

Cinematic Comanches: The Lone Ranger in the Media Borderlands. By Dustin Tahmahkera. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. 263 pages. \$35, paperback; \$35, e-book.

In August 2022, the BBC asked me to comment on the apology the Film Academy had issued to Sacheen Littlefeather, coming some fifty years after Littlefeather had refused the Oscar on Marlon Brando's behalf at the 1973 Academy Awards for his performance in *The Godfather* (Ford Coppola, 1972). In a striking move, Littlefeather took Brando's place and faced down a bewildered crowd and, despite the hostile reception, was composed and dignified. Littlefeather harnessed Brando's cultural power to critique Hollywood's representations of Native Americans, while also drawing attention to the American Indian Movement. Although I conceded to the BBC that the apology *itself* was newsworthy, I stressed the need for this to be a platform to consider the discussions that Littlefeather was addressing *then*, but also *today*, particularly with regard to Native American representations. Too often in Hollywood, Native Americans are largely seen in supporting roles opposite the white hero, as with *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) and *The Revenant* (Inárritu, 2015), or as a faceless and one-dimensional enemy.

That the apology came in 2022 may have more to do with a wider social as well as cultural shift. Debates ignited around Native American environmental and land rights during the Standing Rock protests of 2016–17, the renaming of the Washington Commanders American football team, as well as the #OscarsSoWhite movement. The latter continues to highlight the lack of diversity at the Academy Awards and signifies a vibrancy and urgency in contemporary social and political discourse. Of course, it has since been revealed that Littlefeather's Native ancestry was falsified. That said, the question of Native ancestry is one that has long been problematic in the United States—defined particularly by a colonizer-imposed blood quantum. In the context of *Cinematic Comanches: The Lone Ranger in the Media Borderlands*, author Dustin Tahmahkera plays on this very issue of disputed Native American ancestry with regard to Johnny Depp and his role as Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* (Verbinski, 2013), to provoke the ongoing debate around Native American representation in film and visual culture.

The Lone Ranger forms a recurring case study for Tahmahkera which he addresses across four thematic chapters, considering the reception and interpretation of the text within wider historical, social, and cultural discourse. What is more important, Tahmahkera sees that discussion of film and visual media representations is as necessary as discussion of social and political issues faced by Native Americans. The discursive interrelationship between real and “reel” Native Americans is not considered

in isolation; rather, the author examines how cinema can positively stimulate wider social and political issues facing Native Americans.

While Depp's interpretation of Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* was considered derogatory and dismissed as cultural appropriation by some critics, Tahmahkera's study explains that many Native and non-Native commentators have missed the chance for a nuanced and, more crucially, tribal-specific debate. What follows in *Cinematic Comanches* is an analysis that is scholarly but also playful, imploding the binary set by opposing stereotypes with readings that consider *The Lone Ranger* from a tribal-specific viewpoint. As such, Tahmahkera conceives the film in the context of Depp's own "adoption" by Comanche elder LaDonna Harris. In this way, *Cinematic Comanches* amplifies how Depp's cultural power and influence can be usefully cast into a wider debate concerning Indigenous peoples while contemplating US history through the prism of cinema and the western's burgeoning cultural influence.

The western genre has often problematically served representations of Native Americans. For example, *The Searchers*' (Ford, 1956) stereotypical narrative of Comanche aggression—the film's narrative of rape, murder, and captivity of white settlers—suggests a closed and one-sided interpretations of US-Indigenous interaction. However, this would be too simplistic a reading of *The Searchers* and of film in general. Tahmahkera, in his analysis, does not set aside hegemonic narratives that the western genre transmits. Rather, he considers how, within the confines of frontier mythology, Native Americans were cast in polar opposition to white settlers. That said, Tahmahkera does not try to clean up Comanche history either. There were violent Comanche warriors who did take white settlers captive, but popular culture has too often problematically rendered the Native American as a one-dimensional savage in the US imagination. Tahmahkera leaves room for ambiguity in his analysis and, without reducing either whites or Indigenous people to a caricature, deconstructs both dominant representations of Native Americans and offers Comanches a central role in US history and culture.

Of central importance to Tahmahkera's methodology is the significance of Comanche epistemology when analyzing cinematic representations. *Maruawe*, as Tahmahkera explains, is a Comanche greeting that has connotations to the tribe's past as warriors, and is also a term for "reporting back." This forms the essential Comanche epistemic and tribal-specific root to his inquiry. The gesture itself is central to both Comanche history and culture, demonstrating the continuity between on-screen and off-screen Comanche peoples in Tahmahkera's usage here. As he stresses, the Comanche Empire—or Comanchería—once formed a vast territory across a large part of what is now the United States, reaching as far north as Canada and south to Mexico, beyond its perceived core Plains area. The author cites contemporary scholarship that has moved away from Eurocentric narratives, disrupting the simplistic frontier discourse that more dated scholarly works represent—a premise that upsets the idea of an inevitable east-west flow of settler colonizers and white social, political, and cultural hegemony of the United States. Representations of the Comanchería in the US imagination is too often one that is from a white perspective; as Tahmahkera emphasizes, history is backed up by cultural constructions, particularly the western,

where myth and reality too often conspire to marginalize Native Americans. *Cinematic Comanches* realigns that history and allows Comanche culture and history—both on-screen and off-screen—to take center-stage.

Chloé Zhao's *The Rider* (2017) expresses the changing nature of on-screen representations of Native Americans (illustrating the malleability and endurance of the western genre), and points to the social and cultural factors that have assisted these shifts. However, Hollywood still has massive influence, and despite scholarly claims about the death of the western genre, the idea of the West and the frontier narrative is still a significant discursive entity in the idea of the United States. As such, it is perhaps telling that *Cinematic Comanches* identifies this with a cinematic history centered on the Comanches—both real and culturally constructed. The application of Comanche knowledge offers a unique and refreshing interpretation of Native American cultural representations as well as a critical approach to the media text framed by contemporary discussions of Native Americans. Tahmahkera illustrates the role the Comanchería played in the construction of the United States, while realigning the Comanches in the cultural imagination with an intervention that is both vibrant and absolutely vital.

Jack Rutherford
University of Essex