WESTERNS

The Essential "Journal of Popular Film & Television" Collection

EDITED BY

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Playing at Being Indian

Spectatorship and the Early Western

Alison Griffiths

> A crowd of painted Indians, recruited from the Bowery, and tougher than any Indian ever dared to be . . . do[es] not constitute a Western.
>
> —"The Vogue of Western and Military Dramas" (272)

A nickelodeon screening of an "Indian" melodrama almost one hundred years ago might have seemed both novel and reassuringly familiar to audiences at the time; novel, since "Indian" films were suddenly en vogue at the time, and this may have been the spectator's first taste of the exciting new genre, and familiar, since many of the films' narrative and iconographic tropes would have been instantly recognized from nineteenth-century painting, photography, theater, popular literature, advertising, museums, world's fairs, and traveling Wild West shows.[1] As early as 1840, visitors to Barnum's American Museum in New York City would have marveled at the "Grand Exhibition of a large company of Indian Warriors with their Squaws." Performing at the museum every evening, the troupe demonstrated the "various modes and ceremonies of savage life, superstitions, war songs, dances, etc."[2] Consumed as popular entertainment for well over half a century before the emergence of cinema, audiences would have had few problems recognizing enduring tropes in the representation of Native Americans when they encountered them in cinematic form in the 1890s. While cut from the same discursive cloth as their precinematic antecedents, these films nevertheless, as the quote from "The Vogue of Western and Military Dramas" indicates, provoked a lively debate over the generic parameters of the Western, including expressions of dismay at the artistic liberties taken by some filmmakers. I explore the topic of spectatorship and the early film Western, approaching the subject from two perspectives: first, the role of Indian actualities as cinematic intertexts for the "ethnographic" set pieces used in "Indian" films, and second, the ways in which audiences may have understood the widespread practice of casting whites in Indian leads in early Westerns.

Examining extant primary materials relating to the initial reception of early film Westerns, one is struck by how discourses of romance, authenticity, corporeality, and ethnography shore up the semantic architecture of Indian representations in this fledgling genre. As historians of early cinema have noted, oppositions between authentic and inauthentic, actual and staged, and history and fantasy were by no means fixed during this period. At the same time, early filmmakers drew on a vast intertextual universe of material for Western subjects, confident of audience familiarity with the precinematic roots of the iconography, narrative conventions, and viewing protocols of the emerging genre. In addition, the earliest actualities of Native Americans produced between 1894 and 1901 served as important blueprints for the emergence of the film Western between 1907 and 1914, helping to establish a set of formal and ideological codes for representing American Indians that would be taken up by both fictional and nonfictional films. While early actualities themselves borrowed from a repertoire of Native American iconography, they also instanciated new ways of seeing native peoples, giving audiences an opportunity to vicariously identify with the intrepid white recorders of Native American ceremonial life on government reservations. Questions of spectatorship and representation became even more complex when Euro-American audiences responded to the widespread casting of white actors to play Native Americans in hundreds of fictional "Indian" dramas and Westerns produced between 1907 and 1914 (Abel 77–95). Thus, an examination of the ideological and historical conditions of reception of early filmic images of Native Americans can reveal a great deal about patterns of spectatorship in general, especially the ways in which early audiences made sense of cinematic and noncinematic cultural intertexts.

Thomas Edison's 1894 and 1901 actualities of Native Americans, involving several brief glimpses of Indian dances and religious ceremonies, invited nickelodeon audiences to don the epistemological garb of the anthropologist, witnessing the remnants of a purportedly disappearing indigenous life displayed in cinematic form. The promotional rhetoric associated with these films boasted that the "real" Indian had been positively identified by the filmmaker, who, by faithfully transposing from the reservation onto the screen a version of Indian life coterminous with a mid-nineteenth-century image of native existence, could give spectators privileged access to an alternately noble, savage, or doomed Indian. It is important to note, however, that Native American identity cannot be read transparently from such early film actualities, since the "Indianness" constructed in these films was as much the result of a complex admixture of the profilmic, performative, and filmic as it was an accurate reflection of native existence at the time. Such issues become more complicated as many of these ethnographic tropes were subsequently incorporated by fiction film producers into formulaic narratives of pioneer life, Indian duplicity, the dangers of miscegenation, and the trauma of acculturation. These narrative films often contained scenes of native dances or ceremonies, signifying "Indianness" in its putatively "raw" state, confirming audience desires for exaggerated representations of Indian life in similar ways to earlier actualities of native culture.

Actualities produced by Edison, Pathé, Kalem, and Biograph therefore served as training grounds for cinematic spectators who would implicitly measure the verisimilitude of fictional Westerns against their experience of viewing Native American actualities. The specific interest in Native American dances among early commercial ethnographers reflected dance's iconic status within early cinema; not only did the performance stand as an important signifier of racial and cultural difference, but dance assumed a metonymic relationship to the culture as a whole. As Karen Backstein has pointed out, cinema's kinetic form seemed perfectly suited to the gestic quality of dance (5). An examination of Edison's Indian dance films suggests how dance, as a privileged cultural signifier of Indianness, came to inscribe a series of looking relations that would be invoked in fictional films produced some six to ten years later. At the same time, despite the large number of actualities featuring Native Americans and other native peoples produced in the early cinema period, questions of filmic authenticity remained unsettled, in part because, as we shall see, a number of actualities themselves consisted of performances lifted from popular cultural intertexts such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Drawing on their own pre-cinematic precursors, early actualities provided a repertory of images of Native Americans subsequently evoked in the fictional films, including the "conflict iconography" of Indian battle scenes that were set pieces in early Westerns (Schimmel 162).

