

12-2021

## Screening for Our Fathers: Representations of Native American Masculinity in American Film

Jeromy Duane Miller  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Native American Studies Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)

---

### Citation

Miller, J. D. (2021). Screening for Our Fathers: Representations of Native American Masculinity in American Film. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/4331>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact [scholar@uark.edu](mailto:scholar@uark.edu).

Screening for Our Fathers: Representations of  
Native American Masculinity in American Film

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

by

Jeromy Miller  
Northeastern State University  
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2008  
Northeastern State University  
Master of Arts in English, 2009

December 2021  
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

---

Sean Teuton, Ph.D.  
Dissertation Director

---

Frank M. Scheide, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Kay Yandell, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

## **Abstract**

In this dissertation, I examine representation of Native American masculinity in the American film industry. The American film industry began just over a century ago, and one of its earliest subjects was the Native American. Throughout its history, the American film industry has maintained a steady trajectory of exploitation and erasure of Native American men and their subsequent masculine qualities. While there are notable historical outliers and critical exceptions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Native American men in film have been continually reduced to corpses, devoid of significant social presence, and denied meaningful explorations of their sexuality and interpersonal identity. The representations of Native Americans in film have received a moderate amount of a critical attention, but rarely are films analyzed for their specific treatment of men and their masculinity. This work seeks to fill this analytical space by employing a combination of psychoanalytical theory and postcolonial criticism to isolate key moments of erasure, exploitation, and recovery in select films over the last century. First, we will look at the early attempts at reducing the Native American man to an abject corpse, absent any complex characterization and examine the evolution of this corpse into recent films that have given the body new life and vibrancy while still acknowledging the reality of mortality. Second, we will look at the historical complications of presenting the Native American as a socially situated figure capable of heroism and examine the unique demands of culture heroes and modern Native American spaces. Finally, we will look at treatment of Native American sexuality as one of many modes of interpersonal identity that has been either been erased or treated with hostility in early treatments, but which is now finding new modes of expression and subversion in recent films. Ultimately, this work concludes that the film industry has the power to revitalize Native American representation under the right conditions, despite its problematic history.

## **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible without numerous teachers and elders throughout my adult life who have peeled back layers of truth to reveal the depth and complexity of the Native American experience beyond my own. Terri Baker is central the beginning of this journey as she was one of the first to challenge my understanding of Native American literature and show me just how much more I had to learn. Keith M. Booker continued what Terri started and offered me new challenges to my understanding of theory and application. He, along with Frank M. Scheide opened up the possibility of critically analyzing film.

From our first coffee meeting, and what I can only assume was a frenetic proposal, Sean Teuton was patient, encouraging, and insightful as a mentor on this project. Between Sean and Frank, I had the necessary encouragement to forge ahead and enough space to follow the changing path before me. David Linebarger, Diane Boze, and Andrew Vassar provided me the physical space, regular council, and endless support that I needed for the daily struggle to stay on task. Kay Yandell's timely and necessary addition to this project was instrumental in getting it across the finish line.

Gary Wayne Vann, Jerry Ross, Doris Shell, and Cora Flute helped me come home. They spoke my history back into reality, and their words offered healing and spiritual growth when I needed it most. My time with them, and my work with Ryan Mackey, Kristen Snell, and Howard Paden was necessary medicine as I worked through some of the more personal sections of this work. Wado Nigada.

My final thanks must go to my wife, Hayley Miller and my mom Karen Sewell who read every draft and listened to every monologue as I worked through this project. My four beautiful children had to share their time with their father and his work, but always reminded me why this work mattered just by being who they are.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
The Components of Film as an Object of Analysis .....	5
Representation that is Socially Constructed and Locationally Authentic .....	8
Unlocking Cultural Meaning in Filmic Images .....	14
Post-Positivist Realist Approach to Film .....	19
Film is the Medium - Native Men are the Subject .....	22
A Contemporary Model of Filmic Representation.....	26
Methodology and Organization.....	29
Chapter 1 – Apparitional Americans .....	47
The Wholly Abject Corpse.....	65
The Native American Body as a Vanished Relic .....	72
Chapter 2 – Corporeal Awakenings .....	93
Early Subversions of Erasure .....	98
The Transcendence of the Death of the Body .....	116
Chapter 3 - The Fathers of the Matriarchy.....	135
Early Attempts at Culturally Specific Heroism.....	156
The Native on the Monomythical Journey .....	168
Chapter 4 – Live like a Hero Going Home .....	183
Hints at the Return Narrative for Heroic Evolution .....	188
Locational Heroism for Modern Native Men.....	198
Chapter 5 - Border Crossings.....	230
Early Examples of the Noble/Ignoble Savage.....	247

Embracing the White Savage to Avoid the Noble Indian .....	257
Chapter 6 – The Circle Begins to Close.....	271
Employing Native Trauma for White Ambivalence .....	273
Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity .....	292
Chapter 7 – Coming Home is not Easy.....	316
Knowledge of the Past Informs our Reading of the Present .....	321
Works Cited Page .....	352

## Introduction

Neil Diamond's 2009 documentary, *Reel Injun* tracks the presence of Native Americans in Hollywood films from their earliest incarnations to the more recent films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This documentary is the primary inspiration for my work, and Diamond's odyssey mirrors my own critical and philosophical undertaking. In the film, Diamond states, "I'm on a journey to make sense of how Hollywood's fantasy about Indians influenced the world, even Natives like me." While Diamond and I both center our work on the pursuit of the Native American image in film, I wish to move the perspective closer to Native American men and masculinity to critique this specific category of representation and provide a model for future productions that is both generative and progressive. However, claims that deal in identity politics—Native, Masculine, or otherwise—require clarification on several key theoretical levels.

First, films must be understood as political objects loaded with latent ideological and sociological commentary both on the part of the producers and the part of the consumers, or audiences. For instance, *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913), is an early example of what would become the Hollywood film industry's standard for Native American Masculine representation. It fails to situate the Native American male in a viable and historically accurate scenario or give respect to tribal nuance thereby reducing his complexity to mere stereotype. He is reduced to merely a body in life, and a corpse in death. He possesses no social reality or interpersonal agency. This standard would persist more-or-less unchanged for nearly a century. Furthermore, the proliferation of this type of imagery, especially in comparison to the general lack of alternative representations served to advance public and governmental bias towards Native American men during one of their most vulnerable political periods in history. This manipulation of popular perception of Native men, resulted in federal policies and social stigma

that many Native American men are still wrestling with today.<sup>1</sup> Film, as part of the discourse on the social place of Native American men in America today as well as in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is intrinsically linked to the political dialogue concerning their representation and lived experiences.

As part of this discourse, films from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have made little progress in advancing the image of Native American men from its earliest attempts at the beginning of the century. Fortunately, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Native filmmakers like Chris Eyre, *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Skins* (2002), Sherman Alexie, *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), Sterlin Harjo, *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007) and *Barking Water* (2009), along with non-Native filmmakers like Alex and Andrew Smith, *Winter in the Blood* (2013), and Chloe Zhao, *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015) have repurposed the film medium as a tool for resistance and recovery. They are making tremendous strides in the Native communities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to correct, complicate, and carefully consider the image of Native American men in film. They work to restore agency and life to the Native body, resituate him in complex social spaces, and explore his deeper levels of complexity. Through new media technology like YouTube, Netflix, and GoFundMe they are also finding new methods of distribution and crowdsource funding to not only subvert the barrier to entry into this expensive medium but also retain control of their own creative product. Through this trajectory within the Native community and with the necessary motion of Hollywood to embrace the complete Native American man as a financially viable subject, I hope that the future of Native representation can be both politically progressive and

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the Center for Disease Control, Native American men face higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse, depression, and suicide than any other American males today by alarming margins and are most vulnerable while in their early 20s.



culturally conservative. Perhaps my sons will be able to see images of their people that allow them to root for the Indian instead of the Cowboy.

Exploring the full range of Native American representation in film is beyond the capacity of this work, so certain concessions must be made to produce a focused and meaningful analysis. The task before us spans a period lasting over a century and focuses on a medium of representation that has produced thousands of related images over the course of its history. This work seeks to analyze films as culturally and politically motivated texts. The bias of the filmmakers is in direct dialogue with the expectations and bias of the audiences they hope to attract. These audiences, both Native and non-Native, then influence public policy and engage in direct contact with each other in a society in which these images and their associated meanings dominate. As such, any analysis offered in the pages to come will assume not only an existing political bias in the films analyzed but that such bias is knowable and capable of manipulation.

Stuart Hall and many other cultural theorists over the past five decades have advanced an exciting discourse related to media studies and the impact of television, film, and other forms of communication with the public. Many of these will be explored in greater detail in the body of this work, but Hall's audience-centered approach to meaning production in the television/film/audience exchange is in solid alliance with the general trajectory of realist theory that guides the theoretical approach in this work. Hall considers the way in which ideology both reinforces the hegemonic order and resists its dominance depending on the "articulation" in question. He states that "ideology is a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes, rather than an intention of the agent" (Storey 140). The ideological positions that result from the systematic contributions to the modes of representation are a product that may not flow from a point of deliberate intent on the part of the producers. Whether the agents of filmic

images, be they writers, directors, producers, or actors intend to erase, denigrate, and emasculate the Native American male is irrelevant to the process of ideological production. For Hall, the intention is not as important as exploring the mechanisms of representation and reception. Throughout his consideration of the critical paradigms of media studies, he works his way through the structuralist and later the post-structuralist approaches to media analysis, a trajectory that we will see time and again in this work.

Building on Hall, film is just one of many possible moments in which social tensions become utterances of a particular ideological structure. Hall understands that the hegemonic norm is advanced through consent and reification by the agents of media production. Furthermore, Hall insists that representation and the presentation of signs, even if they are read structurally, should not be considered a closed system of fixed meanings. Thus, the agent is not necessarily acting with intention; rather, is already ideologically influenced, but this influence is unstable. The images produced by this agent may have what Hall refers to as *denotative* meanings, the fixed qualities of meaning such as the image of a horse indicating a four-legged mammal. However, there is also the *connotative* meaning in each sign structure whereby the horse can come to represent or “mean” freedom, power, wealth, and even war when it is associated with a Cheyenne warrior. These are two related structures or “‘maps of meaning’ into which any culture is classified; and those ‘maps of social reality’ have the whole range of social meanings, practices, and usages, power and interest ‘written in’ to them” (Hall 123). To put it simply, the filmmakers and the audiences are participating in the practice of ideological transmission, but their participation is a negotiation between particular socially, politically, and historically situated cultural categories. Unfortunately for Natives, this is not an equal exchange as the dominant mode of representation is largely in the hands of white filmmakers and white

consumers. Shari M. Huhndorf, also recognizing the importance of Hall's framework for media analysis believes that there is real promise in the act of resistance writing that, "recognizing that there are other, non-hegemonic ways of seeing also suggests the possibility of social change". While she is more interested in understanding the dynamics of white filmmakers and actors "going native", her conclusion is similar to our own. In the spaces between authentic and fabricated imagery "lies the potential for decolonizing knowledge and accomplishing social change", but this social change is not without its obstacles as she adds, "throughout the twentieth century, white America has repeatedly enacted rites of conquest to confirm and extend its power over Native America, and these racial dynamics continue to shape contemporary American life" (13-15). In order to succeed in our analysis of these films we will need additional tools for mapping out existing representations of Nativeness while also opening up the possibility for social change that myself and Huhndorf believe are possible. Later, we will explore the possibility of "post-positive realist" method of cultural analysis to help advance the theoretical tensions that Hall et al. considered.<sup>2</sup> First, we must consider the technical aspects of film that are unique to the field and how these elements are used to produce and manipulate the image of Native American masculinity.

### **The Components of Film as an Object of Analysis**

Film as a storytelling apparatus is best understood as a collaboration of many different moving parts and agents brought together in an attempt to form a cohesive whole. What makes film unique in its story-telling ability and subsequent potential for representation is the

---

<sup>2</sup> Also consider Tony Bennett's "Popular Culture and the 'Turn to Gramsci'" for an exploration of movement away from structural determinism. V.N. Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* for the structuralist precursors to what Hall is advancing here, particularly in regard to class negotiation of sign/meaning. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* further adds that under a hegemonic structure, leftist or progressive movements must adopt an internal antagonist ideological structure that reconstitutes the methods of hegemonic consent in favor of egalitarian reform where democratic liberalism is viable but necessarily contested.

combination of visual imagery, motion, and later sound to bring the subject to life in ways that are markedly distinct from literature. Film historian and critic, Frank M. Scheide, highlights a set of questions necessary for film criticism that are very similar in practice to that which is often used in literary criticism such as “what is the film about?”, “why is the filmmaker interested in stating the ideas being expressed?”, and “what effect has the film had on its audience?”.

However, when we ask, “how is the film conveying this information?” we encounter a number of elements that collectively produce a unique narrative and cultural product (Scheide 15).

This work will move between the first three questions continuously to unpack the transmission and reception of the film as a cultural object in relation to its (in)ability to effectively represent Native American masculinity. Yet, it is the fourth question of how film works that supplies the foundation for film production and our ability to properly analyze the finished product. To understand how a film works as a story-telling device we need to consider four essential components to the film product: mise-en-scene, camerawork, editing, and sound (42). Mise-en-scene is a term borrowed from theater which considers where the props, actors, and scenery are placed on the stage. For film, this concept is expanded to encompass all that is visible within a particular shot. For example, when young Debbie, played by Lana Wood, first sees Scar, played by Henry Brandon, in John Ford’s 1956 *The Searchers*, we see her kneeling against a tombstone in a family cemetery. Her hair is braided and tied with red ribbon, and she is wrapped in crocheted blanket as she whispers to her doll to be quiet. Ominous music plays as a shadow moves from the bottom of the screen to completely envelop Debbie. Due to the reaction of her family at the threat of the Comanche, we share her sense of dread as she looks up at the imposing figure.

