NANZAN REVIEW OF AMERICAN STUDIES
Volume 47 (2025): 21-45

Contradictions of Empire within Early Cinema: Colonial Ideologies and Native American Representation

FUKUNISHI Keiko *

The late nineteenth century was a crucial time for both Native Americans and within the history of American colonialism. During this time, the United States fought to expand its territory and utilized political and cultural tools in order to finalize its colonial domination over the Native American population. Although the aggressive suppression of Native Americans had been ongoing prior to this period, various political measures issued by the federal government in the final decades of the nineteenth century made this domination more absolute, justifying and legalizing the disintegration of Native American sovereignty.

These violent political processes of colonial expansionism occurred concurrently with the invention and development of filmmaking techniques and film screening practices. Through examining early films produced in 1894 and in 1898, this paper first discusses the ways in which these films helped to shape and naturalize the colonial domination of Native Americans during this time. Studying these early films can deepen our understanding of the ideological roles that this medium played from the outset, and tracing the refinement of early film technology and its functions enables us to see the roles that early films played in shaping the American empire and its ideologies.

This paper aims to contribute to scholarly discussion on early film by illustrating that films made as early as 1894 were capable of constructing powerful arguments that I identify as proto-narratives.[1] The conceptualization of early

* Fukunishi Keiko is a part-time lecturer at Doshisha University in Kyoto. Her current research focuses on the relationships between American imperialism and visual culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

1. The term "proto-narrative" is often used to describe early cinema (i.e., those films produced until about 1906) within film scholarship. Although early cinema had not yet developed to the stage of narrative cinema—characterized by the continuity of a story that begins, develops, and concludes, and driven by the relationships of cause and effect within cinematic diegesis—some early films and their programming or curation suggest a precursory form of story. See Charles Musser, "The Eden Musée in 1898: Exhibitor as Creator," *Film and History* 5, no. 4 (December 1981): 73−83ff; Charles Musser, "Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 2 (January 1994): 203−23.

cinema is still under debate in the field of film studies. Scholars such as Tom Gunning characterize cinematic representations during the 1890s as attracting audiences with visual spectacle rather than through a clear narrative, which, he suggests, became a more defining feature of films after the first decade of the twentieth century. Gunning made an important and highly influential intervention with the publication of his article, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." Gunning argues that, until about 1906, filmmakers used cinema primarily as a way to present views to audiences, rather than to tell stories.[2] The "cinema of attraction[s]" is the phrase Gunning coined in conjunction with André Gaudreault, another film historian and theorist, in order to describe the exhibitionist traits of early films.[3] In contrast, film scholar Charles Musser's study of the curation of early films by orators and exhibitors who accompanied early film screenings argues that there is a certain range of continuity and narrativity that is created by the organization and programming of these early films.[4] This paper aims to contribute to these scholarly discussions by arguing that films were capable of making short yet powerful political arguments as early as 1894, and that, with the development of filming techniques, films were able to refine these into stronger and more coherent arguments over the following years. As Musser argues, curation was a critical aspect of formulating particular ideological stories through early moving images. However, when studying expansionist messages and representations of Native Americans within not only the curation of early films but within the images themselves and the broader historical and technical contexts around their filming, we can clearly see the steady progress of coherent film narratives. We can trace this development of narrative by examining the rapidly consolidated messaging around colonial ideologies in the late nineteenth century, and relatedly, in Native American representation, as they manifest in films. In other words, through examining early films' representations of expansionist ideologies and Native Americans from 1894 to 1898, this paper aims to demonstrate how the storytelling abilities of film developed in a complicit relationship with the development of American empire.

Second, this study contextualizes early films that feature Native Americans within scholarly discussions of Native American history and sovereignty movements, considering how filmed Native Americans unsettled the expansionist ideologies that these films themselves aimed to naturalize. While each of the early films that I will discuss in this paper were designed to construct such

2. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3−4 (1986): 64.

3. The phrase "cinema of attraction" has enjoyed great popularity and provided important new insights in film scholarship in the decades since the publication of Gunning's article.

4. Musser, "The Eden Musée in 1898." {page nos. not needed here as they are exactly the same that appear in note 1}

expansionist ideologies, I argue that Native Americans' performances within many of the early films covered here tend to denaturalize these ideologies themselves. These moments of contradiction challenge traditional understandings of imperialism as a one-way imposition of power over foreign territory and underline how American films and their ideological messages were shaped and modified through negotiations with colonial subjects, including Native Americans.

Through this contextualization, this paper aims to contribute to the discussions of empire at the turn of the twentieth century within the field of American studies. In her groundbreaking text, *The Anarchy of Empire*, Amy Kaplan examines various American cultural representations at the turn of the twentieth century, arguing that American imperial ideologies and cultural phenomena we think of as domestic or intrinsically "American" are, in fact, forged through America's expansion into foreign territory and through America's relations with ever-shifting boundaries between the domestic and the foreign, or between "at home" and "abroad."[5] She states that America's territorial expansionism and its encounters with the colonial subject shape American culture and America as a nation itself, challenging the traditional understanding of imperialism as a one-way imposition of power in distant colonies.[6] Similar to the cultural representation at the turn of the twentieth century that Kaplan analyzes in her study, early films that feature Native Americans are excellent sources to consider this ambiguous feature of American empire. As I will discuss below, although films from this period aimed to shape and naturalize expansionist messages, they were frequently complicated and disturbed by the gestures of Native Americans and their competing messages within films. Through considering early films featuring Native Americans, this study contributes to discussions of empire by examining not only how early films shape and naturalize expansionist ideologies, but also how Native Americans within these films negotiate with American film crews and complicate these films' ideological messages. I argue that these moments of contradiction within early films function as a snapshot of contestation between Native Americans and white Americans. This racial tension plays a central role in shaping and reshaping early films, and more broadly, in shaping the culture and ideological messaging of the American empire.[7]

---

5. Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11.

6. Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*, 1−11.

7. This argument also builds on Daisuke Miyao's arguments on the Lumiere brothers' films made in Japan. Miyao argues that although the Lumiere's cinematographers, who produced thirty-three films in Japan in the late nineteenth century, aimed to produce orientalist images of Japan and Japanese people as simultaneously timeless and frozen in a premodern time [added as these are completely different—one with no beginning and end {timeless} and the other a fixed point in time], these films captured various moments where the orientalist images of Japanese people are unsettled and negotiated by the Japanese figures in the images

Concurrently, my investigation of the representations of Native Americans in early cinema challenges the dearth of scholarship on race within studies of early cinema. Charles Musser is one of the most recognized scholars of early cinema within the field of film studies. Although many of his works are foundational for the study of early films, his research primarily considers how these early films shaped dominant ideologies, and how these films construct a "subject," or the position supposedly assigned to the film viewer by the institution of cinema.[8] Therefore, most non-white subjects that appear within early films fall outside the purview of his studies. While I consider the means by which early films shaped expansionist ideologies at the end of the nineteenth century, I also aim to contextualize these films within Native American performance studies, Native American history, and similar fields in order to consider the cultural and political significations of the viewable gestures of Native Americans in early films. In doing so, my analysis of Native American performances in early cinema unsettles the imbalanced racial power relationships that tend to be recreated and naturalized within early film scholarship.

