

Indigeneity on the Silver Screen: *The Vanishing American* (1925) and the Limits of “Sympathetic” Representation

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Keywords

silent film;
The Vanishing American (1925);
Indigeneity on celluloid; red face;
Richard Dix.

This article examines visual representations of Indigeneity in an early twentieth-century silent film, *The Vanishing American* (Paramount, 1925). It shows how pervasively the trope of “the vanishing American,” a version of the nineteenth-century “vanishing Indian,” informed the settler colonial logic of sympathy at the beginning of the twentieth century. The cinematic sympathetic glorification of the Indigenous character in this film—played by a white actor in red face—is contingent on his disappearance. As this article argues, sympathy in *The Vanishing American* is a strategy of both appeasing settler anxiety and amplifying the film’s promise of spectacle. It also argues that, in order to amplify settler colonial spectatorial delight, *The Vanishing American*—like other feature silent films in the 1910s and 1920s—used a predictable sentimental plot, appealed to the audience’s Christianity, and participated visually in the larger political struggle for white supremacy and reproducing patriarchal structures of domination.

An interesting and important fact about the poor, vanishing American Indian is that he is not poor and he is not vanishing.
The Youth’s Companion, 1911

A bizarre attempt at setting down on gelatin the story of the American red man in broad strokes.
Carl Sandburg, 1916

Mr. Dix is a splendid Indian.
Chicago Daily Tribune, 1926

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Native Americans were popular subjects (and objects) of representation in early silent films by major and pioneering film producers. Their popularity was not accidental. Throughout the nineteenth century, Indigenous people had been central to American culture represented in captivity narratives, songs and ballads, poems, fiction, travel and sketch books, dime novels, plays, paintings, and photographs. The white American gaze was fascinated with *Indian* exoticism, mystery, and putative danger. The camera loved the action of Native-white combat; stock narrative episodes from dime novels became adaptations for the

screen. The fetishization of Native regalia and other markers of Native identity (feathers, moccasins, long hair etc.) in early silent film set the tone for the industry's dissemination of stereotypes throughout the twentieth century as film became the new medium of both leisure and mass education. One of the most popular genres translating these anxieties was the western, which grew in popularity between the 1890s and the 1920s. Drawing on the post-bellum western romances, cinematic westerns typically depicted violent conflicts between white settlers and Native people. Westerns also validated settler colonial ideology: both a nostalgic reminder of the so-called "vanishing race" and a glorification of the settler (white, capitalist, Christian) culture.¹

The idea of the "Vanishing Indian" was deeply ingrained in the American psyche, the legacy of nineteenth century's legal, literary, and dramatic attempts at perpetuating in print and on stage a stereotypical image of Indigeneity. This ideological formation captured nineteenth century audiences' fascination with an exotic image of Native people, incompatible with categories such as whiteness, citizenship, and modernity. Although non-fiction films at the turn of the twentieth century purported to document Indigeneity on screen in an attempt to capture what I call elsewhere "the last Indian syndrome"—a faulty assumption about the imminent disappearance of Native peoples in the United States—feature films during the first decades of the twentieth century dramatized the promise of assimilation.² White actors, writers, and directors capitalized on the "Indian craze" of the 1920s and the Indian-inflected therapeutic modernism to promote films touting assimilation and Americanization. Some of these films, like *The Vanishing American* (1925), appeared to offer "sympathetic" representations of Native Americans (as long as they were "Vanishing Americans"), which complemented the less flattering portrayals of Native Americans in the westerns. As film critic Angela Aleiss has argued, "Whether the movies' Indian characters were sympathetic, evil, or totally ludicrous, their traditional lifestyle and customs were incompatible with their non-Indian counterparts" (2005: 6). The "Indian-themed" films at the beginning of the twentieth century were of great interest to settler audiences because they helped solidify their sense of whiteness.