After briefly considering the intertextual horizon of the early Western and its debt to early actualities, I explore the powerful fascination that fictional films featuring Native Americans held for early spectators between 1907 and 1911. Drawing on anthropologist Michael Taussig's idea of the two-layered nature of mimesis, which involves "a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived," I argue that audience fascination with Indian subjects in early cinema was animated by a desire "to become and behave like something else" through imitation and, in some cases, parody (Taussig 21). I explore this "trying on Otherness for size," to paraphrase Taussig, in relation to two Biograph films, *The Call of the Wild* (1908) and *The Mended Lute* (1909). In their use of white actors in leading roles, these films create a further doubling of this mimetic effect, as (mostly) Euro-American spectators watch Euro-American actors perform Indian roles. The semiotic complexity of the construction of "Indianness" in these films resonates with the practice of blackface, in which white performers applied burnt cork make-up in a parody of African American identity. Following Jane Tompkins's idea of the Western playing to a "Wild West of the psyche," I explore the contradictory tendencies at play in the white-Indian masquerade, rather than view the figure of the Native American in early Westerns as merely that of a repressed absence (Tompkins 6). In conclusion, I return to the idea of the early cinema actuality as an enduring intertext in Indian films, drawing on the example of Biograph's *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913) to illustrate the iconographic and ideological resemblances across these genres.

Cinematic blueprints: Edison the ethnographer

Filmed by Thomas Edison's cameraman William Kennedy Laurie Dickson at Edison's New Jersey studio in 1894, *Sioux Ghost Dance* and *Indian War Council* are among the earliest surviving filmed records of Native Americans.[3] The synthetic form of the Wild West show, which combined elements of the circus, the parade, the carnival, the stage spectacular, and the melodrama into a single spectacle, made it particularly amenable to cinematic translation, and Edison extended invitations to such disparate celebrities as Annie Oakley, Eugene Sandow, and Anabelle Whitford to perform before his new invention, the kinetoscope.[4] In addition to *Sioux Ghost Dance* and *Indian War Council*, Dickson filmed *Buffalo Bill* and *Buffalo Dance*, the latter film featuring seventeen Native Americans. Antonia Dickson, early cinema critic (and sister of Edison's camera operator), captured the mood of Edison's studio in her article "The Wonders of the Kinetoscope," published in *Frank Leslie's Monthly* in 1895:

> Buffalo Bill marshals his heterogeneous suite—lustrous-eyed Moors and Arabs, turbaned and bejeweled; dashing Texan cowboys in shadowy sombreros and cavernous boots; sleepy-eyed Celestials and agile Japanese; fierce Cossacks and picturesque Albanians; impassive Indians in pomp of war paint and plumes. These resolve themselves into strange combinations—into the Omaha war dance, the Sioux ghost dance and Indian war council; into wonderful feats of swordsmanship, lasooing and shouting.
>
> *(250)*

Dickson's extravagant and stereotypical adjectives evoke a menagerie of exotic performers, suggesting a human carnival under the supervision of the white adventurer-field marshal. A review of the event in the New Jersey *East Orange Gazette* offers a more sober, though no less evocative, account of the proceedings:

> The affair in the theatre started with an exhibition of rapid firing in a circle by Col. Cody, which was followed by a war dance by the Indians. The latter was given in full war paint and feathers, to the music of native drums and was accompanied by the usual brandishing of tomahawks and scalping knives. Next came a war council between Buffalo Bill and the chiefs in which the participants passed the wampum belt and smashed the pipe of peace. A group of pictures of the entire party was then taken and the performance closed with a buffalo dance to native drum music by the three great chiefs present, Last Horse, Parts of His Hair, and Hair Coat.
>
> *(" 'Wild West' Kinetoscoped" 3; see also "Indians before the Kinetoscope" 4)*

The debt of the new medium of cinema to earlier cultural representations of Native Americans can be seen in the already-jaded critic's description of "the

usual brandishing of tomahawks and scalping knives." In all likelihood, though, the films of the Indian dancers elicited a far more complex spectatorial response than that suggested in these two contemporary accounts. Displacing the Native American figures from their lived social context to the limbo background of the Black Maria studio serves to isolate the dancers and underscores the unsettling effect of their provocative visual address to the spectator. The performers' proximity to the camera, allowing the revelation of costume and expressive detail, together with the possibility for repeat viewings of the kinetoscope loop, creates a spectatorial experience likely to have been quite different from that at the Wild West show live performance. At the same time, despite its name, the Ghost Dance depicted in the Edison film was not the solemn circle dance associated with the spiritualist movement of that name, but a different circle dance featuring three performers.[5] In a case of historical accuracy taking a back seat to advertising hyperbole, by titling the film "Sioux Ghost Dance," Buffalo Bill (or possibly Edison, or even the native performers themselves) no doubt hoped to capitalize on public interest in the spiritualist movement.

Helping to frame the reception of both the cinematic and live versions of the Sioux Ghost Dance is the tradition of the Noble Savage, which had long presented the American Indian in an innocent, pristine, and Edenic existence before the corrupting influences of western civilization (Parry 35).[6] Drawing on a language of racialized iconography, the Noble Savage was a persistent and fluid ideological construction, capable of incorporating ambivalent and often contradictory western attitudes toward native life.[7] Although spectators may have viewed the Native American dancers as a poignant reminder of a people "doomed" to extinction, the nearly contemporaneous Native American Ghost Dance movement led by Jack Pauite may have influenced its reception, suggesting a more defiant sensibility evoked in the movements of one of the Sioux dancers, who stares fixedly at the camera while flicking his hand with each rotation of the dance.[8] While the context of the Buffalo Bill show reassured audiences that these dances were to be consumed primarily as entertainment rather than as documentary records of Indian-white relations, the performers in Edison's films had fewer contextualizing markers and were thus more ideologically malleable. Moreover, the semi-celebrity status of the Indian performers as members of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and the *mise-en-abyme* quality of *Sioux Ghost Dance* (a filmic reconstruction of a Wild West show's reenactment of a recently revived Native American ritual) point up the difficulty of separating the "authentic" from the "fake" in early nonfiction film.

Because of its kineticism and visual appeal, dance promised an unmediated, almost tactile representation of Indianness for many turn-of-the-century spectators. Rubbing shoulders with anthropologists and amateur and professional photographers, commercial cinematographers flocked to the Southwest to record native ceremonies from the mid-1890s through the mid-teens (Dilworth). In 1897, more than two hundred spectators attended the Walpi Snake Dance in Arizona, twice the number of white spectators of previous years. The enormous drawing power of the Snake Dance at Walpi was explained by professional

photographer George Wharton James in 1900: "Here the Snake Dance is given in more dramatic form than in any other of the four villages where it is performed," although for government officials, the popular appeal of the performance was cause for some concern (303). Writing in the *Annual Report* of the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1900, Jesse Walter Fewkes worried that the "germs of the degradation of the religious character of the Walpi Snake dance" were already detectable, that the crowding of western spectators posed a serious safety issue (the walls and roof of the pueblo would crumble under the weight of hundreds of onlookers, he feared), and most seriously, that a time would come when the Snake Dance would "cease to be a religious ceremony, the secret rites would disappear, and nothing [would] remain but a spectacular show" (978). According to Fewkes, the younger performers in the ceremonies were especially affected by the presence of white spectators:

> When gazed upon by so many strangers, some of the Snake men appeared to be more nervous, and did not handle the reptiles in the fearless manner which marked earlier performances. The older members of the fraternity maintained the same earnestness, but the more youthful glanced so often at the spectators that their thoughts seemed to be on other subjects than the solemn duty before them, and they dodged the fallen reptiles in a way not seen before at Walpi.
>
> *(978)*

Like the Sioux dancer's defiant gesture and stare at the camera in Edison's *Sioux Ghost Dance*, the performers' acknowledgment of the spectators threatens not only the integrity of the ceremony but also signals the impossibility of conceptualizing Indian identity outside the context of contemporaneous Native American-white relations. Fewkes's rhetoric of germs, contamination, and degradation to describe the contact between native peoples and nonnative image-makers remains an enduring trope of ethnographic discourse throughout the twentieth century, where western contact and media are seen to threaten the imputed pristine and timeless world of the Noble Savage.

For the majority of photographers, cinematographers, and tourists who traveled to Walpi before 1915, visual spectacle was decidedly the main draw; the exotic costumes, live snakes, and unfamiliar dancing offered a heady mix of the abject and the spiritual. It mattered little that most of the early films made of the Snake Dance were poor substitutes for what Peggy Phelan calls the "undocumentable event of performance . . . [p]erformance's independence from mass reproduction" (148). Despite the static camera's distance from the dancers and the short duration of the early performance films, they were nonetheless a resounding success with urban cinema audiences and a popular subject for itinerant "high-class" lecturers such as Burton Holmes (who in 1898 and 1899 sent his cinematographer Oscar Bennet Depue to Oraibi, Arizona, to film the "most famous Moki rite") and for wealthy independent adventurers like Teddy

Roosevelt, who commissioned a film of a Hopi Snake Dance in 1913.[9] Holmes described the Snake Dance as "a spectacle unique in its impressive savagery," although he reassured viewers uneasy about the disquieting nature of the dance that the "horror of the exhibition is dispelled by the dash and spirit with which the celebrants perform the dangerous and thrilling rite" ("Moki Land").

Four years after the first Black Maria films, Edison returned to the subject of Native American dance, commissioning a series of films shot on location in Arizona in 1898 and 1901.[10] With the exception of *Panorama View of Moki Land*, the five films in the 1901 series were shot on location in Walpi, Arizona, and consist of views of the Snake Dance shot at different points in the ceremony. The most visually striking of the series, *Moki Snake Dance by Walpi Indians*, frames a group of snake dancers in a high-angle medium long shot (the camera probably located on an adobe rooftop) and includes internal spectators (mostly white) at the right corner of the frame. The film begins with the dance already in progress and shows the dancers holding snakes in their mouths. The single take frames the dance fragment without changing position, with the exception of some slight refraining at the beginning of the shot (Deutelbaum 299–310). What differentiates the looking relations in *Moki Snake Dance by Walpi Indians* from an 1898 Edison film such as *Buck Dance* is that James White's camera in the former film explicitly adopts the same point of view of the Euro-American spectators who sit on lower levels of the adobe wall on the right-hand side of the frame. As with *Line Up and Teasing the Snakes* and *Parade of Snakes Before the Dance* (both from 1901), the film validates the cameraman as ethnographer through its use of internal spectators. Even though European-looking men can also be seen in *Buck Dance*, they are stationed in the background of the shot looking at the camera, part of the continuous space of the spectacle, as opposed to detached observers implicitly identified with the camera operator and film spectator. The presence of the white spectators also signals the film's probable status as a reconstruction, almost certainly staged for the tourist market, rather than performed as part of a traditional cycle of ceremonial life.