A shot is one of the many components of camera placement, which along with editing, make up the more complex and nuanced elements of filmmaking. Camera Placement and camera angle consider the apparent distance between the camera and subject and relative position between camera and subject, respectively (113-115). There are essentially "six major types of camera placement...extreme long shot, long shot, medium shot, medium close-up, close-up, and extreme close-up." (113). When Debbie sees Scar, the camera is at eye level with her so we can see her looking up and get a sense of the relative size of Scar, and she is framed in a medium shot allowing us to see the entirety of her small frame against the tombstone behind her. Additional components include the movement of the camera as it collects its shot and various adjustments and filters to produce specific visual effects. Editing is the process of cutting various shots together to form a final product. The essential elements to the editing process are the frame, shot, scene, and sequence (147). When the shot cuts to a closeup of Scar the screen is filled with his foreboding presence, complete with feathers, beadwork, face paint and blue eyes. The shot lingers on him as his eyes reveal that he is taking in the surroundings before he lifts a horn to his mouth and signals for his men to attack. The scene ends with a fade to black and a transition to the next day after the attack has occurred.

Sound encompasses all of the "voices, music, sound effects, and silence" that accompany the visual elements on screen (221). Much like the camerawork and editing, sound is a complex set of options broadly understood through two different points of origin: "synchronous", which is temporally and usually physically in line with the elements in the scene, or "asynchronous", which is not necessarily aligned with the visual elements within a scene (220-221). How the sound is arranged, mixed with the scene, and adjusted can have a radical impact on the final filmic product. Scar's horn blow, a synchronous sound, breaks through the ominous strings that

play when he first appears, which is an asynchronous sound. His horn blow signals the fade to black and the transition to the next scene where the strings return combined with trumpets that signal a cavalry charge that cannot quite overcome the bass of the strings. While no dialogue is spoken in this scene transition, the sound adds all the necessary emotional responses to our initial perception of Scar and his men.

While the example of Scar's arrival is only partially explored here and only a small component of a much larger film product, it suggests the depth and complexity that can occur when the various filmic elements are combined. When each of the various technical elements of film are considered collectively, the end result is a cultural object with an incredible range of expression and articulation that can either erase or reveal Native American men and their masculine characteristics in harmful or sympathetic ways. When these various elements are employed in a consistently harmful manner and with few counter-narratives in film and in popular culture more broadly, the result is a tenacious view of Native American masculine qualities that overtime have little connection to the lived experiences of the represented subject. Throughout this work, we will move through the various elements of form and style to analyze each film for its technical representation of Native American men and masculinity, but we will combine these elements with additional cultural and psychological aspects.

### **Representation that is Socially Constructed and Locationally Authentic**

As a Cherokee man, I am personally interested in exploring the various modes of representation of my people and using such explorations to advocate for social justice and equality. For many men today, and Native American men specifically, the sexual and gendered norms of the past are no longer viable or self-evident. For example, Native men today who understand their cultural roots and still live in a largely traditional setting will find their gender

norms and social dynamics, particularly the patriarchal and matriarchal divides, at odds with the mainstream American patriarchal structure. Additionally, and in the wake of postmodern deconstruction, social media propagation, and general humanistic progression, masculine normativity is becoming increasingly difficult to pin down or articulate. The #metoo movements and other current social trends that have brought gender relations again to the front of social commentary are examples of this destruction and reconsideration of gender normativity still dominating the political and social discourse. Yet, complexity and nuance does not necessarily delegitimize the notion of Native American men, or their masculine characteristics. The general debate between essentialist and constructionist identity would seem on the surface to force a choice between the two paradigms to either accept an absolute and authentic Native American masculine identity or a complete disruption of all identities and a subsequent de-legitimization of the very idea of identity. The former is in danger of fixing identity into an immutable conception and cultural paralysis, and the latter removes all possibility of cultural belonging. However, failure to move beyond an agonistic discourse between the two ideas can also be damaging.

Robert Warrior acknowledges the unfortunate reality that “forums in which complex critical problems of audience, reception, and representation are worked through – rather than announcing critical judgment – remain few and far between” (Warrior xix). Warrior and Sean Teuton both extend the essentialist/constructionist debate further by clarifying the role of trickster theory as a problematic counter to essentialism that has become so pervasive that it too “has kept Indigenous scholars working within a binary leading to cultural ossification or political apathy” (Introduction). As a strong alternative, the post-positivist realist position advances the idea of a changeable identity structure without accepting a complete destabilization. The core of this realist position is in many ways congruent with the Cultural Studies vision of hegemonic

influences open to subversion from unique subject positions and cultural agency. Therefore, while boundaries are collapsing between all social categories and cultural groups, Native Americans are reinvigorating their efforts and reasserting their agency to articulate their collective ideology. However, tribal, geographical, and communal locations further divide the Native American community into sub-cultural groups with their own nuances and characteristics. Yet, amid all this ideological chaos and identity disruption exists real Native American men and boys who suffer from a lack of cultural cohesion between the self and the Other. The “self”, in this instance, is the internalized view that each Native American has of themselves. By contrast “Other” is the externalized social view of Native Americans from outsiders. In other words, it is how we see ourselves internally and how we are seen by others externally. Yet, even this is not precise as there are intersections where the outsider’s view of the Native as “Other” becomes internalized and begins to shape the “Self”. What is projected onto Native men can influence how they perceive themselves and change how they present themselves to society.

Much of modern Western cultural history has positioned the men, particularly white men, in positions of authority and associated patriarchal normativity. It is against this imbalance of power that post-modernist versions of deconstruction have sought to destabilize identity structures. Native men, though occupying a privileged position in relation to Native women from a Western perspective, are still denied access to the national patriarchal normativity due to their racial minority status. As such, the Native man has existed on the margins of power since colonization. This marginalization combined with the non-Western conceptions of gender and power that most tribal nations followed prior to and after colonization has further exacerbated the identity conflicts facing Native men today. Native men who want to be respected members of their tribal community and respected members of their national community may find it difficult



to legitimize their gendered practices and behaviors in both camps. Ultimately, though I can claim that I am a Native American man, I cannot exactly define what it means or how to demonstrate this reality in all the social arenas in which I operate, yet I know it to be true. Realist theory of identity helps explore this tension with a pragmatic approach to experiential knowledge, by rejecting the binary between authentic and inauthentic and advancing lived experience as a legitimate epistemological source. Cultural Studies adds that sufficiently complex cultural productions and images can reduce as well as advance the tensions between competing ideologies, representations, and receptions.

While there are many different approaches to understanding how images can carry meaning, psychoanalysis is an effective tool to understanding the process of human sign recognition. The essential framework of an unconscious/conscious divide between the knowable self that can be enunciated and mediated through a theoretical understanding versus the unknowable and internal self was popularized by Sigmund Freud. His isolation of the tripartite self is still of value to us, but we will pull more heavily from key modifications made by Jacques Lacan. Crucially, Lacan situates language in the interstitial spaces between the real world and our perception of that world. Language is a way of coding our internal responses to the world around us through associations with recognizable symbols or signs. In this way, film functions as a complex system of signification where the film itself is an utterance, just as the images, sounds, and dialogue within are their own utterances. All of which, when combined, do not equal reality, but a symbolic mediation of reality whose meaning must be negotiated by the producers as well as the receivers, neither of which will ever actually arrive back at the reality which inspired the utterances. By identifying patterns of signification in the filmic experience and working them through the real and the perceived genesis of the signifier in reality, we can

both unravel harmful images and create new images more in line with our lived experiences. Cowboy narratives make our bodies the object of primal desire and then destroy it. We need to recast our bodies as objects of future survival and sublimate it into our selves. We will see this demonstrated more effectively in the coming chapters, particularly in relation to the Native American corpse trope.

The driving paradigms in the field of film analysis largely falls into two competing camps: film theory or “screen theory” and post-theory. Film theory, of which this work is largely aligned, utilizes psychoanalysis and Marxist conceptions of ideology to unlock the relationship between the filmic image and the audience. Post-theory on the other hand focuses the attention of the analyst on the film as an object and its reception by audiences on a *cognitive* level.<sup>3</sup> Though this work takes up the realist approach to identity analysis, which largely dismisses the sort of essential or structural approach advanced by Lacan, we still need a cogent method of reading films as a symbolic medium with both latent and overt meaning. Lacanian methodology for film, popularized by Laura Mulvey, Julia Kristeva, and Slavoj Žižek, help us critique the efficacy and accuracy of filmic images to reflect and represent the Native American man. As we will see in the coming chapters where we look at the physical being (the corpse), the social being (culture heroes), and the internalized being (sexuality), psychoanalysis still has a great deal to offer as a method of inquiry and analysis so long as we do not allow the analysis to universalize or fix meaning. Through this tool set we will unpack the filmic images, their range of meanings, their cultural impact, their ideological importance, and their influence on identity.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a more complete understanding of the competing paradigms in psychoanalytic film theory, see David Bordwell and Noël Carroll’s *Post-Theory*, which articulates the movement away from the psychoanalytic reading of film advanced by Mulvey, Kristeva, et al. and argues for a more formalistic reading of film. Matthew Flisfeder’s *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* (2012) offers a counter to Post-Theory through Žižek and a renewed emphasis on the political unconscious aspects of film and subsequent film analysis.

In contrast to the structural approaches offered earlier, many theorists sought to situate meaning more in the realm of social construction of which the unconscious is a blank slate for the experience to impart significance. Under this conception, there is no generally universal core, at least not a knowable one; rather, we are all unstable and unreliable vessels of a life's worth of experiential interactions. It is thought that this paradigm can free the oppressed through a destabilization of the naturalness or essentialness of the oppressive regime. Slavoj Žižek proposed an ideological laden system in the Marxist vein of Antonio Gramsci and later Louis Althusser that posits the unconscious as a vessel always and already ideologically bound.<sup>4</sup> This ideological influence by society, and through cultural productions like film, is so pervasive that it appears natural and organic yet dangerously unregulated enough to allow for and even invite manipulation by the dominant class. Realist theory takes issue with this approach. While realists do accept the necessary role of environmental stimuli to inform the theory that mediates experience and understanding, they contend that the post-modern approach does little to understand and appreciate the social and temporally specific experiences of the individual where the internalized identity resides. To put it simply, even if the qualities of myself that allow me to see my gender as male and my behaviors as masculine are socially constructed and therefore unreliable, they still serve as a very real framework of how *I* understand and negotiate my place in the world. The inescapability of the constructed nature of identity does not necessarily render it epistemologically useless.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* for a more complete look at his synthesis between Marxist theories of ideology and representation and Freudian conceptions of the unconscious as an exegesis for dreams, and by a loose extension film. His two documentaries, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), and *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012), both directed by Sophie Fiennes, help crystalize the ideas presented in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and demonstrate Žižek's concerns directly in film and culture analysis.

## Unlocking Cultural Meaning in Filmic Images

This work is an effort to understand this reality and reconcile the perceived inconsistency of representation and experience with cultural and historical realities. The primary mode of representation that we will explore in this work is the Hollywood film. Hollywood films are typified by their higher budgetary capacity, narrative trends, and established discourse.<sup>5</sup> While some of the films analyzed in this work either predate Hollywood as an industrial force or attempt to escape the confines of Hollywood influence, full escape is simply not possible. Hollywood film images are ubiquitous, and every filmmaker of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is at least marginally influenced by the industry standard. The capacity of the film object to produce photo-realistic images, and the industry's capacity to limit and control the means of production combined with the dominance of the industry as a form of cultural representation positions Hollywood films as a primary source of cultural and ideological influence. By understanding the mechanisms of production and representation, we can then analyze the efficacy of alternative film productions to reclaim Native identity from the Hollywood system and articulate a new and progressive image for future consumption by Native and non-Native audiences.

Already, the task of analysis of film is incredibly complex when means of production, authorial intent, and audience reception are considered. To further seek to map out cultural implications is increasingly complicated and subject to theoretical destabilization. Understanding Native men, their masculine behaviors, and the associated filmic representations has proven difficult. I have alluded to some of the theoretical tools I will employ in this endeavor, but it is necessary to explain the framework of this project in greater detail. First, there are two underlying assumptions that require some clarification: Native American masculine

---

<sup>5</sup> See David Bordwell's *On the History of Film Style* for a more complete examination of the history and development of the Hollywood Film industry and its potential impact of the style, function, and presentation.

identity is knowable, and film is a mode of ideological representation susceptible to analysis and criticism. To understand the former, we will turn to a post-positivist realist approach to identity. To understand the latter, we will work within the conventions of psychoanalysis to analyze filmic images and audience's receptions. Approaches from the school of Cultural Studies will help us articulate the structures of power inherent in the film industry and the ideological influences it possesses.

As a mode of analysis, Cultural Studies broadly encourages its practitioners to seek out connections between human behavior, their creative artifacts, and the systems that govern these interactions. Societies, often arranged into groups who share certain commonalities tend to favor certain behaviors and condemn others. Within every society is the potential for power and subsequent exploitation as resources invariably have a limited supply. Resource allocation and the resulting social arrangements are managed through systems of control and resistance. Antonio Gramsci's conception of *hegemony* considers the capacity for the dominant society to maintain control of the subordinate groups through "'spontaneous consent'...caused by the prestige...which the dominant group enjoys...[and] state coercive power which 'legally' enforces discipline" (12). Edward Said advances this notion in his consideration of the mechanism of postcolonial resistance. He writes, "culture, of course, is to be found operating within civil society, where the influence of ideas, of institutions, and of other persons works not through domination but by what Gramsci calls consent...what Gramsci has identified as hegemony" (Said 7). Antonio Gramsci's influential *Prison Notebooks* establishes the foundation of hegemony theory as a coercive force predicated on consent by the oppressed for their oppression. This theory has been advanced and modified in many ways by various theoretical schools, many of which will be utilized in this work. Edward Said is one of many to build on

Gramsci's work in his seminal work *Orientalism* and later *Culturalism and Imperialism* where he not only proposes the method and practice of colonization and control, thus leading to the development of post-colonial theory, but also insists that such methods of control require the same level of consent and the appearance of a coherent Imperialist structure to establish and maintain control.