In this essay I read sympathetic representation in *The Vanishing American* as a strategy of appeasing settler anxiety and amplifying the film's promise of spectacle. I turn to *The Vanishing American* (1925), a silent film forgotten for many decades, and rediscovered by the American Film Institute in 1970 (Brownlow, 1979: 345). Critics have praised it for its sympathetic representations of Indigenous communities in the United States in the 1920s; yet, a hundred years later, when Native film directors and actors are rewriting the landscape of Native film from a decolonial perspective, the film's resonances are markedly different. Although the film is critical of federal Indian policy, the portrayal of the Navajo people, represented by a fictional Nopah tribe—with a white actor (Richard Dix) in the leading role—makes the film a good contender for a "sympathetic melodrama," a genre highly popular with settler audiences. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have argued that "Indigeneity prompts multiple forms of settler anxiety, even if only because the presence of Indigenous peoples—who make *a priori* claims to land and ways of being—is a constant reminder that the settler colonial project is incomplete" (2012: 9). For the twenty-first century viewer attuned to representations of Indigeneity on screen in the last hundred years, the film's significance lies perhaps in its misdirected political

¹ Buffalo Bill Cody's and white filmmakers' masculinist approaches to American identity were also part of late-nineteenth century discourse on Native Americans. See Gregory S. Jay, "White Man's Book No Good."

² See Stanciu, "The Last Indian Syndrome' Revisited."

potential of advocating for Indigenous causes, its artistic and technical accomplishments, as well as glimpses of cultural loss, obscured by the film's ultimate emphasis on death, loss, and disappearance. Silent films paid little attention to the harsh realities of reservation life, the corruption of the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA) employees, and the assimilation policies aimed at transforming Native Americans into American citizens. In fact, the film came out one year after Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act (1924), which granted American citizenship to all Native people in the United States, finally recognizing them as American citizens. Read in this historical context, *The Vanishing American* missed important opportunities to bring political and social issues to the (white) American public's attention. Instead, it appealed to settler viewers for its "sympathetic" look at reservation life and its (mis)representation of Indigenous people.

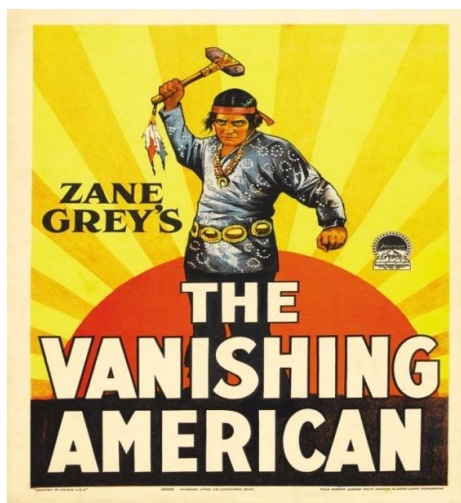


Figure 1. Theatrical poster for *The Vanishing American* (1925), in the public domain

In September 1925, Paramount Studio completed filming *The Vanishing American*, directed by George B. Seitz, and adapted from white settler novelist Zane Grey's novel of the same name, first serialized in *Ladies Home Journal* in 1922-1923. Like other adaptations of Indian-themed novels, *The Vanishing American* resorted to a sentimental plot: a white woman (Marion) and a Native man (Nophaie) fall in love; he dies and she lives. Throughout, the film advocates for assimilation and Americanization through military service, education, and Christianity. The film also makes social Darwinism central to its message; the first intertitle, a quote from Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Biology* (1864), introduces a long prologue about evolutionary history: "We have unmistakable proof that throughout all past time there has been a ceaseless devouring of the weak by the strong ... a survival of the fittest." This emphasis on survival, traced ambitiously through several episodes from the beginning of human life to World War I, also alludes to the many challenges the fictional Nopah tribe faced historically. In its emphasis on the successive "races"—from the basket weavers and cliff dwellers to the contemporary Nopahs—the film's evolutionary sequence offers a cautionary tale about the future of the fictional Nopah tribe, suggesting an imminent "vanishing."