The closing glimpse in *Moki Snake Dance* of a white woman leaning forward from her standing position against an adobe wall to secure a better view of the performers suggests the gendered appeal of early actualities featuring native peoples, and how nakedness as a complex sign system resurfaced in the context of the early Indian Western. According to Eileen Bowser, in addition to their evocation of a sublime landscape, part of the allure of these early "Indian films" for female viewers was the spectacle of male nudity (176). Charles Inslee, who played the lead in *The Call of the Wild*, elicited a strong reaction from female spectators when they saw him play Indian roles with a bare torso; according to one film reviewer, "Inslee made a striking appearance on the scene, and the ladies simply went gaga over him. Oh's and ah's came from them whenever he appeared on the screen in one of his naked Indian hero roles, so naturally most of his pictures were on that order" (Balshofer and Miller 40). Unlike spectators witnessing the Snake Dance first-hand, film spectators were free to view the

ethnographic spectacle from the safety of cinema's displaced representation, a safety doubly bracketed in this film by the implicit point of view of the on-screen white onlookers. The mixture of repulsion, fear, fascination, and reassurance conjured up by *Moki Snake Dance* speaks to both the voyeuristic appeal of the ceremony and the comforting distance provided spectators by the moving picture apparatus.

But while the internal white spectators gave film audiences an opportunity to identify with the onlookers present at the live performance, they also offered evidence of the contemporaneous nature of Indian and white cultures in stark contrast to the pains taken by most contemporaneous photographers and filmmakers to eliminate all evidence of intercultural contact. The problem of white subjectivities and their inscription in turn-of-the-century ethnographic photography and filmmaking thus provides a link between early film actualities and the Western. The white spectators glimpsed at the edges of Edison's 1901 *Moki Snake Dance* series (as well as in the photographs of Ben Wittick, Jesse Walter Fewkes, and George Wharton James) stage a dramatic reappearance in the early Western. Taking center stage rather than standing in the wings, white actors playing Native Americans transmogrified into the very Indians once witnessed performing sacred rites and ceremonies in early actualities. Psychological identification thus shifted from the peripheral internal spectator to the white actor as audiences now imagined what it would be like to play an American Indian rather than simply watch one from the sidelines. The American fantasy of the frontier symbolized a place where, in Gaylyn Studlar's words, "a man's 'natural' primitive urges could find expression and where Americans could find their instinctual 'racial' heritage confirmed and renewed" (66). You, too, could discover your true "primitive" self, by trying on "Indianness" for size and participating vicariously in the pleasure of the masquerade.

Playing Indian

As filmmakers borrowed from the visual lexicon of precinematic representations of American Indians, these mythologized images were transformed by cinema's signifying practices (Slotkin 18).[11] Myth played a crucial role in normalizing the contradictory figures of the "good" Indian (essentialized as kind, brave, and frequently constructed through motifs of corporeality) and the "bad" Indian (who represented lechery, debauchery, even cannibalism).[12] The tension between civilization and savagery was sometimes ameliorated via an evocation of the putative extinction of the Native American altogether, which many believed would come about with the inevitable progress of history in the closing of the western frontier (Berkhofer 47). As a result, Jeffrey Steel argues, "Forcibly removed from any contexts that would threaten the imaginative security of consumers, American Indians . . . were . . . turned into fetishized images that satisfied the hunger for entertainment and disposable commodities" (46). Legendary Indian figures were transformed into consumer icons that emblazoned the labels of soaps, hair

preparations, perfume, coffee, and cigars; severed from history, these images invited consumers to enter into a collective fantasy about Native American identity in which exoticism functioned as an associational principle that helped differentiate a consumer product from its competitors.

Not surprisingly, this collective fantasy about native identity inflected the genre of "Indian" films produced between 1908 and 1914. As Richard Abel has shown, these films were not only enmeshed in an ongoing ideological discourse of Americanization within the film industry, but echoed the rhetoric of social progress and imperialist might that "sought to privilege the 'Anglo-Saxon' and the masculine as dominant in any conception of national identity" (78). The casting of nonnative actors in Indian roles, especially characters who turned their backs on native culture in adopting white institutions and moral codes, evoked the assimilationist project of integrating recent European immigrants into the American mainstream; as Abel points out, if Indians could "acquire, embody, and enact the values of an 'American' (being a white actor like Charles Inslee in disguise, of course, helped immeasurably) so too could the newly arrived immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, who were even closer to the 'Anglo-Saxon' ideal" (88).

But if the "Indian" films of the silent era advanced the ideological project of Americanization, the dearth of Native American actors in the early motion picture industry underscored the real limits of Native American assimilation into white society. At the same time, many of the Westerns of the period foreground the conflict over assimilation. For example, in Biograph's *The Call of the Wild* (1908) and Lubin's *Red Eagle's Love Affair* (1910), the protagonists, played by white actors, come to realize that they can never be fully integrated into white society, despite having been educated in a white school. In both films, it is the Indian hero's rejection by white women, who had earlier led them to believe that a romantic union was possible, that triggers an abandonment of Euro-American ways and a "regression" to a pre-assimilationist, "wild" state. In *The Call of the Wild*, the protagonist Redfeather seeks refuge in his room after realizing that his romantic designs on a white woman would never be reciprocated. Gulping frantically from a liquor bottle, Redfeather rips off his western suit, replacing it with a gown decorated with native designs, a full-feather headdress, and an Indian necklace.

Charles Inslee's melodramatic performance in this scene exemplifies what Roberta Pearson calls the "unchecked histrionic acting code" of early cinema, in which an actor gesticulated in broad, exaggerated movements, extended his or her arms upward, outward, or downward while stressing and holding each of the gestures (41). Despite the conventionalization of cross-casting within early film melodrama, Inslee's histrionic performance as a Native American in *The Call of the Wild* can nevertheless be read as reflexive in its parodic excess. Redfeather's disrobing and rerobing in traditional Indian dress enacts the palimpsest of ethnic identity as performance, as audiences get to watch Inslee dress up as an Indian right before their eyes. The symbolic act of turning his back on Euro-American

FIGURE 7.1 Owen Moore striking a stylized pose as Little Bear in D.W. Griffith's *The Mended Lute* (1909). The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

society may have resonated for film audiences who, in addition to watching the character Redfeather vent his frustration, see Inslee the actor dress up as an Indian in a highly self-referential manner. It is as if we are afforded a privileged behind-the-scenes glimpse of the very process of enacting Otherness through costuming and histrionic acting.

