



Mishuana Goeman. *Settler Aesthetics: Visualizing the Spectacle of Orinary Moments in 'The New World'*. University of Nebraska Press, 2023. 189 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8032-9066-2.

<https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/nebraska/9780803290662/settler-aesthetics/>

Filmic and other cultural representations of foundational U.S. narratives, such as the Pocahontas story, have a history of bolstering what settler historian and scholar Patrick Wolfe terms “the logic of elimination,” by presenting and idealising the colonial erasure of Indigeneity (387). In the book *Settler Aesthetics: Visualizing the Spectacle of Orinary Moments in The New World* (2023), Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) uses an Indigenous Feminist lens to analyse the representation of what she terms “orinary moments” of contact in the 2005 movie *The New World (TNW)* by American director Terrence Malick. This film tells a version of the story of Pocahontas which is, as outlined by Goeman, accompanied by “pristine landscapes rather than the sexual violence, physical subjugation, and coercion that enable conquest in actuality” (11). In this text, the approach to demythologising the Pocahontas “love story” digresses from typical perspectives, which aim to dissect the direct narrative of Pocahontas’ romantic relationship with John Smith and her eventual “sacrificing” of her Indigeneity (Goeman 11, 14). Instead, the text examines “the settler aesthetics that are upheld” in film which perpetuate a visual spectacle that shapes and “sustain[s] settler colonialism and empire” (Goeman 14).

In the introduction, Goeman succinctly outlines how she will use an Indigenous Feminist perspective to engage with an element of the settler aesthetic in each of the book’s chapters. The sections of the book then unfold by covering the following: the consumption and reception of the Pocahontas narrative, Malick’s “direction, film techniques, and philosophical focuses within the context of his position in the American film canon” (15), the film as an example of “Indian sympathy films” (95), which put excess labour on Indigenous participants and use their visual and auditory form as an apology for the “violence” of a settler colonial past necessary to “creating America” that is “no longer needed” (92), and finally by looking “to the future and voices of Pocahontas’s people, the Pamunkey” (Goeman 16).

As Goeman considers the response to the romanticised figure of Pocahontas in the first chapter of the book, she uses personal anecdotes to focus the reader on the contemporary real-world impacts on Indigenous people of the “naturalized consumption–mediated through Disney–of their identity and being” (20). This provides an evocative introduction to the topic at hand which, though perhaps not

necessary to the conviction of her analysis of Malick's direction, is important in her (re-)centring of Indigenous experience and voices.

Beyond her anecdotal introduction, Goeman moves to conceptualise her use of the terms "moves to innocence" and "spectacle" as she shifts to her critique of *TNW* (22). She describes the spectacle as "the way that social relations become mediated through images and capital endeavors" (Goeman 22). With this definition of the spectacle in mind, the "move to innocence" is conveyed as being a settler aesthetic in and of itself which is "grounded in the emptying out of racialized and gendered violence," in an "attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity" (21). This becomes the central tenet of Goeman's argument.

As she begins to explore the spectacle of the "cordial and romantic coming together" that the "move to innocence," in *TNW*, upholds, she reinforces how Malick's "attempts [at] cultural authenticity," through "dress, scenery, and Alogonquin language dialects," fall short (Goeman 25, 22). She assesses how the film reinforces the ongoing neglect to undermine the facets of the well-known narrative that the movie perpetuates, which has "had a profound effect on Native and Black communities by upholding white supremacy" (Goeman 40). Through an effective implementation of the concepts outlined above, Goeman's analysis convincingly argues and reminds us that, even in a supposed attempt to re-envision the portrayal of initial contact and of Pocahontas, *TNW* succeeds only in "present[ing] a kinder version of Indians and conquest," which sanitises reality (Goeman 24).

Transitioning into the book's second chapter, Goeman unveils a survey of Malick's film techniques, looking at his academic and creative background, how his upbringing in Oklahoma and Texas may have influenced his filming style, and at *TNW* and facets of the wider catalogue of movies he has directed. Her examination is particularly concerned with depictions of the environment, and how Malick's works are pensive in their "diminution of the human narrative against the vastness of nature" (Goeman 49). Through her analysis of technique, Goeman argues that *TNW*'s "romanticization of land ... reproduces a geographic settler aesthetic in [the] portrayal of American landscapes ... [which] evacuat[e] American Indian histories and geographies" and effectively empty out the realities of the dispossession of Indigenous people and Indigenous land sovereignty in place of "a neoliberal focus on respect and shared responsibility for the Earth" (49, 50).

Though much of the book's second chapter provides interesting explorations of Malick's filmic techniques and creative choices; the section titled "Soundscapes of Settlement" provides the most insightful exploration of *TNW*'s deployment of settler aesthetics. What emerges is the assessment that, through musical and sound-based choices, the landscape becomes "another character" (70). Goeman asserts that the use of voiceover pulls audience focus to the "visual narrative of America" (70), and the use of nature sounds overlaid with music by the European composers Wagner and Mozart to accompany the visuals of the Virginian landscape serves to



“demonstrate European mastery over nature that will come” (62). Alongside other analyses, her assertion that these “soundscapes evoke Eden” bolsters the claim that Malick’s focus on the Virginian landscape shows the land as “pure property and consumable,” making this chapter especially salient to her overall argument (Goeman 65, 50).