As a film adaptation, *The Vanishing American* diverged from the novel in significant ways to fit the studio's artistic and ideological interests in presenting Native people as "vanishing." If,

in the novel, Nophaie was educated in the East before he returned home, the movie dispensed of this episode and made Marion, the white teacher on the reservation, the agent of his education and conversion to Christianity. Similarly, the initial story, published in *Ladies Home Journal*, took a critical stance at both Indian agents and missionaries who attempted to “educate” and Christianize Indigenous communities. This inconvenient description aggravated church groups and made the publisher, Harper and Brothers, require substantial revisions in the story’s subsequent publication as a novel (Jackson, 1973: 80). Although, in the novel, Nophaie dies of influenza—a nod to the 1918-1920 epidemic on the Navajo reservation, which claimed Navajo lives four times higher than other American populations—in the film adaptation he is accidentally shot by one of his men³. In the novel, Zane Grey criticized settlers for the destruction of Native cultures (Aleiss, 2005: 35). Had Nophaie died of influenza, would the film have been less sympathetic? Aleiss argues that “the idea of an Indian succumbing to the flu lacked the spectacle and grandeur that movie audiences expected” (1991: 472). Instead, Nophaie dies telling his white love interest, Marion, that they could never marry. This comment also eschews the potentially dangerous trope of interracial unions beyond the fleeting interracial romance the film offered. Although other films in the 1910s, some directed by Native directors (such as Nanticoke James Young Deer’s/James Young Johnston’s 1910 *White Fawn’s Devotion*) represented interracial couples, allowing both the settler fathers and the Native mothers to survive, *The Vanishing American* closed that possibility. The white teacher, Miss Marion Warner (a.k.a. “Little White Rose” or the “White Desert Rose”) is disheartened but soon finds consolation in young white officer Ramsdell after Nophaie’s death. Sympathetic representation, therefore, grounded in settler anxiety, has its limitations.



Figure 2. Richard Dix (in red face) as Nophaie, a fictional Native character, and Lois Wilson as Marion, his white teacher, in *The Vanishing American* (1925)

³ On the impact of the 1918 influenza on Navajo communities, see Benjamin R. Brady and Howard M. Bahr, “The Influenza Epidemic of 1918–1920 among the Navajos.”

Although early silent film companies like Bison or Vitagraph employed Native actors (like James Young Johnston/James Young Deer), most studios continued to employ white actors in red face rather than Native actors in leading roles. Navajo actors cast in *The Vanishing American* served only as background to a story told and performed by white actors, who occasionally wore too much make-up. As theatre and film critic Mordaunt Hall recorded in his *New York Times* column, the protagonist “Mr. Dix [...] weakens in some scenes in the dark make-up.” Hall praised Dix’s performance but criticized the changing make-up, which “does not always strike one as being a redskin” (1925: 18). A reviewer for the *Wall Street Journal* also noted that there is “a lovely heroine with her exaggerated eye-work,” a reference to Lois Wilson’s performance of Marion, the teacher on a Native reservation (Metcalf, 1925: 3). Another reviewer noticed the heroine’s melodramatic acting in her blinking too much, “to a sort of Morse code,” and her high heels, which contrasted with the setting, “such a wild place” (Hall, 1926: 18). An interview with Jesse L. Lasky, the film’s producer, reveals that the Paramount team also took the liberty of “teaching Indians how to act”: “Making the thousands of Indians who appear in *The Vanishing American* understand what was wanted of them (99 out of every 100 of whom had never heard of motion pictures) was also a job” (“Producing Indian Film,” 1925).

Whereas the reviewers of the film in the mid-1920s were quick to observe the white characters’ exaggerated or anachronistic features, very few noticed the invisibility of Native characters and their point of view. Like many of his Progressive Era contemporaries attuned to “pleas” on behalf of American Indians, in his review of the film, poet, writer, and film critic Carl Sandburg lamented both Zane Grey’s fictional attempt and George Seitz’s cinematic effort to impress the audience with a “passionate sentiment for the red man” at the expense of making such dramatizations “partisan, exaggerated, and pleading.” In his review of *The Vanishing American*, Sandburg called the film “a bizarre attempt at setting down on gelatin the story of the American red man in broad strokes” (2000: 301-302). Like Joseph K. Dixon’s ethnographic *The Romance of a Vanishing Red* (1916), *The Vanishing American* (1925) was certainly not a cinematic oddity in its emphasis on the mourning of a (presumed) disappearing culture, an instance of what Renato Rosaldo (1989) calls “imperialist nostalgia.” Yet, to amplify settler colonial spectatorial delight, *The Vanishing American*, like other contemporaneous feature films, used a predictable sentimental plot, appealed to the audience’s Christianity, and participated in the political struggle for white supremacy and reproducing patriarchal structures of domination. As such, feature films like *The Vanishing American* obviated the presence of Native people on screen.