Lastly, through studying the actual footage of Edison films from 1894 to 1898, which represent the earliest moving images framing Native American performances and contextualizing them within both the cinematic visual culture during this time and the history of expansionism, this paper challenges the lack of discussion surrounding early films within the fields of American studies and Native American studies. Native American cultural and performance studies scholars such as Linda McNenly, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Jaye T. Darby, Courtney Elkin Mohler, and Christy Stanlake have published detailed studies exploring the cultural meanings of Native American performances within popular culture of the time, including within the variety show known as Buffalo Bill's Wild West. As I will discuss, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American government banned virtually all of the dances, songs, and ceremonies of Native Americans, aside from those that were performed within the context of American popular entertainment.[9] Under this intense assimilationist

---

themselves. Similarly, the gestures of non-white subjects within many of the films I discuss appear to contradict with the dominant and white supremacist meanings of race that the films aim to construct. I argue that these visual elements enrich the representation of America as a nation and an empire, just as they highlight the complexity of American empire and its culture. Daisuke Miyao, *Japonisme and the Birth of Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 74–93.

8. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 261; Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 126–27.

9. Jaye T. Darby, Courtney Elkin Mohler, and Christy Stanlake, *Critical Companion to Native American and First Nations Theatre and Performance: Indigenous Spaces* (New York:

policy, these scholars make the important argument that Native American performers experienced performances within popular cultural outlets such as Buffalo Bill's as a crucial space for their cultural survival. Therefore, their dancing in this context functioned as important significations of their cultural, political, and spiritual agency.[10] Nonetheless, although Edison's films offer one of the earliest preserved representations of Native American performances, scholarship within Native American cultural and performance studies has almost entirely omitted any discussion of these performances captured in early films. Within American studies, however, scholar Tria Blu Wakpa notably contextualizes the gestures of the Native American dance comprising the film entitled *Buffalo Dance* (1894) through the cultural conventions of Native American culture and analyzes these gestures within the framework of Indigenous sign language. Through this framework, she argues that Native American performers within this film communicate the sovereignty, survival, and futurity of the Lakota Nation for Native American viewers.[11] While Wakpa's study is eye-opening, it is limited to the examination of only one film and lacks broader contextualization within cinematic representations during this time. Through contextualizing early films from the 1890s not only within Native American studies but also within the cinematic visual culture during this time, and considering the relationships between the dominant ideologies shaped by these films and the contested meanings that filmed Native Americans construct, I explore the cultural meanings in early films of Native American performances and the importance of these performances for shaping and complicating American cinematic culture and the American empire itself.

Native Americans in Early Films

During the 1890s, the sovereignty of Native Americans, which had been challenged ever since Westerners first set foot on the American continent, rapidly disintegrated through various territorial measures and legal legislation. These historical processes happened simultaneously to the invention and development of films. This section argues that films produced in 1894, while constructing

---

Methuen Drama, 2020), 26–27; Jacqueline Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing; Native American Modern Dance Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 23, 31–32.

10. Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 69–70; see also Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake, *Critical Companion*, 32; Linda S. McNenly, *Native Performers in Wild West Shows: From Buffalo Bill to Euro Disney* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 89.

11. Tria Blu Wakpa, "From Buffalo Dance to Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala, 1894–2020: Indigenous Human and More-Than-Human Choreographies of Sovereignty and Survival," *American Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (December 2022): 898–904.

powerful expansionist ideologies, were already being complicated by the performances of Native American actors. As I will discuss, the messages of these films are conveyed by addressing the camera directly. Therefore, although these films resemble Gunning's "cinema of attraction[s]," they do not simply exhibit views but rather make counter-sovereignty arguments through referencing various cultural and historical representations during this time. This section will first underscore how films from 1894 shape and naturalize expansionist ideologies, and will then frame the ways in which the performances of Native American casts deliver messages of Native American sovereignty and demonstrate their awareness and understanding for appropriating Western technology, complicating the expansionist ideologies. Before focusing on the early films themselves, however, below I will first briefly outline the settlement-era history of American colonialism, which provides an important historical context for these films.

The settlement era of the United States and its continued legacy were shaped through two related courses of action: first, the mass murder of Native American people and the invasion and denial of the nations that they had built; and second, the justification and naturalization of American settlers' territorial and economic expansionism as the necessary course of historical development, obliterating the sovereignty of Native Americans in the process. American studies scholar Manu Karuka calls this series of actions, which helped shape the American historical narrative during this era, "counter-sovereignty."[12] There was no national territory of "America" that existed prior to the Anglo-Saxon colonization of Native American territories, and therefore the development of America was founded through settlers fighting against or violating the sovereignty of Native American nations.[13] Indeed, by the time Europeans traveled to the American continent in the late fifteenth century, 112 million people had already been living on the continent.[14] American settlers killed 95 percent of this Native American population through enslavement, mass murder, and disease.[15] They also

12. Although actions of colonial violence over Native Americans tend to be justified, glorified, and naturalized under the narrative of American history, Karuka denaturalizes these historical tropes by studying archive materials that show how the relationships between immigrant laborers and Native Americans developed under colonial expansionism, and how their responses to the United States government function at times as a powerful critique to the racism and contradictions of America as a nation. Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Works, and the Trans-Continental Railroad* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), xii−19.

13. Ibid., xii.

14. William M. Denevan, *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 1−34; M. Jaimes Annette, ed., *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston, MA: South End Press, n.d.), 23−54.

15. David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xii, 3−4, 57−60, 87−119; Denevan, *The Native*

completely ignored and denied these Native Americans' political rights and demands, and forcefully removed and displaced them from their homes from as early as the first decades of the 1700s.[16] American settlers justified this physical and political violence against Native Americans through reducing Native Americans to sinful, monstrous creatures,[17] and glorified settlers' expansionism as a necessary and heroic duty with which these settlers, selected by God, were destined to fulfill.[18]

Within this historical process of counter-sovereignty, the industrial activities of American settlers, including the construction of a transcontinental railroad, went hand in hand with the expansionists' territorial measures.[19] Through these settler activities, the natural resources Native Americans had used for centuries were made unavailable to them. In pulling out stands of trees, diverting streams, and turning the land and water through methods that disrupted the habitats of fish and game animals, American settler activity fundamentally changed the ecological balance of the land that Native Americans maintained.[20] In addition, the building of the transcontinental railroad greatly unsettled the sovereignty of Native American nations, not only by increasing the prevalence of crime in Native American territories, but also by intensifying pressure for the federal government to legalize the invasion into the territories of Native American nations.[21]

Visual images were on the front lines of the American settlers' efforts to overturn Native American political autonomy. In order for the federal government to get access to Native American lands and resources in the area, these economic interests had to gain support from both United States politicians and the American public, which would create the environment for laws to be generated and passed, ultimately allowing the United States to disintegrate the political autonomy of Native nations.[22] However, some of these Native American nations, such as the Cherokee Nation, maintained powerful political, legal, and welfare systems that were equivalent to or even superior to the systems established by the federal

---

Population of the Americas in 1492, 1−34.