As with most theories of control, the primary critique of both Gramsci and Said is the inescapable nature of hegemonic theory. If the system is so pervasive and effective at incorporating and normalizing resistance, then the individual has no path to subversion. However, this misses the primary argument that articulation and appropriation of hegemonic regimes can and does lead to social change. The key to this liberation is to consider hegemony as a description of systematic power concentration rather than a thing in and of itself. It is less important to resist the hegemonic structure than it is to resist the unequal distribution of power and privilege at the top of the system. By withholding consent, as all acts of subversion inherently do, the individual is granted agency to influence who and what is at the top of the structure, even if the structure remains in place. In this work, we seek to isolate films that have, in various ways, resisted the dominant mode of representation by presenting examples of alternatives, even if the domination of Hollywood as a production force remains.

Said's influential work in the field of postcolonial theory argues that the dominant group—he was interested in the Occidental control of the Orient, but his framework applies well to the American control of the Native American—controls the modes of representation through the process of consent, and by extension the hegemony can also control how the subordinate group sees themselves. This framework is not without its flaws as it also risks denying agency in favor of deterministic influences. Agency is central to the process of resistance. Yet, the

subaltern must find a means of resistance that is both understood and accepted by the dominant society, not simply absorbed and appropriated under the hegemonic regime. As an example, capitalism and the representative democracy in America can at once be a liberating force and a means of control as wealth and political power concentrate into ever smaller collectives. When the system is manipulated or the resources are off balance, injustice often occurs. However, the narrative of capitalism that emphasizes individualism in times of success and ignores social factors in times of difficulty encourage consent of the masses into a system that statistically offers real opportunity to only a select few. Social justice demands that those who can see the imbalance fight to restore balance. It is this call to action and through a negotiation between the individual and the collective that Cultural Studies mobilizes its criticism. The bulk of representation of Native Americans in film was produced under the control of the hegemonic white and often male establishment that routinely denied the Natives the opportunity to tell their own stories or control their own image, and this work seeks to call attention to films that actively resist this trend.

Just as we must resist the systems of power behind the industry of film production, so too must we resist the systems of sign and signification within the film apparatus. Psychoanalytic film theory can help us unlock the meaning of the filmic image to begin the work of reclamation and subversion. Lacan conceptualized the “mirror stage” as the moment of both recognition of objectivity and the beginning of the eternal tension between drive/desire/object. The image in the mirror will never become the individual or even approach any proximity to the complexity that is the individual human self, nor can the individual ever reconcile their internalized sense of self with their newly discovered social identity. Instead, the mirror stage first articulates and then forever reminds us that how we are perceived, like the mirror reflection, is incomplete, even

if it has the appearance of completeness. We can never rejoin or return to that state of pre-separation (pre-objectivation) to achieve wholeness, and this internalized and eternally present state of lacking creates desires that never satisfies our drive for full actualization. When the self, always and already fractured at the moment of discovery, enters the realm of signification, the distance between the real and the imaginary becomes even more pronounced (*Écrits* 1-5).

Laura Mulvey extends the core of this argument to film in the development of the “male gaze” as a way of understanding how the filmmaker is using the lens to play out the drive/desire/object tension, for the purposes of some form of visual pleasure (11-13). Julia Kristeva, in a similar motion, used Lacan to understand how filmic images can create horrific, alienating, and “abject” images by playing with the inherent psychological tensions between drive/desire/object and our subsequent eternal sense of lacking (1-6). Finally, Slavoj Žižek revisited the “gaze” and added an ideological dimension combined with a third-tier gaze, where the fantasy produced and manipulated by the filmic scene is not simply the image as it is presented or the image that we gaze upon to fulfill our fantasy. Rather, the process of gazing itself, the assumed component upon which reception is dependent and subject to manipulation, is a manifestation of desire engaging in a sort of Hegelian dialectic (*Less than Nothing* 666-670). By calling attention to the methods by which the images of Native American men are manipulated and how these films manipulate us as consumers we can more aggressively mobilize acts of subversion within the filmic structure.

Careful analysis of the methods of representation and the systems of control behind the industry as well as the fundamental ideology inherent in the narratives can reveal much about the systems of oppression and cultural erasure. These systems have led to the perpetuation of the Vanishing American myth along with stereotypes like the Noble and the Ignoble Savage.



Simply calling out moments of misrepresentation or harmful imagery is unsatisfying at this stage with nearly four decades of existing literature covering such analysis.<sup>6</sup> There are now dozens of books, hundreds of articles, and several documentary films dedicated to this task. It is past time that scholarship moves beyond the need to simply articulate injustice and focus on the more rewarding work of calling attention to and giving honest account of successful examples of representation of Native Americans in film. These works by Native filmmakers and their non-Native allies have appropriated the film medium to reclaim the Native image from the Hollywood machine. By pulling from the last century of filmmaking techniques and conventions and adding their own style, expertise, and experience these filmmakers are revitalizing, recovering, and reforming the image of their people. Hopefully, the lives of Native Americans and the perception of tribal life within and outside of Native communities will find a new avenue of agency in this historically oppressive medium.

### **Post-Positivist Realist Approach to Film**

As a broad category of cultural production, film can serve several different subversive needs, but our work here is particularly concerned with the capacity of film to present, complicate, and invigorate Native American masculinity. It is in the tensions between self/family, desire/obligation, present/history, and personal/community that masculine identity is established. In this work, we will not look at film as a method of mapping out or recovering an essential Native American masculinity. Nor is this work concerned with using film as a method of breaking down assumptions of gender to reveal their constructed nature. Rather, this work

---

<sup>6</sup> Consider Ralph Friar's - *The Only Good Indian* (1972); Robert Berkhofer's - *The White Man's Indian* (1979); Gretchen Bataille's - *The Pretend Indians* (1980); Michael Hilger's - *The American Indian in Film* (1986) as just some of the early the examples of theorists considering the representation of Natives in film. In each of these instances, the general conclusion is that the film's deal only in stereotypes and offer little in the way of subversion. As we move closer to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the conversation becomes more nuanced, yet the general trajectory seems to still emphasize problematic representations over moments of progressive portrayal.

assumes that all films, and our analysis of them, will ultimately lead to an imprecise understanding of Native American identity, masculine or otherwise, but that through careful analysis of the interplay between the production of the films, the internal narratives, and the social and historical location of the films during their time of release and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can continue the work of recovery as a negotiation between representation and lived experience, between the past and the present, and between the internalized self and the social reality. To achieve this theoretical objective, we will need a framework that accepts experience as a valid epistemological tool without a complete destabilization of patterns of identification and recovery.

Realism is the most effective program for identity analysis that allows for and encourages the epistemological value of experience necessary to situate identity in specific Native American contexts. To fully understand the program of realism we need to understand the limitations of essentialism and post-modernism that dominate the field prior to and in the wake of this development. Paula Moya works her way through essentialism and constructionism to arrive at the realist approach by asserting that, “essentialist conceptions of identity, according to critics, is the tendency to posit one aspect of identity (say, gender) as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual’s experience.” While post-modernists contend that, “because meaning exists only in a shifting and unstable relationship to the webs of signification through which it comes into being and because humans have no access to anything meaningful outside these sometimes-disparate webs, there can be no “objective” truth.” Yet, the post-positive realists argue that “identity categories provide modes of articulating and examining significant correlations between lived experience and social location” and that “post-positivist realists assert both that (1) all observations and knowledge are theory mediated and that (2) a

theory-mediated objective knowledge is both possible and desirable” (Moya 3-12). Linda Alcoff and Satya Mohanty add:

The core ideas that emerge from the realist theory of identity are these: Social identities can be mired in distorted ideologies, but they can also be the lenses through which we learn to view our world accurately. Our identities are not just imposed on us by society. Often, we create positive and meaningful identities that enable us to better understand and negotiate the social world. They enable us to engage in the social world and in the process discover how it really works. They also make it possible to change the world ourselves in valuable ways. (Alcoff 6)

It is from this admittedly optimistic approach that we hope to reveal the regenerative potential of film and its capacity to restore cultural agency for Native filmmakers. If all observation and knowledge is already mediated through theoretical exchanges, then they can certainly open a path for social change if such observations and associated knowledge are mobilized effectively. Any analysis in this work that leads to a more complete understanding of representation and reception must ultimately lead towards changes that promote justice and restore social equality within Native communities and with the lives of tribal members.

As the realist program begins to develop in this work we will move from the larger theoretical framework to a more focused application in Native American studies as outlined by Sean Teuton. He considers a “tribal realist approach to Native identity to show that identities need not be based on a cultural or racial essence but instead can operate as revisable constructs to reconnect with tribal pasts, a process that produces new knowledge to inform ourselves in the present world” (Chapter 2). In essence, Teuton suggests that the lived experiences of individual tribal members, their particular histories, social location, and theory-laden sense of self, or identity, can allow Natives to navigate their place in the colonized world. Furthermore, experiential knowledge can help Natives retain and even expand their cultural agency in the process of de-colonization by relying on their realist conception of self to recover, articulate, and

modify identity constructions as they fit the needs of the people at a given time and place. At its core, this is in line with other realist considerations through its attempts to walk a sort of middle ground between total essentialism and total deconstruction. We will also use psychoanalytic and therefore essentialist/structuralist readings of the image to trace them through various films and various time periods. But we will escape the deterministic nature of this grand analysis by proposing multiple different subject positions that might be occupied during the viewing process, such as the Native audience, the non-Native audience, the white man, the child, etc. Further, we will expand on these socially constructed subject positions and their *gaze* into the signifier by promoting Native-specific historical and cultural details. This process will be better illustrated below with the exemplary discussion of *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015) and more thoroughly in the body chapters to follow.

### **Film is the Medium - Native Men are the Subject**

Let me first clarify the concept of Native American men and Native American masculinity. In both cases there is an assumed level of cultural specificity. While the men of Native American descent share much of the same DNA and history with white Americans today, their cultural history, racial subjugation, and contested sovereignty situates them on the margins of larger American cultural norms. As such, the definition of *Native American* men is critical to our understanding of this cultural category. For reasons that will be explained throughout this work, Native American men are in a unique social position as *Tribal*, *National*, *Racial*, and *Gendered Other*. Similarly, masculinity as a category of behaviors and practices typically associated with the male sex of a given cultural group has culturally specific nuances requiring further qualification. While masculinity is not exclusive to men and the nuances of Native masculinity are not entirely exclusive to Native men, a critical examination of the representation

of masculine imagery and practices from a culturally specific perspective will help move the conversation closer to an objective truth. To put it simply, Native American men are a culturally specific and unique category with their own sub-cultural divisions. Their behaviors, practices, and ideological framework, broadly understood as masculine, is equally specific and distinct across time, tribe, and geography.

If *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, or any of the other films analyzed in this work is going to have any weight as a cultural object, we must first establish the objective of each analysis. To this point, I have made it clear that I am interested in masculinity and Native American identity. A brief look at several theorists who have worked with the concept of masculinity reveals just how imprecise the term actually is as a signifier of an identity category. Eve Sedgwick argues that “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence” (Chapter 1). The primary thrust of her usage of the concept of masculinity is to situate it against its typical binary opposite—femininity—and suggest that like femininity, masculinity is a social category of behaviors manifested in the relationship between desire and power. Therefore, the behaviors observed and hailed as masculine are those that most effectively navigate and maintain patriarchal normativity, at least in Western society.

R. W. Connell adds that within masculinity, “the hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity, let alone the most comfortable.” However, Connell agrees that “Masculinities are created in specific historical circumstances and, as those circumstances change, the gender practices can be contested and reconstructed” (Connell 10-14). Broadly speaking, Connell advances a theory that she refers to as the “gender relations” approach as a

means of rejecting the categorical and the role theories of understanding gender. Through this relational approach Connell posits that masculinity, and by extension femininity, are understood as social practices that depend on the relationship to the other for a full understanding to emerge. Connell, in an article answering the criticisms of her conception of “hegemonic masculinity” writes, “Masculinity is defined as a configuration of practice organized in relation to the structure of gender relations. Human social practice creates gender relations in history. The concept of hegemonic masculinity embeds a historically dynamic view of gender in which it is impossible to erase the subject” (“Hegemonic” 843). Ultimately, she concludes that hegemonic masculinity is, like all her other configurations of masculinity, relational and useful for locating behaviors and practices on a hierarchal scale. This is not to suggest that hegemonic masculinity is fixed or even the majority masculinity; rather, it is the preferred masculinity of a given arena, to which she identifies three basic levels: local, regional, and global.

The hegemonic category of masculinity may be normative, but that normativity is best understood in relation to subordinate masculine identities formulated not as resistance necessarily but as alternatives that *act* as modes of resistance. The subordinate masculine configurations offer agency to the individual to resist the normative qualities of the hegemonic system, but the system is designed to adapt and even absorb key features of a subordinate group into the hegemonic regime to maintain that normative quality. George L. Mosse explores how such dominate masculine categories can take on a type, or stereotype, where the ideal contains physical, psychological, and ideological dimensions played out in the acceptance and/or rejection of normative behaviors, what Judith Butler expands into a performative theory of gender.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See George L. Mosse *The Image of Man* for his treatment of masculinity as a movement of type and relation and as a further extension see Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble* for insights on the performative nature of gender. Generally, this work does not accept the ultimate horizon of performative theory as it

Mosse does not identify a hegemonic structure, which would allow for resistance and acceptance in relation, but he does acknowledge that *modern masculinity* has its alternatives that could but rarely manage to fully destabilize the normative characteristics he articulates.