The Vanishing American also dramatized the losses World War I caused to the fictional Nopah community as the returned Native soldiers found their lands stolen by the Indian agent for an “experimental farm.” As a shell-shocked soldier returns home, his temporary double vision reveals a superimposition of the two “realities”: before and after the war. As he faces the distorted reality around him, he sees shadows of Native people walking around, glimpses of the pre-war reservation land, now forcibly taken away. The scene is eerie in its emphasis on the ghostly present, marked by a single mud house and an old Native man refusing to leave his land. The world as the Native soldier knew it before World War I is gone. At the end of the film, as he lies dying, Nopah is visibly distraught and angry at “this God of the white man [who] looked from those cold heights beyond the stars and let his people perish!” He tries to reconcile the reality of the rebelling Nopahs with the American government, represented by Booker, the corrupt assistant to the Indian Agent, and his entourage. If films participate in “a

political struggle for supremacy,” as film critic Jacqueline Kilpatrick has argued, then *The Vanishing American* stages the irreconcilable distance between colonial fantasy and white guilt, or what D.H. Lawrence called “the desire to extirpate the Indian” and “the contradictory desire to glorify him” (Kilpatrick, 1999: xvi; Lawrence, 1923: 36). In other words, the cinematic glorification of the Indigenous character is contingent on its disappearance. Lawrence’s study from the 1920s is emblematic of the decade’s struggle to restore an Indigenous place in modernity; yet, the film’s ending reveals that there is no place for the Navajo hero in this modernity.

The film’s promise of spectacle did not disappoint audiences ready to witness cinematic wonders. Critics reviewing *The Vanishing American* called it an “extraordinary picture,” and compared it to (the notoriously racist) *Birth of a Nation* (1915). One *Los Angeles Times* review called it “one of the most ambitious motion picture undertakings in the history of the screen.” The review presented in great detail the lengthy process of production; the filming of *The Vanishing American* “kept 500 whites on the Navajo Indian reservation, from 160 to 200 miles from a railroad, for four months, and brought 10,000 red men before cameras for the first time in their lives.” (“New Zane Grey Film Finished”, A 11). To complete *The Vanishing American* (1925), Paramount assembled an impressive cast and crew, including director George B. Seitz, and headed for the Arizona desert in beautiful Navajo country.⁴ After two years of planning and shooting, the result was, according to reviewer Mordaunt Hall, “an inspiring production” (1926: 18). Although the film ultimately diverged from Grey’s equally exploitative book, the contract Grey signed with Paramount—ceding the film company the rights to all his works, “past present, and future”—required that the films based on his books be “made on the exact locations of the author’s stories.” This contract clause proved a major inconvenience for the studio, but the film introduced the viewers to a world they had only imagined before. The production of the film intruded on Navajo land in Monument Valley, Arizona, as Paramount crew members “opened up a road and constructed usable cliff dwellings for the spectacular attack sequence” (Brownlow, 1979: 344-47). The making of the film was equally challenging for the production crew. *The Vanishing American* was shot on location, which included not only the “village” in the desert, ninety miles from Flagstaff, Arizona, but also the cliff dwellings at Keetseel, in the Sagi Canyon, also in Arizona. The favorable reviews started pouring in before the film was actually displayed in theatres across the country; the less flattering reviews appeared in more specialized film magazines, with a smaller national audience. The reviews of *The Vanishing American* in the national press dwelt on the film’s spectacular settings, offering a version of Indigeneity that could appease, at least temporarily, settler anxiety.

