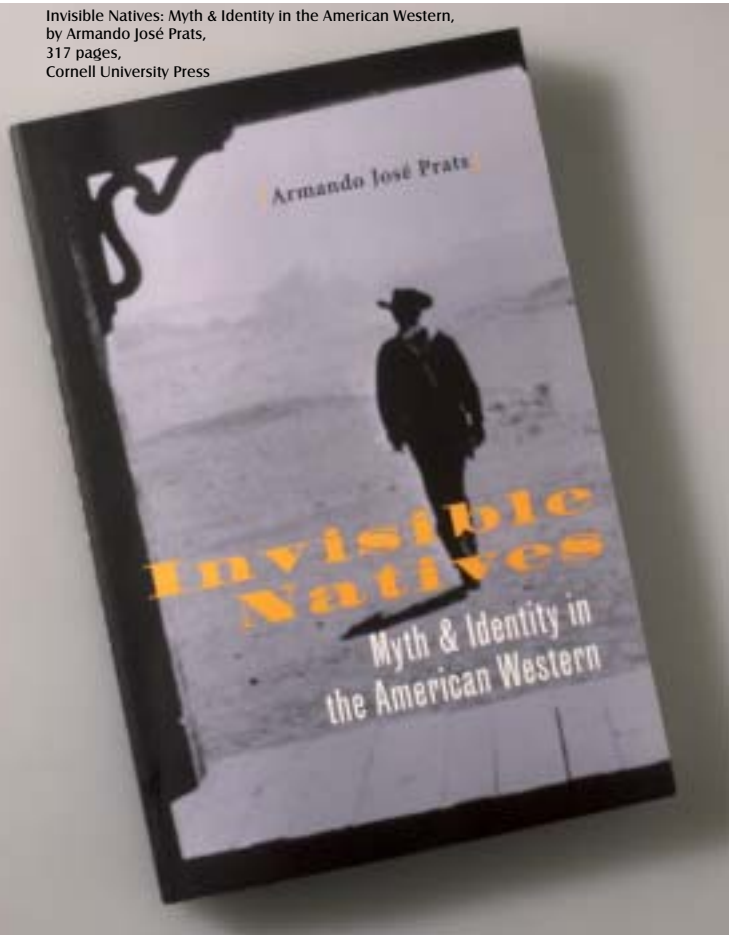


Invisible Natives: Myth & Identity in the American Western,
by Armando José Prats,
317 pages,
Cornell University Press



Hollywood's Indian

Oklahoma. The Lancaster character bolts the train, gets wounded in a skirmish and, symbolically, rubs a couple handfuls of earth into his wound to help it heal.

“I felt he was so daring and so human,” Prats says. “I saw the movie over and over.”

Years later, as an associate professor of English at UK, Prats was still troubled by the portrayal of Indians. And when he decided to write a book about the American Western, his theme became as clear as a full moon shining over an Apache campfire—the treatment of the Indian in Hollywood Westerns.

“Now I was looking at Westerns from the perspective of an academic who knows how to ask questions about movies,” he says.

His “looking” took four years and involved taking detailed notes on about 90 movies, some of which he researched at home (the UK English department has a considerable collection of films), and some of which he saw when he traveled to the Library of Congress in Washington or to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. “I ended up with 1,000 single-spaced pages of notes,” Prats says. “In this kind of scholarship, you have to create your own text, literally, before you can analyze it.”

One of Prats’s major discoveries, and one that led to his book’s title, was that Hollywood’s portrayal of the Indian was predicated on the idea that the Indian had mostly disappeared, or was otherwise invisible.

“The Hollywood Western never produced an Indian antagonist more memorable, or more familiar, than the one we never quite see,” Prats says. “In so many of these films, it’s the disquieting anticipation of an encounter that fuels the imagination of the fearful whites. Smoke signals and feathered bonnets, arrows and lances, faces in war paint half-seen in the forest, the obligatory row of warriors on the distant ridge—these amorphous images and artifacts announce the Indian,” Prats says.

He adds that he worked hard to write a book that will interest academics and the general public. “I would like the book to be read as a document on dominant American culture and how it operates.”

“Today so many of these movies are accessible,” he says. “I’d be pleased if people read the book, went out and rented some of these movies, and screened the movies with my book in mind. I’d want them to really see what previously they only looked at.”

—Jeff Worley

Growing up in Havana in the 1950s, Armando Prats began a long love affair with the American Western.

“We were very tapped into America, and my friends and I would go to the movies every Sunday for a double feature—all Hollywood films. And lots of these, of course, were Westerns.”

What attracted Prats to the Western early on, he says, wasn’t so much the action as the outcome. “Even before I thought of Westerns as genre or formula or myth, I responded to their moral force and focus. In Cuba our leaders—the guys who were supposed to be the good guys—weren’t. The president, for one, was a thief and a thug. The Western provided a moral model—evil can have its day, but the good guys eventually win.”

As Prats saw more and more Westerns, though, he began to wonder why the Indians were always portrayed as the bad guys. “Even as a kid it was clear to me that the Indians had a culture, too, and it was even older than white culture. What was so bad, I wondered, about people who were merely defending their land and trying to protect their families against aggressive intruders?”

The 1954 film *Apache*, starring Burt Lancaster as the Indian warrior Massai, was a pivotal movie for Prats in his thinking about Hollywood’s portrayal. The film centers around the thousands of Apaches shipped off by train to reservations in