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Essais

Hollywood Indian Sidekicks and American Identity

Aaron Carr & Lionel Larré

Recently, an online petition was launched to protest against the casting of non-Native American actress Rooney Mara in the role of an Indian character in a forthcoming adaptation of *Peter Pan*. An article defending the petition states: “With so few movie heroes in the US being people of color, non-white children receive a very different message from Hollywood, one that too often relegates them to sidekicks, villains, or background players.”¹ Additional examples of such outcries over recent miscasting include Johnny Depp as Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* (2013), as well as, to a lesser extent, Benicio Del Toro as Jimmy Picard in Arnaud Desplechins’s *Jimmy P.: Psychotherapy of a Plains Indian* (2013).²

Neither the problem nor the outcry are new. Many studies have shown why the movie industry has often employed non-Indian actors to portray Indian characters. This trend, which Ted Jojola calls “absurd,”³ has increasingly raised the ire of Indian activists, who forced Hollywood to open its eyes on such issues in 1973, when Marlon Brando refused to accept his Oscar for his role in *The Godfather* and sent onstage in his stead Apache actress Sacheen Little Feather to make a statement against “the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry.”⁴ This activism targets two issues: Indian characters are

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- 1 Puchko Kristy, “Online Petition Launched to Protest Rooney Mara’s Casting in *Pan*.” *CinemaBlend*. <http://www.cinemablend.com>. Consulted on June 4, 2015.
 - 2 “The Real Problem With a Lone Ranger Movie? It’s the Racism, Stupid.” *Indian Country Today* July 8, 2013, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com>; Rothman Lily, “Johnny Depp as Tonto: Is *The Lone Ranger* Racist?” *Time* July 3, 2013, <http://entertainment.time.com>; Squires Camille, “The Lone Ranger’ Movie: Why Are Native Americans Angry At Johnny Depp?” *Mic.com*. <http://mic.com>. All websites consulted on June 4, 2015.
 - 3 Jojola Ted, “Absurd Reality II.” Peter C. Rollins & John E. O’Connor (eds), *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998, p. 15.
 - 4 The video of this protest is visible on youtube. Consulted on August, 1st 2015.

only sidekicks, villains, or background players; and Indian actors are not cast in roles of heroes. Even in Westerns, where the presence of Native Americans should be taken for granted for obvious historical reasons, Indians are only extras or fake. In a thorough study of the genre, Jane Tompkins sums up Hollywood's treatment of Natives "as props, bits of local color, textural effects. As people they had no existence. Quite often they filled the role of villains, [...] a particularly dangerous form of local wildlife. But there were no Indian characters, no individuals with a personal history and a point of view."⁵ When they do appear in a more substantial way, they are "fake Indians": "How do you take Charles Bronson and Anthony Quinn seriously, when they're surrounded by nameless figures who *are* natives?"⁶ Thus, both Indian characters and Native American actors remain relegated to playing sidekicks or underlings, never full-blown heroes.

Overall, Hollywood's relationship to American ethnic groups has been notoriously problematic as far as both characters and actors are concerned. In the words of Ralph and Natasha Friar, "*all* minorities, cultures, and races have been capriciously invented, stereotyped, and falsified by Hollywood."⁷ What is specific to the Indian, though, is what signifies the very term *Indian*. As Robert Berkhofer demonstrated, as well as Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, in the wake of "five centuries of perceptions –and misperceptions,"⁸ filtered through and nourished by 19th century literature and dime novels, Hollywood has lumped together people from very different cultures to shape a completely fabricated "fictional identity" called the "Indian."⁹ The Hollywood Indian is a "white man's Indian," in Berkhofer's terms; he argued in his seminal study that "Native Americans were and are real, but the Indian was a White invention and still remains largely a White image, if not stereotype."¹⁰ Thus, Hollywood's Indian is but a reboot of an old invention. For lack of space, we will not delve deeply into the reasons for Hollywood's re-invention of the Indian at the expense of more realistic and complex representations of Native Americans, but they have been analyzed by many scholars as having to do mainly with dramatic simplification and economic imperatives.¹¹ The

5 Tompkins Jane, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 8.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

7 Friar Ralph E. & Natasha A. Friar, *The Only Good Indian... The Hollywood Gospel*. New York: Drama Books Specialists/Publishers, 1972, p. 1.

8 Kilpatrick Jacquelyn, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, p. 1.

9 Friar, p. 2.

10 Berkhofer Robert, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. New York: Random House, 1977, p. 3.

11 Among others, cf. Kilpatrick, *op. cit.*; O'Connor John. "The White Man's Indian: An Institutional Approach." Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (eds.), *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky,

Indian sidekick, the one form of that invention that is certainly more complex than earlier depictions, at times close to attaining full realization as hero, was widely overlooked by the prolific scholarship on Hollywood's Indian. It is the focus of this article. Overall, we will refer to the invention as "Indian" and to actual tribal members as "Native Americans" or by their tribal names.

