Romaine Fielding was a popular and versatile silent filmmaker who often produced, directed, and starred in his own productions. He worked for the influential Lubin Film Company and cranked out two-reelers at a prodigious rate. Committed to authenticity, he was also one of the few directors of his time to film westerns in the West, shooting several in New Mexico. Enrique Lamadrid (1992), Linda and Michael Woal (1995), and A. Gabriel Meléndez (2008) have all argued for the importance of studying Fielding’s oeuvre. As Lamadrid points out, Fielding was a cinematic pioneer in the use of sophisticated symbolism; and as the Woals note, Fielding broke ground by portraying Indians and Mexicans in leading roles. His films also reveal American perspectives about Nuevomexicanos in the early twentieth century. Yet one of Fielding’s films, *The Rattlesnake: A Psychical Species* (1913), remains resistant to unified interpretation. This essay argues that the film is a colonizing narrative that uses a controlling gaze to justify the theft of Mexican land and render the Mexican male an object of colonial domination—a part of the landscape as surely as a rattlesnake but one that can be monitored and managed.

*The Rattlesnake*, filmed in Las Vegas, New Mexico, runs just under nineteen minutes and chronicles the tale of “Happy” Tony (played by Fielding). The film opens with an eponymous rattlesnake slithering over rocks. A title card then states that Tony is interrupting José’s flirtations with Inez. All three characters are Mexican, easily evinced by stereotypical dress and the hacienda in the background. After a moment’s dalliance, Inez chooses Tony, and in a murderous state of mind, José stalks off and waits in ambush. After Tony leaves the hacienda, José attacks him, but as José moves in to him, a rattlesnake strikes. Tony awakens to find José screaming and the rattlesnake lying beside him.

Back at the hacienda, a white civil engineer, John Gordon, arrives, and after some flirtation, Inez agrees to show him the local mine. They stumble upon Tony, eerily caressing the snake, and a now-deceased José. John pulls his gun, and Tony tells them in broken English that José “tried to kill me and snake killed him.” Tony keeps the snake but loses Inez to John. The film jumps forward in time and Tony aims a gun at John from afar, but seeing Inez and a baby, he desists, heartbroken. Seven years pass, and Tony falls into complete deprivation, living in a cave-like dwelling while the “happy” Gordon family resides in the hacienda. In a fit of obsession, Tony goes to their home, sneaks into John’s bedroom, slides the snake into bed with him, and absconds through the window. John awakens, grabs his gun, and gives chase. Meanwhile, John’s daughter crawls into his bed. Tony sees John searching the grounds with an officer and looks in the bedroom window; to his horror, he sees the little girl and jumps inside, killing the snake, with John and the officer in pursuit. Tony says, “My love for the child is
greater than my hate was for you." He removes his outer shirt to reveal fang marks on his arm. The little girl hugs him, John lowers his gun, and the officer leads Tony away. Father, mother, and daughter hug, their all-white clothes bright against the dark background.

Six months later, the family gathers at a garden party. The little girl helps Tony remove his jacket, revealing that he has lost his right arm. John and Inez greet him, and then the adults turn away. The child points off-screen, and Tony lifts her and takes her into the bushes. Inez notices they are gone and touches the arm of another woman, peers into the bushes, and smiles along with everyone else.

The next shot appears to be damaged and lasts only a fraction of a second but is critical to interpreting the film. Lamadrid’s plot summary concludes with Inez finding her child and Tony in the bushes, “playing innocently” (13). Meléndez notes that the film ends with “[n]o further explanation… and the viewers are left with questions about Tony’s intentions and motives” (28). The Woals largely ignore Tony’s retreat into the bushes and focus instead on the setting as a metaphorical Garden of Eden in which Tony is redeemed. However, what scholars omit is that the little girl is covering Tony’s face with a handkerchief or sheet in a high-angle shot that divests him of power. The bushes in this context would normally represent a place from which to spy or perpetrate a sexual assault; Tony, however, will do neither. He is at the mercy of everyone’s gaze, and his own gaze is cut off, rendering him defenseless and emasculated.

A controlling gaze establishes a subject/object power dynamic, and racial identity is inscribed by who gazes at whom (Rony 55). Thus, in The Rattlesnake, it would at first appear that Tony’s gaze is dominant in that he is always watching the Gordons. However, as Vicente Rafael (2000) points out about colonized subjects such as Tony, “they can never look from a position of safety and invisibility because they have already been marked and categorized as subordinate by a prior look” (64-65); in this case, the prior look of John, the audience, and the camera itself. Indeed, the invention of movies erased the problem of the “return gaze” in that white audiences were free to look upon “primitive” races unseen (Rony 43). Furthermore, Tony’s gaze is defenseless against the irresistible forces of conquest. John arrives with a gun and surveying equipment—two tools of “civilization” with equally destructive power. John’s own body and cultural norms serve these ends as well—he is the only character who has a last name; thus Inez, her daughter with John, and her land become part of the “white” family and the American colonization of the West.

The process of domesticating the Otherness of New Mexico was also facilitated by assimilating upper-class Hispanos into a white power structure (Mitchell 79, 102). White colonizers could thus not make blanket claims about sexualized and racialized Latino Others. They could, however, use instruments of the state (the officer assisting John, for example) and their own watchful gaze to keep lower-class Mexican males in perpetual check. In The Rattlesnake, Inez and her parents are portrayed as heirs to a noble Spanish tradition, while José and Tony are, as Lamadrid (13) and Meléndez (28) point out, “greasers.” Such stereotyping of the ethnic Other is drawn from still older "semiotic" racist methods of debasing minorities as infantile, animalistic, over-sexed, and immoral (Kaplan 79-80). Tony exemplifies all of these traits and is positioned as the antithesis of John, the white exemplar of
domestication, order, and manliness.

Fielding may have been progressive in other films, but in _The Rattlesnake_ he transmutes his Mexican subject into an emasculated object of surveillance that poses a limited threat to white settlers, a message that surely resonated in a time period when New Mexico had finally acquired statehood. Tony tries to actualize his desires and exert sexual domination over John and his family by placing the snake into his bed. Yet Tony loses his snake and his arm, suggesting that sexual colonization, hybridization, and a Foucauldian panoptic gaze would pacify the former Mexican territory and lower-class Mexican and Mexican-American male bodies as well. Once under proper surveillance, Tony is a mere blip in the vast western landscape, a defanged rattlesnake crushed under the relentless boot of westward American expansion.

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