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## Women and Native American Representation in Silent Western Film

The allure of freedom in the American west was a dream for audiences during the time of silent film. To audiences, the open space in western film was seen as a place to escape from city life. It was a place to connect and immerse ones self in nature. The open and undomesticated land was also seen as a resource that America had in comparison to Europe. In the 1925 silent western film *Tumbleweeds* starring William S. Hart and Barbara Bedford, the focus on the open landscape was an essential part of creating the sense of freedom in the film. The opening and closing shots suggest the freedom of open space, by using long shots of the landscape to emphasize the characters within the beauty of the uninhabited land. However, the reality of obtaining free open space was not an equal opportunity for everyone. Women and minorities had less of a chance of pursuing this freedom out west due to cultural barriers during westward expansion, as well as during the time of silent film.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women were expected to exist within the private domestic sphere. This expectation is present at the end of *Tumbleweeds* when the main female character, Miss Molly, has successfully claimed a land stake, but with the help and support of the main male character Don Carver. The plot of *Tumbleweeds* is centered around the Oklahoma land grab of 1889, which is

explained to be the last of the frontier. The goal was to claim a piece of land as your own, for your chance to make it a home in the wilderness. The end of the film shows Don with Miss Molly, embraced together at their land claim looking out at the expansive landscape. However, Miss Molly is not there without the help of Don. She is not surviving in the wilderness alone. The idea that women still needed a man's help in order to survive in the wilderness is part of the message at the end of the film. The end offers a resolution between wilderness and community, however there are still flaws which reveal who really is able to successfully live in and control the open west.

Minorities are rarely shown in the film, as they are only shown either helping the main character or within a larger group of people. In contrast to not being equally or positively represented in silent western films, women and minorities did have leading roles in other areas of western film. These other types of films showed representations of these groups as having freedom in the west and maintaining a sense of community in the wilderness.

Understanding how people, mainly westerners, relate space to freedom is essential to understanding the meaning placed upon the American west. Author and geographer Yi-Fu Tuan provides knowledge in his book, "Space and Place" on how freedom and space are related. Tuan writes,

"Space is a common symbol of freedom in the Western world. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. . . Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed pattern of established human meaning; it is like a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed." [Tuan, 54]

Throughout American history, the need to place meaning on open, blank space can be seen specifically with the movement of people out west with manifest destiny as well as the removal and displacement of Native Americans and their sacred land. In their book, “Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western”, authors Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stohr explain how western landscape evolved as a site to place meaning on. The authors write,

“The landscape seems like nothing without its inhabitants; the people and the wildlife are inseparable from their physical environment. It may be sparsely populated, but an entirely empty West can have no meaning for us—though the temporary sense of emptiness as evoked by a barren landscape can have a powerful and alienating emotional effect. The land exists to be occupied . . .”[Bandy and Stohr, 81]

With the inherently attractive nature of the west, filmmakers and actors began to frequently make trips to the landscape to capture the scenery, almost as if it were a character in itself, in early westerns.

Epic westerns maintained the idea that the west represents freedom, but who could actually leave their home and attain this? Women, immigrants, and minorities needed a community in order to get by, but city life was also seen as a place of immoral behavior and vice. The male characters of epic westerns, like Don, appear to be the only characters who have the ability to exist in both wilderness and community. Don has the ability to oscillate between states of community and individuality. Men on screen had the ability to oscillate between acting within the community or acting as an individual. Douglas Fairbanks took this concept of

oscillation, presented by Hart, a step further in his films by changing the setting from west to east, while still allowing his characters to go between a playful figure and a tough cowboy. This allowed his characters to bring ideals of the west to eastern cities and landscapes. In her book, "Silent Film and the Triumph of the American Myth", Pamela Cohen tracks this progression through Fairbanks' characters. She writes,

"His character was always in a state of alternation between boyishness and manliness—boyish in the act of everyday life, manly when heroic action was called for. . . His shifting identification with the boy and the man in himself was a version of Hart's oscillation between the stray and the line, but by translating the rigorous moral categories that defined Hart's persona into a lighter context, he made this dynamic ideal available for imitation by a mass audience." [Cohen, 103-104]

Fairbanks was successful in taking Hart's concept of oscillation into the later years of his film career with his western and swashbuckling adventure films. He was capable of relating to his audience through performing beyond one or two morally acceptable roles. While men in the audience could relate to Fairbanks' acting, women were not yet allowed this oscillation between playfulness and action in the same capacity male actors could portray.

Epic silent western films mainly had male lead characters with female characters fulfilling supporting roles. However, before the rise of the epic western, women held starring roles in serial western films. These shorter, twelve to twenty minute films showed women as the lead starring actresses, performing outside of the private sphere in typically male dominated spaces and roles. A silent western

film website developed by Mary Halnon uses author Ben Singer's work on what he deems the "serial queen" in his description of female led film serials. Halnon quotes Singer's work writing,

"... the serial-queen melodramas avoided the 'private sphere in favor of an adamantly non-domestic *mise en scene* of criminal dens, submarines, lumber mills, diamond mines, munitions factories, race tracks, warehouses' and such.' He continues by writing, 'the serial-queen melodrama's refusal of domesticity, its aversion to the contained realm of family drama, is felt most strikingly in its total banishment of the figure of the mother'".

