



PROJECT MUSE®

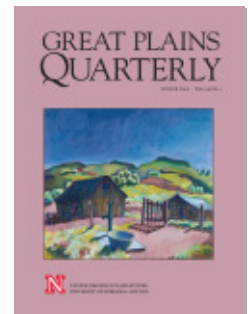
*Visualities: Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian
Film and Art* ed. by Denise K. Cummings (review)

Nancy Marie Mithlo

Great Plains Quarterly, Volume 34, Number 1, Winter 2014, pp. 106-107
(Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gpq.2014.0010>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/536902>

Tribute to the Plains People was intended as a catalog to accompany a retrospective exhibit. The text of the book is a celebration of Howard Terpning's life and work rather than a critical analysis or a scholarly resource for those researching Plains Indian cultures. As such, the book, which includes 120 full-color plates of Terpning's paintings, will appeal to collectors and admirers of the artist's work.

JOHANNA M. BLUME
Assistant Curator of Western Art,
History, and Culture
Eiteljorg Museum of
American Indians and Western Art

Visualities: Perspectives on Contemporary American Indian Film and Art.

Edited by Denise K. Cummings. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011. xxiv + 243 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, works cited, index. \$29.95 paper.

This illustrated edited volume aims to embrace "a visual field perspective in order to examine aspects of the social importance of indigenous visual culture." Divided into two parts—"Indigenous Film Practices" and "Contemporary American Indian Art"—the essays draw primarily from a literary theory and cultural studies perspective; their authors teach in English departments or undertake their scholarly analyses from a critical literary perspective. Given that the title and emphasis of the text is on "visualities," this dynamic presents some compelling challenges. It is telling that the most successful chapters concern the moving image. Perhaps the narrative structure of the screenplay speaks most directly to the skills of the literary theorist. Some difficulties lie in the scope of inquiry selected (the

"crowd syndrome" of discussing too many artists within one piece); others arise from a lack of theoretical focus (the "floating thesis"). Of interest to Great Plains scholars are chapters that discuss the work of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds.

It is instructive and a bit disappointing to note how the same constructs of two decades ago—Stephen Leuthold's "Indigenous aesthetics" (1998), Gerald Vizenor's "survivance" (1993), Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie's "visual sovereignty" (1998), and Jolene Rickard's "sovereignty" (1996)—are still being relied upon somewhat uncritically as theoretical destinations rather than signposts for further inquiry. This is odd given the introduction's assertion that the essays will "parallel the contemporary moment from a critical perspective." Legal scholars have long questioned the imposition of political sovereignty "granted" to Native nations rather than the recognition of inherent sovereignty that predates the formation of the United States. Two chapters escape this didactic theorizing—Joanna Hearne's "Indians Watching Indians on TV" and Theodore Van Alst's "Sherman Shoots Alexie," both dealing with Native spectatorship. These authors demonstrate how sharp, creative approaches to the arts that employ a well-articulated theoretical frame can accomplish more than reliance on verbiage alone. I would likely excerpt these two contributions and assign the reading to a 300-level or higher college course; however, the compilation itself would not serve well as a textbook, given the unevenness of the essays and the overall dense arguments staged.

The best Native arts scholarship today looks beyond the eternal dualisms of individual/collective, traditional/modern, linear/holistic, and corrective/reactive formulas to engage in the specific details of singular art-

ists, their audiences, and their aims, rather than the eternal “challenge the mainstream” agenda employed here.

NANCY MARIE MITHLO
Department of Art History and
American Indian Studies Program
University of Wisconsin–Madison

***Backstage: Stories from
My Life in Public Television.***

By Ron Hull. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. ix + 260 pp. Photographs. \$19.95 paper.

Ron Hull's *Backstage: Stories from My Life in Public Television* sums up the incredible journey of a man who has loved, with heart and soul, the mission and impact of a philosophy and medium known as public television. I read with fascination, consuming his tales of pioneering work at the birth of the University of Nebraska's educational television station in the mid-1950s, to his bringing television to South Vietnam a decade later, through his directing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's Program Fund from 1982 till 1988, as though acquainting myself with a childhood superhero. Ron's strong convictions and ideas created a lasting roadmap for future generations of content developers and public media advocates. As he put it during his Program Fund interview with the CPB board, “Our job [in public television] is to provide viewers with programs in all the disciplines, backed by scholarship and accuracy and representative of the best the world has to offer in the arts, sciences, humanities, news, and public affairs. Our distinguishing feature is intellectual and artistic excellence—and audiences instinctively know when they are seeing the best.”

Ron's rich, descriptive recollections give depth and substance to our collective public television history. Many tremendously successful and gifted individuals who led the charge to create a better world and a more civilized nation through their efforts in the arts and education are acknowledged and given due credit. Writers John Neihardt and Mari Sandoz contributed to the reputation and stature of educational television in Nebraska during its early years. Later, as Ron recounts, such luminaries as Bill Moyers, David McCullough, Ken Burns, Stanley Karnow, Nancy Dickerson, and a host of others would add their talent and support to public television's mission. Ron's stories also bear witness to the difficulty of “insulating federally appropriated dollars from politics,” which ultimately led to his principled departure from Washington DC and his grateful return to Nebraska Public Television.

Backstage is an arresting read for all of us in public broadcasting and for any student of history and public media. The diverse relationships Ron has developed throughout his life and his engagement and love of the arts are a joy to encounter. His passion for learning, teaching, profound conversation, and thoughtful reflection, in tandem with strategic thinking and planning, is a theme woven from beginning to end. His stories are encouraging, insightful, and revealing of why we have such a strong foundation in public television today.

“The most valuable asset of any life,” Ron Hull observes, “is the time we are given.” Thanks, Ron, for using your time so well and blazing a trail for the rest of us to follow.

DANIEL L. SCHIEDEL
Executive Director
Oklahoma Educational Television Authority
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma