



ARCHIVOPAPERS

JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218


FILM AS BODY, LAND AND STORY CONFRONTING COLONIAL HISTORY WITH INDIGENOUS DANCE

Amanda Fayant

To cite this article:

Fayant, Amanda. 2023. "Film as Body, Land and Story: Confronting colonial history with indigenous dance". *ARCHIVO PAPERS* 3 (1):111-115.
<http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7951299>

Published online: 18 May 2023.

[Link to this article](#) 

[Submit your article to this journal](#) 

© Archivopapers Journal / Archivopress, 2023



Archivopapers Journal is licensed under a
[Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

REVIEW

FILM AS BODY, LAND AND STORY: CONFRONTING COLONIAL HISTORY WITH INDIGENOUS DANCE

AMANDA FAYANT *Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway****Dancing the Space Inbetween***

Directed by Lacy Morin-Desjarlais.

Written by Lacy Morin-Desjarlais, Michele Sereda

CA, 2015, color, 7 min.

Dancing the Space Inbetween is a short dance film conceived by Lacy Morin-Desjarlais in collaboration with Michele Sereda, inspired by the Regina Indian Industrial School's unmarked cemetery in Regina, Saskatchewan.

Every time I watch this short dance film, I try not to cry and every time I am equally unsuccessful. This is the power of the short film *Dancing the Space Inbetween* by Lacy Morin-Desjarlais in collaboration with choreographer Michele Sereda. Sadly, both artists passed away in a car accident just after the completion of the film.

Through film and dance, Lacy embodies and relays the story of the Regina Industrial Indian school (1891-1910) and places a spotlight on the unmarked cemetery, where Indigenous children who once attended the residential school are buried. The site is just north of Regina, Saskatchewan on Pinkie Road. This movie is an elegy to the children who died attending the Regina Indian Industrial School.

Lacy Morin-Desjarlais was an award-winning Indigenous dancer, artist and filmmaker from Saskatchewan's Saulteaux First Nation. She grew up in Burnaby, B.C., and began teaching powwow dance at the University of Regina

Conservatory. In her art, Lacy bridged traditional culture and contemporary practice.

The film focuses on incorporating movement and telling a story with dance from an Indigenous perspective. The movement of the camera, of Lacy and of the land connects the themes of the film- honoring the stories of Indigenous children and their families, highlighting the history of the land and acknowledging the relationship between body, spirit and land. Linda T. Smith writes about the importance of telling stories with an Indigenous voice in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, “Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes.”¹

The opening scene is a split screen with two contrasting, yet complimentary shots. On the left, we see a close-up of someone walking across a floor. The temperature of the light is a cool blue which highlights the deep black of the shoes as the shot shows Lacy walking through a door into a room. On the right, we see Lacy kneeling on the grass outside, with a red cloth folded in front of her. The camera focuses on Lacy as she stands and starts to move, opening her arms almost as if embracing the land, the wind and the space. The soundtrack of the film is uplifting, yet also mournful and the music sets the tone for a beautiful and raw expression of Indigenous filmmaking.

The camera moves on to a close-up of the grass on the prairie. The grass moves and sways in a similar fashion to the movements of Lacy in the previous shot. We are reminded of how the movements of the grass, light and wind are connected. As the film progresses, we see a combination of shots, almost like they are braided together. The first shots are of Lacy on the prairie, slithering through the grass, gripping onto the land as she moves over it with her body. Her dress is almost white except at the bottom where it seems stained red, a reminder of the blood shed on the site of the unmarked cemetery. The next shots are of Lacy in a dance studio with a costume head of a buffalo, all black, like the footwear in the beginning of the film. The buffalo head is made of a material that is a deep black yet is also reflective and shimmers in the light as Lacy practices her dance. At one point, Lacy takes off the buffalo head while the camera focuses on it as she places it on the floor. We can see that the buffalo spirit is an important visual for the story and is a reminder that from an Indigenous perspective, the buffalo (bison) is a symbol for resilience and spirit of the prairie. Tasha Hubbard explains the importance of the buffalo in Indigenous culture in her thesis, *The Call of the Buffalo: Exploring Kinship with the Buffalo in Indigenous Creative Expression*:

(M)y father has shared with me that Nêhiyaw (Cree) people are in a kinship relationship with the buffalo spirit known as Kise-napewi-mostos or Old Man Buffalo. It has been explained to me that the word has a connotation of a benevolent grandfather, in that grandparents often have a soft spot for their grandchildren. Through this relationship, the buffalo is understood to be our

teacher of good governance; in other words, the buffalo teaches us how to live as family, as kin, and as a people.²

The buffalo head in the film is incorporated in different ways throughout the film. When Lacy is in the studio practicing, she takes the head off and we see in the next scene of Lacy on the land that she is crawling on her stomach towards the buffalo head. She almost slides into the head and again, we see her performing the same dance she was practicing in the studio footage. The buffalo head connects scenes and crosses time, highlighting how the spirit is always with us and around us.