The favorable reviews raving about the film’s technical achievement, the visibility of the Arizona desert and canyons, and the “amazing” white actor in red face contrasted sharply with the reviewers’ striking downplaying of the story’s central concern—the Indigenous subject—which some reviewers merely glossed over, thus rendering the story of the Navajos and their “plight” only semi-visible. A Paramount publicity release focused almost exclusively on Dix: “The whisper of the winds of history was on it—Dix was amazing” (*apud* Brownlow, 1979: 344). A review of the film summed up the contradiction between the film’s aesthetics and politics, calling it “as serious as a requiem.” The reviewer’s sympathetic take was filled with

⁴ The cast also included Richard Dix (as Nophaie, the Navajo warrior), Lois Wilson (as the white teacher, or “White Desert Rose”), Noah Beery (the villain, i.e., the Indian Agent), Malcolm McGregor, Shannon Day, Charley Crockett, Bert Woodruff, John Dillion, Dick Howard, and Bruce Gordon, as well as an impressive number of Navajos as extras.

melodramatic twists: “Bursting its seams with plot, the modern story uses a reincarnation of Simon Legree and a band of villainous white marauders to show just what happens to *the poor Indian* when Uncle Sam’s back is turned. It is indeed awful” (Reiners, 1925: 616; my emphasis). The trope of “the poor Indian” has dominated colonial representations of Indigeneity for centuries, providing occasions for settler sympathy and further accumulation of Indigenous land. As Jace Weaver has shown, settlers “came to define themselves in comparison with, and in contrast to, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas” (2014: 216). Sympathy and identification with Indigenous nations allowed for comparisons between the two groups which, in turn, normalized settler occupation of Native lands (Akerman, 2021: 7).

One of the sites of settler sympathy is the reservation school, where Indigenous children learn together in small classrooms, often under the scrutiny of a white teacher. In *The Vanishing American*, the classroom setting and the preparations for war represent the film’s main scenes of Americanization. In the classroom, the agent of Americanization is feminized; white (savior) teacher Marian Warner teaches both “the primitive desert children” and Nophaie, “the smartest buck on the reservation.” The film also offers a glimpse into a more individualized Native child character, Nasja, who becomes Nophaie’s right hand. According to one reviewer for *The Wall Street Journal*, Nasja, “an Indian boy [...], [a] lad of his race, with all the native energy and a surprising intelligence, was a lucky find for this undertaking.” The reviewer concludes with a scathing political indictment and praises the film’s aesthetic merits: “Anyone can see ‘*The Vanishing American*’ with profit, aesthetically for one thing and for another, the increased hatred it may inspire for the professional politician and his greed” (Metcalf, 1925: 3). The reviewer’s note about the Native boy’s “surprising intelligence” indexes wider assumptions about Native intelligence by silent film audiences. Nasja is a student in the on-reservation government school, taught by Miss Marion Warner. A typical class day at the boarding school imagined in *The Vanishing American* begins with the pledge of allegiance to the U.S. flag: one Navajo student presents the flag to the classroom while the others seem to utter the words of the pledge. All the children acting in the scene look scared, disoriented, not in the least excited to pledge allegiance to a flag they know very little about. Their (imposed) American future includes the acquisition of English, loyalty to the country as good citizens, and Christianity; the teacher sometimes casually reads the Bible outside the classroom. The sympathetic teacher, the agent of the state, is complicit in the Americanization efforts, yet distant from the Native children’s daily realities.

The same classroom where young students pledge their allegiance to the United States flag is also a battleground for racial and masculine supremacy. As the Indian Agent (Booker) sexually harasses Miss Warner, Nophaie comes to her rescue, confronting Booker and his small army of bullies. The *mise-en-scène* suggests that the fight desecrates the symbolic power radiated by the presidential portraits on the wall and the American flag decorating the room. As the fight progresses, taking the protagonist to various parts of the room, the flag accompanies him throughout the fight. After saving the white woman (Marion) from the white men, the Native protagonist disappears, only to reemerge as Marion pleads with him to help in the war effort. Distressed to hear that Uncle Sam needs him—“The government comes to me—a haunted man—for help?”—Nophaie listens to Marion, Uncle Sam’s fair spokeswoman: “You’re as much an American as any of us.” The scene ends with Nophaie contemplating, in disbelief, the distance between the “haunted man” he is and the desired American he could become—if only he shared his tribe’s horses with the U.S. troops: “American! Me!” This abrupt conversion presents Nophaie as a changed man, joining the war in hopes that his effort

might be rewarded and that the reservation might escape the tyranny of agents like Booker: "Since we are Americans, we go fight. Maybe if we fight...maybe if we die...our country will deal fairly with our people." The scene ends with Native soldiers, led by Nophaie, leaving to fight in World War I, flanked by U.S. flags flying in the wind. After Nophaie leaves the scene, Marion muses: "Pitiful and ...Riding away to fight for the white man..." Another intertitle praises the bravery of Native soldiers: "In all the annals of the Great War, there were no more thrilling pages than those written by the first Americans." Both writer Zane Grey and director Victor Schertzinger were critical of the clash between the recognized patriotism of Native soldiers and the dismal socio-economic and political changes in Native communities after the soldiers' return from fighting in World War I.