In chapter three, Goeman focuses on how *TNW* embodies the tradition of filmic apology for a settler-colonial past imbued with violence and underlines the recurrent labour put on Indigenous actors and film staff in the creation of narratives which feature Indigenous people, histories, and experiences. Through her exploration of *TNW* as a filmic apology, she exemplifies how the film acts as another “Indian sympathy fil[m],” through the spectacle and the spectator role (Goeman 95). Goeman states, “[t]his is part of how the spectacle operates in *TNW*,” as the sympathy which accumulates in “the spectator” (92) serves to “affir[m] that the guilt one feels [when watching] means we have moved past our violent colonial past” (97), effectively “relegating the spectator to the role of observer” despite the continuation of settler colonial forces (92). This statement highlights two points: the capital connections attached to the (cinematic) spectacle of originary moments and the way in which visual representations of settler colonialism allow movie-goers to participate in the spectacle and the upholding of its “structures,” of “consumable” land and property whilst sustaining a feeling of non-complicity (Goeman 22, 50). To hark back to the book’s introduction, Goeman addresses the aforementioned points by asserting that “we can watch conquest on screen, have feelings that it is wrong, and even know that there is doubt about the [storyline being presented] but consume the images and continue to participate in the structures” anyway (Goeman 22). The theme of apology and of the complicity in looking or spectating in the spectacle moves across the third chapter which, in my opinion, provides the strongest stand-alone analysis of the settler aesthetic and its “undermin[ing of] a decolonial presentation of the Powhatan Empire” in *TNW* (Goeman 117).

Before reaching the book’s final chapter, “The ‘New World’ of Race, U.S. Law, and the Politics of Recognition,” Goeman’s argument(s) about the prevalence of settler aesthetics in Malick’s film are already convincing. What this chapter offers to reinforce this claim is the alternate possibilities for visual and creative portrayals of Virginia-based Indigenous communities amidst the structure of settler colonialism. The fourth chapter rejects the film’s erasure of “the actual survival and thriving of Pamunkey communities” and the “extraordinary, mythologized” narrative at play (Goeman 123). Goeman spotlights various significant elements of Pamunkey history which Malick neglects to showcase in *TNW*. By drawing attention to these shortcomings, Goeman compounds the settler aesthetics she asserts can be found within Malick’s film by underscoring the missed opportunity to centre “survivance” and to illuminate the politics of recognition and other eliminatory legislative

decisions which suppressed the Pamunkey people but failed to eliminate them (127). Through a thorough outlining of the racialisation of land and laws, the politics of recognition, and sovereign possibilities, readers are made aware of the “history of racial laws [which] are lost in the spectacle of interracial romance” (140) and of the Pamunkey’s own decade-long process of petitioning the U.S. government for recognition, which was in progress while *TNW* was in production. Goeman outlines the “irony” of this, illuminating how Malick was working on the creation of a narrative which remains entrenched in “the tragic tale of destruction of Indigenous peoples” (Goeman 147, 126-127) whilst, to invoke Kānaka Maoli scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, the Pamunkey “exist, resist, and persist” within the settler-imposed borders of the Virginian landscape (Kauanui 1).

In summation, the principal arguments of *Settler Aesthetics* are entangled with the danger that films like *TNW* pose in reaffirming and “recirculating” the “image of the sacrificing, assimilated,” romanticised figure of Pocahontas and in stripping Indigenous nations represented in such movies, such as the Pamunkey, of their own agency and of their own stories (Goeman 147, 145). By underlining the reinforcement of “tropes of sacrificing Indigenous women and vanishing Native nations” in Malick’s film, Goeman convincingly demonstrates how Indigenous agency is de-centred, and she reminds us that Pocahontas’ “name is not mentioned in the film and does not appear until the final credits” (126, 35).

Settler Aesthetics is a book of contestations and calls for re-framings. Through a broad and in-depth assessment of the filmic representation of the “spectacle of originary moments,” Goeman’s book iterates how creative presentations of settler-Indigenous relations have the potential to reconfigure romanticised, sanitised depictions of settler colonialism and how *TNW* ultimately fails in this pursuit (147). Together with her definition of the spectacle in chapter one, and her examples of where it is littered throughout *TNW*, Goeman uses her assessments of the film to extend the reach of her analysis to reshape current understandings of how the medium of film can “disrupt the settler colonial structure set in place to extract land and resources from Indigenous communities (24). By ending her analysis with a brief history and a nod to the experience of the Pamunkey people, Goeman reconfigures the oversimplified depiction of Indigeneity and settler violence to be found in *TNW* by centring those impacted by these perpetual narratives and sharing her own hopes for Indigenous films and futures. As a result, Goeman has given readers a stimulating, analytical take on *TNW* which is vibrant and convincing in its approach and valuable for those in and outside of Film and Indigenous Studies.

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