Mosse's conception of the stereotypical male aligns well with most recent conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, but his configuration verges too close to a deterministic or essentialist masculine dynamic. Where Connell argues that the subordinate masculinities can influence and even force alterations in the normative qualities of hegemonic masculinity, Mosse suggests that such alternative masculinities lack significant agency or subversive power. Judith Butler, and other postmodernists who suggest that gender possesses a performative quality that is reinforced by social interaction, reject the notion of an essential gender, masculine or otherwise, in favor of viewing gender as a social construct. Masculinity for Butler, though she rarely addresses this category directly, is a social construct that hides its origins in an ever-reducing cycle of obfuscation and normalization. She writes, "gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions--and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness" (*Gender Trouble* 190). However, such performativity and postmodern constructionism, though rejecting an essentialist claim of original or authentic identity, offer little in the way of interpreting the lived experiences of everyday men. We are socially constructed in many ways, but our lived experiences are real and as such have social and psychological inertia that cannot be ignored. Ultimately, the meta-theories of identity and masculinity, as well as the cultural location of film are best understood in practice. To this end, I

---

destabilizes what is, in reality, a genuine experience of gender. However, the essential core of performativity as a way of understanding behavior and gender in social practice still has currency in my research.

will briefly summarize the 2015 film *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* and utilize it here in this introduction to demonstrate the theories proposed above and crystalize the abstract theories in a concrete and contemporary filmic example. The analysis that follows will be necessarily limited and brief, but it will establish the foundations that I will develop more fully in the chapters to come.

### **A Contemporary Model of Filmic Representation**

*Songs My Brothers Taught Me* is a brief look into the lives of Johnny and Jashaun Winters, Lakota brother and sister living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their father, largely absent in their lives, has just died, and they discover that they are two of 25 different children he fathered with 9 different “wives.” In the physical absence of their father and the emotional absence of their alcoholic mother, Johnny (age 17) has become the default caretaker for Jashaun (age 11), but as graduation looms, Johnny considers moving away from the reservation to maintain his relationship with his high school sweetheart Aurelia who is moving to Los Angeles to attend University. Jashaun still has years left under her mother’s limited care and is without a father or a father figure, so she seeks other avenues of guidance on the reservation. For Johnny, this is a coming-of-age story of agency, desire, and self-discovery, but through his relationships with Aurelia and Jashaun, we also come to see this as a story about family, duty, and tradition.

Johnny is conflicted by no less than three competing appeals to his body, time, and attention. His sister needs his attention if she is to survive on the reservation without succumbing to many of the social pressures and personal dangers that await her. She needs him to not only be physically present, at least until she reaches adulthood, but she also needs his compassion and understanding of her idiosyncratic world view for, as Johnny explains, “My



sister Jashaun, she's got a thing about this place. She sees things that I don't. She's a good one."

In contrast, Johnny's girlfriend Aurelia's imminent departure from the Rez to Los Angeles presents Johnny with an opportunity to escape his troubling world and pursue his teenage romance further, yet in this instance, the desire is more an internalized abstract need to remain close to his object of affection and protect her than to liberate himself from his home life.

Finally, the community itself pulls at him to give of his body. His original occupation on the Rez as a bootlegger is one of exploitation and capitalization on the misery of his community and his people. Johnny does not enjoy the suffering he is enabling, as is evident in many scenes of his bootlegging trade, but it is a means to an end. Fortunately, his half-brother Jorge offers an alternative path as a laborer in his stepfather's garage. Thus, his occupation and place in the community is able to transition from vampirical capitalism to healer and provider. If he chooses this path, he will no longer contribute to the decline of his community but will, by nature of this new occupation, repair that which is broken and preserve that which is still of value.

If Johnny's Nativeness, as but one marker of his identity, is to offer any insights into these tensions it must consider the influences on his masculinity as well as his individual experiences that mediate his decisions. There is no quest for an essential and natural Native self that will provide any answers for Johnny, for even if such a pre-colonized, pre-capitalist, conception existed, his current environment denies its discovery or recovery. Furthermore, to reduce the impact of these tensions and the subsequent choices he will make to a series of performative actions predicated on socially constructed realities denies Johnny the agency necessary to resist pressure from any of the above camps. Jashaun serves to represent kinship and family as the defining pressure. Aurelia serves to represent sexual desire and heteronormative American masculine conceptions of protection of the female body and

preservation of ownership. Jorge's proposition rejects the capitalist tendency towards exploitation and instead situates the labor in the garage as a liberating path. That his body is now the exploited site of labor is offset by the generative qualities of the position in relation to community wellbeing and kinship health. Furthermore, Jorge's proposal does not insist on a choice between the garage and Jashaun; rather, it provides Johnny with a means of supporting his sister, improving his community, and establishing his own financial agency. Johnny's agency is not yet fully formed, for it was the lingering feeling of unacceptance and rejection from Aurelia and her family that caused him to revisit his doubts about leaving. Neither is his choice to work at the garage a full reclamation of his identity as is evident in the narrative's focus on the kinship choices over the actual job of mechanic.

In each of these instances, Johnny is better understood in his relation to the female characters, but there is also a recurring theme of community between himself and his male friends. We see many instances of this homosocial bonding between Johnny and his friends, his half-brothers, and the older men in his life such as Bill. His friends understand his desire to leave to maintain his relationship with Aurelia, Jorge sees his responsibility to his people and Jashaun, and Bill seems to respect the desire for full liberation, with women as only one of the many prizes for this freedom. Todd W. Reeser, building on ideas advanced by Sedgwick and others, suggests that masculine identity as a social construction can be understood by examining the *triangulation* of representation between the male-male relations and a third entity, often a woman. Ultimately, he concludes that "the objects that get passed back and forth between men construct the relation between those men and how they construct masculine subjectivity at the same time" (61). This triangulation will be advanced further in this work and at times challenged, but the essential dynamic of definition through social relation is important here.

Ultimately, Johnny gives his own justification for staying on this Rez, “You get really tired of it [life on the Rez], but there’s just things you always gotta do. It’s always a hard place to leave because that’s all you got growing up.” While this line in isolation suggests a lack of agency and choice as it is “all you got,” he follows this line with a focus on Jashaun and how she understands the world in ways that he does not.

Johnny’s tensions between self, Aurelia, and Jashaun are mediated through his own interpretation of his self-worth and the potentiality of a Lakota man surviving off the reservation without any marketable skills, while also understanding the crucial role he plays in the life of his free-spirited sister and his latent potential for community advancement through personal labor. To put it simply, viewers might not be able to fully understand the nuances of his choices, but that does not mean that such nuances are not knowable for Johnny. Johnny offers us little insight into his inner thoughts throughout the film, with Director Chloe Zhao preferring to let the camera linger in the silent spaces between sparse enunciations. Instead, we must piece together the justification for his choice by observing his interactions with the people in his life. Zhao gives us access to that experiential knowledge without Johnny as the mediator. Though he offers a brief pair of bookend monologues at the beginning and ending of the film that provide a somewhat clunky explanation of his world view, it is in the social interactions that his choices achieve meaning for the audience. What we need is a method of analyzing the seemingly disparate scenes in the film to approach an objective truth about Johnny’s Nativeness and his masculinity.

### **Methodology and Organization**

For our purposes, we will divide the Native male into three primary components from which we can seek out moments of revelation and recovery: the physical being, the social being, and the internal being. These three categories assume that all Native men are physical beings

whose Nativeness and masculinity are played out in their bodies, but the body's motions are given true meaning in social circles, with the most intimate circles offering the deepest insights into the Native man's vision of his own identity. This tripartite mode of analysis is in constant dialogue between its constituent parts that in many ways mirrors the dialogue between the Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real. I will further divide these categories of representation into themes or filmic tropes to create a coherent and consistent analytical framework from one film to the next. For the first category, the physical being, we will look closely at the corpse as a primal image of the Native male body in film. Then we will move to a consideration of the culture hero figure in Native communities. Finally, we will look at moments of intimacy and sexuality as the final layer of complex representation of Native American male identity.

In *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, the two primary corpses both die off screen and are never presented visually to the audience. Instead, the corpse is an unseen image that moves throughout the film as a specter reminding us, through its interactions with Johnny and Jashaun, that death is not only an ever-present reality in this community, but life is the ultimate legacy. We do not see the body of their father, instead we see the wake and the subsequent bonfire where the 25 children come together not so much to remember their now deceased father but to get to know one another. His funeral then is not the close of a life, nor the vanishing of an American, but the birth of a family structure and a community that can begin to set its roots. While it is true that the funeral marks the all-to-common tragedy of reservation life, and indeed impoverished life in general, it is also a moment for healing the fracturing of kinship ties predicated on the wanderlust of the father. He is isolated within himself and unable to find a permanent space to call home, thus the nine different "wives." His displacement and endless need to rediscover the self, to heal the fractures and return to the sublime, resulted in the extended family while

simultaneously separating it. When Jashaun visits the destroyed home of her father, burned in a fire, she sees the ashes and discarded memories of his life. She sifts through the physical space of what is left of his life in an effort to recover something of him. Yet, nothing there can place him in her life physically or fulfill the lack she feels at his passing as well as his absence from memory. Instead, she comes to know her father through the community she forms with her brother. She never finds her father in the burned down house or the stories from her family, but she does find the aspects of “fatherhood” that he metonymically represented. Where her father was only the imperfect signifier for protection, guidance, love, and attention, Johnny becomes the manifestation of these desires. He too is imperfect, and this film is not shy on this point. Her trajectory is unclear as she seems to need the presence of a strong and caring male figure in her life, but this relationship signals the ability of the corpse to transcend its abjection if the subject-viewer can focus on the living rather than the dead. Jashaun is by no means a weak character. Indeed, her subversion of the Princess/Maiden stereotypes highlighted by M. Elise Marubbio is worthy of consideration, but at 11 years she is still vulnerable and in need of protection and guidance.

From its earliest inception, the film industry, and Hollywood in particular, has regularly presented the Native American man as an image of the past, savagely defeated and at times romantically mourned. His body is the site of resistance to the naturalness of white progress across the Western frontier. His death becomes the necessary conclusion to that resistance, and his unalive Native body becomes the physical embodiment of the contrasted virility and vitality of the conquering white man. This is effectively demonstrated in the killing of the Chief’s son in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913). While this first corpse sets the stage for the upcoming “battle”, it is the complete lack of empathy and concern by the white settlers at his murder that

clearly establishes the righteousness of his death. *The Vanishing American* (1925) does allow for white sympathy of the Native corpse but loads the images with the underlying assumption of inevitability. This corpse image and the associated Vanishing American myth surrounding the loss of the Native American man in the American consciousness is well established in Native Academic criticism and exemplified in numerous examples in film.<sup>8</sup> Chapter 1 of this work seeks to map out primary examples of this corpse trope in action, but not with an emphasis on misrepresentation or cultural erasure, but as a movement towards recovery. For just as the corpse is a site of abjection and loss in one cultural setting, so too can it be a site of recovery in another.

Chapter 2 of this work will revisit the corpse in films that use the trope as a marker of recovery and revitalization. These films counter the Vanishing American narrative not by hiding or rejecting the Native corpse, but by focusing their attention on the lives of the men before and after the living become the dead. *Little Big Man* (1970) builds on the foundation of genocidal eradication of Native people hinted at in earlier films, but the ultimate thrust of the narrative is one of survival and endurance, exemplified by the premature funeral ritual of Old Lodge Skins and the humor that surrounds this scene. While the corpse may be the ultimate transition of the individual lived experience, the passing of that individual is often the beginning of new transitions for the survivors of the deceased. The end for the individual becomes a regularly repeating new beginning for the community as they enter life without the presence of the deceased. This is the Vanishing American myth ultimately subverted, for the myth suggests a

---

<sup>8</sup> Consider Joanna Hearne's *Native Recognition* for a historical look at the placement of Native images in film and their generative and subversive potential. Shari M. Huhndorf's *Going Native* considers the obsession and appropriation of the Native image throughout film, literature, and popular culture. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor's *Hollywood's Indian* collects several essays concerning Native representation, in particular Michael J. Riley's "Trapped in the History of Film". Also consider Angela Aleiss' *Making the White Man's Indian*. M. Elise Marubbio's *Killing the Indian Maiden*. LeAnne Howe's *Seeing Red*. Beverly R. Singer's *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens*. Michelle H. Raheja's *Reservation Reelism* each of which is utilized more explicitly in later chapters.

loss of a people and a future without the Native, but these films reinsert the Native and treat the corpse as beginning rather than ending. *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007) completes the journey of the Native corpse as a body of recovery by beginning the film with the voice of the deceased narrating the film, and the plot focuses on the survivors as they grow and mature in his absence. Central to these first two chapters is an understanding of the corpse image as abject. Julia Kristeva's "The Power of Horror" is an influential essay that utilized Lacanian psychoanalytic understandings of the I/Other. She, like much of Chapter 1 and 2, sees the corpse as a primary marker for Otherness, the human identity reduced to a purely physical unalive object. Yet, her move towards abjection necessitates revulsion at the corpse image, a position challenged in the films examined in Chapter 2. These chapters will employ and problematize Kristeva and her derivatives to consider how the Native corpse image is used to equate the Native to the abject Other while recent recovery films reposition the Native corpse as a site for re-unification between the past and the present. Thus, the corpse becomes restorative rather than repulsive when it signifies life rather than pulling the subconscious towards the Real.