16. John P. Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians: Northern Indian Removal* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 122−35; John P. Bowes, "American Indian Removal Beyond the Removal Act," n.d., 67−81; Christopher D. Haveman, *Rivers of Sand: Creek Indian Emigration, Relocation, and Ethnic Cleansing in the American South*, 1st ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 1−11.

17. Stannard, *American Holocaust*, 208−11.

18. Ibid., 240−41.

19. Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, xi−2; Julie L. Reed, *Serving the Nation: Cherokee Sovereignty and Social Welfare, 1800−1907* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 3780−95, Kindle. [the numbers here I guess are not page nos.; please see my comment above]

20. Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, 7.

21. Reed, *Serving the Nation*, 3780−4088; Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, 7−61.

22. Reed, *Serving the Nation*, 3780−3809.

government.[23] Until the late 1800s, the Cherokee Nation actively launched a series of press campaigns in order to challenge the increase in illegal activities of the incursion of Anglo-American settlers, and also to convince the American public of the superiority of the welfare and educational systems that the nation was able to offer for both Native American and settler populations, in order to guard their political rights and independence.[24] Therefore, as part of the countereffort to create the foundation and support to destroy the political rights and independence of Native Americans, American settlers used cultural materials such as early film to craft and reproduce the monolithic stereotype that Native Americans were uneducated and uncivilized savages,[25] and that they were already defeated and entirely dependent on the United States.[26]

Through examining early moving images produced by Thomas A. Edison during the mid-to-late 1890s, the following section discusses how early moving images aided in shaping and naturalizing these racial and expansionist arguments against Native Americans. An examination of the ways in which Native Americans were represented within this early history of moving images clarifies how films were used as a powerful means to deliver political ideas and arguments from the very beginning of their use and distribution.

Kinetoscopes

The kinetoscope was an early motion picture exhibition device where one individual was able to see a moving image through a peep-hole window at the top of the device. This device, invented by Edison in May 1891 and first used commercially in April 1894, became an extremely popular form of entertainment at amusement parks, world's fairs, and phonograph parlors, and remained popular from 1894 to 1895 for the middle-class audiences who could afford the fee of 25 cents.[27] Since the invention of nascent forms of cinema, the camera's ability to capture objects moving at high speeds earned films an elevated status as a special medium able to reproduce reality more directly than other mediums.[28] The movement of objects and figures in the image fascinated Americans and earned the kinetoscope a reputation for its "perfect reproduction" of reality.[29]

---

23. Ibid., 3764−4019.

24. Ibid.

25. Alexandra Harmon, "American Indians and Land Monopolies in the Gilded Age," *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (June 2003): 109; Reed, *Serving the Nation*, 3804.

26. Ibid., 3780−3809.

27. Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 57, 31−45; Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 81−84.

28. Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 58.

29. Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 104−5; see also Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 54−55.

Kinetoscopes featuring Native Americans, which were the earliest representations of Native Americans in moving images, relied on Buffalo Bill's Wild West, the highly popular traveling entertainment enterprise during this time, not only by utilizing the same actors and themes,[30] but also through shared ideological messages. Before the emergence of actuality films,[31] kinetoscope pictures initially relied on contemporary popular entertainment such as vaudeville performers as subjects.[32] In 1894, William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, the head of the Edison Manufacturing Company's Kinetograph Department, produced a total of eight films featuring Native Americans, all employed by Buffalo Bill's Wild West and reenacting themes from this show, in Edison's Black Maria studio in West Orange, New Jersey.[33]

One of the most popular features in Buffalo Bill's Wild West was an action-packed reenactment of early settlement-era history.[34] This historical reenactment was a typical example of visualizing and reifying counter-sovereignty ideologies. As many scholars have pointed out, within the reenactment of early settler history by Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Native Americans' political rights were completely removed from the history of America, and the land was represented as if it were an open land awaiting white American settlers. American settlers and their territorial expansionism were represented simply and yet powerfully as heroic and

30. Sarah Blackstone, *Buckskin, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 26−27; Kristen Whissel, "Placing the Spectator on the Scene of History: The Battle Re-enactment at the Turn of the Century, from Buffalo Bill's Wild West to the Early Cinema," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 22, no. 3 (2002): 227.

31. Actuality films were a genre that featured depictions of daily life and were popular in the mid-1890s. For more information, see Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 118, 232−338.

32. Musser, *Before Nickelodeon*, 52−53.

33. Buffalo Bill's Wild West was active between 1883 and 1913 and appeared before audiences in U.S. and European cities, including New York, Atlanta, Buffalo, Manchester, London, Rome, Paris, and at a number of World's Fairs, including Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Edison's films were considered as promotional material for Buffalo Bill's Wild West and the Congress of Rough Riders of the World, which set up camp in Ambrose Park in Brooklyn as a form of entertainment; see Blackstone, *Buckskin, Bullets, and Business*, 26−27; Whissel, "Placing the Spectator on the Scene of History," 227; Jeffrey Geiger, *American Documentary Film: Projecting the Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 35; Wakpa, "From Buffalo Dance to Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala, 1894−2020," 898; Michael Gaudio, *Sound, Image, Silence: Art and the Aural Imagination in the Atlantic World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 126.

34. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992), 29−87; see also Whissel, "Placing the Spectator"; Blackstone, *Buckskin, Bullets, and Business*; and Jonna Eagle, *Imperial Affects: Sensational Melodrama and the Attractions of American Cinema* (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 71.

necessary actions. Moreover, the displacement of Native Americans was justified by portraying them as an inherently violent, vicious, and hostile racial group, serving as mere obstacles that white settlers inevitably needed to destroy in order to achieve their heroic mission of settlement and expansionism.[35] By representing the history of the early colonial period as a heroic mission of American settlers, and constructing Native Americans as a monolithic, depoliticized, and demonized racial group, the historical reenactments of Buffalo Bill's Wild West naturalized the obliteration of the sovereignty and political rights of Native Americans.[36]

One of the ways in which early films shaped counter-sovereignty ideologies was through marketing the performances in these films as an extension of performances by Buffalo Bill's Wild West. In situating these short kinetoscopes by Native American performers within this ideological context, Native Americans' performances in these films immediately functioned as a signifier of their hostility and savagery, obstacles to the civilizing and heroic missions of American settlers. Props and texts in the films were part of the means by which filmmakers invited audiences to view these moving images and Buffalo Bill's performances as linked. In the case of the film *Buffalo Dance* (Edison, 1894), for example, while the actual dance being performed is not in fact the Buffalo dance but rather the Omaha dance, the performance was entitled "Buffalo Dance" in order to market the film effectively as part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, as well as to place the performances within the show's ideological contexts.[37] Within *Sioux Ghost Dance* (Edison, 1894), a large sign is placed in the foreground which reads "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," which clearly aims to contextualize the performances of Native Americans within the settler colonial framework of the show.[38]

Sioux Ghost Dance references the Wounded Knee Massacre, and this reference was another means by which early kinetoscope pictures bolstered counter-sovereignty arguments. In the late nineteenth century, many Lakota Indians practiced a particular dance known as the Ghost Dance as a means of spiritual relief in response to famine brought about by failed crops, a reduction of rations, and, ultimately, the presence and actions of white settlers.[39] Although the dance

35. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 29−87; Eagle, *Imperial Affects*, 69−71; Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 59−61.

36. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 29−87; Eagle, *Imperial Affects*, 69−71; Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 59−61; Whissel, "Placing the Spectator on the Scene of History," 230, 237.

37. Wakpa, "From Buffalo Dance to Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala, 1894−2020," 898.

38. Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 125−26.

39. Gaudio, "Dancing for the Kinetograph: The Lakota Ghost Dance and the Silence of Early Cinema," 131−35; Raymond J. DeMallie, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account," *Pacific Historical Review* 51, no. 4 (November 1982): 385−405; Sam A. Maddra, *Hostiles? The Lakota Ghost Dance and Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 1−30.

was an unarmed ritual call for a return to pre-settler contact, the federal government interpreted this dance as a performance with hostile undertones. In the midst of the military's search for arms in December 1890, a Lakota man inadvertently discharged a shot, and as a result, American forces murdered more than 300 unarmed Lakota Indians.[40] Art Historian Michael Gaudio points out that many Americans during this time perceived this confrontation as the final chapter in the American war against Native Americans and argues that the Ghost Dance of the Lakota Indians functioned as a symbol of Native Americans' primitivism and hostility over which the white race must triumph.[41] Filmed only four years after the actual massacre, *Sioux Ghost Dance* reminds American viewers of Native Americans' hostility toward the white race and of white Americans' social and technological superiority over, and complete suppression of, Native Americans.[42] By titling this performance *Sioux Ghost Dance*, and relying on the historical context surrounding the name of the performance itself, which would have been familiar to most Anglo-Americans viewing the film, this film invites audiences to feel the connection between Native Americans' performance in the kinetoscope images and the ongoing dispossession and displacement of Native Americans. In drawing audiences into visual "encounters" with Native American performers entirely contextualized through colonial associations such as these, kinetoscopes such as *Sioux Ghost Dance* shape and naturalize counter-sovereignty arguments.

Kinetoscopes also delivered and normalized discourse on the primitivism of Native American culture through relying on print coverage of the shoots themselves. Various newspapers covered the filming of Native American performers from Buffalo Bill's Wild West in Edison's studio, and oftentimes represented gestures made by the Native American actors as evidence of their lack of ability to understand the functions of the kinetograph or other specialized technology used in Edison's Black Maria studio.[43] A powerful example of this can be found in an 1894 newspaper article from the *New York Herald*, which

---

40. John Andrews, "Wounded Knee: The Massacre," *South Dakota Magazine*, vol. 31, issue 4 (November/December, 2011), 25−26, 29−30; Erik K. Calaugh, "The Evolution of a Massacre in Newspaper Depictions of the Sioux Indians at Wounded Knee, 1876−1891," *Atlanta Review of Journalism History* 12*,* no. 1 (2015): 38−40; David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019); Gaudio, "Dancing for the Kinetograph," 131−35; DeMallie, "The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account," 385−405; Maddra, *Hostiles?* , 1−30. {I cannot find the highlighted title anywhere on the web; should this be the *Atlanta Review of Journalism History*?} Thanks for pointing that out—this was a typo!

41. Gaudio, "Dancing for the Kinetograph," 140−41.

42. Ibid., 140.

43. Aby M. Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 53; Gaudio, "Dancing for the Kinetograph," 129−30.

covered an incident in which Holy Bear, one of the Lakota visitors to the studio, was injured in the process of picking up a large cable that carried power to the studio. The whole article described the maneuvering of Native Americans within the studio space as evidence of their ignorance and treated the injury of Holy Bear as a signifier of their surrender to Anglo-American culture. The article summarized the whole incident, stating that: "[The unfortunate accident of Holy Bear] was probably more effective in demonstrating to the red men, the power and supremacy of the white man, for savagery and the most advanced science stood face to face and there was a triumph for one without the spilling of a single drop of blood."[44] The article celebrates the injury of Holy Bear as evidence of Native Americans' inferiority and their loss against Western civilization while abstracting the actual details of the incident. It frames Native Americans here as literally pacified by the progress of Anglo-Americans, fitting into the broader ideological thrust of the period's counter-sovereignty movement, in which Native Americans were destined to be defeated by the civilization of Anglo-Americans, overwriting the incident as evidence of Native Americans' ignorance and inferiority.[45]

While kinetoscopes normalize white Americans' invasion of Native American territories and their colonial domination of America, the performances of Native Americans within these films and in this modern space also signified Native Americans' cultural survival, challenging the notion that they were defeated. In fact, many Native American performers at the time experienced their performances, even within formats of popular culture such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West, as an expression of their cultural, political, and religious views. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American government banned the dances, songs, and ceremonies of Native Americans, stating that these activities were primitive and that they remained obstacles to Native American assimilation into Anglo-American culture.[46] In the context of this intense assimilationist policy, Linda McNenly argues that Native American performers such as Standing Bear experienced performances within the Wild West show as a crucial space for their cultural survival, where they were able to live their culture outwardly.[47] Jacqueline Shea Murphy also argues that even though performances contained within spaces such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West had to conform to the audience's and producer's expectations of how an Indian should act and dance,

44. "Red Man Again Conquered: Easily Subdued Before the Rapid Fire of The Kinetoscope at Edison's Laboratory. Wonder of the Savages: Holy Bear of an Investigative Turn, Became Unwittingly Attached to a Live Wire," *New York Herald*, September 25, 1894; Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890–1900* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 128–29.

45. Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890–1900*, 129.

46. Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake, *Critical Companion*, 26–27; Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 23, 31–32.

47. McNenly, *Native Performers in Wild West Shows*, 89.

and therefore functioned as a form of circumscription, their dancing continued to invoke dancers' cultural, political, and spiritual agency.[48] The performers saw more of a connection between the stage and their own worldviews and way of life than non-Native American audience members did.[49] Seen in this light, even though many of Edison's films directly reference Buffalo Bill's Wild West and actively placed Native Americans' dance performances in the context of a counter-sovereignty narrative where Native Americans were considered a savage race, destined to be destroyed by American settlers, their actual dance functioned as a manifestation of their Native American identity in a fraught modern context, signifying their cultural survival and political beliefs.