The Vanishing American was conceived and publicized as a "dramatic tribute to the fast disappearing red man" and amassed an exceptional team and studio efforts to shoot on location in Arizona, over a period of two years ("To Play Indian Role"). To make the "fast disappearing" part appeal to wider audiences, Dix became, overnight, "a splendid Indian," at the beginning of Richard Dix's short career as the quintessential cinematic Indian, amplified by his leading role in another feature film, four years later: *Redskin* (1929). In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Richard Dix did not shy away from imparting his sympathy for the "copper colored lads" who "aren't bad fellows at all, once you get to know them." Although he enjoyed their company, Dix was also frustrated with the demands of shooting on location in Arizona, "a million miles away from nowhere," as he confessed to a reporter a few months before the film's release. Dix was less interested in the location as "the copper lad's" own home, an elision suggestive of the film company's and actors' colonial, extractive acts. But Dix's seeming distress at the demands of a challenging location was a small price to play Indian in an "epic of [the] red man" (Kingsley, 1925: 7). Dix's leading lady, Lois Wilson, was equally uncomfortable, as she described her experience in *Picture Play*: "We have had rainstorms, sandstorms, heat that sent the mercury up to one hundred thirty degrees, locations that could only be reached by long horseback rides, and sometimes only by mule pack" (*apud* Brownlow, 1979: 345).

Despite all these technical and physical challenges, Dix's performance transported the audiences to a world on screen allowing for both sympathy and identification with the Native characters. If we read sympathy as "eliminatory," as Erin Akerman has proposed, this scene reveals sympathy as a tool of Indigenous elimination (2021: 21). In the comfort of the movie theatre, the audience could *become* Indigenous by projecting themselves on the screen, not only playing *Indian* but also becoming *Indian*. In this way, the audience's sympathy for Native people is eliminatory as the settler viewer inhabits the (Indigenous) character on screen. The white actor in the leading role also amplifies this sympathetic affiliation. As a reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* put it, Dix exuded a certain "primitive fire," which was "magnificently effective." Grace Kinsley also opined: "I guess all of us turned a little bid [sic] Red Indian at the moment, especially after Dix showed up." The same reviewer also noted that, given the Indigenous people's supposedly improved living conditions, "we no longer feel ashamed to trot him out and show him off in the movies. Our crimes against him are lessening, I hear, and we can afford the luxury of feeling sorry for him now that we no longer feel the so great need of stealing from him and murdering him" (Kingsley, 1926: A9). Manipulating the audience's emotional response, Dix's performance called into question the film's seemingly sympathetic rendition of Indigenous peoples in his performance in red face. At the same time, Kingsley's settler entitlement in her review of the film is also settler exculpatory; the objectification of

Indigeneity on the silver screen appears less harmful to the settler writer (and audience) once the murder and theft of land have “lessened.”

Despite its shortcomings, *The Vanishing American* showed some sympathy to the Native causes which contemporaneous social reformers and other “friends of the Indian” championed in the 1920s. The film made Booker, the assistant to the Indian agent, the culprit for the Nopahs’ relocation to infertile lands, as well as their illnesses and deaths resulting from this relocation—perhaps a larger commentary on the dire consequences of the Allotment Act (1887) and the enormous loss of land suffered by Native people. The film also attempted to criticize federal programs calling for the disintegration of Indigenous reservations and praised the efforts of the Navajo soldiers who fought in World War I and were rewarded with U.S. citizenship. It also took a critical stance at the Bureau of Indian Affairs: as the Native soldiers returned home, they found their reservation in a precarious state, the women abused, their lands taken, and the assistant to the Indian Agent (Booker) instituting a regime of terror. This criticism the film engaged in did not go unnoticed. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* published an opinion piece by a W.E. Dunn, superintendent of the Crow Creek agency at Fort Thompson, South Dakota, who objected to Grey’s portrayal of Indian agents. Dunn objected to the film not because it was not “a good yarn but because the Indian agents in it [were not] all they should be.” Dunn called for a recognition of the merits of the “Indian Field workers” who did not share Booker’s callousness (1926: 14). Although the film’s social critique targets settler sympathy at the same time that it advances it, it is ultimately an incomplete project.