Once the body has been recovered, revived, and reinvigorated with life and agency with a past, present, and future, it is necessary to situate that body in a social sphere to give meaning to agency and significance to volition. For this endeavor, we move beyond the limits of the body and into the social realm. Once freed of the limitations of the body as a site of identity and agency, the subject enters the realm of the social being. For this work, we will focus on the hero figure as the idealized social role of the subject. The hero, as considered here, is a specific embodiment of the needs and desires of the community at a given time, place, and cultural reality. The definition of the hero can be a communally accepted ideal, but it can also have a very subjective and personal composition, where the individual accepts or rejects characteristics

that are consistent with their own world view of ideal human behavior. Films will often present the mono-mythical hero figure whose characteristics are universalized across culture, borders, and throughout history. This figure is presented as the ultimate ideal that all individuals should strive towards. Yet, this ideal, so generically applied, misses the complexity and nuances of socially specific realities of most individuals. Despite the subjective quality of the hero figure, there is real cultural currency awarded to those that occupy that heroic space. Few theories understand the systems of heroic figures without falling into a structuralist, and therefore reductive, approach. Zeno Franco et al. writes, “Heroism is a social attribution, never a personal one... It is historically, culturally and situationally determined, thus heroes of one era may prove to be villains in another time when controverting evidence emerges...Moreover, the very same act accorded hero status in one group... is absolutely abhorrent to many others” (99). Essentially, the hero as a figure is difficult to define and even more difficult to generalize. Yet, their cultural and temporal relativity does not render the concept useless for our purposes. Simply put, if we consider the hero as a model for social action, often through some form of sacrifice for the sake of communal good, we can view films as a form or representation of the ideal.

In *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, Jashaun admires and gravitates towards a male heroic figure as a stand-in for her absentee father. At the film’s open, and presumably throughout her 11 years of age, she looks to Johnny as her hero. He is her protector, teacher, guide, and companion. Yet, as the film progresses and Johnny starts to distance himself from Jashaun, the death of their father becomes a tremendous weight for her, so she seeks out other hero figures. First, she finds Travis, whose artistry and spiritual qualities distance him from most of his fellow tribesmen, a state of insider/Other that Jashaun seems to share. Yet, Travis has his own fall, and



she then turns to her half-brother Kevin, but he rejects her attempts to form that bond by pointing out that his life with their father was not all that great. He is happy to spend time with Jashaun, but he has no deep emotional capacity for her and fails to meet her needs. Instead, it is Johnny, having gone through a version of his own journey of self-discovery that returns to her and takes his place in her life, seemingly for good. Johnny does leave the community unit, but not physically. His attention and devotion shift from his family/Jashaun to himself and the outside world, and through a rejection by his companion/Aurelia and through a hesitation to embark on the journey alone, he is transformed by his renewed commitment to family/Jashaun. Johnny's danger is the destruction of his family and community, exemplified in Jashaun. Johnny's sacrifice is his own desires and potentiality. His success, as is often the case in the lives of young men today, is not in great deeds of valor, but in the simple ability to put his own passions aside for the betterment of his people. Therefore, in the most basic sense, Johnny's heroic journey is consistent with a structuralist reading, but to understand his importance to his community and the journey to his own brand of masculinity requires a much more complex reading of his choices.

Instead of focusing on the structure of the journey from a narrative stance, we can instead understand the film as a cultural object where the hero is a manifestation of the culturally, spatially, socially, and temporally specific needs of the people. It is to this end, that our project is largely focused. We will rely on a three-stage process of analysis of the hero figure in Chapters 3 and 4. First we will identify the essential roles the hero figure fulfills in the narrative. Johnny, for example, is the male role model, protector, and provider for Jashaun. These are perceptible points of representation. Second, we will look at the film's social and temporal location in order to add context to that representation. *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, was

released in 2015, directed by a Chinese American filmmaker as an independent production, and shot on location on the Pine Ridge reservation. Furthermore, the narrative pulls heavily from the life of John Reddy, who plays Johnny in the film, to inform the narrative. This gives the film a contemporary, social, and locational immediacy that adds currency to its heroic portrayals. Finally, and to whatever degree is possible, we will look at the culturally specific details that inform the production and reception of this reading. In the case of *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, we want to move towards a greater understanding of the Lakota specific kinship arrangements and tribal history that might inform this film's representation.

Chapter 3 of this work will begin with a close reading of the 1920 independent film *Daughter of Dawn*. Through examination of the two central male figures in this film we can parse out the film's version of the prototypical male or the culture hero. White Eagle is a positive example signifying the productive models of masculine behavior. In contrast, Black Wolf is a negative example signifying selfishness and laziness. However, the film essentially recasts the idyllic white settler threatened by marauding Comanche with idyllic Kiowa nomads similarly threatened. Under this reduction, it fails to capture the generations old relationship between the two tribes, the social complexity of their interactions, or the complex kinship relations that would normally be observed in a film set completely in tribal camp sites. If Hollywood had continued the trajectory that *Daughter of Dawn* started, it is possible that we could have seen significant advancements in cultural representation. However, 1929's *Redskin* addresses a darker period of U.S. and Native relations: the Indian Boarding School experience. While *Daughter of Dawn* is set in a pre-colonized American frontier as a struggle between two tribes and no Europeans, *Redskin* situates the narrative directly in the middle of colonizer/colonized relations.

Wing Foot, played by Richard Dix, is forced to leave the Navajo reservation and attend a boarding school where he will receive a white man's education, but his father, Chief Notani played by Greek/American George Regas, reluctantly allows the white agent to take his son away but tells him "Go with the white man. But come back to me – an Indian!" As a culture hero, Wing Foot has many of the same characteristics exhibited by White Eagle. Yet, unlike White Eagle, and all too characteristic of the period, his most enduring qualities by the end of the film are the very aspects that his father warned him not to take to heart. In the end, his Indian biology gives him an advantage, but it is his education and assimilation that gives him real power. On the surface, we have a Native Male character acting honorably and intelligently and benefiting his people in the process. The essential structure of the narrative arc is consistent with many Hollywood heroic tales of the period; however, the structuralist approach does not offer enough explanatory power to fully unlock the film's socially located nuance. Therefore, a realist specific reading reveals *Redskin's* missed opportunities is in its treatment of the boarding school and the inherent assertion that that white education is superior to the Native tradition.

What still eludes us to this point is a film that can view the Native as inherently viable and heroic with strong social and cultural bonds removed from colonial influence. Any contemporary film will have a difficult time escaping the colonial influence, but they can still emphasize the cultural and tribal specificity present in many contemporary Native narratives without forsaking traditional values. As explored in Chapter 4, *Thunderheart* (1992) moves us closer to this destination by eschewing the natural assumption that capitalism, western education, and technology is ideal, and the Indian ways are primitive and provincial. However, like *Redskin*, *Thunderheart* also seems incapable of allowing the protagonist to inhabit a fully realized Native space. Indeed, Levoi relies on his white moral superiority in his attempts to help

the people of Bear Creek Indian reservation. As an FBI agent with native ancestry, he is sent to the reservation to investigate a murder and hopefully act as a mediator between the competing factions on the reservation. Throughout the film's narrative Levoi's detective work is upstaged by Walter Crow Horse a tribal police officer that proves to be more capable than Levoi, a twist on the superiority of the Western education. Levoi can integrate himself into the tribal community spiritually and even has several visions, to which Crow Horse is at once incredulous and envious. The film is much more sympathetic to the values of the Native traditions than most Hollywood offerings and through the interactions between Crow Horse and Levoi, Director Michael Apted humorously deconstructs some of the lingering stereotypes of past Hollywood productions. Crow Horse and Jimmy Looks Twice are the true heroes here but they are relegated to supporting cast as Hollywood is not yet ready to follow a fully realized Native hero through his own journey to save his people.

Finally, in 2002, Chris Eyre drops the "Red" and gives us *Skins*. This film is situated entirely on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation and follows two brothers whose lives have taken completely different paths. Mogie, played by Graham Greene, is a Vietnam War veteran and an alcoholic. His life on the reservation is as tragic as it is common. He has a son, Herbie played by Noah Watts, that he spends little time with, and his relationship with his brother is strained. His community knows him by site, but he never truly feels at home amongst his people. Rudy, played by Eric Schweig, is a tribal police officer and though he is single and without children of his own, he has taken on a primary role of mentor for his nephew and an unwelcome caretaker for his brother. From the beginning of the film to its conclusion, the narrative oscillates between the two brother's journey through life trying to find their place. Mogie cannot locate a space where the demons of his past and the dissatisfaction of the present do not fuel a crippling

depression and substance abuse. Rudy cannot locate a space where he is able to make a real difference in his community and with his brother. Both men are powerless to drive their future and feel that they are denied agency, so they both seek differing methods of coping. Yet, at the film's conclusion there is a resolution of sorts where both men find peace, and the film ends on a hopeful note of what Gerald Vizenor considers a state of "survivance", or "an active resistance and repudiation of dominance, obtrusive themes of tragedy, nihilism, and victimry" (*Survivance* 11). Though Mogie does not survive the narrative in body, his spirit endures in the memory of Rudy, Herbie, and the rest of the community. Rudy does survive the narrative in body, but more importantly with a renewed spirit. Rudy reclaims his position as a heroic model in his community through his mentorship with his nephew and his role as an officer of the peace. While the death of Mogie and the general state of the reservation may, on the surface, appear tragic and without much purpose, Rudy and Mogie remind us that the lives of Natives on the reservation are also filled with hope, passion, adventure, excitement, and progress.

With the corpse now resurrected and the emphasis shifted from the passing of the physical being to the experiences of the living and to the eternal qualities of the spirit, the Native man now exists in a physical and communal space. He has life, and he has a society in which to live, serve, and prosper. He is seen as a viable model for the Ideal-I. Unfortunately, such exploration still does not help us to understand the state of Native American masculinity to its fullest. As I have already argued, masculinity is the behaviors and practices typically associated with the men of a given social, geographical, and temporal location. Native American tribes, as we have already demonstrated here and will explore further in the following chapters, share some similarities to the hegemonic American masculinity, but there are subtle distinctions that are recognized and experienced by Native Americans today. To understand the subtleties and

distinctions, as well as the subsequent rewards and punishments for adherence to these subtleties, we must penetrate even deeper into the lives of the characters presented on screen.

Chapter 5 and 6 will focus on the intimate relationships of the Natives on screen to gain an understanding into the psychology and internalized sense of self that are only present when the individual is at their most vulnerable. Generally, narratives only reveal these intimate relationships in the form of romantic relations, but as we have seen in both *Skins* and *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, layers of intimacy can also appear in close kinship, family, and platonic relationships. This brings us back to the core conversations in psychoanalysis advanced by Lacan. His conception of the mirror stage and the ultimate negotiation between desire and drive helps us to understand the tensions between conscious behavior and unconscious motivations. Advancing this basic conception, Laura Mulvey formulates an influential film theory of the *Male Gaze*. While Mulvey was largely concerned with the heterosexual male perspective and its ability to subjugate the female as object-to-be-looked-at for the visual pleasure of the male filmmaker, and the viewer by proxy, we will utilize the core of her argument and apply it to our purposes. The *gaze* is not only a way of understanding how the male views the female object, but also a way of understanding how race can inform representation. By controlling if and to what extent the Native male is presented in a pleasurable context, the filmmakers have the potential to encode a racial and gendered reading of the Native male for their audiences. We not only see as a heterosexual male, but we are encouraged to view the Native from the perspective of the heterosexual *white* male. By combining this theory and revisiting masculine triangulation, we can gain a better understanding of the internalized self as denied by non-Native filmmakers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and reclaimed by Native filmmakers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, by giving the Native characters voice, agency, and moments of intimate interaction with friends,

family, and lovers, we are able to move past the deterministic limits of *gaze* theory and formulate a relational understanding of the character through their interactions at their most vulnerable.

In *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, Johnny's relationship with Aurelia gives the audience insights into his insecurities and hopes as we see that he is unsure of his capacity to survive outside of the reservation without being a burden to her plans. He still desires a life with her and away from the reservation. Yet, Johnny's relationship with Jashaun and their interactions onscreen offer the audience the most intimate insights into the complexities of his character. Through Jashaun we come to understand the tension he feels between his responsibility to her and his family, his inability to dedicate himself to her completely, and his frustration with himself for wanting more than a role as her brother. Simultaneously, we also come to see that through his relationship with Jashaun he has power, purpose, and reciprocal love that gives him courage.

During one of the opening scenes of the film, we see Johnny repairing Jashaun's bicycle for her. This bicycle is her mode of freedom and travel. It allows her to escape the limits of her physical space and venture out to explore the Reservation without his protection. Johnny seeks to acquire a car to travel with Aurelia to Los Angeles, so he needs a more sophisticated method of liberation as his desire to move beyond his confines exceeds that of Jashaun. After his truck is torched, he decides to stay on the reservation with Jashaun. Johnny is now shown riding a horse again and riding a bicycle with Jashaun. His decision to stay has not diminished his desire for freedom and escape, but the distance he needs to travel to find what he desires has been reduced. As the circle of intimacy closes for Johnny, we come to see him as a more complete person. The reduction of this social space allows us to move closer to the point of identity located in the mediation between the Lack and the Whole, which is that state of incompleteness shared by all

that requires a type of somethingness to drive towards the void, what Žižek maps out as *less than nothing*.