Tria Blu Wakpa points out that Lakota Indian performers' costumes and gestures in Edison's *Buffalo Dance* in particular highlight this message of the survival of Native American nations, speaking back directly to the counter-sovereignty arguments made by settlers and their government. Wakpa notes that the performance that had been circulated as *Buffalo Dance* in Edison's films was in fact a performance of the Omaha dance, which features the movement of chickens. Wakpa argues that since chickens signify masculinity, potency, and maintenance of one's own territories within Native American culture, the performances and costumes that symbolize the physical appearances and gestures of chickens signify the sovereignty of the Lakota nation.[50] In addition, some of the gestures that are made in the film are actually Native American sign language, which directly communicates the survival and continued nation-building of the Lakota nation and their spirituality in resistance to settler colonialism.[51] In this way, Wakpa maintains that the Native American performers in *Buffalo Dance* utilized modern technologies to deliver and advance the political purpose of continuing to build and maintain the Native American nation.

When the kinetoscope performances of Native American actors are placed in this context of the Native American sovereignty movement, it becomes apparent that kinetoscopes functioned as a powerful cultural art that highlighted the contradiction of American racial ideologies. As mentioned, early studio kinetoscopes constructed racial arguments in alignment with counter-sovereignty ideologies through placing the performances of Native Americans within the context of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, using both para-textual information and details within the images. However, when the actual performances and costumes

48. Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 69−70; see also Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake, *A Critical Companion*, 32.

49. Through analyzing the lyrics of Ghost Dance, Michael Gaudio argues that some versions of these lyrics also communicated Lakota Indians' commitment for further nation and community building. Gaudio, "Dancing for the Kinetograph," 153−55.

50. Wakpa, "From Buffalo Dance to Tatanka Kcizapi Wakpala, 1894−2020," 904−6.

51. Ibid., 907−10.

of Lakota performers are placed in the context of Native American culture, their performances simultaneously functioned as manifestations of their cultural survival and their commitment to cultural and political independence. This draws us into questioning the validity of white Americans' heroism and the demonization of Native Americans constructed to drive colonial expansionism.

Further, in Edison's films, including the aforementioned *Buffalo Dance* and *Sioux Ghost Dance*, Native American performers danced and gestured directly to the camera, communicating their commitment to sovereignty through their clear understanding of how to utilize modern technology. Within *Buffalo Dance*, performers' gestures clearly develop in relationship to the function of the camera. As the three performers move to the foreground of the frame (or closest to the camera), they slow down significantly and stay momentarily in front of the camera. There, while keeping their eyes fixed on the camera, they stamp, squat, and raise their chests and arms, which, as Wakpa discusses, are referencing the movements of a chicken.[52] All of these gestures are made directly to the camera. In contrast, as the dancers move to the background and circle behind other performers in the foreground, their gestures become sustained and subdued, primarily lowering their backs, crouching, and looking down. Movement develops with a powerful emphasis on the foreground of the shot, which indicates these Lakota performers' understanding of the nature and function of the camera, and their desire to communicate their political and spiritual messages with this function in mind. Their dance is something not just to perform, but something to be framed and seen via the camera. A similar phenomenon is seen in *Sioux Ghost Dance*. Within the film, several performers who have been squeezed onto the cramped, tiny stage of Edison's studio appear to take turns and compete to exhibit themselves, lowering their hips and stamping in front of the camera. These performances in the image underline their knowledge and ability to take advantage of the camera, since the foreground of the image visibly becomes the focal point of competition and the coveted space from which to perform.

The development and organization of Native American actors' performances in kinetoscope films around a strong awareness of the camera highlights their "mastery" of this equipment, taking advantage of modern technologies for their own political aims, which then underlines the contradictions within American empire and imperial ideologies. While kinetoscopes—both the content of the films as well as the surrounding process of filming in the studio and the broader media coverage of this process—aimed to construct Native Americans as an uncivilized and primitive racial group,[53] the organization of these filmed dances around direct address inherently underscores an understanding of the functions

52. Ibid., 904−10.

53. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 29−87; Eagle, *Imperial Affects*, 69−71; Shea Murphy, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, 59−61.

and mechanisms of kinetographs that allowed Native Americans to appropriate this Western technology for their political messages. The competing messages that these early films construct indirectly highlight how racial messages of American empire are actually negotiated and contested between American empire and Native Americans, and how these moments of negotiation and contradiction form American national identity during this time just as they are simultaneously deforming the central meaning of American imperial ideologies. When these early kinetoscopes are studied in the contexts of the history of expansionism and Native American cultural and performance studies, these films appear as a snapshot of the negotiation of racial power between Native Americans and white Americans at the turn of the twentieth century and of the anarchic nature of American empire and its national culture.

Location Films

In the middle of the 1890s, two simultaneous technological innovations revolutionized the practice of watching moving pictures and substantiated people's perceptions of the camera as a device that captures reality. The first innovation was the invention of a new projector, which allowed multiple people to sit and watch moving images on a screen together as a communal activity. In the United States, Charles Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat invented a new projector called the Phantoscope, which was marketed to the public as the Vitascope and exhibited publicly in Georgia in October 1895, while in France, the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, invented the Cinématographe, publicly exhibited in December 1895.[54] Prior to these developments, moving picture viewing was an isolated activity, in which only one person at a time could view a film through a peephole. Both the Cinématographe and the Vitascope gained popularity at vaudeville theaters across the United States.[55] The lifelike and life-size representation of figures projected on a large screen heightened the sense of immediacy of the visual representations and fascinated viewers.[56] The second invention that heightened people's belief in the camera as a realistic device was the invention of the portable camera. While all of the films produced in 1894, such as those discussed above, were shot in Edison's Black Maria studio using popular professional performers, the construction of new portable cameras by the Edison Company in spring 1896 allowed for the inclusion of naturalistic backgrounds and larger numbers of nonprofessional actors as filmed subjects.[57] The portable camera's ability to film figures and objects outside of the studio

54. Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 57; Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, 135–37.
55. Ibid., 140–43.
56. Ibid., 104, 115–18.
57. Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon*, 65–67.

intensified people's belief in the medium's ability to capture reality.

These technological innovations allowed for the creation of location films featuring Native Americans from late 1897 to early 1898, which was a crucial time for both the counter-sovereignty movement of American settlers and the sovereignty movements of Native Americans. As mentioned, American settlers' industrial activities, including the building of a transcontinental railroad, shaped and naturalized the foundations of settler colonialism.[58] Since the territorial measures of the American settler's government went hand in hand with the development of the railroad company, the federal government developed more aggressive means to legally dissolve the sovereignty of Native American nations as the transcontinental railroad expanded.[59] With the Dawes Act of 1887 and the Curtis Act passed in June 1898, the federal government finally possessed the legal means to destroy Native American nations through dismantling communal landholding and tribal governments.[60]

Produced in late 1897 and early 1898, the location films of Native Americans took the form of a racial argument. These films functioned as a powerful political means for campaigning against the sovereignty movement of Native American populations. While the kinetoscope films I discussed in the previous section make arguments primarily through relying on preexisting cultural representations, location films during this time came to show particular sites or interactions between Native Americans and Anglo-Saxons and offered a specific interpretation of what is represented in order to use the images as evidence for counter-sovereignty arguments. Although the arguments within these films do not take the form of a story in the sense of later narrative films, i.e., where a story begins, develops, and concludes, these location films are clearly designed to convey racially charged arguments that resemble stereotypical images of noble Indians.