One may argue that portraying the Indian as the White Man's sidekick is an improvement of sorts, since, for the longest time, Hollywood has relied exclusively on the "Indian-as-an-obstacle formula,"¹² portraying him, as Jim Jarmush says, as "the savage that must be eliminated, the force of nature that's blocking the way for industrial progress."¹³ By definition, the sidekick is an individual, which is the first step into being depicted in a positive way in Hollywood: "Individual Indians could be 'good,' but the group had to be depicted as 'bad' in order to justify the existing philosophies of government and religion."¹⁴ It may also be an improvement from the stereotypes defined by Kilpatrick as mental, sexual, and spiritual/ecological.¹⁵ At the very least, as Bradford Wright argues in *Comic Book Nation*, the sidekick is usually a "well-meaning" image, even if he considers it is "still degrading": "At least these characters were portrayed positively as likeable and heroic, they were still never portrayed as more than mascots or subordinate partners."¹⁶ In any case, in Hollywood, the sidekick status allows for at least some complexity in Indian characterization, necessarily nuancing the above stereotypes to some degree.

However, since the silent era, when the Indian was "a very popular character,"¹⁷ as well as Cherokee actor Will Rogers' work in the 1920s and '30s, it is difficult to name one Hollywood movie whose lead hero is played by a Native American actor whether the character is Indian or not. Additionally, Native American actors rarely portray characters whose Indianness is not a determining characteristic, in the same way that African American actors such as Samuel L. Jackson or Denzel Washington can and often do portray heroes whose skin color is not a defining factor. On the other hand, there are few Hollywood movies in which the hero is Indian, although *The Lone Ranger*

1998, p. 27-38; and Aleiss Angela, *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies*. Westport, Ct: Praeger, 2005.

12 Aleiss, p. xv.

13 Rosenbaum Jonathan, "A Gun Up Your Ass: An Interview with Jim Jarmush." *Cineaste* 22.2 (1996): 20-23, p. 23.

14 Bataille Gretchen & Charles L.P. Silet, "The Entertaining Anachronism: Indians in American Film." Miller Randall M. (ed.), *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*. Englewood, NJ: Jerome S. Ozer, 1980. 36-53, p. 38.

15 *Op. cit.*, p. xvii.

16 Qtd in Sheyahshe Michael A, *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008, p. 10.

17 Film critic Jesse Wentz in *Reel Injun*, Neil Diamond (dir.), Lorber Films, 2009.

has recently featured one notable and ironic exception.¹⁸ Beginning with the 1930s radio serialization and continuing through the popular television series, *The Lone Ranger's* well-known Indian character, Tonto, has always existed to be the masked hero's loyal sidekick. However, in the 2013 Hollywood reboot, Tonto attains a full-blown heroic stature. The irony lies in the fact that Tonto is portrayed by Depp, who is not usually perceived as Native American—despite his tentative claim to Native American ethnicity¹⁹—but who possesses enough audience appeal to not only introduce such a surprising change of status of an Indian character but also to presume wide acceptance of this reincarnation to a global audience. It is such that the very stardom of the actor—as well as the fact that he is one of the executive producers—is what has allowed a minority sidekick to become a hero, something that may not have happened if Tonto had been portrayed by a less famous Native American actor.

One may agree with historian Wilcomb E. Washburn that Hollywood, which seized the image of the Indian because it could be conveyed in the “dramatic, violent and exotic terms” that the movie industry thrived upon, “helped promote the recovery of the contemporary Indian in the early and mid-twentieth century” (ix-x), if only by keeping the Indian—in whatever form he was depicted—present in popular imagination.²⁰ Considering the massive influence that Hollywood has on ethnic representation not only in the media but in American society as well, we propose that the relegation of both Indian characters and Native American actors to roles of sidekicks and underlings can tell us something critical about the American psyche. Starting from the historic ambivalence regarding Indianness which remains at the core of American identity, where there is both a repulsion, in Philip Deloria's terms, by the “savage barbarity” against which civilization had to be erected, and yet an attraction to its “savage freedom,” our study examines whether it is possible to consider the American Indian sidekick as a construct that enables and allows American identity an inevitable coming-to-terms with its Indian facet.²¹ Whether he helps to humanize the Euro-American hero, or supports the latter in finding his true self; or whether he simply helps him save the day, the Indian sidekick allows the American psyche to consistently choose the noble side of the double-bind representation of the Indian and to complete what D.H. Lawrence called the “unfinished” American identity.²²

18 *The Lone Ranger*, Gore Verbinski (dir.), Johnny Depp (perf.), Armie Hammer. Disney, 2013.

19 “I guess I have some Native American somewhere down the line. My great grandmother was quite a bit of Native American, she grew up Cherokee or maybe Creek Indian.” *Entertainment Weekly*, quoted in Kaufman Amy, “Armie Hammer: Native Americans on set loved ‘Lone Ranger.’” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2013. Consulted on September 22, 2014.

20 Washburn Wilcomb E., “Foreword.” Peter C. Rollins & John E. O'Connor (eds.), *op. cit.*, ix-xi, p. ix-x.

21 Deloria Philip J., *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 3.

22 Lawrence D.H., *Studies in Classic American Literature*. London: Martin Secker, 1924, p. 160.

Ron Buchanan asks “Where would the Lone Ranger be without Tonto?” We attempt to answer the question: “Where would the American hero be without the Indian sidekick?”²³

The sidekick as a foil

Comic relief seems to be a crucial function offered by some Indian sidekicks in Hollywood, a function that is arguably related to a traditional Native American character, the heyoka (among the Sioux and some other Plains tribes), or even the trickster in other tribes. According to anthropologist James Howard, “The heyoka cult is made up of individuals who [...] are obliged to assume the role of antinatural clowns.”²⁴ At least in the twentieth century, the heyoka assumed a sacred function of parody and satire: white people or drunkards, for example, were mocked, presumably to highlight, and confront them with, their flaws or problematic attitudes. According to anthropologist Thomas Lewis, mockery, in Oglala society, is a way to discourage deviant behaviors and promote conformity.



Fig. 1: Dakota heyoka dancers (photograph by Frank Fiske, Fort Yates, north Dakota, featured in Howard).

23 Buchanan Ron, “Side by Side: the Role of the Sidekick.” *Studies in Popular Culture* 26.1 (oct. 2003), 15-26, p. 15.

24 Howard James H., “The Dakota Heyoka Cult.” *The Scientific Monthly* 78.4 (april 1954), 254-258, p. 254; and Lewis Thomas H., “The Heyoka Cult in Historical and Contemporary Oglala Sioux Society.” *Anthropos* 69.1/2 (1974), 17-32, p. 30.

Although the heyoka is not literally a sidekick, his humor, subversive behavior and function as a foil, are features he has in common with some Hollywood Indian sidekicks. Other than causing welcome laughter in otherwise tense and serious movies, the sidekick, by providing comic relief often to the hero's detriment, helps the audience sympathize with the latter by harmlessly making fun of him, thus revealing flaws big enough to make the hero more human and yet not so big that we, the audience, forget that he is in fact the hero. The sidekick mediates access to the hero. Similarly, the heyoka will often single out individuals who deserve respect but who are sometimes forgotten or who do not put themselves or what they do forward.

Another key function of the Indian sidekick as a foil is to demonstrate the superiority of the white American hero. In that sense, Depp's Tonto subverts the sidekick's function to the point of turning him into the real hero of the movie. Both characters are outsiders in American society, joining forces as crime fighting partners. The reasoning behind Tonto's attachment to the Lone Ranger in the original 1938 movie serial is not made clear although "popular belief is that Tonto was created only so that, for the radio listeners, the Lone Ranger would have someone to speak to other than his horse."²⁵ In any case, Tonto would not exist without the Lone Ranger. In Depp's interpretation, however, Tonto is given a more substantial purpose; avenging the massacre of his community or, more clearly, bringing the murderers to justice. His attachment to the Lone Ranger thus becomes looser and more motivated by needs of self than by the presence of his "White Brother." He has an autonomous existence.

The functions and completion of Depp's Tonto reminds us of Chief Dan George's rendition of Lone Watie in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*.²⁶ Both outsiders on the run, Wales (Clint Eastwood) and Lone Watie meet by chance and complement each other, watching each other's back on their journey to render justice. Lone Watie is an Indian sidekick whose humor not only makes fun of the hero but of himself, as well. In a DVD feature documenting the making of the movie, director Clint Eastwood explains how humor was important in depicting his Native characters: "I wanted the treatment of the Native Americans to have more than just the cliché that had been presented in the past, where you have the Indian treated as a very stoic personality without much sense of humor and this one was the first story I'd read where they were treated with humor."²⁷

Besides the humanness provided Lone Watie by humor, what gives him a far more complex and full-fledged personality than other types of Indian characters, is that it is politically charged by the moviemakers themselves. In 1976, a movie

25 Sheyahshe, p. 40.

26 *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Clint Eastwood (dir.), Clint Eastwood (perf.), Chief Dan George. Warner Brothers, 1976.

27 "Hell Hath No Fury." Warner Home Video, 1999.

about the destructiveness of war (*Josey Wales* is set in the wake of the Civil War) on the individuals inevitably echoed the impact of the Vietnam War on many people, a link that Eastwood explicitly makes clear in a short introduction to the movie on the DVD. According to Jojola, the depiction of Hollywood's Indian at the end of the 1960s and in the '70s, in movies such as *Little Big Man* (also starring Dan George) and *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (both 1969), benefitted not only from anti-Vietnam War sentiment but also Native rights activism.²⁸ Not only did moviemakers use such film to express criticism of a US presence in Vietnam²⁹, but parallel protest events such as the occupation of Alcatraz (1969), of the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters (1972), and of Wounded Knee (1973) awakened many Americans' awareness about the plight of Native Americans; up to and including the Brando/Little Feather protest at the Oscar ceremony, which ensured the same year that Hollywood itself could not ignore the overall problem. Such a context made it difficult not to cast Native American actors in Indian roles, and to continue portraying Indians in stereotypical ways. *Josey Wales* shows Native Americans in more sensitively written roles (besides Chief Dan George, Geraldine Keams was cast as Moonlight, another sidekick, and Will Sampson as the Comanche chief Ten Bears), and also depicts them as heroes in such a way that had been seldom seen before. Thus culminating in positive scenes where, without any justification from the storyline, Lone Watie is given an opportunity to voice criticism directed at the "white men [who] have been sneaking up on us for years" and to remind audiences of the history of the removal and the tragic episode of the Trail of Tears, as well as the absurdity of any such notions as "civilizing" the Indians. In character, and humorously, Eastwood's Wales falls asleep as the old man continues talking. Eastwood the director, however, has allowed his Native American actor—who was also an activist for Native American rights—to convey a critical message. And when Wales responds that it "seems like we can't trust the white man," viewers are signaled that both characters are on common ground, truly partners, as Lone Watie puts it 1h36' into the movie, and that we are meant to identify with both. According to Geraldine Keams, thanks to the authenticity of the Indian characters, "the Native Americans really embraced this film, because they saw themselves on the screen."³⁰

Lone Watie stands as an exception in the gallery of Indian sidekicks. Oftentimes, and quite ironically, a good Indian sidekick often bolsters the superiority of the white hero by an agreeable deference to him and stepping aside as the hero becomes a better "Indian" than the Indian himself. *Dances With*

28 *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

29 The climax in *Soldier Blue* (1970), for instance, could not but remind audiences of what they had heard about the My Lai massacre in 1968, the Colorado 11th Volunteers of the movie echoing the infamous 11th infantry brigade.

30 "Hell," *op. cit.*

Wolves's John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) is a perfect illustration of the process, but Sheyahshe prefers calling it the "Mohican syndrome" after Fenimore Cooper's character, Natty Bumppo, the hero of *The Last of the Mohicans*: "With the Mohican syndrome, a white man becomes Indian in every way that counts. In comic books, these individuals are not only transformed into the best representation of that Indigenous culture, but they also become heroes."³¹ The first few minutes of Michael Mann's free adaptation³² of the novel blatantly signify that the Indian sidekick's function is to be a foil for a super-wannabe. Three American Indian actors –AIM activist Russell Means, Eric Schweig and Wes Studi– are cast alongside Daniel Day-Lewis and yet, in spite of the fact that the very end of the movie makes clear that the last of the Mohicans is Russell Means's character, Chingachcook, the prominent place of Day-Lewis in the opening credits and throughout the film –for obvious reasons of star name recognition and audience appeal– may have the viewers believe that his character is in fact the title-character. Means appears fourth in the credits, and Schweig, his character's son and Nat's adoptive brother, is placed sixth after Studi's Magua, the Huron villain. The first character to appear physically is Day-Lewis's. He is running, perhaps chasing someone, or being chased. Then Schweig appears, also running. Day Lewis's attire is supposed to evoke an Indian costume but the audience knows him, and also that he is British. So, at the start of the movie, are we the audience to presume that an unknown Indian villain is chasing a white settler? Or, that a white settler is chasing an Indian victim? Yet appears a third character, embodied by Means In the next shot, Day-Lewis and Schweig are now running side by side and soon we see that Schweig becomes a sidekick by giving his gun to the star-hero, who's taken the lead. At the end of this scene, the hero, suddenly and heroically bare-chested –as an Indian in the woods should be, according to popular imagination– is allowed to give the killing shot, while his by-now Indian sidekicks stand by to legitimize the hunt by performing some Indian ceremonial gesture. Both Indian characters are appropriately stoic and of few words, and will remain so throughout the movie.

A good Indian helps save the day before he dies

The Indians of *Windtalkers* are Code-talkers, mainly Navajo Indians, who were enlisted in the U.S. forces and who used their Native language as an undecipherable code in the war in the Pacific.³³ At the beginning of the

31 *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

32 *The Last of the Mohicans*. Michael Mann, (dir.), Daniel Day-Lewis (perf.), Madeleine Stowe, Russell Means, Eric Schweig, Wes Studi, 20th Century Fox, 1992. Cf. Philip Deloria, "The Last of the Mohicans." Howe, LeAnne *et al.* (eds), *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2013, p. 65-68.

33 *Windtalkers*. John Woo (dir.), Nicolas Cage (perf.), Adam Beach, Christian Slater, Roger Willie,

narrative, Ben Yazhee (Adam Beach) is not properly speaking the sidekick of Sergeant Jo Enders (Nicolas Cage). On the contrary, because Jo and Sergeant Pete “Ox” Anderson (Christian Slater) are assigned to protect Yahzee and Charlie White Horse (Roger Willie), the two Euro-American officers might be perceived to be the sidekicks of their Indian fellow marines. However, as if Hollywood was not quite ready yet to show duos in which the white man would be the Indian’s sidekick, it is bluntly stated in the film that what Jo and Ox are really protecting is not the men but the code itself, as is made clear by Jo himself: “I was following orders, Ben. My orders were to protect the code. If one of you got caught, talked, the code would be useless.” Thus, when Charlie is captured by Japanese soldiers, and his own white sidekick is killed, Jo reluctantly kills him to preserve the more important secret code.

Leading up to and immediately after this climactic scene, various staging details and dialogues further illustrate the overall positive changes Hollywood has made in its depiction of the Indian sidekick. For example, in the combat scene leading to their death, Ox and Charlie play each other’s literal sidekicks, that is to say, watching each other’s back by “kicking” enemies attacking them from all sides. Then, more than Jo simply killing Charlie, the viewers see the latter sacrificing himself—stated visually by his somewhat heroic nod to Jo—for the protection of the code, and subsequently of the nation. This sacrificial function, which can be attributed to the sidekick since it allows the hero to be saved, can be seen as a sort of transition between the status of the Indian as an enemy and his status as a hero in popular representation. The Indian still must die but at least now, he dies willingly and for a good cause: defending the nation instead of his savage way of life. This transition is verbalized in the dialogue between Jo and Private Chick (Noah Emmerich) after Charlie’s death. The latter is a stereotypical prejudiced redneck, who learns in the war, as shown in this conversation, to accept the Indian, whom his grandfather used to “hunt.”³⁴ At the end of the day, though, the sacrifice of the Indian sidekick merely seems to be a gentler restatement of General Sheridan’s proverbial phrase: “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.”

If there is slow improvement in Hollywood, it seems that something as yet remains not quite right for movies to portray cowboys playing sidekicks for Indians. As Ben says of Charlie after his death, and referring to Ox and

Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 2002. The Marines tracked down already-enlisted Native personnel and then trained these soldiers as code-talkers.

34 Private Chick: “You know, White Horse, he saved my bacon. I wonder what George Armstrong Custer ‘d make of that. I remember my granddad sittin’ on the porch talkin’ about huntin’ Indians, like he was talkin’ about gophers or somethin’, about gettin’ paid three dollars per Comanche ear. I know, it gets you thinkin’. In another fifty years, who knows, we c’d be sittin’ down with the Nipponese, drinkin’ their sake, shootin’ the shit, lookin’ for somebody else’s ass to kick.”

Jo protecting his friend and himself, “He wondered about cowboys watching Indians’ backs. Something about it didn’t seem right.” Indians are instrumental for the heroes, but they are just that: instruments, code-talkers, not quite heroes yet. Thus far, they have not quite rid themselves of the subservient function that Buchanan attributes to the sidekick. However, their role is becoming more and more a key ingredient in the war between good v. evil, and they are approaching full acceptance.

The Indian sidekick as essential to the American hero symbolizes the part the Native Americans played in the construction and defense of the nation. *Cowboys and Aliens* plays out that symbolism in a light, tongue-in-cheek manner.³⁵ The title of Jon Favreau’s film is an obvious reference to the traditional opposition –cowboys and Indians– played out in the Western movies, a genre that Favreau renews by blending it with the sci-fi genre. However, because these cowboys and Indians are in fact all “Indians” to the conquering aliens who have come to colonize, exploit and steal the resources of their land, settlers and Apaches all side against the invaders. In a way, this is a similar dynamic as illustrated by the dialogue between Jo and Private Chick in *Windtalkers*: in the face of a common evil, they are all Americans fighting on the same side.

In his essay *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria argues that when Bostonian rebels disguised themselves as Indians to attack British ships and throw British tea overboard during the 1773 Boston Tea Party, these Americans shifted the definition of Indians from “exterior others” to “interior others,” which marked a step toward the acceptance of Indianness as part of a national identity to oppose the tyrannical mother-country.³⁶ In the climactic battle scene of *Cowboys and Aliens*, the Apaches, who used to be exterior others to Civil War veteran Colonel Dolarhyde (Harrison Ford) become interior others in the face of a common enemy attacking a land claimed by both settlers and Indians in a co-ownership. In the process, however, Dolarhyde loses his Indian adoptive son (Adam Beach), who has to die before being actually called a son.

Native filmmakers in Hollywood

This acceptance as an interior other brings up the critical role of the audience and Hollywood’s response to audience expectation, a key factor in the stereotyping of sidekicks. At this point, it may be useful to briefly consider Native America’s relationship with Hollywood, namely as to how, if at all, Native filmmakers express themselves within the so-called American Dream

35 *Cowboys and Aliens*. Jon Favreau(dir.), Daniel Craig (perf.), Harrison Ford, Olivia Wilde, Adam Beach. Dreamworks, 2011.

36 *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

Machine. Often, a film's popularity with an American audience depends on acceptance of the characters' qualities, which may or may not include ethnicity. With Native films, however, entertainment for a viewing audience still plays a key role in acceptance or denial of Native characters and the narratives that these protagonists set into motion. Hollywood bases its production green-light process on this fact, thus stereotyping remains extant. Such that a film like *Powwow Highway*, a film considered to be less popularly relatable yet more authentic in terms of contemporary Native American life cannot survive, but a film like *Smoke Signals* has more of a fighting chance to be produced and to succeed as it fits more neatly into popular imagination since it was written, in the words of its director, for "Indian people but certainly for the over culture" (Chris Eyre in *Reel Injun*).³⁷ Both films describe the journey of a duo the members of which are so equally developed that there is no telling who is whose sidekick. Similarly, *Naturally Native*, another Native independent film, presents no sidekicks, since each character possesses her own narrative trajectory; a necessity in driving plot and enriching character development and thus making for complex story lines. In movies with Indian sidekicks, the hero's own personality and history only come into play in the attainment of his/her goal. In *Naturally Native*, each sister becomes a heroine in her own right, each with distinct personalities and goals that mix and complicate and ultimately enrich this tale of Native American women creating a start-up business. It is a satisfying movie experience in terms of the unique female Native ingredients which are practically unknown to a non-Native audience. The question here is not to ask why movies striving for authenticity fail with American audiences, and a film more reliant upon stereotypes wins, but rather, Is there hope for change?³⁸

This is the critical point, where Hollywood is slow in changing and where Native filmmakers could succeed but have not. Because Native filmmakers can, in fact, produce a meaningful yet entertaining tale and fashion it in such a way that it satisfies, to some extent, a Native tradition and yet also satisfies, to a more necessary extent, the needs of a movie audience. Compromise is the key here.

Partially, the reason for the success of *Smoke Signals* is that both filmmakers and audiences agree with what the stereotypical Hollywood Indian should be, and this is accepted and built upon even by the Native filmmakers themselves. The fact of the rejection of the film by Native people themselves is fundamentally a rejection of the stereotypes, as Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe explained in a

37 Chris Eyre in *Reel Injun*.

38 *Powwow Highway*. Jonathan Wacks (dir.), Gary Farmer (perf.), A. Martinez, Joannelle Nadine Romero. Handmade Films, 1989; *Smoke Signals*. Chris Eyre (dir.), Adam Beach (perf.), Evan Adams, Irene Bedard. Miramax, 1998; *Naturally Native*. Jennifer Wynne Farmer & Valerie Red-Horse (dirs), Valerie Red-Horse (perf.), Yvonne Russo, Irene Bedard. Red-Horse Productions, 1998.

review of the film.³⁹ On the contrary, *Powwow Highway*, a box-office flop, was a rental success among Native American youths because its makers “rework and refute the stereotypical image of the Hollywood Indian,”⁴⁰ and Cayuga actor Gary Farmer “came closest to revealing the ‘modern’ Indian-self,” and his character is “believable to Indians and non-Indians alike.”⁴¹ But the point for Hollywood is that *Smoke Signals* is entertaining enough to meet a financial goal. Compromise on the part of the Native filmmakers in this instance worked and money is made for everyone. For any filmmaker, the goal is to continue to work in the film business is to make sure your last production’s revenues doubled, at least, its production budget.

One aspect of the evolution that must occur now is for Native filmmakers to accept compromise and, in a sense, to regard the Indian sidekick as he stands in the American psyche and then take the audience beyond the stereotypes, where there are fresh narrative fields to harvest. Not necessarily to break down the role of the Native sidekick, but to turn it on its head and make him one of the tribe.

The Indian sidekick as part of the American hero

The humor of the sidekick contributes to building the character hero, or revealing his true personality. The sidekick, like the heyoka, highlights flaws and deficiencies so that his direct audience—that is his partner—can take it upon himself to improve, to become a better person, thus fulfilling himself as a hero. This can endow the Indian character with a deeper, a more fundamental and more humanizing dimension. Depp’s Tonto, for example, literally creates the masked hero in a scene in which the duo decides to ride together to render justice. Tonto, as it were, hires Reed to help him on his quest, gives him the mask to turn him into the Lone Ranger: more than a sidekick, Tonto has become the creator of a hero, and so takes on a loftier, instead of subservient, position. In *Dead Man*, Jim Jarmusch playfully depicts such a hero-making scene when the Indian savior/sidekick/spiritual guide, tellingly named Nobody (Gary Farmer), vehemently tells his new companion (Depp), so far an anti-hero, fatally wounded in a gunfight over a one-night affair, who he truly is: “You are a poet, and a painter, and now, you are a killer of white men.” William Blake remains incredulous to the identity bestowed upon him by a Nobody who passionately recites excerpts from the English poet’s “Auguries of Innocence”: “Some are born to sweet delight, some are born to endless night,” Nobody recites as a lullaby, as he tucks in Blake.⁴²

39 Howe LeAnne, “*Smoke Signals*.” Howe LeAnne *et al.* (eds.), *op. cit.*, 113-115, p. 115.

40 Anderson Eric Gary, “Driving the Red Road: *Powwow Highway* (1989).” Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor (eds), *op. cit.*, 137-152, p. 137.

41 Jojola, p. 15.

42 *Dead Man*. Jim Jarmusch (dir.), Johnny Depp (perf.), Gary Farmer. Miramax, 1995.

The Indian sidekick sometimes serves to reveal the true self of the hero, to the audience as well as to the hero himself. In this role, the Indian is still only instrumental to the construction of the white hero. Where one can see a positive evolution, though, is when that true self of the white hero implies either an acceptance of his own Indian identity or an Indian perspective as part of his worldview or society.

The positive side of the Indian stereotype has made acceptance of Native people in the American fabric of history, tradition and myth slightly easier than for other groups. This acceptance can manifest itself as a unique transference of Self. The idea that to become Indian, or to possess some form of ancestral connection with Native Americans can bestow a form of true or bedrock Americanness still holds true to this day. Of course, there is sometimes financial or some other gain to be had in this, but this transference, when explored fully, becomes more complex. This accepted transference of Indian self to American heroism is well illustrated by the playful representation of Disney's Pocahontas in the attire of Captain America, by artist Christopher Stoll (see **Fig. 2**). On film, two movies feature this transference, in two different ways. In the first, the Indian sidekick becomes a hero; in the second, the hero becomes Indian.



Fig. 2: *Captain Native-America*, Christopher Stoll. "I wanted [...] to bring across both the position of Captain America as the leader of the group, and Pocahontas' willpower and self-sacrifice. Ultimately, to try and make her look empowered." (<http://christopher-stoll.deviantart.com/art/Princess-Avengers-CAPTAIN-AMERICA-336921248>. Consulted on February 2nd, 2015).

Throughout *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, “Chief” Bromden (Will Sampson) is the “real hero,”⁴³ but he goes through various stages of the typical Indian sidekick. The first encounter between him and the “hero”—meaning the one who rebels against the authoritarian institution and becomes a mentor of sorts for a group of characters—R.P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson), shows a caricature of an Indian: Bromden is a huge man with long black hair and a stoic face—McMurphy compares him to a mountain, salutes him with the stereotypical “How,” and performs a mock dance and war whoop. Throughout the movie, he calls him “Chief,” a common ethnic slur to refer to Native Americans, although used here as a buddy nickname. To everybody’s knowledge—characters and audience—Bromden is deaf and dumb, conveniently making him the perfect subservient sidekick when McMurphy starts using his immense body, which he manipulates as a puppet, to serve his objective of victory in a basketball game against the asylum personnel. Thus, in the first few interactions between the two characters, the Indian sidekick appears utterly devoid of volition. This changes gradually. The first time the viewers see him move of his own volition, he jumps to McMurphy’s rescue in a fight, thus becoming the faithful backup of the hero. Later, in the sole presence of his partner, he speaks. In this scene, he not only lets his partner in on his secret (see **Fig. 3**); he also departs from the stereotype of the stoic Indian/silent sidekick and, in a way, becomes a full-fledged character. According to Jojola, in this brief scene, resounding with McMurphy’s words—“Well goddam, Chief! And they all think you’re deaf and dumb. Jesus Christ, you fooled them Chief, you fooled them... You fooled ’em all!”—“a new generation of hope and anticipation was heralded among Native American moviegoers. Long the downtrodden victims of escapist shoot-’em-and-hang-’em-up Westerns. Native Americans were ready for a new cinematic treatment—one that was real and contemporary.”⁴⁴ Although Bromden’s loss of the narration, in the process of adaption of Ken Kesey’s novel into a movie, can be deemed “unfortunate,”⁴⁵ one may argue that, at the end, Bromden becomes the hero by proxy by fulfilling his partner’s dream of freedom, at the same time that he saves the lobotomized hero—turned victim of the institution—from a lifetime of miserable, mental as well as institutional, alienation.⁴⁶

43 Aleiss, p. 137.

44 Jojola, p. 12.

45 Kilpatrick, p. 100.

46 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Milos Forman (dir.), Jack Nicholson (perf.), Louise Fletcher, Will Sampson. Fantasy Films, 1975.



Fig. 3: “Chief” Bromden is about to “open up” to McMurphy, No traditional garb or stereotypical headdress here: their identical attire puts them on an equal footing.

The ultimate dimension of the Indian sidekick’s role as revealing the Indian self of American identity is illustrated in *Thunderheart*.⁴⁷ In this politically-charged, based-on-true events movie by Michael Apted, whose documentary *Incident at Oglala*, released the same year, investigates the truth behind the arrest of activist Leonard Peltier, and who cast other former activists (notably John Trudell of Alcatraz fame), young idealistic FBI agent Ray Lavoie (Val Kilmer) leads an investigation that turns into a quest to find himself, with tribal policeman Walter Crow Horse (Graham Greene) as a sidekick. On one level, Crow Horse serves Ray as what Buchanan calls a “buffer from his environment”;⁴⁸ he introduces Ray to a world that rejects everything he represents. During their first encounter, Crow Horse speaks Lakota to Ray, whom he knows is part-Sioux. Ray does not understand him. During their second encounter, Crow Horse speaks to Ray in a tongue-in-cheek cliché Indian way –telling him to “listen to the wind” and “talk to the sand”– but actually making a lot of sense, to which Ray remains impervious. In these encounters and conversations between the hero and his sidekick, we see that Ray, although a Sioux, is first of all an FBI agent. As such, in the rez, he is in a hostile environment. Crow Horse appears to provide fun to Ray’s detriment. However, what he really does is protect him and introduce him to the people who can help his investigation. On a more fundamental level, more than acting as a mere buffer, Crow Horse eases Ray’s way into his own world, into

47 *Thunderheart*. Michael Apted (dir.), Val Kilmer (perf.), Sam Shepard, Graham Greene. Tristar, 1992.

48 *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

being Sioux more than FBI, into learning exactly who he is, into not being—as Crow Horse says in a translation of Grandpa Sam Reaches’s words—“as far from himself as the hawk from the moon,” into moving his Indian side from a quite literally interior other to a whole self, the ultimate step of acceptance. Ray’s self-acceptance can be broadened to symbolize the American psyche’s acceptance of its Indian identity.

Conclusion

While it can be understood that Native American activists are wary of misrepresentations and wish that Indian characters were heroes instead of villains or sidekicks, one also has to keep in mind that Hollywood’s movie industry is a money-making business which, as such, cares little about such political and ethical considerations. As far as producers are concerned, the issue boils down to what celebrity is likely to appeal to the largest audience. Certainly, one can regret that Indian actors are not given the opportunities to become as bankable as Depp or Del Toro but one can agree with the latter when, questioned on the controversy around his performance as Jimmy Picard, he said: “there is a money issue in doing movies, and the fact that I have a career created the chance of the movie being made. That is a fact of life at this moment in time. So, when I read the story, I just felt it was a really strong story that should be out there. And, with all due respect, I dared to do it.”⁴⁹

There are really two perspectives from which to look at the fact that Native American actors start being cast in non-necessarily Indian parts and that Indian characters tentatively approach full-blown heroism. In Sheyahshe’s terms, “some Indigenous characters find limited acceptance from white culture by becoming the token sidekick to the dominant white character.”⁵⁰ This evolution may be seen as a sign of the gradual integration of Indians within the fabric of American identity. Or it may be seen as “limited acceptance” only.

It is difficult to say whether *Frozen River* is an illustration of a new positive trend coming from the margins of Hollywood, or just one exceptional occurrence subverting the traditional Indian sidekick formula.⁵¹ This dark but hopeful indie drama shows the growing friendship between two women struggling with economic strains and family disruptions. Ray (Melissa Leo) is a Euro-American resident of New York; Lila (Misty Upham) a member of the Mohawk nation. If, from a formal perspective, Lila appears to be Ray’s

49 Godreche Dominique. “Benicio Del Toro: ‘Native Americans Are the Real Americans.’” *Indian Country Today Media Network*. <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/09/26/benicio-del-toro-native-americans-are-real-americans-151462>. Consulted on July 19, 2014.

50 *Op. cit.*, p. 189.

51 *Frozen River*. Courtney Hunt (dir.), Melissa Leo (perf.), Misty Upham. Harwood Hunt Productions, 2008.

sidekick, riding on the passenger's seat while Ray drives the Spirit (by Dodge) with which they try to escape their dire strait, they quickly reach a balanced relationship: they need each other and they end up having each other's back, both ready to sacrifice themselves for the other. If Ray's goal drives the storyline, Lila's character's complex development offers a realistic view of one Native American woman's life today. In *Frozen River*, the Indian sidekick becomes, according to Ray, "a friend."

So, is there a possibility for Native filmmakers to move beyond the "sidekick ceiling" and to take on the mantle of hero/heroine in Hollywood? The big-budget *Lone Ranger* movie that turned the tables on a beloved American myth and featured the Indian sidekick as hero demonstrates that room exists for growth. Its relative failure does not preclude the possibility that an independent, small-budgeted Native-produced movie featuring a Native hero and an enthralling story that contains some stereotypes but only those particular ones that the filmmaker considers relevant to his/her tribal culture, will be made and distributed and garner subsequent box office success. For this to happen, however, there may be a painful process of downplaying what Native filmmakers consider as important to convey about their culture, to make it less regional or tribal-specific, and to possibly merge a tried-and-true Hollywood narrative with a traditional Native one. Hollywood is brutal to ethnicity, but it is open to experienced talent whose films consistently bring in big revenues, no matter where they originate.

For this process to work, it may become more critical to consider as important the authenticity that actors –Native or non-Native– bring to their portrayals of the psyches of Native peoples. In other words, for a Rooney Mara or a Benicio del Toro to be cast as Native may be less important than how their portrayals represent and redefine the representation of Native people, past and present; perhaps even how these actors' talents can help authenticate the Native stories that Native filmmakers wish to tell. This collaborative process between Native and non-Native film artists could be the keystone to an expanded presence of American Indians in the cinema. The evolution of the Indian sidekick may in fact help to build and solidify a New Native Cinema –one that garners the Native in all Americans and merges all our collective stories together. This process is still embryonic to be sure, but not without hope of success.

Traditionally, the sidekick "is aiding the reader's acceptance of the main character."⁵² It is certainly true in most of the movies we mentioned. We would like to argue in conclusion, however, that the Indian sidekick might be urging, in American audiences, an acceptance of the Indian part of the American psyche, signaling a completion of the American identity. Kilpatrick

52 Buchanan, p. 20.

argues that “the Native Other as sidekick has always been comforting to that part of the audience that desired a painless solution to racial harmony.”⁵³ The American Indian sidekick may be seen as a construct to move beyond the representations of Indians as opponents or supports. Just as *Moby Dick*’s narrator Ishmael and Queequeg “the cannibal pagan,” the Euro-American and the Indian are in bed together in an inextricable and welcome embrace,⁵⁴ or tied together, for better and for worse.⁵⁵

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Abstract

The Hollywood movie industry has often employed non-Indian actors to portray Indian characters, and reduced Indian characters to villains or secondary roles. In the wake of centuries of misperceptions and misrepresentations, Hollywood has invented a new form of the “white man’s Indian,” the Indian sidekick. Drawing examples from a dozen movies, this paper attempts to analyze how the Indian sidekick is a symptom of the ambiguous place Native Americans have in the American psyche. Without the Indian sidekick, would the typical American hero be complete?

Keywords

Sidekicks, Native American, hollywood.

Résumé

Hollywood a souvent employé des acteurs non-Indiens dans des rôles d’Indiens, et réduit les personnages indiens aux méchants ou aux seconds couteaux. À la suite de plusieurs siècles de méconnaissance et de représentations fallacieuses, Hollywood a inventé une nouvelle forme de « l’Indien de l’homme blanc », le comparse indien. À partir d’exemples tirés d’une douzaine de films, cette contribution s’efforce de montrer comment l’on peut dire que le comparse indien est un symptôme de la place ambiguë occupée par les Indiens dans l’imaginaire américain. Sans son comparse indien, le héros américain serait-il totalement accompli ?

Mots-clés

Faire-valoir, Indien, Hollywood.

53 *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

54 “I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife [...] For though I tried to move his arm –unlock his bridegroom clasp– yet, sleeping as he was, he still hugged me tightly, as though naught be death should part us twain.” Melville Herman. 1851. *Moby Dick*. London: Penguin Books, 1994, p. 43-45.

55 “So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honour demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake.” *Ibid.*, p. 310.