*Songs My Brothers Taught Me* gives audiences an intimate look at Johnny through multiple different interactions but this level of depth and complexity was not always available to Native characters in film. Chapter 5 explores the triangulation of most Native American men in early films. Before the 1960s, most Native American filmic representations of men fell into two basic categories, the Noble and the Ignoble Savage and their competition for the affections of the White Maiden. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* has received numerous film adaptations and Chapter 5 will explore the 1920 version directed by Maurice Tourneur and Clarence Brown, with reference to the 1936 and 1992 versions for comparisons of the narrative's evolution through time. Whether in the novel or in the various filmic representations, *The Last of the Mohicans* stands as the prototype for the Noble/Ignoble/Maiden triangle. The *Noble* Uncas, played by Alan Roscoe in the 1920 version, is a Mohican man whose characterization is one of stoicism and loyalty. His physical being fills the screen but his tenderness towards Cora, played by Barbara Bedford, softens his character and distances him from the other men in the film. The *Ignoble* Magua, played by Wallace Beery, is equally imposing but is visually more savage and his motives are more sinister. Similarly, he is as aggressive and threatening towards Cora as Uncas is protective and tender.

The two men are both understood more fully through their interactions with Cora. Uncas' nobility is expressed in his sacrifice, tenderness, and protection of the white maiden. Magua's savagery is expressed in his desire to possess, harm, and even rape Cora. What tragically underscores this triangle is the underlying assumption that neither Native man is fit to be with a white woman, and as such both men must ultimately die to make way for the superior



white man: Hawkeye. Hawkeye is a white man who has been raised by the Natives and learned their ways. He has all the Nobility of Uncas with none of his latent savagery. His racial purity, combined with his romanticized Native nobility, make him an acceptable figure for the exploration of sexuality and intimacy of the Native identity.

The fears of miscegenation between the Native man and the White Maiden persisted in Hollywood filmmaking for decades, occasionally reemerging in contemporary films, but it was never more prevalent than in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). This film also explores the triangulation between the Noble/Ignoble Savage and the White Maiden, but through John Wayne's turn as Ethan Edwards we see the inherent American racism and fears of miscegenation personified into a single unyielding terror. For *The Searchers*, the Noble Savage is explored in Martin Pawley, a part Cherokee man who has been raised by the Edwards. Though he is dark skinned and favors moccasins over boots, he is identical in dress and mannerisms to the white men in the film in most respects. Scar, by contrast, is an unassimilated Cheyenne warrior and chief who captures little Debbie (age 11), the film's primary White Maiden. Her capture is what sets the stage for the rescue narrative that will fill the bulk of the film. However, *The Searchers* takes a different turn to *Last of the Mohicans* by not only allowing Martin to survive the narrative, Scar must still die of course, but the film also allows both White Maidens to survive in the end. We learn through Martin that he does not share the same fears of miscegenation or the same prejudice. Indeed, he seems capable of loyalty and love for those that have become his new kinship circle, regardless of their non-Native ancestry. Scar, on the other hand, is Magua revisited; only in this case he is able to complete his capture, rape, and marriage of the White Maiden. While the narrative of the film pivots on the captivity and rape of a white woman, the

result is an exploration of the internalized Native masculine identity of two Native men from different backgrounds that are juxtaposed to the masculinity of the white men in the film.

Eventually, Hollywood would come to terms with the possibility of the Native man having intimate relationships that did not require a dichotomy between Nobility and Ignobility, nor an assumption of inherent savagery. In Chapter 6 we see how *Tell them Willie Boy is Here* (1969) explores the possibility of the dichotomy combined into a more complex exploration of Native American masculinity and intimacy. Through Willie Boy, played by Robert Blake, we see a man who is both strong and brave. He is dangerous and yet loyal. He is tender yet violent. He is assimilated and yet distinctly Native. He is understood through his intimate relationship with his Maiden, but in this case, she is a Native woman. While this does exclude any discussion of miscegenation inherent in the previous films, it still gives audiences the chance to see a Native Man in a leading role portrayed with complexity and depth. To penetrate past this stereotype and escape the necessary juxtaposition with white masculinity, audiences would have to wait several more decades.

*The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), written and directed by Sherman Alexie, seems to turn every previous convention of Native American intimacy on its head. Seymour Polatkin, played by Evan Adams, is a Native poet who has left the reservation to pursue his career in the metropolitan literary scene. He is neither warrior nor protector. He is neither calculating nor capable of dealing with the tensions of his life. Instead, he is evasive, guarded, and flippant. He is neither noble nor ignoble, preferring to walk the line of moral ambiguity. His intimate relationships escape the previous conceptions of Hollywood as his White Maiden is recast as a white Man. Additionally, his deepest personal connection is with an ambiguously platonic relationship with Aristotle, a Native man from his reservation. We learn a great deal about

Johnny from *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* through his romantic relationship with Aurelia and his familial bonds with his sister Jashaun, and both relationships are required for a complex understanding of Johnny's sense of self. Similarly, Seymour's relationships with Steven and Aristotle helps us understand each man better through their relationship with each other and the people around them. Their various masculine characterizations become evidence of a complex spectrum that defies type and stereotype.

After a century of filmmaking, where Hollywood has consistently tried to erase, reduce, and emasculate the Native American male, we finally arrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where Native filmmakers and their non-Native allies are able to subvert the representations of the past and offer new visions of Native American identity. These visions are not new to those that have lived as Native men and women during the past century, but they are, with few exceptions, new to film. While our brief look at *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* served us in this introduction as a structuring device for the methods in the chapters that follow, and while the films explored in chapters 1-6 all have elements of the corpse, the community, and intimacy, we have not yet employed every lens and technique for a complex and complete analysis of a single contemporary and progressive film.

*Winter in the Blood* (2013) stands as the most complete look at the Native American male experience and the most compelling exploration of masculinity and Native identity to date. This film is not without its issues, and its negotiation with the peerless source novel by James Welch is at times puzzling. Regardless, Virgil First Raise, played by Chaske Spencer, and his odyssey of self-discovery in *Winter in the Blood* marks a clear turning point in the capacity of film to represent Native American men as complex and compelling characters for film audiences, both Native and non-Native. His struggles are simultaneously Native-centric and universally

understood. He, like most men today, struggles to find his place in the world. His identity is bound in a complex web of identity influences ranging from Native to white American, from communal to capitalistic, from sexual to impotent, from wealthy to impoverished, from connected to detached. His identity, like so many of us, is not found in its placement within any realm of understanding; rather, Virgil is best understood through the tensions of competing influences. He is, “caught in the in-between space”; between discovering who he is and becoming eternally lost. The death of his brother, father, and grandma informs his depression and arrested emotional development. His alienation from his mother and local community as well as his perpetual state as an outsider in the nearby white towns deny him the necessary community ties to situate him as a fully realized social being. His sexuality is a source of escapism and emasculating experiences. Yet, his journey, much like the journey of the Native American man in film over the past century is one of ambiguous hope. The film leaves its audiences with the assumption that Virgil, and Native American men by proxy, will endure. However, the film does not give us clear answers as to what the future will hold for Virgil or the men he represents. We, as scholars, filmmakers, and Natives, must take deliberate action to guide our future. Essentialists, structuralist, post-structuralist, and post-modernists, all struggle over the role of agency and identity. The realists approach employed in this work emphasizes that agency exists, but the range of choices are influenced by the experiences that mediate our lives. For a century, Native Americans were largely presented with how Hollywood and white American sees us. For the past couple of decades, Natives have reclaimed this tool of representation. We can show the world how we see ourselves.

## Chapter 1 – Apparitional Americans

We are two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and American culture is still struggling to overcome problematic aspects of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, hyper masculinity, and toxic masculinity are ubiquitous buzzwords in and out of the social justice discourse. Men are facing calls from all sectors to re-evaluate their normative behavior and formulate new masculinities. Unfortunately, there are few arenas for men to express their fears and anxieties in this new age. Bell hooks suggests that men are not only discouraged from expressing their emotions and the pain of the struggles they are facing as men, but that such expressions can lead to further emasculation and denigration (5). While it is clear that men are in a state of cultural and ideological disruption, it is less clear what direction such change should take. Articulation of undesirable traits are frequent, but clear roadmaps for alternative behaviors remain elusive.

For Native American men, as with most marginalized men, masculinity can be even more problematic. Not only are they facing the same struggles to re-invent themselves in a modern world, but they must also push back against centuries of interpellation and encoding by non-Natives. Television, literature, history texts, and film all present a particular image of Native American men that is simultaneously emasculated and dangerous. Their rage and frustration are discouraged, but their oppression is intolerable. In the pursuit of a more egalitarian world order in and out of Native communities, Native men must overcome racism, poverty, dehumanization, and intergenerational trauma in order to chart a path forward. Before any such efforts to change can take root, we must first evaluate how we have been perceived and how we perceive ourselves. This is a crucial step in the process of reclaiming the masculine agency required to make the necessary changes for a 21<sup>st</sup> century masculine identity.

To aid in this process of self-evaluation for self-determination, this work will take particular aim at the image of Native American men in film. For generations, the Hollywood film industry has removed the Native American man from his interpersonal relationships and rendered him simultaneously eroticized, castrated, and vilified. His community spaces have been reduced to amorphous reflections of archetypal community roles that ignore the necessary kinship and familial bonds that give social membership its potency. Frequently, the Native American man is not allowed to have anything resembling a human identity as he is valued only in his death. His role in film, and history by extension, is to die and die often.

This work will explore how the Native American man is dehumanized in film for over a century, only to recently re-emerge in the hands of Native filmmakers. This emergence will resurrect the corpse, reinforce his community bonds, and expand the depth and breadth of his internal self as an individual and intimate being. Unfortunately, for each recent film that has revitalized the Native American man and redefined the boundaries and complexities of his masculinity, there are hundreds of preceding films whose ultimate impact was erasure and repeated re-colonization. We will explore the Native American male body, community, and sexuality in three respective and distinct phases. Each phase will begin with a historical look at Native American male representation in each category and end with a close examination of more recent films that demonstrate the potential for progress. Joanna Hearne, like many existing scholars of Native Americans in film, insists on continued attachment of historical accounts and contemporary data to understand each filmic representation in its proper historical context. She believes that scholars need to, “to read visual culture in this narrative way and to understand the mutually constitutive origins of Western and Native cinema because they have powerfully shaped American national imaginaries of Native absence and presence”. To this point, we are in

alignment, and to a certain degree this work follows her suggestion by placing the film analysis offered here in broader historical context to create a narrative of representation. Hearne adds that “we need to read images of Native families at the heart of this confluence because they signify Indigenous futures to a multiethnic viewing public” (40). It is to this final point that this work makes a crucial amendment. Here we are primarily interested in how Native Americans in film are viewed by audiences today, and as such nuances of historical accuracy are going to be limited to a select few and even then, the “multiethnic viewing public” will likely read their own history from unique subject positions. This renders any serious arguments about the links between historical accuracy and filmic representation largely ineffective as a tool for resistance. Those in the business of resisting hegemonic representation of Native imagery are likely already initiated into the reality of Native American and Euro-American history. Therefore, a new layer of analysis is required to push the discourse even further. By additionally considering the resulting images psychoanalytically, authentic or imagined, and assuming their place has part of the hegemonic order, we can form an understanding of the film as a product of its producers and as a contributor to personal knowledge and self-identification.

The first voice heard in the 2007 film *Four Sheets to the Wind* is that of Frankie Smallhill as his son drags his lifeless body to a pond near the family home. Frankie, played by Richard Ray Whitman, narrates the scene in a voiceover delivered in the Creek language. Choosing to situate the story within a framework of oral traditions is critical to the success of the film in capturing some of the nuances of Native histories and cultures. As Beverly Singer explains, the oral tradition is fundamental to understanding Native film and video and how we experience truth, impart knowledge, share information, and laugh. Traditional Native American storytelling practices and oral histories are a key source of our recovery of our authentic identity”

(Introduction). Throughout this film, Frankie's oral narrations provides key contextual information about the scenes, and more importantly, about the family dynamic that might be apparent to viewers without insider knowledge. The subtitles read:

*I was once told by my grandmother a long time ago; Rabbit ate Bear whole. She said that Rabbit told bear that he had a belly full of honey. This made Bear curious, so he went into Rabbit's mouth and down his throat into his belly. This made Rabbit full for years to come.*

This brief story of Rabbit swallowing Bear is analogous to Frankie and his son Cufe buying into the allure of the non-Native world. It can also be read as a reference to Natives as a whole buying into the myth of salvation offered by the white man's world. Rabbit is insatiable. Those equipped with experiential knowledge of the Native world, particularly the nuances of Creek history, will be able to see this scene as an analogous representation of the continual struggle of Native men to find social reconciliation in modern America. However, those capable of also seeing the film apparatus historically will be able to understand the layers of rejuvenation and resistance offered in these opening moments.

The Creek culture considers Rabbit a trickster figure. Tricksters are sometimes heroes, sometimes villains, always mystical, and often arrive to help the people cope with an unforgiving world. The character of Cufe, played by Cody Lightning, is guileless and acts with almost no sense of self-satisfaction. He is akin to Gerald Vizenor's conception of a cultural healer. According to Vizenor, "Tricksters only exist in a comic sense between two people who take pleasure in a language game and imagination, a noetic liberation of the mind." ("Trickster Discourse" 70). Even in this (mis)clarification of the attributes of Trickster, Vizenor is playing with the tangibility and certainty of language to understand Trickster. As a post-modernist, Vizenor, and those who have followed his example, uses Trickster and Trickster Theory as a mode of literature disruption, to break down as much as build up any assertions. Yet, the



ultimate horizon of postmodernism unchecked is not a liberation of tribal specificity, but a complete disruption of all identity formations that are necessarily predicated on the imbalances of power directly influencing experiential knowledge.

Cufe, then, is less a complete disruption of assumptions but an affirmation and complication of all and none of the assumptions about Native men. He is masculine discord personified, and in the opening minutes of this film, he begins to tell the journey of discovery that, as the oral narrative suggests, never ends and requires a vision of the past, present, and the future. If we, as audiences, are willing to accept Cufe's invitation to see him, we too might become "full for many years." Sean Teuton argues that "Vizenor's fiction ultimately inhabits the more or less stable moral center" but it is Vizenor's "skeptical view of tribal knowledge that leads to a number of disabling theoretical problems for American Indian scholars and activists" (Part 1 Section 2). To utilize the strengths of Vizenor's trickster discourse without destroying stable claims to identity, analysis of Cufe's character must include an awareness of his unique experiential understanding of the world he inhabits as told through the direction of Sterlin Harjo.

Cufe is a young man characterized by quiet introspection; as such, he is much like his father Frankie. Both men are able to bring about the healing of the family unit in their unique ways. As the opening scene jumps back in time to just before Cufe discovers Frankie dead in his chair in the living room, Frankie tells us in voiceover, "Cufe's father never had that much to say but on this day Cufe's father was even quieter than usual." To understand the complexity and filmic significance at work in the ironic first five minutes of this film, audiences must go back over one hundred years into the cultural and filmic history of the early 20th century. The Hollywood film industry has created a problematic lineage of Native American masculinity that

we must try to understand in order to appreciate the intertextuality at play in *Four Sheets to the Wind*.

Frankie is a corpse, but his voice is the first voice we hear. Cufe is his son, but he is the first man we see in motion in the film. Cufe's mannerisms defy the energy of Rabbit, his namesake, but audiences come to learn that his reticence and humor are traits he has inherited from his father. Frankie will be with us throughout the film, speaking of the past, present, and future as all fathers must do from time to time. His continual presence reclaims the filmic gaze from white filmmakers and recasts it through the eyes of a Native Man and a Native corpse. The Gaze, and Screen Theory more broadly, asserts that film can both create and conceal the subject and the subjectivity of its narrative and presentation through the apparent realism of the finished product. Laura Mulvey argues that understanding of the gaze reveals how the male filmmaker sees the subject as captured through the lens. Audiences and filmmakers alike are then able to derive visual pleasure from this vicarious observation. The male protagonist becomes the stand-in for the audience who identifies with him as an ideal self. When the protagonist is understood as a manifestation of the male filmmakers and how they wish to be seen, then a direct transfer of voyeuristic pleasure moves from the director to the audience through the filmic lens (11-13). Admittedly, Screen Theory, and the Gaze, presents their own limitations as tools for unlocking meaning in film, not the least of which is a potentially essentialist and dated critique of what has become an increasingly diverse field of artistic expression. However, one must grant the essential premise that the filmic product is in many ways a manifestation of the vision of the filmmaker that is shared with the viewer. By accepting this premise and then extending Mulvey's critique to include not just men, but white men as they produce and reproduce Native men, both for visual pleasure and sadistic destruction, then it can become a tool to help us unlock

the mechanisms of misrepresentation throughout significant cultural and historical periods in film.

Audiences come to know the Smallhill family as an insider knows them. Both Frankie's corpse and Cufe's role as his son becomes everything the Hollywood film industry never allows the Native American man to become. While Native audiences may be familiar with the subtleties and nuances in this film, non-Native audiences will likely find the complexities of the narrative and the characters difficult to fully appreciate. Hollywood has historically encoded the Native body to represent polarities of a noble/ignoble binary with little room for nuance. Stuart Hall's conception of the encoded/decoded discourse exchange in television can be instructive in our consideration of film: a similar medium of representation in many respects.

For Hall, signification is a process of packaging ideas into a set of meaning laden images and sounds, at least in the case of film and television, which are encoded with intended meaning by the producer and then decoded by the audience. For the audience, Hall argues, there are three degrees of reception: the *dominant*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional* code (Hall 126-127). The filmmaker transmits meaning through the images and sounds of the film that have a preferred—*hegemonic*—meaning, but the audience has the capacity to fully accept, complicate, or outright reject and modify this intended signification. This work seeks to explore the systematic encoding of the Native American male in film and explore the various layers of decoding that are possible in a given situation. As the *dominant-hegemonic position* of the Native American male in film has historically been that of a corpse, a savage, and a predator, the traditional dominant decoding of that image is to accept this representation as both true and as satisfactory justification for Native genocide or subjugation. There are individuals, both in the Native and non-Native communities, who are capable of negotiating with the encoded meaning by

acknowledging that this image of the Native male is true in some cases, but not all. However, to produce the oppositional encoding of the filmic text the audience must be able to understand the film as it was intended and read each encoding against this intended grain without ignoring the constructed nature of the filmic image in practice.

Unfortunately, after over a century of white filmmakers encoding a preferred vision of Natives in the noble/ignoble binary, the dominant hegemonic position has proven not only pervasive but also resilient, even in light of effective counter narratives. The corpse/savage/rapist images are so effective that they have become simulacra to many audiences and filmmakers, both Natives and non-Natives. Only through careful contrapuntal readings of films from the past, can audiences find and demand the oppositional code and resist repeated filmic re-colonization and erasure.

Edward Said's exploration of Orientalism as a theory of understanding the production of the image and idea of the Eastern world by its colonizers in the West is well-covered territory. However, his conception of the contrapuntal reading of a cultural text is instructive here as a means of articulating further the process by which Hall's *oppositional decoding* can occur. Contrapuntal readings of texts and contrapuntal analysis of film is the process of seeing the position of the colonizer and the colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed, the hegemonic and the marginal in all texts to seek out nuance and complexity. The goal of contrapuntal readings is not merely to replace negative images with positive images, nor is it to seek out the agents of destruction for no other purpose than to call out injustice. This work advances Said's assertion that, "looking at the different experiences contrapuntally" can reveal "an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility." This multi-historical reading allows for an interpretation "altogether more rewarding

than the denunciations of the past, the expressions of regret for its having ended, or--even more wasteful because violent and far too easy and attractive--the hostility between Western and non-Western cultures that leads to crises” (*Culture and Imperialism* 18-19). *Four Sheets to the Wind* is not the answer to *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, but part of the growing discourse in Native American masculine representation. Understanding the history of this representation and employing that historical knowledge can alter the encoding and the decoding of future films about Native men.

Sometimes to go forward, we have to look back at where we have been. The final chapter of this work will explore the 2013 film *Winter in the Blood*, which reminds us that sometimes it is necessary to “lean into the wind to stand straight.” We will look directly at the missteps of the past in an effort to frame the filmic vision of the future appropriately. This chapter will take us back to the silent era and the precursors to the Classical Hollywood aesthetic with an emphasis on the 1913 silent film *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*. This early period established the trope of the Native American male as a corpse who is dehumanized and emasculated. By the mid-1920s with such films as *The Vanishing American* (1925), this corpse trope will evolve into a more sympathetic, yet largely one-dimensional figure. By the time we escape the Classical Hollywood treatment of the Native American male in *Little Big Man* (1970), we can start to see the corpse reawakened and his character imbued with new life and complexity, yet the unfortunate assumption is that he must still die and fade into the past. Finally, as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after over a century of misrepresentation, Native American filmmakers, like Sterlin Harjo in his film *Four Sheets to the Wind*, are able to revitalize the Native male. The Native American death can have renewed purpose and give him

back his tribally situated masculinity more representative of the lived experiences of contemporary Native men.

As a trope, the corpse is a recurring visual image that carries with it the weight of all its predecessors. Each new film image of the corpse contributes to the solidification of the corpse image to the point of producing a simulacrum of the Native American male body as perpetually dead. To this end, filmmakers in the early days of the Hollywood film industry only needed to present a Native American body on screen, often in a long shot on a hillside silhouetted by the sun, or in the deep shadows of the forest, to fill the viewer both with a sense of dread at the impending violence. The audience can anticipate a cathartic release as the white protagonist invariably conquers this symbol of savage terror. Examples of this dominant encoding are the two Native men wrapped in blankets standing in the background as the young girls arrive at the camp in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913); the arrival of Magua outside Fort Edward, in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920); and perhaps most iconically in *Stagecoach* (1939), with Geronimo's arrival on screen. In each instance, the Native is encoded as a threat before he has taken any negative or aggressive actions. Audiences are certain of his role in the film and can only hope that he dies before the white characters come to harm.

The corpse image is encoded as an abject component of human society. It is a reminder of all that constitutes life, while at the same time calling attention to each person's unavoidable mortality. The corpse reveals that which no human wishes to face: their own death. Through the reaction to the corpse, what Julia Kristeva has characterized as the ultimate in abject imagery, filmmakers can manipulate the audience's fear and anxiety. Kristeva writes, "Corpses *show* me what I thrust aside in order to live" (3). When the corpse begins as a sympathetic character, filmmakers can encode the corpse with a sense of loss as it reminds us of our own

vulnerability. Yet, when the corpse begins as a Native American man—horrific and savage—prior to his death, the filmmakers can encode the corpse with a sense of justice and catharsis. It becomes a physical representation of what we seek to cast off in our living world. Judith Butler argues that “the abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (*Bodies That Matter* Introduction). The Native corpse defines the Native male and his associated masculinity as abject. Additionally, and necessarily, the Native male corpse defines the white male as the preferred subject position and his masculinity as ideal when contrasted with the abject Native male. The Native male, through his lived savagery on screen stands to represent all that threatens the visions of white civilized society and racial purity. His repeated filmic death is a symbolic victory of civilization over primitive savagery.

Furthermore, the use of the Native corpse on screen continued to reaffirm the hegemonic position of white racial superiority more broadly. Just as the white audiences wanted a romantic view of their past and a morally sound rejection of miscegenation, they also needed a narrative that could unambiguously confirm the inevitable triumph of white culture over Native culture. Since the early 20th century was in a state of increased cultural and industrial production along with urbanization and technical innovation, the film industry could capitalize on this obvious confirmation of Manifest Destiny and the moral justification of westward expansion. Natives then had to represent a clearly primitive existence that was less civilized than white American culture, while simultaneously opposing assimilation. When juxtaposed together, images of white society and Native society had to be a clear dichotomy of harmony/chaos, progress/stagnation, and civility/savagery. With each of these motions, the position of the Native

American body could clearly represent all that was dangerous and untamed of westward expansion and minority races at the time. As such, the inevitable death of the Native American became unambiguously abject.

The Native is just human enough to elicit a biological connection with the white audiences, but savage and dangerous enough to die without sympathy. In many cases, the film's imagery serves to purify any natural revulsion at the loss of human life with the death of a Native by emphasizing feelings of elation for the survival of the superior white settlers. In rare cases, the audience may lament the loss of the purity and natural spirituality of the Native, but rarely could an audience develop any significant sympathy for the loss of a Native as a human being. The image of the Native corpse was horrific in its abject quality, but that horror served to increase feelings of terror at the thought of the same fate reaching the white settlers. Additionally, filmmakers encoded the often "clean" death of the Native as a morally justified defense against rape, mutilation, and savagery.

The effects of this continual presentation of the Native corpse were many. For non-Native audiences at this time, this abject image served as a cathartic tool for successful resolution with the violence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, the repeated portrayal of Native Americans as abject corpses was inconsistent with the reality of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or any decades since. For the Classical Hollywood period, this presentation, coupled with removal policies and the isolation of the vast majority of Native Americans to localized regions or reservations resulted in a skewed and self-perpetuating image of the Native American as *vanished*. Furthermore, with a dearth of progressive Native American images on screen to demonstrate the capacity for Natives to transition successfully into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, be it urban or rural, tribal, or mainstream society, white audiences could easily begin to see this filmic representation as reality. As such, the



insertion of this assumed reality into federal policy, public schools, and successive films would lead to a solidification of this image as hyperreal: more real than reality.

Jean Baudrillard has repeatedly explored this notion of reality simulation. He writes: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (3). For Baudrillard, and for Slavoj Žižek as we will see later, the simulacrum is a particular form of representation that becomes so pervasive and ubiquitous that it has the capacity to supersede its antecedent or even become a representation of a reality that never existed. Once created and employed through the white male gaze, the subject position of the Native American became whatever the hegemony deemed appropriate, regularly contributing to the dominant White Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemonic paradigm of the time.

It is important to note here that this image of the Native American male corpse finds its origins in the very real history of violence and genocidal policies of westward expansion and American colonization. The reality of the death of the Native American male is not consistent with the perpetuation of the Native American corpse as seen in dime novels, paintings, and later in films. It is unlikely that any of the producers of the films in question here were actually at the sites of the death they depicted in their films, nor were they likely pulling from reliable or accurate historical sources to inform their projects. They are not reproducing the image of any real corpse. They are reproducing the idea of violence as represented by the Native American male body. They can then pacify this violence with the death of that body.

In an interesting mix of technology, politics, and historical development, the American film industry gained its initial traction at the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While technology continues to evolve in the film industry, a new era of filmmaking sees filmic possibilities reach

unprecedented heights. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the silent film era was still developing many of its narrative techniques. Sound-film would take several decades to achieve financial viability, and the industry still lacked a universal system of distribution where each film company could expect consistent exposure of their films to a wide audience. During the teens, directors such as D.W. Griffith, produced hundreds of films leading to the evolution of the Classical Hollywood narrative style that would dominate the industry for decades. Without the use of sound for dialogue and with a relatively new medium and mode of representation, the directors relied on efficient narrative devices that could advance the story with little additional exposition. This era would see the expansion of several visual tropes and stereotypical images that helped an often-constrained director develop the story in as little as a few frames.

