
Imagine There's No Indians, It's Easy If You Try: The Trope of the Vanishing Indian and Unintended Consequences

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Abstract

Picture this. I'm thirteen years old; it's a hot dry summer in Oklahoma, a scorcher. Stretched out on a grass-colored divan in our living room I watch tiny raindrops hit the linoleum floor from our evaporative cooler window fan (swamp cooler). I've had scarlet fever followed by rheumatic fever and it's left me with a heart murmur. I'm supposed to rest. There isn't much else for a sickly Indian kid to do but watch television seven days a week. I'm the original couch potato, a red-skinned one at that. On the Friday night late show, and Saturday re-runs, I watch Hollywood westerns in which Indians are killed and disappeared. I learn that we Indians must die so that the settlers may live. "Crap," I would say to my brother as the credits rolled. He would shrug, "Whaddaya expect?" Watching classic Westerns had a profound effect on me as an American Indian author and reader. I write novels in which there are no cowboys, no U.S. Seventh Cavalry with Gatling guns, no weak-willed Indian women falling for white men that leave them.

My paper discuss the trope of the vanishing Indian over the last 100 years, using novels, silent and classic films, and western art to show how women also participated in making Indians disappear. I'll discuss the novels of Willa Cather, Dorothy Scarborough, and Musko-gee author Alice Callahan, along with early women screenwriters such as Frances Marion. Scarborough's book became the 1928 silent film and shows ghostly Native stories haunting protagonist Letty Mason to death suggesting the power of vanquished Natives. I argue the unintended consequence of the trope of the vanishing Indian is the literary renaissance by American Indian women authors such as Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Silko, Linda Hogan, Anna Lee Walters, Louise Erdrich, Susan Power, and many others.

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