These serial films allowed women to perform other roles besides wife, mother, and homemaker, and portrayed them as fearless heroines. A few famous characters and serials included, "Calamity Anne", "Ruth of the Rockies", and "The Hazards of Helen". "The Hazards of Helen" was the most popular female heroine serial, with a total of one hundred and nineteen episodes. Many of these serial films were shot in the wilderness and out west. Women acting in western space is significant because it allows representation of women outside of the domestic sphere. The women were taking matters into their own hands and solving problems without the help of a husband. Some of the actresses even performed their own dare devil stunts, like actress Helen Holmes did in, "The Hazards of Helen". Although once epic westerns gained popularity, women were moved from the spotlight to play supporting roles. These longer western films showed the men as the main rescuers and heroes of the land, with the women primarily indoors. In *Tumbleweeds* Miss Molly is first shown inside the ladies parlor, separate from the men completely. This

change from fearless heroines to women in supporting roles emphasizes the cultural expectation at the time of where women should exist in relation to domestic space, and who has the authority and power to claim the land as theirs.

Cultural expectations also prevented minority groups from performing in starring roles in silent westerns. African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, immigrant groups, and other minorities were likely seen as characters helping the main white characters in film. This occurs in *Tumbleweeds*, when Don is seen speaking with Native Americans in order to gain their help and protection. One African American character is seen playing an instrument during a town party scene.

The history of Native Americans in film and also in relation to space in western film can be traced back to when Thomas Edison first recorded Native Americans for Kinetoscope in 1894, performing a “Sioux Ghost Dance”. Before western landscape and wilderness became the focus of western film, Native Americans were viewed as the first iconic symbol of the American west. Indians were an exotic people that Europe did not have. During this time period, Indians were deemed the, “noble savage”. Native Americans were used in early western film as a means to convey a narrative, and were usually presented as either a morally good or bad character. American audiences were intrigued by Indians and for most it was their first time seeing what Indians looked like. Silent film shaped audience’s perception of how Native Americans supposedly behaved and looked in the wilderness. Native Americans were a popular film subject before the rise of the epic western, so much that in D.W. Griffith’s first three months as a director, he made

several films with Indians as the subject including, *The Redman and Child*, *The Girl and the Outlaw*, *The Red Girl*, and *The Call of the Wild*, all in 1908.

One film that exists contrary to how Indians were presented in epic silent westerns is, *In The Land of the War Canoes*. This film exists separate from other Indian westerns because it features an entirely authentic Native American Kwakiutl cast. Similar to *Tumbleweeds*, the film has the narrative of a melodrama, with outright morally good and bad characters. Shown in 1914, it was initially thought to be a documentary due to how realistically the Indians were filmed and acted. American audiences were not impressed, because these Indians did not wear feathered headdresses or sleep in teepees, which is what they were used to seeing. Instead, the natives were shown in their authentic landscape, dress, and even made authentic war canoes for the film. The filmmaker, Edward Curtis, was photographing uninhabited British Columbia landscape before white men would soon take over the land. During his expedition, he encountered the native Kwakiutl tribe, and decided to film a scripted movie entirely in their native landscape. The film captured a melodrama narrative showing Native Americans functioning as a community in the wilderness. The film presents an alternative image of wilderness and community, in contrast to how epic westerns presented it for white settlers and viewers. In chapter three of her book, "Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies", author Angela Aleiss discusses how Native Americans have been constructed through silent westerns and the cowboys and Indians genre, as well as how they have been shaped by American film perspective of Indians.

“Silent epic westerns revived the Indians-as-obstacle formula, while the rare docudramas offered a glimpse of Native American lifestyle untouched by civilization. As these longer films allowed a more in-depth exploration of underlying racial tensions, they nonetheless reinforced the belief that Indians remained separate and apart from civilization”. [Aleiss, 20]

By marginalizing natives in western film or using Indians as a prop to move a narrative along, their culture has been shaped by racist American ideals that permeate beyond just film. Representing Indians as belonging separate from civilization, or not even representing them at all in film, does not embrace their place in society but instead perpetuates the idea that Indians should be moved aside to make room for white settlers and ranchers on screen and in real life.

Native American culture and religion is rooted in its sacred bond between man and the natural world. *In The Land of the War Canoes* captures the authenticity of this minority group practicing daily life in their natural space. It is ironic that as white men settled land in the west, they were unsettling Native American spaces. Throughout American history, natives have been displaced from their land to government appointed reservations. As a result there have been devastating consequences for natives such as gambling and alcohol addiction, and poverty. These problems still exist in American reservation life today. With the pattern of deep, historical racial marginalization in America towards Indians and other minority groups, it remains important to evaluate the ways in which society and film has shaped the stereotypes of these cultural groups. *In The Land of the War*



*Canoes* remains iconic in its representation of authentic Native Americans and their place in nature and sense of community.

*Tumbleweeds* romanticized the idea of owning open land with the love story between Don and Miss Molly. The ending works out for both characters, appealing to audiences the idea that open land can be anyone's for the taking. The reality of the time during silent film, however, was different than the ending. Women were tied to the domestic sphere and were expected to raise the children, often without any outside help such as family or government assistance. African Americans, Native Americans and immigrants were at the mercy of larger political powers and low wage jobs that prevented these groups from advancing in social class and making more money. These larger factors made the thought of escaping city life and moving out west remain simply a dream or fantasy to audiences. The ability to make meaning out of open space is possible if you are a white male, while Indians are set aside in the margins.

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