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Book Review

Review of Beenash Jafri, *Settler Attachments and Asian Diasporic Film: A Cinematic Study of Asian-Indigenous Relationality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025)

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Beenash Jafri's *Settler Attachments and Asian Diasporic Film: A Cinematic Study of Asian-Indigenous Relationality* (2025) offers an interdisciplinary examination of the complex relationship between Asian diasporas and settler-colonial structures. As the first scholar to critically explore Asian-Indigenous relationality through film and visual media, Jafri probes the enduring attachment of Asian diasporic communities to settler-colonial ideals, despite their own histories of colonization, racism, and displacement. In doing so, she reveals how Asian diasporic cinema both perpetuates and challenges these attachments, positioning film as a site of complicity and potential decolonial resistance.

The book opens with a poignant analogy that juxtaposes the author's diasporic childhood in Toronto to the experience of Indigenous teenagers depicted in *Beans*, a 2020 Canadian drama directed by Mohawk-Canadian filmmaker Tracey Deer and set during the Oka Crisis. Jafri recalls:

> Like *Beans*, my cousins and I experienced the typical forms of boredom many children face during the slow summer. But whereas *Beans* deals with that boredom by joining older teenagers

> throwing firecrackers at Canadian soldiers, my cousins and I decided to organize a costume party, at which Toronto-born, diasporic me chose to dress up as a cowboy, a literal and symbolic figure of American empire and colonization.[1]

This parallel serves as both a personal and historical key moment through which the author examines the distinct yet interconnected experiences of Asian diasporic individuals and Indigenous peoples within a settler-colonial context while also considering the role of representation in both independent and Hollywood cinema. Jafri reflects:

> For myself, as a brown child, settler-colonial violence was discernible as something more abstract and diffuse. I was experiencing gendered forms of racism, aspiring to assimilation in Canada, a white settler society. Film and the figure of the Hollywood cowboy mediated my relationship to race, gender, and settler colonialism—not just because I absorbed stereotypes and misrepresentations, but because I was enthralled by the pleasures of cowboy cosplay. My cowboy play was emblematic of my assimilatory desires.[2]

Her reflection on her own relationship to this "stolen land"[3] reveals the intricate emotional and psychic entanglements that diasporic communities navigate within settler-colonial structures, shaped by both a longing for belonging and the allure of settler society's promises of wealth, freedom, and independence. Thus, Jafri's concept of attachment encompasses not only direct political engagements with settler colonialism but also the more subtle emotional investments that perpetuate it. These attachments, central to the diasporic condition, often obscure the underlying violence of the settler-colonial project. While they may not always be directly linked to acts of violence, they remain deeply entangled with it. As Jafri emphasizes, despite her extensive scholarly research and political activism aimed at understanding Indigenous struggles, this awareness has not been enough to sever her own ties to settler colonialism.[4] She acknowledges that her positionality

remains shaped by and embedded within settler-colonial structures, illustrating how complicity persists even among those critically engaged with decolonial thought. Consequently, Asian diasporic attachments to settler societies are not merely ideological but also deeply affective and structural, making disentanglement from these systems particularly challenging. This entanglement mirrors a broader intellectual impasse between race and diaspora studies, on one hand, and Indigenous and settler-colonial studies, on the other—fields that, despite addressing overlapping forms of oppression, often struggle to fully account for each other's complexities. Jafri, however, reframes this impasse as generative, adopting a stance that is "simultaneously pessimistic and hopeful, working from the premise that a modified, counterhegemonic hopefulness is necessary for imagining alternate worlds."[5]

The concept of worldmaking is central to *Settler Attachments*,[6] functioning both as a critique of how Asian diasporic communities contribute to the reconstruction of settler-colonial worlds and as an exploration of alternative diasporic worldmaking rooted in decolonial possibilities. Rather than viewing decolonization as a final goal, Jafri frames it as an ongoing process that lays the foundation for reimagining Asian-Indigenous relations and envisioning futures beyond settler-colonial structures.[7] This framing positions worldmaking as a critical site of both resistance and potential, emphasizing the need to reimagine relationships across racial, colonial, and diasporic boundaries in order to cultivate a more inclusive and decolonized future. Building on the idea that "film is both an object and an instrument of structural power,"[8] Jafri approaches visual media not as passive representations but as active sites of worldmaking. In *Settler Attachments*, the films under analysis function as contested spaces where filmmakers engage with cinematic traditions while negotiating both personal and collective histories. While these works remain entangled in the internalized structures of settler colonialism, they also confront its enduring legacies, critically reflecting on and challenging the systems that shape Indigenous and diasporic experiences. The book shifts the focus of film studies from stereotypical representations to the structural violence embedded within cinematic narratives, employing relational methods from critical ethnic studies to

film analysis. It examines the intersections of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and globalization.

Jafri critically engages with absence and erasure in film,[9] highlighting how these gaps are both affectively and aesthetically constructed, carrying as much significance as what is shown. She begins her analysis with the figure of the cowboy—an overrepresented yet telling figure that speaks to what is implied and unspoken. Rather than focusing on the white hegemonic cowboy, Jafri examines the diasporic Asian cowboy, exploring how melancholic yearning emerges within this figure. Jafri argues that while the "Brown non-Native cowboy does indeed reaffirm and undo the presumed whiteness of the cowboy, [it does not fully dismantle] its coloniality,"[10] stressing how this iconic symbol of American masculinity and power remains deeply entangled with settler-colonial legacies, particularly for non-Native diasporic peoples. What makes her analysis especially compelling is its challenge to conventional interpretations of the cowboy myth. Rather than situating Asians within a rigid binary of cowboys versus Indians—colonizer versus colonized—Jafri presents a more nuanced perspective, showing how the Asian diasporic cowboy is simultaneously "other" and "complicit" in settler-colonial narratives, thereby complicating assumed oppositions between these identities. From the figure of the "not quite settler" emerges a form of diasporic melancholia,[11] which is a response not only to the exclusion from but also to an attachment to U.S. settler colonialism. The desire for assimilation into settler culture leads to an internalization of its violence, rendering settler colonialism a "lost object" within the diasporic subject.[12] Jafri's interrogation of melancholia, therefore, enriches our understanding of the emotional layers embedded within settler colonialism, revealing that its violence is not solely external but is also deeply internalized. Her analysis of the "not quite" settler is particularly revelatory, as it complicates the emotional dimensions of assimilation and underscores the inescapable impossibility of full belonging within the settler-colonial order. Through an analysis of *Cowgirl* (1996), a comedic drama by Sunny Lee about a Korean American woman obsessed with Western culture, and *Wild West* (1993), a film about a South Asian country band in London doomed to fail, Jafri examines how

these works expose the fetishization of the cowboy and its connection to racial melancholia. The films' protagonists, as they navigate their fraught desires for belonging, embody a paradoxical and often painful attachment to settler-colonial culture—a culture that excludes them yet simultaneously shapes their sense of self. Here, the cowboy serves not only as a symbol of colonial power but also as a repository for the desires, losses, and contradictions embedded within the diasporic experience. Through this exploration, Jafri brings race, diaspora, and settler colonialism into conversation via the lens of melancholia and desire. Drawing on Freud's theory of fetishism and Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, Jafri offers a compelling argument about how diasporic subjects both reinforce and resist the colonial frameworks they engage with.

Jafri deepens her analysis by critically engaging with the works of South Asian diasporic artists Shani Mootoo and Vivek Shraya,[13] whose attachments to settler-colonial landscapes persist despite their political commitments to Indigenous solidarity. Both artists, rooted in queer and trans-BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities in Toronto, navigate the complexities of Indigenous sovereignty in their work, revealing a broader implication: ideological transformations, coupled with activism, are insufficient to sever diasporic ties to settler-colonial structures.[14] Rather than framing this contradiction as a moral failing, Jafri situates it within the broader settler-colonial systems that shape how racialized communities engage with Indigenous sovereignty. Her critique shows how these systems incentivize racialized subjects to adopt dominant modes of belonging, unintentionally reinforcing settler-colonial logic. Jafri reframes this complicity not as passive acceptance, but as an opportunity for refusal—challenging assimilationist norms and shifting the conversation toward alternative relationalities beyond settler-colonial frameworks.

In acknowledging the pervasive violence of settler colonialism, Jafri resists a fatalistic outlook, instead positioning Asian diasporic filmmaking as a space for decolonial worldmaking. To develop this argument, she analyzes *Shooting Indians* (1997), in which filmmaker Ali Kazimi and Onondaga photographer Jeffrey Thomas foster a radical

friendship that reimagines land and Indigeneity outside of settler-colonial frameworks. Jafri moves beyond conventional narratives of multicultural inclusion, demonstrating how the film disrupts dominant frameworks and constructs a diasporic archive that enables cross-colonial and cross-racial dialogue. By framing their friendship as a "portal of alternate possibilities for living and loving on occupied Indigenous land,"[15] Jafri challenges the assumption that solidarity must be mediated through state recognition, instead envisioning non-statist, relational modes of belonging. In doing so, the book not only critiques the structures that constrain diasporic-Indigenous relations but also reimagines the possibilities for solidarity beyond colonial paradigms.

Another form of worldmaking emerges through the queer relational survivance depicted in films such as *This Place* (2022), directed by V. T. Nayani, and *Scarborough* (2021), an adaptation of Catherine Hernandez's novel. These films shift the discourse from passive representations of the diaspora to active sites of worldmaking, using queer-of-color frameworks to interrogate the intersections of colonial violence and racialized subjecthood. Jafri highlights how the films integrate Indigenous experiences through queer-of-color imaginaries, complicating the relationship between diaspora and Indigeneity. By foregrounding queerness, they challenge traditional settler-colonial narratives, emphasizing the tensions and possibilities of navigating Indigenous sovereignty alongside diasporic belonging. Through this, they provoke critical questions about how these histories can be brought into dialogue without erasing their differences, moving beyond simplified land acknowledgments. Jafri positions these films within a broader discourse on the possibilities of decolonization in cinema, advocating for a relational approach that acknowledges both the tensions and transformative potential of diaspora-Indigeneity intersections. Like *Shooting Indians*, Nayani and Hernandez's films are embedded in activist cultures that emphasize relational survivance—the endurance of Indigenous struggles against colonialism within transnational contexts.[16]

Expanding this conversation, Jafri incorporates Jin-me Yoon's *Untunnelling Vision* (2020), a sensory exploration of Indigenous

and diasporic entanglements.[17] Yoon's work resists settler-colonial narratives by fostering attunement to Indigenous ways of knowing, adding another layer of resistance and spatial reimagining that complements the critiques embedded in Nayani and Hernandez's films. By engaging both sensory and speculative modes, Jafri invites readers to reconsider the possibilities for solidarity and connection across colonial and racialized divides.

Despite unresolved tensions, Jafri emphasizes that working through impasse is a generative process. Decolonization is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing, imperfect effort that requires continuous experimentation and engagement. By exposing absence and erasure, interrogating settler colonial cinematic tropes and their manifestations in independent Asian diasporic film, and foregrounding radical friendship, queer-of-color imaginaries, and sensory disruptions, Jafri challenges dominant multicultural narratives and reimagines diasporic film as potential sites of resistance. *Settler Attachments and Asian Diasporic Film* significantly contribute to film, diaspora, and Indigenous studies by demonstrating how cinematic practices foster refusal, solidarity, and alternative worldmaking. Rather than offering neat resolutions, the book invites readers to remain attuned to the possibilities of decolonial futures, acknowledging both the challenges and the hope that lies ahead. Through its critical insights and expansive vision, Jafri's work opens new pathways for theorizing relational survivance, cross-racial solidarities, and storytelling as acts of resistance in an era of ongoing settler colonialism.

Notes

[1] Beenash Jafri, *Settler Attachments and Asian Diasporic Film: A Cinematic Study of Asian-Indigenous Relationality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 2.

[2] Ibid., 3.

[3] Ibid., 12.

[4] Ibid., 16.

[5] Ibid., 4.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 32.

[8] Ibid., 21.

[9] Ibid., 28.

[10] Ibid., 41.

[11] Ibid., 45.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 70.

[14] Ibid., 34.

[15] Ibid., 132.

[16] Ibid., 137.

[17] Ibid., 167.