The image of noble Indians in this context refers to the American imagination of Native Americans as occupying a pristine existence, living in the Edenic space of the American West and uncontaminated by influences of whites or modern civilization.[61] As I will discuss below, many location films produced in 1898

58. Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, xi−2; Reed, *Serving the Nation*, 3780−95.

59. Reed, *Serving the Nation*, 3780−95, 4048−88; Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, xi-xiv.

60. Geary Hobson, Janet McAdams, and Kathryn Walkiewicz, eds., *The People Who Stayed: Southeastern Indian Writing After Removal* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 1−23; Reed, *Serving the Nation*, 3780−4528.

61. The imagery of the noble Indian as a resident of Eden who is removed from the corruption of Western civilization was initially developed in French literature from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth century and became popularized in wider Western literature. For more information, see Alison Griffiths, "Science and Spectacle: Native American Representation in Early Cinema," in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. Elizabeth S. Bird (New York: Routledge, 1996), 82−88; Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 72−75.

represent Native Americans in a wide-open prairie, appearing to be uninfluenced by the activities or economic development of American settlements. Most of these location films feature Native American life on reservations, and visual cues in the films suggest that daily life is completely separated both socially and geographically from Western culture and civilization. However, only 20 percent of the southern region's pre-removal population avoided westward relocation and managed to stay in their ancestral homes.[62] Therefore, as these location films were being made, most Native Americans were in fact living in areas in which American settlers lived, while actively fighting against the federal government's encroachment. Representing Native Americans as living in remote areas that are clearly separated from settlers and their activities displaces Native Americans from the geopolitics of the time and from the political struggle they engaged in throughout the history of the United States. In doing so, these propagandistic representations helped support the federal government's removal policy and naturalized the idea that Native Americans had already been removed.

At the same time, however, the gestures of Native Americans included within these location films continued to highlight their cultural survival, complicating the meanings of race that aligned with the counter-sovereignty movements these films aimed to deliver. Although these location films were primarily designed and made to construct racial arguments in alignment with counter-sovereignty movements—the representations of figures projected on a large screen heightened the verisimilitude of these racial arguments—the actual gestures of Native Americans included within these films were also forms of cultural expression with entirely separate sets of meanings for the performers engaging in these gestures. When location films are interpreted from the perspective of Native American culture and history, the elements that are included in the films function to highlight the vitality of Native American culture, and bring into focus the racial tension and contestation between Native Americans and white Americans that are concealed within the ideology of "noble Indians" and expansionist ideologies. These moments denaturalize the validity of the ideological messages and highlight the contradictory nature of American empire.

Previous discussions of Edison's location films have been limited by a lack of attention to the ways in which these films actively shaped and naturalized settler colonial ideologies. Many scholars believed that cameras could be used to reproduce reality. For instance, Alison Griffiths analyzes written materials such as letters and diaries written by film directors like Thomas Edison, Edward Curtis, and Joseph K. Dixon, as well as their use of elements of mise-en-scène associated

62. Jane Dinwoodie, "Evading Indian Removal in the American South," *The Journal of American History* (June 2021): 17−21; Hobson, McAdams, and Walkiewicz, *The People Who Stayed*, 1−23.

with studio productions such as wigs, costumes, and sets,[63] and articulates how these filmmakers claimed the authenticity of their representations through such actions as affiliating with anthropologists while incongruously creating inauthentic representations by using filmmaking techniques associated with studio films.[64] Griffiths's approach seems to suggest that location films could produce real and objective representations of Native Americans if none of the elements of the mise-en-scène associated with studio filming were used.[65] This belief that a camera should be able to produce unmediated and authentic representations of non-whites is found both explicitly and implicitly throughout scholarship on visual anthropology. In his study of the ways in which anthropologists influenced the development of audio-visual technologies, Brian Hochman also criticizes the ways in which early filmmakers did not objectively film non-white subjects but instead changed their appearance using exaggerated props and by altering their outfits.[66] These authors focus on props and other theatrical elements, implying that their absence would bring us closer to "the real."

The idea that films might be able to offer an unmediated representation of reality is a long-lived misperception within much scholarship on film that emerged from the particular representations that are enabled by photographic mediums. Because cameras capture various objects made available in front of the lens through the reflection of light, the information included in films is full of complexity and contradiction. Through the detailed depiction of objects that existed in a unique moment in the past, photographic images such as those captured by films serve to indicate ontological connections between the objects that once existed in front of the camera and the objects in the image.[67] The physical relationship between the photographic images and the objects heighten the realism of the image.

However, the camera's physical relationship with reality does not necessarily mean that film can objectively represent reality. This is because, as Judith Butler points out, even the simple process of framing objects shapes ideological

63. "Mise-en-scène" is a French term meaning "placing on stage" in English. It refers to all of the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed, including the settings and props, lighting, costumes and make up, and behaviors, actions, gestures, and presence of filmed figures. See David Bordwell et al., *Film Art: An Introduction*, 11th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2013), 3, 112, 113−40; Ed Sikov, *Film Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 16−18, 43.

64. Griffiths, "Science and Spectacle," 82−88.

65. Ibid.

66. Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 112−39.

67. Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, eds. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 24, 34−36.

messages, and ideological forces shape the framing as well. As Butler argues, the "framing of reality" not only means deciding what is included in and excluded from the viewers' perspective, but also how particular objects might appear to viewers such as through angling, lighting, and focus.[68] Framing objects, therefore, is a way of constructing, elaborating, and validating particular perspectives on the world.[69] In addition, particular ways of framing a photograph convey visual norms or ideologically constructed perceptions of reality, created over the course of historical processes that render particular interpretations of subjects manifested in the photographs as legible.[70] Although the camera's physical relationship to reality creates the impression that photographic mediums might be capable of offering objective depictions of reality, particular interpretations of photographers and dominant ideologies are encrypted through the ways in which objects are framed.

The following section argues that location films served as a powerful means to naturalize American settlers' counter-sovereignty arguments against Native American nations through utilizing both framing as well as texts popularly circulated as promotional material for films known as catalogue descriptions and typically consumed via voiceover narration by orators who accompanied the film screenings (particularly during the Vitascope era). Particular ways of framing natural backgrounds and Native Americans created powerful arguments against the sovereignty of Native Americans and naturalized the ongoing removal policy. In addition, unlike earlier kinetoscopes, where the moving images depended largely on entertainment forms outside of the films themselves, like Buffalo Bill's Wild West, these location films shaped political and racial arguments independent of other entertainment during this era. As the federal government's effort to disintegrate the sovereignty of Native American nations intensified, films simultaneously developed to shape a much clearer and nuanced argument in alignment with counter-sovereignty ideologies.