The paradoxical attempt to capture the American Indian as “the Vanishing American” in an imagined “authentic” location—performed by white actors in red face and amateur Native actors—raises questions about the film’s politics of representation. Did the film, therefore, condemn the nineteenth-century trope of the “vanishing Indian” by turning its attention to genocide and cultural annihilation in the first decades of the twentieth century, filled with government neglect and impoverished communities? If so, why the emphasis on the “braves” who fight both for the country and their own community, even as the fight which animates them seems already lost? Does the film simultaneously mourn the “vanishing” of the Indian as the first American and celebrate his transformation into an American? Does the film therefore reinscribe national pride through an unthreatening “symbol,” albeit by failing to acknowledge the survival of the Indian as the new American? In its privileging of the trope of the Indian as the “Vanishing American,” the film calls attention to its own representational politics for the urban audiences of the 1920s. Conceived as a “dramatic tribute to the fast disappearing red man,” *The Vanishing American* was certainly not a cinematic oddity; it reinforced the assimilationist agenda of the Progressive Era reformers, at the same time that it occasionally criticized it.

Although the film was innovative in both subject matter (the discrepancy between modernity’s promises for Indians as new Americans and the harsh realities on Native reservations caused by government neglect) and technical achievement (the discrepancy between the production effort to film on location and the employment of white actors in Indian roles), *The Vanishing American* was not a box-office success. Despite the massive praise and publicity for the film and Richard Dix, after only a brief success, the film did not bring the expected revenue. As Angela Aleiss explains, the “Indians’ predicament was hardly entertainment for audiences hooked on action-packed cowboy epics” (2005: 37). The film was also released during a decade marked by alarmist settler fears about the “vanishing American race” (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) as the racial urban landscape of the United States was changing

dramatically following the largest immigration wave that began in the 1880s and continued through the early 1920s. Therefore, the conflation of the Indian as the “vanishing American” with the “old stock” Anglo-Saxon as the “vanishing American” represented, as Brian Dippie has argued, “a perfect fusion of the nostalgic with the progressive impulse” (1982: xii). A film like *The Vanishing American* elicited sympathy from Progressive Era audiences concerned with the disappearance of Native people as the ultimate “symbol” of American geography.

As Nophaie dies at the end of the film, killed accidentally by one of his men, the film ends circularly by reiterating the disappearance of another “race” at the same time that it reflects on the permanence of artistic representation: “for the races of men come—and go. But the mighty stage remains.” Before he succumbs to an untimely death, Nophaie asks Marion to read to him from the *New Testament* she had gifted him. The only element that saves this scene from melodramatic predictability is Nasja, a Navajo boy, who mourns for Nophaie (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Navajo boy Nasja, Mourning Nophaie’s Death at the end of *The Vanishing American*

As Nophaie dies—“vanishes”—taking with him the hope for the future of the Nophas, the last intertitle of the film brings the audiences back to their present and the artificiality of the medium they have just witnessed: “For races of men come—and go but the stage remains.” The self-referentiality of the last scene returns the viewer to the fictionality of the story, its illusory medium, and the triumph of art. The film thus privileges its own complicity with the medium and de-emphasizes the potentially promising political implications of the critiques the film ultimately fails to make. This rather disappointing conclusion returns to the permanence of the medium itself, deflecting a more sophisticated engagement with the failure of settler reform efforts and the reality that *the Indian* was, in fact, refusing to vanish.

Acknowledgments: The author thanks professor Isabel Quintana Wulf for her careful and insightful feedback and professor Robert Dale Parker for his feedback on an earlier draft of this essay, as well as the larger project where it originates.

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