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Restoring Relations through Stories: From Dinétah to Denendeh. By Renae Watchman. Foreword by Luci Tapahonso. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2024. 248 pages. \$100.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper; \$35.00 e-book.

Restoring Relations through Stories: From Dinétah to Denendeh is a distinctive and much-needed intervention in Indigenous literary and film studies. Renae Watchman brings together oral history, Diné and Dene literatures, land-based story, and Indigenous visual media to ask how relations are remembered, strained, and restored through narrative. The book is especially valuable because it gives sustained attention to Diné/Navajo cinema, a field still too rarely treated as a specific intellectual formation. Indigenous film scholarship has produced influential work on visual sovereignty, “fourth cinema,” and Native self-representation, yet Navajo-specific film criticism remains comparatively sparse. Watchman’s study therefore fills a significant gap by reading Diné films through Diné concepts, Diné language, and Diné social worlds.

The book’s argument crystalizes in one sentence: “I see Indigenous visual storytellers actualize *hózhó* through *k’é*” (57). This claim carries the conceptual weight of the study. *Hózhó* cannot be reduced to beauty or balance in an aesthetic sense, and *k’é* cannot be reduced to kinship as a sociological category. Watchman understands both as lived structures of relation that shape ethical, visual, and narrative practice. Her work asks what becomes visible when film is approached through the obligations of relation, and when story is treated as an active force in restoring life, not as an object to be interpreted from a distance.

This is where the book feels most original. Watchman places pressure on established Indigenous media theory by allowing Diné language to reorganize its terms from within. Her term *hane’tonomy*, an “emergent conceptualization of visual narrative autonomy” (52), grows from *hané*, or story, narrative, and wisdom. The term is useful because it names the autonomy of Indigenous visual storytelling without detaching autonomy from land, kinship, humor, protocol, and responsibility. In this sense, *hane’tonomy* enters conversation with Michelle Raheja’s *Reservation Reelism* (2010), Joanna Hearne’s *Native Recognition* (2012), and Barry Barclay’s fourth cinema, while keeping Diné epistemology at the center of the analysis.

Watchman’s command of Navajo dynamics gives the book its strongest texture. She is attentive to what outsiders often miss: the force of clan relations, the difference between English kinship terms and Diné relational practice, the humor carried in Diné Bizaad, the social meaning of being corrected, and the ways land is spoken to and remembered as relative. Her work shows that Navajo life on screen cannot be understood through representation alone. A scene may be formally well composed and still fail if it misrecognizes kinship, language, land, or protocol. A brief line in Diné Bizaad may do more intellectual work than an entire explanatory monologue. A joke

may carry critique. A silence may protect knowledge. This sensitivity makes the book pedagogically useful for students because it teaches readers how to notice relation at the level of language, gesture, setting, and sound.

The opening chapter on Tsé Bit'a'í, or Shiprock Peak, establishes the stakes of this method. Watchman reads Tsé Bit'a'í as a living storied presence, not scenery. Her discussion of mainstream films that use Shiprock as spectacle, alien landscape, or convenient desert icon reveals how cinema can participate in epistemic violence by severing land from the stories that make it accountable. Watchman demonstrates that place-based criticism can begin from story, law, and relation, giving readers a way to understand land as an active participant in visual culture.

The film chapters are the heart of the book. In her discussion of Sydney Freeland's *Drunktown's Finest*, Watchman develops the idea of "reel restoration" through a reading of contemporary Diné life that refuses a damage-centered frame. The film's conflicts around gender, sexuality, alcohol, mobility, family, and home are read through *hózhó*, *k'é*, ceremony, and the power of *jini*, the phrase that signals what "they say." Watchman's analysis of *Felixia* is especially important because it situates *nádleeh* identity within Diné teachings and kinship instead of treating gender diversity as a modern social issue appended to tradition. The chapter shows how the film contests colonial stories about Gallup and Navajo life while bringing its characters toward restored relations.

Her chapter on Blackhorse Lowe's *Fifth World* is equally compelling. Watchman reads the film's road structure, love story, clan revelation, sound, long shots, and pauses through a Diné diegesis. Her attention to the scene in which clan relations interrupt desire is a beautiful example of the book's method: the stakes of the scene become legible through *k'é*, not through plot mechanics alone. Watchman shows how Lowe's film teaches viewers through indirection, discomfort, humor, and relational consequence. The film does not translate everything for a non-Diné audience, and Watchman respects that refusal. Her analysis helps readers understand that opacity can be an ethical and aesthetic choice.

The book's final movement toward Denendeh deepens its relational framework by following ancestral, linguistic, and story-based connections between Diné and Dene peoples. Watchman does not collapse these communities into sameness; she holds distinction and kinship together with care. This section makes the title's movement from Dinétah to Denendeh intellectually meaningful, showing relation as something carried through language, memory, story, and responsibility across distance. In doing so, the book expands Navajo/Diné studies into a broader Athabaskan geography while remaining grounded in specific homelands, protocols, and narrative traditions.

Restoring Relations through Stories is also a strong teaching text. Its maps, figures, selected Indigenous filmography, clear explanations of key terms, and careful movement between oral, literary, and visual materials make it useful for courses in American Indian studies, Indigenous film, Diné studies, and storytelling. The book teaches readers to approach Indigenous cinema with better questions: Who is related to whom? What does the language do? What protocols govern the image? What does land remember? What forms of restoration become possible through story?

Future research can build from Watchman's work by examining community reception, classroom use, festival circulation, and emerging Diné digital media. Yet the achievement of this book is already substantial. *Restoring Relations through Stories* gives Indigenous media studies a rare Navajo-specific vocabulary for reading film through *hózhó, ké, hané*, and land. It is a deeply relational book, and its best insight is also its method: stories restore because they continue to make relations felt, heard, and accountable.

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