The use of empty reservation settings within location films is an important aspect of the counter-sovereignty arguments that were shaped via these images. All of the location films featuring Native Americans were shot on Native American reservations, which appear to be only sparsely populated and placed in wide open areas accompanied by only a few teepees. As Joanna Hearne argues, the representation of Native American families as separated and ruptured, and, therefore, the supposed inability of Native Americans to develop thriving cultural networks, communities, and political independence, were typical within mainstream cultural characterizations. These representations naturalize one of the dominant tropes in the history of both the Western cultural and federal Native

68. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 65−72.
69. Ibid.
70. Judith Butler, "Photography, War, Outrage," *PMLA* 120, no. 3 (May 2005): 826−27.

American policy rhetoric, the "vanishing Indian," a mistaken and yet widespread belief that native people were destined to disappear from the continent, either through depopulation or amalgamation with settler populations.[71] As Joanna Hearne points out, representing Native Americans and their way of life through sparse groupings of teepees containing only a few residents within the reservation implied that Native Americans were already defeated and that their sovereignty was no longer an issue.

The films *Circle Dance, Ute Indians* (Edison, 1898) and *Buck Dance, Ute Indians* (Edison, 1898) offer two examples of this representation. Both of these films were shot on Native American reservations and frame their subjects with an extreme long shot,[72] so that the landscape is the predominant content of the image. In the background, there are a few tepees framed at the foot of vast low foothills rising from the prairie. Representing Native American communities through framing a limited grouping of teepees dwarfed by the expansive, empty, natural background of the reservation creates the impression that Ute Indians are isolated or sparsely located. The absence of much of the infrastructure that was a prominent part of most Native Americans' contemporary lives and well-being also suggests that they were no longer a powerful political presence.

In addition, through filming American soldiers observing Native Americans contained within a camp, the location films project Native Americans as already defeated. Various location films featuring Native Americans limited the number of framed community members, and also oftentimes include American soldiers who are visibly observing these Native Americans. For instance, within both of the films mentioned above, several American soldiers are shown in both the middle ground and background observing the performers closely. These visual details communicate the idea that American soldiers were keeping close watch over Native Americans who were already under their control. Through representing Native Americans using only a few figures who were monitored and protected by American soldiers within a reservation setting, these films communicate that the Native Americans are already defeated and domesticated under white American rule, giving credence to the myth of "vanishing Indians."

Catalogue descriptions were one of most essential means through which early location films created racial messages within films. These descriptions help shape these messages by fixing the meanings of the gestures in the image within the

71. Joanna Hearne, *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 7−9.

72. The term "extreme long shot" describes a particular range of camera distance used when the film was made. The camera distance determines the size of the object that appears on screen. When extreme long framing is used, the scale of the object shown is very small, and a building, landscape, or crowd of people will fill the screen. For more information, see Bordwell et al., *Film Art*, 187−94; Sikov, *Film Studies*, 9−12.

discourse of counter-sovereignty. *Serving Rations to the Indians* (Edison, 1898) functions as a good example of how Edison's films used catalogue descriptions to naturalize the counter-sovereignty arguments made by American settlers and their government. The title of the film *Serving Rations to the Indians* already constructs Native Americans as "dutiful" and "submissive." During the film, dozens of Ute Indians walk out of a log house where, according to the catalogue copy, they receive their semi-monthly allowance of rations.[73] Through this information in the catalogue descriptions, the action of simply walking out of the log house appears as a gesture of obedience. Each Ute Indian who appears is marked as dependent on white aid. In addition, by framing this scene from a slightly higher angle and positioning viewers to look down on these figures, the film itself naturalizes the passive and obedient racial image of Ute subjects on screen.

Wand Dance, Pueblo Indians (Edison, 1898) is another example where the catalogue descriptions include elements that do not appear in the film itself in order to construct the performances as signifiers of their racial abnormality and inferiority to American settlers. This film depicts a Native American dance within a reservation setting, but due to the lighting and close framing, the details of performers' facial expressions and the entirety of the dance performance are largely unavailable within the image. Regardless of the lack of detailed visual information of the dancers as well as their movements in the image, the catalogue descriptions state: "[T]he dance [...] is weird in the extreme, and is a faithful reproduction of this particular custom. They go through the ceremony with the usual stolidity and lack of expression characteristic of the race."[74] The adjective "weird" constructs the gestures happening both on and off screen as signifiers of or evidence for the subjects' abnormality and their inferiority to Anglo-American culture. Furthermore, the details in the catalogue descriptions here, which dictate that we are witnessing stolid, emotionless expression, establish and shape otherwise mostly invisible visual details of Native American performers based on dominant stereotypes and use them as evidence of racial alterity. The catalogue descriptions add absent visual details in order to naturalize the total alterity and inferiority of Native Americans.

While crafting powerful ideological messages through images and working in tandem with catalogue descriptions, the location films during this time mask the constructed nature of these messages and naturalize counter-sovereignty arguments through creating the impression that what is filmed is an unmediated representation of reality. One such technique that is used to accomplish this is the lack of direct address. Unlike kinetoscope films, where performers are clustered on a tiny studio stage and perform directly to the camera, performers in these location films do not necessarily direct their performances at the camera. This

73. Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures*, 355.
74. Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures*, 349.

creates the illusion of an activity unfolding in a natural way, unprompted by the presence of the camera, and therefore naturalizes the perception that the onscreen figures are leading their lives exactly as depicted. Within *Wand Dance*, for instance, the majority of the figures are framed without a powerful direct address. The dancers and drummers are mostly framed in profile, appearing to be absorbed in their respective activities. In addition, most of these performers occasionally go off-screen while dancing in a circle. The lack of direct address and the movements of the dancers beyond the physical constraint of the framing serve to create the impression that these performances are not constructed for the camera. This sense that the presence of the camera did not influence the activities happening in front of it is part of the film's ideological message—the activities in the film are meant to be read as objective depictions of reality, and, therefore, the racial message is also consumed as authentic.

While these location films create and naturalize counter-sovereignty ideologies through various means, they simultaneously serve to indicate the constructed nature of these ideological messages, denaturalizing the validity of the political messages themselves. In the aforementioned *Serving Rations to the Indians*, the interactions between white soldiers and Ute Indians function as a visible trace of the racializing script to exhibit the passiveness and dutifulness of Native Americans onscreen. Within the image, white soldiers pressure Ute Indian subjects to walk toward the camera without success. Ute subjects appear to be trying to leave both the log house and the frame of the image as soon as possible, while white soldiers appear to apply physical and verbal pressure to keep them within the frame. Besides pushing the Ute figures, the white figures are seen repeatedly pointing their fingers and yelling at those who are unwilling to follow their directions. The means by which white soldiers pressure the Ute subjects onscreen to move in the direction of the camera indicates the presence of an overarching scenario shared by these American soldiers and the film crew to film the gesture of Ute figures walking out of a log house as a represention of the passiveness and dutifulness of Native Americans. However, because these Ute subjects try to leave the log house as well as the frame, refusing to follow the directions from the white Americans, a film like this discloses its active processes of scripting and framing a particular sight and gesture to make specific racial arguments. Therefore, it denaturalizes the dependency and passiveness of Native Americans that the film itself aims to construct through revealing the constructed nature of such racial messaging.

Examining the reaction of Native American subjects to white soldiers oftentimes makes clear another element that complicates the hegemonic reading of the images. The aforementioned film, *Serving Rations to the Indians*, functions as a good example: although it suggests a lack of agency on the part of Native Americans through the title, as well as the visual information included in the images, some of the gestures visible within the image function to denaturalize the

racializing messages in the film. As white soldiers pressure the Ute figures to simply walk out of the log house and move directly to the camera, the Ute onscreen repeatedly try to leave the onscreen space. Regardless of the pressure placed on the Utes to walk toward the camera, they resist being directed and thereby create the impression of being disobedient or indifferent to the control of white soldiers, denaturalizing the passive and obedient impressions that the title of the film and framing of the image aim to construct.

Wand Dance provides an additional example of how some of the visual elements that are included in the location films complicate the racial meanings that the film aims to construct. The film depicts a Native American dance within a reservation setting, similar to the settings seen in *Circle Dance*, *Buck Dance*, and *Serving Rations*. In the background of the wide-open prairie, broken by the presence of a single teepee, several Pueblo Indians are shown dancing in a large circle. As in the aforementioned films, the background of these images creates the impression that Native Americans have already been conquered by American settlers and are therefore no longer a political threat. However, unlike the extreme long framing used in *Circle Dance* and *Buck Dance*, where the landscape comprised the dominant content of the films, the medium-long framing of *Wand Dance*, through which the figures are shown from above their knees, offers a closer view of the ceremonial dance, as well as the costumes and artefacts used for the ceremony such as a long wand and feathered headdress. A closer view of the figures' ceremonial outfits, as well as the close view of the performance itself, communicate the vibrancy of the Pueblo Indians' spiritual and religious practices. The detailed information captured in the moving image functions to authenticate the idea that Native Americans, such as the Pueblo seen in the film, kept on dancing despite the strict assimilation policy in which all Native American dance, song, and ceremony was prohibited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[75] While the background of the image naturalizes the political idea in alignment with counter-sovereignty movements where Native Americans are constructed as already defeated, the detailed view of Native American performers communicates the survival of Native American culture and spirituality.

These moving images function as a testimony to how the American empire developed through the process of encountering its colonial subject, and how it juggled the various contradictions of empire brought forth by these colonial subjects in the process. When location films are compared with earlier kinetoscope films, it becomes possible to chart the particular means by which location films solidified the ideas presented in alignment with the counter-sovereignty movement and how they developed increasingly cohesive arguments. Some of the interactions between Native American and Anglo-American figures' gestures, together with the catalogue descriptions, offer a powerful trace of the

75. Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake, *Critical Companion*, 33−35.

racializing scripts behind these films. Although the arguments within these location films do not yet take the form of a story in the sense of later narrative films, they are clearly designed to convey racially charged arguments, such as the passiveness of Native Americans, through the framing of figures, gestures, and natural landscapes, as well as through the use of catalogue descriptions. These proto-narratives seen within early location films function contrary to actuality films, where filmed content is viewed as a passive sight, and suggest a greater complexity than the loose curatorially-defined narrative that Musser identifies in his examinations of narrativity in the programming of early films.

And yet, some of the details that are included in location films denaturalize the counter-sovereignty ideologies that these films aim to naturalize. Although location films use various methods, such as catalogue descriptions and framing, to create coherent arguments in order to heighten the verisimilitude of racial arguments, they also include various visual elements that simultaneously unsettle the counter-sovereignty arguments and the stereotypical meanings of Native Americans that these films aim to convey. Similar to kinetoscope films, the gestures of Native Americans highlight the vibrancy of Native American culture. In addition, within location films, some of the gestures of Native Americans in reaction to white soldiers denaturalize the racial messages that these films aim to construct by contradicting the racial meanings of the films' "script" and highlighting the constructed nature of these meanings. While these location films shape and naturalize stereotypical racial perceptions of Native Americans, such as the vanishing Indian, as real, the gestures of Native Americans within location films also indicate that Native Americans continued to be a powerful presence in the United States, and that their cultural heritage continued to be celebrated. Early American films function as a powerful snapshot of the anarchic nature of American empire, where its ideological messages are constructed and then deconstructed through these processes of racial tension, conflict, and negotiation between white Americans and Native Americans.

Conclusion

Through analyzing the development of precursory forms of story in early films alongside the escalated encroachment and colonial domination of Native Americans, early cinematic narrative was developed in a complicit relationship with American colonialism. Kinetoscopes require cultural references from Buffalo Bill's Wild West to make their ideological messages clear to audiences. Conversely, location films, shot as the United States expanded its colonial domination of Native American populations and its territory, developed to tell independent and therefore nuanced stories without being forced to rely on cultural materials outside of the film itself. Within these earlier sources, there are already burgeoning bite-size stories of white Americans claiming Native American

territories as their "home," and calling these indigenous populations savage and dependent, and eventually vanishing, thereby naturalizing counter-sovereignty ideologies.

While the storytelling possibilities of film developed significantly during this time, these early films are an especially powerful representation of American culture specifically *because* the ability of films to shape ideological messages is at a nascent stage—meaning that other contested cultural meanings remain bare for viewers to examine. Even though the catalogue descriptions work systematically to smooth over various contradictions within the images to fit counter-sovereignty and expansionist ideologies of the time and to create more coherent and powerful arguments, early films during this time continue to show all of the visual elements, including the ones that are contradictory to counter-sovereignty arguments. Unlike later films that came to more carefully curate scenes and erase "irrelevant" visual elements from the film's messaging through filming techniques such as editing, aspects of Native American performances that highlight the vibrancy of their culture and their survival are still clearly present within the kinetoscope and location films discussed within this paper. It is particularly through this limitation that earlier films are culturally valuable and unique. In particular, when these filmic representations are placed in the context of Native American performance studies and the Native American sovereignty movement, the gestures of Native Americans and their interactions with white Americans within these early films function as a visual trace of the sovereignty movement and of the racial tension between Native Americans and white Americans.

Studying these moments of contradiction in which filmed Native Americans complicate the dominant ideological messaging of films, and considering how films developed to offer another layer of narrative "adhesive" through catalogue descriptions that could overwrite these contradictory meanings, allows us to critically situate the logic employed by imperial ideologies and unpack the various aspects of the history of American empire that are concealed within the logic and narratives used to justify American expansionism. Although these films' intended messages celebrate white Americans' power over colonial subjects, their encounters with colonial subjects and the competing messages that are pulled into focus as a result of such encounters are seen as informing and deforming the core elements of the filmic representation of American national identity and its ideology. The moments of contradiction within films function as a powerful representation of the anarchic nature of American empire and of films as American national culture.