insightful comments, and encouragement to pursue my research further were invaluable to the completion of this article. I must also thank Ryan Berndt, whose support and generosity continue to make my work possible.

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Published Materials
A Useful Institution: William Twin, “Indianness,” and Banff National Park, c. 1860-1940

Tolly Bradford

This paper examines the life of William Twin (c. 1860-1940), a member of the Nakoda (or Stoney) First Nation, and pays particular attention to his connection with Banff National Park and role in facilitating the tourism empire that still flourishes there. Being careful to distinguish between who William Twin was and how he was imagined to be, this paper argues that his life story has at least two aspects: William as an “institution” useful to the development of Banff National Park, and William as a person who enjoyed sustained and very personal interactions with both Stoney and Euro-Canadian communities.

Cet article examine la vie de William Twin (v. 1860-1940), membre de la Première nation Nakoda (ou Stoney), et s’intéresse en particulier au lien qu’il a eu avec le Parc national de Banff et au rôle de facilitation de l’empire du tourisme qui y règne encore. En faisant attention de faire la distinction entre qui était William Twin et comment on imaginait qu’il était, cet article souligne que sa vie a eu au moins deux aspects: William comme “institution” utile au développement du Parc national de Banff, et William comme homme qui a vécu des interactions soutenues et très personnelles avec les collectivités Stoney et euro-canadiennes.

Given the wide gulf separating the [Indian and non-Indian] cultures, Europeans have tended to imagine the Indian rather than to know the Native people.

- Daniel Francis, The Imaginary Indian, 1997

William was an Institution.

- Philip Moore, “An Appreciation for a Man.”

Crag and Canyon, 12 May 1944

Two stone faces overlook the intersection of Bear and Caribou streets in downtown Banff, Alberta. These carvings, mounted on the exterior wall of the Brewster Mountain Lodge hotel, hang about ten feet from the ground.