Although Inslee's actions are narratively motivated, there is an ironic undercurrent to the scene, triggered by the fact that Inslee is a white actor playing an Indian who wants to be accepted by white society and pass as "white." Finally succumbing to the "call of the wild," Redfeather kidnaps the white woman, only to be persuaded in the final scene by the "presence of the All Powerful Master above" that he belongs with his people and should not try to rise above his station in life. The morality play at the heart of *The Call of the Wild* thus pits racial determinism (signified by skin color) against upward mobility, leaving little doubt as to which reigns supreme, as the *Biograph Bulletin* explained:

> "Call the farthing if you will, but it is a farthing still." So it is with the Redman. Civilization and education cannot bleach his tawny epidermis,

> and that will always prove an insurmountable barrier to social distinction. He may be lauded and even lionized for deeds of valor and heroism, or excellence in scientifics [*sic*], but when it comes to the social circle—never. "Lo the poor Indian," and well we may say it, for his condition is indeed deplorable; elevated in intellectual supremacy, only to more fully realize his extreme condition.
>
> *(Biograph Bulletin)*

Western society's censure of Indian-white relationships was a popular theme in early Indian dramas, although intermarriage between white men and Indian women did not evoke as strong a negative reaction as the converse (it is *always* the threat posed to white womanhood and white masculinity that triggers the antipathy). Some scientists of the period went so far as to actively promote cross-cultural marriages between white men and Indian women; American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, for example, argued that acculturation and the degree of progress made by a tribe should not be measured by its contact with outsiders, but to the degree of intermarriage. Indeed, Morgan believed that the amalgamation would ultimately benefit both races as Euro-Americans profited economically through gaining access to land, and future generations of mixed-blood offspring would become, in Morgan's view, "beautiful and attractive" as a result of the genetic union (qtd. in Beider 219).

While we may never know for sure how film spectators negotiated the cognitive dissonance brought about by the spectacle of white actors passing as Indians passing as whites, it is likely that most audience members were aware of the fact that leading roles were played by white, not native, actors. Indeed, part of the pleasure of these films may have stemmed from the acknowledgment of this information, assessing, for example, whether or not Inslee could "pass" as Native American. Writing in the trade press, critics and Native Americans alike occasionally decried this practice, arguing that in the pursuit of sensationalist representations of native peoples (seen in conflict with whites for much of the time), motion picture manufacturers were producing farces as opposed to serious dramas. An Associated Press article reprinted in *Motion Picture World* in 1911 reported that Californian Indians were at a loss to understand why their race was "always depicted on the moving picture screen in war paint, while in reality they are now engaged in the peaceful pursuit of farming" ("Indians Grieve" 32). In response to these criticisms, companies such as Kalem began making films with less exploitative narratives and prided themselves on their attention to ethnographic detail; for example, an 1907 advertisement for *The Red Man's Way* stressed that "All of the properties used are genuine, the details accurate, and the settings beautiful. The Indian canoes, blankets, garments, teepees and weapons used in this story were received from a famous collection."

Biograph's *The Mended Lute*, similar to a number of Biograph's Indian dramas from 1909, conveys a strong sense of ethnographic realism through its location shooting, *mise-en-scène*, costuming, and props, although the film features an

all-white cast: Florence Lawrence plays Rising Moon, the daughter of Elk Horn, the "Great Chief of the Dakotas"; Owen Moore plays Little Bear, Rising Moon's true love; and James Kirkwood is cast as Standing Rock, the rich suitor favored by Elk Horn to marry Rising Moon. Shot in Cuddebackville, New York, Griffith made full use of the lyrical landscape, staging the Indian lovers in front of a three-level mountain cascade in their second scene together and staging a climactic sequence in a canoe chase down a river (Gunning 209).

Griffith uses the location to evoke a richly textured portrait of Indian life. The film's establishing shot of the Indian camp stages movement across several planes: a group of Indian men sits in the foreground smoking a pipe, women sit in the midground either cooking, caring for children, or doing beadwork, and at one point a group of hunters enters the background. The effect is that of an authentic-looking Indian camp, replete with examples of Indian material culture interwoven into the scene. We are reminded, at least for the opening moments of the film, of Edison's 1898 dance films shot on location at Indian encampments, as well as the nineteenth-century landscape paintings of Albert Bierstadt (especially the Indian encampment featured in *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* [1863]).[13] Like nineteenth-century paintings and photographs depicting Native Americans, the early encampment actualities by Edison provided fictional filmmakers and audiences with a visual mnemonic of what a "real" camp should look like, including images of teepees, fires, hunting, and women taking care of children.[14]

The ethnographic realism established at the start of *The Mended Lute* is quickly fractured, however, when Florence Lawrence walks from mid-ground to foreground, stops directly in front of the camera, and smiles. Standing with an earthenware pot in her arm, Lawrence hails the audience as the film's leading protagonist but also, I would argue, as someone who implicitly acknowledges the mimetic counterfeit of her "Indian" performance. The reflexivity of this scene, together with its pictorialism—she moves toward us, stops, smiles, and looks around before exiting—can also be interpreted as a directorial trademark of Griffith's Biograph style, his use of composition, especially actors' movements toward the camera, as a way of building mood and shaping audience's attitudes toward character (Gunning 210). Griffith's decision to introduce Lawrence's character to the audience in this way also reminds us that the diegetic world of the Indian drama has a limited number of semantic correspondences with Native American life; in other words, while the settings, costumes, and props are most convincing, Lawrence is instantly recognizable as a nonnative actor, as is Owen Moore, especially in a medium shot of him with outstretched arms.