The back and forth between the shots in the studio and the land works as a visual metaphor for grappling with the past and the present. The intertwining of these two scenes shows how the story of the land is a part of who we are as Indigenous people in Canada and that when we tell stories from the land, we can connect to our history on both a physical and spiritual level. Part of telling the story of the land is acknowledging and honoring the memories of those who walked there before us, those who left traces. By highlighting the untold stories of the Regina Industrial Indian school, the film makes us aware of the injustice of the unmarked cemetery and how those stories are not gone despite not being seen—those stories are a part of the land, and therefore, a part of us.

As the film continues, we see Lacy's movements tell the residential school children's stories. First, Lacy dances, runs and jumps as if she is a child. She is free and happy for a brief moment before the dance turns violent. Lacy moves as if she is being beaten and tormented. There is fear being expressed through her dance. A red cloth is strewn on the ground and as Lacy moves, she picks up the cloth and allows it to encase her. She is covered in red, a symbol of the blood that has been lost on the site. As the scene plays out a few blades of prairie grass come into focus. By focusing on the grass, the film shares an Indigenous view on the significance of nature and the relationship between all beings. Vine DeLoria Jr described this Indigenous philosophy in his article *Relativity, Relatedness and Reality*, where he simply states, "we are all relatives"³. This statement by DeLoria Jr. reflects an Indigenous belief that all things are related and connected, including land, people and animals. The blades of grass are given space and show agency in the way they move with the wind. The grass bends and moves in similar way to the movements of Lacy's dance. She allows the cloth to flow over her and slowly drift to the ground as the camera continues to focus on the blades of grass just in front of her. As the red disappears from the frame, Lacy comes into focus and begins to dance again. This dance is the same as the dance in the beginning, where she opens her arms almost as if to embrace the land, the wind and the spirits who remain at the site. The film switches focus between Lacy and the blades of grass as she dances and moves in connection with the land. The buffalo head appears again briefly almost as a reminder that the buffalo spirit is always with us and connects us as Indigenous people to the history of the land. In the introduction to

her book, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video*, Beverly Singer writes about the importance of Indigenous filmmaking and explains:

(T)he chance to remedy the lack of literature about telling our own stories is deeply connected to being self-determined as an Indian. It is part of a social movement that I call "cultural sovereignty," which involves trusting in the older way and adapting them to our lives in the present... Our films and videos are helping to reconnect us with very old relationships and traditions. Native American filmmaking transmits beliefs and feelings that help revive storytelling and restore the old foundation.⁴

When the camera brings Lacy into focus again, we see her lift her arms to the sky, offering her prayer to the memory of the Regina Industrial Indian school children. This scene shows how agency in re-telling history from an Indigenous perspective is part of reclaiming agency over our stories and experiences.

The final shot of the film is of the prairie sunset with a flock of birds flying across the sky. The mood is somber, yet free and open. The prairie sky offers comfort and hope. The land holds knowledge and stories. This film explores the Indigenous gaze as a source of knowledge, storytelling and connection. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes in her article *Land as Pedagogy*, "(c)oming to know is an intimate process, the unfolding of relationship with the spiritual world"⁵. Through her movements and dance, Lacy connects the intimacy of knowing to the spirituality of the site of the Regina Industrial Indian school unmarked cemetery.

REFERENCES

- DELORIA Jr, Vine. "Relativity, Relatedness and Reality." In *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader*, edited by Kristen Foehner and Sam Scinta Barbara Deloria, 32-39. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999. <https://library.wisn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/130105-Relativity-Relatedness-Reality.pdf>
- HUBBARD, T. *The Call of the Buffalo: Exploring Kinship with the Buffalo in Indigenous Creative Expression* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, 2016. doi:10.11575/PRISM/28021. <http://hdl.handle.net/11023/3272>
- SIMPSON, Leanne Betasamosake. *Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol 3, No. 3, 2014, pp. 1-25. <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/22170>
- SINGER, Beverly. "Introduction: Thinking Native Thoughts." In *Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens: Native American Film and Video*, by Beverly Singer, 1-4. Minneapolis: University of MN Press, 2001.
- SMITH, Linda T. *Decolonizing Methodologies*. 2nd. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2012.

-
- 1 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 29.
 - 2 Hubbard, *The Call of the Buffalo*, 13.
 - 3 DeLoria Jr, *Relativity, Relatedness and Reality*, 36.
 - 4 Singer, Introduction.
 - 5 Simpson, *Land as pedagogy*, 15.