Of course, it would be misleading to assume that all nonnative-looking actors were Euro-Americans, that "Indianness" as a signifier was the outcome of physiognomy alone. On one level, one could argue that it should not have made the slightest difference to perceptions of Indianness whether Euro-Americans or Native Americans played Indian roles, since many native peoples do not conform to stereotypical preconceptions. As half Cherokee, half Polish academic Debra L. Merskin makes poignantly clear in an essay entitled "What Does One Look

Like?" Native American identity is as fluid and multidetermined as any other ethnic or cultural affiliation: "Soul and face and body, words and action contribute to our identity. We invent ourselves. We are invented by others. I'm not sure what I look like; I just know I don't look like 'one,' at least according to cultural definitions of what constitutes 'Indianness' " (281). Casting whites in leading roles and surrounding them with native extras who often did conform to widespread perceptions of Indianness was thus the outcome of a complex interplay of factors governing the hegemonic control of the nascent motion picture industry by whites, institutionalized and wider social and cultural racism, and western narratives with narrowly circumscribed and essentialized roles for native peoples. The realism of the performances in *The Call of the Wild* and *The Mended Lute* was thus measured not against the performances per se, but against what Sally L. Jones sees as the "perceived typicality of the actions and their effect on the audience" (19). Having whites perform in the way whites imagined Indians *would* perform was at once reassuring and controlling, since it meant that whites could have their cake and eat it, limiting the available representations of Native Americans by casting themselves in the leading roles. Of course, we must also recognize that these films were made on the cusp of the emerging star system, which responded to audience interest in knowing the identities of lead actors and demands from actors for screen credits and higher salaries (DeCordova).

Perhaps in the same way that the minstrel show facilitated what literary theorist Eric Lott sees as a safe "exchange of energies between two otherwise rigidly bounded and policed cultures" in nineteenth-century popular amusements, so did the substitution of white actors for Native Americans break down a number of boundaries between native and nonnative peoples (Lott 6). As a form of "nostalgic primitivism," to quote Gaylyn Studlar, this desire to return to a simpler past where "primitive urges could find expression" was part of "widespread effort to redefine American male identity in response to threats associated with modernity" (63). However, the desire to dress up as a native person cannot be reduced to either parody or a pure instance of white hegemony; it was an act bound up with contradictory emotions of longing and fear. As Lott explains, the blackface mask, like the Indian masquerade, was less a "*repetition* of power relations than a *signifier* for them—a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities." In this context, minstrelsy should be viewed less as "the incarnation of an age-old racism than an emergent social semantic figure highly responsive to the emotional demands and troubled fantasies of its audiences." It was racial desire, not racial aversion, Lott argues, that was fundamental to the practice of minstrel-show mimicry (6). Lott, therefore, provides a useful model for thinking about white imitation of American Indians in mainstream culture. In spite of the differences between minstrelsy and Native American masquerade, both evince what Lott calls "the dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy, moments of domination and moments of liberation, counterfeit and currency" (18).

Of course, what Native American actors may have thought of white actors playing Indians is open to speculation, although it is important to note criticism

of the practice of cross-casting in the trade press (see Griffiths 79–95). However, unlike minstrelsy, which began to disappear in the 1920s, the substitution of whites for Native American actors has continued, with Native Americans occasionally appearing in lead roles but more often cast as decorative extras. Given the longevity of this practice, we can investigate the experiences of contemporary native peoples working in Hollywood. For example, in *Imagining Indians* (1992), Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva, Jr., interviewed Native American men and women who appeared as extras in Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Dark Wind* (1991), an Errol Morris film shot on Hopi land and featuring Hopi ceremonies and sacred dances. Despite the sacred nature of the ceremonies and Hopi ambivalence about allowing them to be filmed, the Hopi eventually gave in to the producers of *Dark Wind* in a process that Robert Stam and Ella Shohat argue is reminiscent of the treaty negotiations of indigenous nations and the United States government at the end of the last century (Shohat and Stam 188). While native peoples have a greater say in how their people and culture are represented in contemporary media, *Imagining Indians* reminds us of the exigencies of working with powerful (white-owned) media institutions such as the film industry.

FIGURE 7.2 Death of the chief's son in D. W. Griffith's *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913). The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

The nineteenth-century commodification of native people's cultural lives for popular amusement anticipates the modern mass media in the United States; according to historian John F. Sears, part of the enduring appeal of the Buffalo Bill show was its ability to transform the events of the West into stageable theater that embodied "the triumph of civilization over . . . wilderness" (156). While Edison's *Sioux Ghost Dance* didn't entirely succeed in taming that wilderness, it nevertheless severed the Ghost Dance from any historical referent by turning it into pure spectacle. The West constructed for audiences in turn-of-the-century films, theater, photographs, paintings, postcards, and dime novels was, according to Sears, essentially a "tourist's West, performing and reenacting itself for the entertainment of Easterners and Europeans and the profit of entrepreneurs like Buffalo Bill Cody" (156). But the desire to experience the West as theater could not be satisfied by visual representation alone; audiences demanded a more immersive, life-like experience. The simultaneous emergence of tourism and national parks in the United States in the late nineteenth century gave audiences the perfect opportunity to experience a less mediated West for themselves through camping expeditions to such national parks as Yellowstone, created by President Ulysses Grant in 1872. Bolstered by talk of its physical and mental restorative functions, camping became popular in the late nineteenth century, as tourists viewed the rugged outdoor existence as a way of play-acting what it would be like to live in the "real" Wild West (Sears 156). In stark contrast to merely watching Wild West shows as live theater and in the form of one-reel films, tourists saw Yellowstone as the perfect stage for acting out fantasies of Indian attacks and cavalry rescues (Yellowstone's unusual topography, wild game, and vast size contributed to the realism of the frontier "effect").[15]

This image of a violent West was, as Sears points out, sustained in dime novels, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and in such frontier film dramas as Griffith's *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*. In one of Griffith's least sympathetic portrayals of Native Americans, Indians attack a white settlement as revenge for the death of the chieftain's son. While the film's elaborately staged battle scenes are dramatic and realistic, Native Americans are represented as dog-eating savages in a formulaic "Indian revenge" narrative. As one of the four most enduring iconographic tropes featuring Native Americans (others include the buffalo chase, the Indian council, and the Indian portrait), the attack on a wagon train, stagecoach, or remote cabin plays on white fears of native savagery and insurrection (although, as John C. Ewers has pointed out, contrary to popular myths, this emblem of the Old West occurred much less frequently in reality than it did in popular accounts) (Ewers 83, 86). Early in the film, Griffith juxtaposes white sentimentality for animals (two young orphans who are traveling to join their uncle bring along their two dogs) with Indian barbarity; as the newly arrived children unpack their belongings and are told the puppies must be kept outside, we cut to the following intertitle: "The Dog Feast Suuka Alawan 'Wayaramin Sunka? E Ya E-E Yo' ('May You Eat Dog and Live Long')." Wearing feather headdresses and loincloth type shorts, the bare-torsoed Indians dance frenetically at the start of the scene

before one of them, who had been seated with his back to the camera playing a drum, gets up and walks into the background, which acts as a signal for everyone to gather around him in preparation for the sacrificial act. Sparing us the visual details, Griffith cuts to the poignant image of the white children back at Elderbush Gulch preparing for bed.

Returning to the "Dog Feast" in the following scene, Griffith compensates for cutting away from the dog sacrifice by underscoring the aftereffects of the event; lying prostrate on the ground, the Indians look at first as though they've been in a battle (perhaps a prefiguration of the Elderbush Gulch attack to follow), with debris and disheveled bodies strewn about the ground. However, by having the chief and his son miss the feast, Griffith connects the Indians with the white settlers, who as it turns out, have just deposited the puppies outside the cabin for the night. Spotting the dogs, the chief and his son declare "Wanna Watinke" ("Now we eat"), but their efforts are foiled by a fatal gunshot wound to the chief's son delivered by one of the frontiersmen who had followed the little girl in pursuit of her dogs. Declaring revenge on the settlers of Elderbush Gulch after the chief's son's body is brought back to the camp, the Indians raise their weapons in the air and dance while the chief's son lies on a stretcher in the foreground. The visual entanglement of bare torsos and raised arms prepares the audience for the drama of the ensuing battle; moreover, the highly detailed *mise-en-scène*, including the decorative costumes of the chief and his son, the shrouded teepees and horseback riders in the extreme background, and the seated drummer in the foreground, is further evidence of Griffith's interest in verisimilitude.

However, the signifiers of ethnographic realism in these scenes are undercut by Griffith's brutal stereotyping of Native American culture, which, in conformity with the conventions of the Western genre, presents images of unchecked savagery as a motivation for white retaliation. Part of the visual and dramatic effectiveness of these scenes derives from their shared iconographic features with earlier actualities such as Edison's *Sioux Ghost Dance* and *Hopi Snake Dance*. In spite of their documentary qualities, the Edison films were nevertheless meant to elicit similar reactions from spectators as their fictional counterparts. The abject imagery of the snakes in the dancers' mouths in *Hopi Snake Dance* provokes the same revulsion as the fictional "Dog Feast." The war dance thus becomes the ready visual metaphor for Indian barbarity in general and provides audiences with a frame of reference for viewing scenes of native life. It makes little difference in these scenes whether the Indians are played by Native American extras or nonnative actors; what was important was their legibility, the fact that audiences were left in no doubt as to where their identification should lie.

Early actualities were influential not only in determining *what* aspects of Native American life would be represented cinematically, but *how* these aspects of ceremonial life could be used in a variety of filmic contexts. While Edison and his cohorts had to overcome specific challenges of access and logistics in filming Native American ceremonies at the turn of the century, their films helped create

a model of visualizing "Indianness" across several media that was to endure through the history of cinema. But this model was by no means fixed, as I have shown, and it transformed in the transition to narrative cinema when white performers began playing Native American roles. At the same time audiences enjoyed watching Florence Lawrence and Owen Moore play Indian lovers in *The Mended Lute*, they could also pay to see more realist ethnographic representations of Native Americans in such non-fictional films as Vitagraph's *Indian Basket Making* (1909), which featured Pasamaquoddy Indian women and children from Maine, and Edison's *Camping with the Blackfeet* (1910) in which the octogenarian Chief Three Bears was shown at home on the Blackfeet reservation in northwest Montana. That audiences were still interested in non-fictional images of native culture is telling, an appetite present in contemporary cultural and touristic mediations between Euro-Americans and Native Americans.

A 1998 *New York Times* article, "Indian Reservations Bank on Authenticity to Draw Tourists," reported that the Blackfeet Reservation has again become a cultural Mecca for tourists wanting to experience Native American life in all its original splendor. According to the article, European visitors to the Navajo Reservation near Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona pay $85 a night to sleep in a traditional earthen-floored hogan, a cylindrical house with no running water (A15). Although some tribes aim to show life as it is currently lived by the members of a tribe, other package tours offer a more calculated mix of heritage culture and contemporary reservation life. For example, many of the tribes that organize tourist packages attempt to portray the tribes as dynamic, vibrant cultures proud of their autochthonous identities but equally proud of their accomplishments in the modern world. Education is an important component of many of the trips, with visitor centers and tribal museums recounting harrowing stories of poverty, dispossession, relocation, boarding schools, disease, and cultural regeneration.

But these stories of the past are never allowed to overwhelm the visitors' experience, and tourists get a sense not only of Indian self-determination—tribal members are in total control of the tour operations—but a chance to witness how little life has changed for many indigenous communities that have lived on the same land for over a century. However, if contemporary cultural lives are intrinsically less interesting to the tourists in search of a pristine heritage culture, then they can always return to their local video stores in the safe knowledge that, in the world of Hollywood filmmaking at least, little has changed in the lives of American Indians.

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Notes

1 As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have pointed out, the film Western "inherited a complex intertext embracing classical epic, chivalric romance, Indianist novel, conquest fiction, the paintings of George Catlin, and the drawings of Frederic Remington" (115).

2 Notice in the Amusements section of [New York] *Evening Post*, Oct. 19, 1840, p. 3.

3 Both these kinetograph films are extant and can be viewed at the Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center.

4 See Kinetoscope Company, *Price List of Films* (May-June 1895), p. 3, and Edison Manufacturing Company, *Edison Film* (March 1900), p. 19, both cited in Musser (50).

5 According to Alice Beck Kehoe, the anti-clockwise movement symbolized the "ingathering of all people in the embrace of Our Father, God, and in his earthly deputy Jack Wilson. As the people move in harmony in the dance around the path of the son . . . so they must live and work in harmony" (7). The Ghost Dance began in the 1870s and was contained in the 1890s after the massacre at Wounded Knee where the U.S. Army launched an attack on the Sioux; 98 unarmed men and 200 women and children were killed (Gossett 36).

6 The idealized concept of the Noble Savage was applied primarily to American Indians and, by extension, to Polynesians and native peoples of West Africa transported as slaves to the New World (Parry 35).

7 However, as Julie Schimmel points out, beginning in the 1840s, paintings representing Indians in a generally favorable light were challenged by two other subject categories: scenes of conflict with whites and images of the "vanishing" or "doomed" Indian. Although the doomed-Indian genre declined in popularity in the late 1860s and 1870s, it reemerged in painting and fiction after the Plains wars of the 1880s (Schimmel 159).

8 It is possible that the Sioux dancer who gestures defiantly at the camera in Edison's *Sioux Ghost Dance* is the Sioux performer American Horse. A photograph of him taken by Gertrude Kasebier around 1900–01 appears in Fleming and Luskey (215).

9 This film is a virtual remake of Edison's *Moki Snake Dance* from 1901. Both films employ a very similar profilmic space; internal white spectators view the proceedings from behind what looks like a rope barricade (the print is obscure at this moment), although their obvious pleasure at viewing the ceremonial dances (there is a pan showing men smoking cigars and joking with one another and another shot revealing women onlookers), and from being image-makers themselves (we see a still camera being operated in one medium shot of the onlookers), is given more prominence than in Edison's film. Despite the jump cuts, awkward framing, and minimal camera movement, we are nonetheless occasionally afforded closer and more dramatic views of the snake dancers than in Edison's films. The film can be viewed at the Library of Congress.

10 The three films that make up the 1898 series, *Circle Dance, Buck Dance*, and *Wand Dance, Pueblo Indians*, were shot in an undisclosed Southwestern location (probably Arizona). Four of the five films of the 1901 series are known to have been shot in Walpi, Arizona. The 1898 films were copyrighted at the Library of Congress on Feb. 24, 1898. Of the three 1898 films, the one that offers the clearest view of the dance is *Wand Dance, Pueblo Indians* (the extreme long shot of *Circle Dance* and visually congested frame of *Buck Dance* make the dancers' movements harder to decipher). The medium long shot film features a small group of identically dressed Pueblo Indian dancers performing around a drummer who stands in the center of the frame. Three Pueblo girls sit facing the camera in the extreme foreground, with their backs to the performers, while a handful of Indian participants occupy spaces in the background and edges of the frame.

11 According to Richard Slotkin, "by deriving usable values from history, and putting those values beyond critical demystification," myth appealed to "ritualized emotions, established beliefs, habitual associations, memory, nostalgia" (18).

12 Hierarchical and evaluative strategies for constructing Indian identity had been articulated as early as the 1850s, when physician and slavery advocate Josiah C. Nott proposed a hierarchy of intellect for the peoples of America. According to Nott, "intelligence, activity, ambition, progression, high anatomical development characterize some races; stupidity, immobility, savagism, low anatomical development characterize other" (Nott and Glidden 461; cited in Berkhofer 58).

13 For more on the landscape and the American West, see Nemerov (285–343), Anderson (237–83), Treuttner, ("Ideology and Image" 27–53), and Mitchell (56–93).

14 Ironically, along with Essanay, Edison showed very little interest in Indian dramas between 1907 and 1910; according to Abel, the three companies that specialized the most in Indian subjects were Kalem, Biograph, and Bison. Selig and Vitagraph released a limited number of titles but at crucial moments in the genre's heyday (84).

15 According to Sears, as many as forty tourists on horseback at a time would embark on camping trips through Yellowstone equipped with tents and baggage wagons. Alternatively, tourists could stay in "canvas towns" set up for tourists along the main routes. On rare occasions, fantasies about the violence of the Wild West came true as seen in a case of a group of tourists being attacked by Nez Perce Indians in 1877. Having refused to be placed on a reservation, the Nez Perce were being pursued by the cavalry and decided to take the party of tourists captive. While all, with one exception, were eventually released unharmed—George Cowan was shot and abandoned by the Indians—the group was greatly relieved when the real frontier experience was eventually over (Sears 179–80).

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