Politically and culturally, the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century was still a turbulent period between Native Nations and the Federal Government. Several tribes still warred with pioneers and federal troops, and land disputes were just as contentious. Additionally, some of the survivors of the Great Plains Wars and other similar conflicts were still alive during this period. America had already “won” the West, but Natives still felt the wounds of the conflicts required for this “victory.” The American public was in need of a narrative that allowed them to come to terms with their recent violent past and provide a level of catharsis similar to the national pride experienced at the end of WWI. This cultural climate was perfect for the production of such images as the noble/ignoble savage and in the case of this chapter, the Native American corpse. As the Native characters, often played by white actors in redface, entered the scene in some recognizable and often inaccurate image of the Native American male, his presence would signal the coming of danger for the film's white characters.

The films of this period needed to employ the Native American male presence for the film's protagonist in some meaningful way. These films' plots center on the capacity of the pioneers, explorers, and soldiers to overcome this danger. This required blood and death. This required a corpse to silence the threat of resistance to progress while signaling the end of an era with a visual justification for a new one. In effect, Hollywood created not only the commodified Native body that could be reproduced as needed, but in creating this living commodity they also created an endless supply of corpses for narrative and financial purposes. Hollywood became an industry of death for the Native American body and the consuming audience was insatiable. Within a few years of this trope's development, directors and film producers no longer needed to establish any validity for their corpse image. Instead, by the mid-to-late teens, the film industry was reproducing images of images so far removed from any origins of actual Native deaths that they became a self-replicating hyperreal representation.

In order to create an efficient visual image, Hollywood filmmakers needed the corpse to have certain consistent characteristics. Certainly, the corpse had to first resemble Native Americans, but not necessarily any real Native Americans; rather, a type of Native that could fit into the narrative image. The Native had to be dangerous, scary, and identifiable with filmic efficiency. He had to be a stereotype recognizable at a glance or interpellated by the white characters. He promised death to the white men and rape for the white women. A simple call out as "Cheyenne", "Apache", "Comanche", or similar plains tribes, or the more reductive, "Bucks", "Injuns", "Savages", recalled all the associated dangers of crossing the Mississippi. Once the image or interpellation establishes the dangers associated with the object visually or verbally for the viewing audience, the film narrative possessed the requisite tension of the story of westward expansion. Yet, the early films took this reduction a step further by

deliberate exclusion. In order to solidify the Native corpse as wholly abject in early films, it was also necessary to avoid any humanization of the Native body before the body could become a corpse. As we will see in films like *Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, the less the audience knows about the Natives the less they care about them. Furthermore, the sharper the Natives contrast with the civilization and humanity of the white characters, the more their death can provide an unambiguous catharsis in the triumph and survival of the white settlers.

Later, films would recognize the limitations of such erasure of the humanization of the Native American as it ultimately hinders the tension in longer films. They began to understand that the more humanity they gave the Native, the more sinister and dangerous his motives could become. Films such as *The Vanishing American* would try to recover the full humanity of the Native American and provide a more sympathetic treatment of them on screen. Unfortunately, such attempts at recovery only served to enhance the vanishing American myth and add even more layers of erasure. In the case of *The Vanishing American*, the Natives no longer serve as a threat to a sympathetic expansion. The film reverses many of the tropes of the previous decade by presenting the white reservation agents as the rapists, murderers, savages, and thieves. However, even with this change, the film still leaves audiences with the same message as *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*; the Native corpse is the only viable means for American and white progress. *The Vanishing American* offers a more overt presentation of the Native death, including the lingering shots of Nophaie's death scene, but director George B. Seitz denies the audience the chance to sympathize with a fully realized 1925 Native American. Instead, the film's setting and conclusion maintains the historically locked position of the Native American.

We have considered some of the possible motives for the use of the Native corpse. The early film industry was in a constant state of experimentation and financial

fluctuation. Technology, economics, and distribution likely provided the strongest points of motivation in the film industry in the early days of Classic Hollywood. Much like today, financial viability was the primary motivating factor for writers and directors. The lack of authenticity in any tribal representation was likely a combination of ignorance on the part of the writers and a lack of time and funding to “get it right.” Additionally, the audiences in the early decades seemed insatiable and the more simplistic the narrative, the easier it would be to sell to the audience and thereby ensure robust ticket sales. Hollywood has always been in the business of creating audiences, and the audience wanted white exceptionalism regardless of any resulting Native erasure.

Though some early filmmakers attempted to present a more sympathetic Native character for audiences, most only succeeded in providing sympathy for their erasure. Ultimately, these sympathetic film’s “aura of romantic tragedy is fundamental to maintaining the noble/ignoble savage and savage/civilized binaries coded into the structure” (Marubbio 36).<sup>9</sup> There are few surviving examples that took deliberate effort to recast the Native historically as a viable culture or to suggest that they could, and indeed did, survive into the contemporary setting of American urban culture. However, the rare exception does little to disrupt the power of the dominant standard, and as we will see throughout this work, such efforts were simply absorbed into the hegemonic structure and repackaged where necessary. Undoubtedly, repeated exposure to any such narrative would have called to question all the original assumptions of earlier films, and the white audiences would have to come to terms with their failed romantic past. Admitting that the tribes survived their attempted genocide meant that the white audiences would have to admit to

---

<sup>9</sup> M. Elise Marubbio refers to these types of films as “helper films” and notes that James Young Deer and some of D. W. Griffith’s works are notable examples, with Young Deer successfully producing a number of complex Native portrayals.

their nation's historical actions. Public policy in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflected this agenda as several federal acts had the specific goal of assimilating Natives into a non-Native world as quickly as possible.

These films had a particular goal of confirming a romantic view of America's past. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century audiences were still reeling from the events at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were keenly aware of their own urbanization and industrialization and therefore felt a need for reconnection with a lost natural world. Native Americans served the purpose of providing that romantic conception of good/evil. Yet, when necessary, filmmakers employed Natives to recall a time of natural purity. Regardless of how the Native was presented during this period, the only consistency was the inevitable survival of the white settlers by the end of the film once they had appropriated the best that the Native had to offer, be it land, resources, or spiritual purity.

For Native communities, this image produced a doubly problematic impact. White audiences and the white community at-large began to form their own conceptions of the Native subject position and push this conception onto Natives in public schools and other media representations. The Native audience and community was forced to either assimilate to this new conception or face losing the credibility of their identity outside of their community, which could have serious repercussions with federal policy. In essence, their own identity as 20<sup>th</sup> century Native Americans was not as authentic as what the white audiences had come to expect. However, the persistence of this type of misconception well into the information age is telling of the impact such presentations had on the formation of Native American identity with non-Native audiences.

As Natives faced this outward conflict of representation, they began to develop a sense of fractured identity when interpellated by white popular culture. They could either become what

the white audiences and American popular culture said they were, which was unfortunately a 19<sup>th</sup> century stereotype that no longer existed, or they could reject their own identity in favor of the more viable assimilated white culture. Sherman Alexie, echoing a sentiment shared by many Native American writers and filmmakers, articulates this point clearly with his claim that when he was a child, he did not want to play an Indian because the Indians always lost (“Sherman Alexie Interview”). Indeed, Hollywood's presentation of Natives well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not a pleasing representation of Natives, and as such the options of identifying with the filmic image and facing the supposed truth of their own justifiable erasure or identifying with the white settlers was harmful for the Native viewer. Many Native consumers of film had the phenotypical characteristics of the Natives on screen and thus decoded their filmic mirrors as savage, dangerous, and ultimately dead. Internally however, Native audiences may have decoded their more positive characteristics of bravery, industriousness, and pride as inherently white. This tension was a continual confirmation of the Frederick Jackson Turner view that Native life on the frontier had ended. As such, it was time to advance Richard H. Pratt’s infamous call to “kill the Indian and save the man.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Wholly Abject Corpse**

*The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913) and *The Vanishing American* (1925), when viewed under the dominant code reveals the white audience’s appetite for Native erasure through its treatment of the corpse image. A contrapuntal viewing of the two films can also reveal the mechanism of cultural erasure of 20<sup>th</sup> century Natives. These films demonstrate how film can overtly declare the physical death of an entire race, and how film can subtly suggest the

---

<sup>10</sup> Turner argued that the American frontier was built on the availability of free land once the existing Indian population was culled or assimilated. Pratt adds to this contention with the desire to save the life of the Indian but destroying all that is recognizable in him that is Indian. As such, the physical destruction and cultural assimilation was a necessary component to the inevitable prosperity of America as a nation.

necessary and righteous destruction of a culture. Resistance to this hegemonic encoding of Native Americans as a vanished race has struggled to find popular acceptance outside of Native communities. Fortunately, film can also serve as a revitalizing force for marginalized groups as we will see in the next chapter.

Produced in 1913, *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* is an early example of Natives in film. While there are many films that fall into this category at this time, *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* is unique in that it took the Native Savage stereotype to extreme levels of representation. The film is primarily a survival narrative set in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century following the Civil War. The film follows two conflicting narratives of two young orphan girls moving west to live with their pioneering uncle on a ranch and an unnamed Native tribe that lives near the white settlement. When the girls arrive in the settlement, their presence sparks a conflict between the otherwise peaceful and industrious whites and the perpetually aggressive Natives. When one of the white settlers kills one of the Natives, the film moves towards a climactic battle between the Natives and the whites. Through this formulaic plot, the film serves as a model for many similar films during this period. The whites represent the validity and difficulty of Manifest Destiny and westward expansion of Euro-Americans, and the Natives come to represent the untamed and savage frontier. While famine, disease, infighting, and even natural predators were constant threats to settlers of the West, these threats were random. The Native was a threat with a small measure of agency and an abundance of abhorrent violence.

The film opens with two young and innocent white girls traveling to stay with their uncle on a ranch following the death of their parents. At the three-minute mark into the film, we see our first glimpse of Dir. D.W. Griffith's take on Natives as the carriage pulls into the township near the ranch. As the white passengers, including the two orphan girls exit the carriage, two



silent Native men huddle close to the whites. They wear blankets with feathers sticking out of their hair. The arrival appears to be joyous, but the Natives, in a shoddy bit of foreshadowing, stand just outside of the activities in silent observation, as though Griffith is already aware of the proper place of the Natives at this time. They are there as part of the civilized landscape, but as silent and unnoticed by the settlers as the buildings and sagebrush around them. As the scene ends, a title card appears telling us that along with the orphans, an infant child arrives in the camp. In a busy medium shot, the child and its mother are met with much adulation, but as they move out of frame, the camera remains steady, and the two Natives are seen fully for the first time in a lingering longshot. Even in this isolated screen time, they are not given life. They pull the excitement from the scene.

As the orphans arrive at the ranch house where their uncle lives and works, they are greeted warmly, and the scene resonates with excitement, but when the orphan girls reveal that they have two puppies with them, the ranch boss refuses to allow the dogs to stay indoors. There is a clear division between the human and the natural world as the animals are to be kept separate from the civilized and enclosed space of the house. This scene ends with the title card “The Dog Feast Sunka Alawan ‘Wayatamin Sunka E Ya E-E Yo’ (May you eat dog and live long)”. This title card signals the cut to the Native encampment where we see various actors in loincloth and war bonnets “dancing” around a campfire with no real rhythm or pattern. Through the transition of the dogs being cast out of the house, and the shift to the Native encampment following a title card indicating a feast of dog meat, the film positions the Natives as socially equal to the dogs. They are given no communication or social interaction that represents what 1913 America might consider civilized, and the association with the adorable puppies and the feast suggest they are not even civilized enough to know the difference between pets and livestock.

The next scene pairing shows the young girls helping the men of the camp prepare for sleep by reciting a prayer and crawling into bed. This scene is juxtaposed to the next cut scene of the Natives, who have completed their feast and are now laying around the camp, seemingly wherever their hedonistic feasting put them. There is no indication of prayer, ritual, or even order to their sleeping arrangements. In fact, they appear almost drunk from the feast. The next few scenes set the conflict that will lead to the film's climax.

As the puppies are kept outside overnight, the orphan girls are worried for their safety, and naturally the Native chief's son and companion are hungry having missed the "Dog Feast," so they are wandering in the woods nearby, apparently drunk. They find the puppies wandering in the woods and prepare to eat them. One of the men actually holds one of the dogs with his teeth while making stabbing motions at the other dog with his knife. Predictably, the oldest orphan girl, Sally, arrives to see this display. Without any apparent apprehension, she rushes in, pushes the fully-grown Native man to the ground, and grabs her puppies. The chief's son grabs her, but her uncle, having followed her into the woods, shoots the Native without hesitation.

By this point, the narrative has fully established its conflict between the Natives, who must now retaliate for the death of the chief's son, and the settlers who must protect themselves and their innocents against the dangerous Natives. To read contrapuntally, it is important to take careful stock of the characterization of the Natives at this point. As mentioned, they receive little screen time and almost no voice. They are ignored by the white settlers and appear on screen as little more than children or wild animals. As the film presents them as animals at best, and subhuman at worst, it allows the audience to view them more as a natural force rather than a human threat. All the civilization and humanity that the white settlers are given: homes, family, communication, prayer, etc., are denied to the Natives. This is a critical part of encoding the

Vanishing American myth as it suggests that even the most rudimentary civilization, such as a frontier settlement, is more advanced than an established Native settlement. Such a slow progression of social and civil development must naturally give way to the superior advances of the Euro-American expansion into the west.

The imagery of this film is particularly telling in its portrayal and perception of the Native at this time. Initially, this film, and those like it, assumed a non-Native audience and as such, the process of abjection was one of rejecting the Native Other and re-affirming the superiority of the Euro-American self. This is evident in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*'s insistence on the association between the Natives and the dogs. In this sense the Native tribe is unambiguously encoded as Other, and the audiences' process of casting off any connection to that entity is much easier. However, the psychological payoff will not be as rewarding for non-Natives, yet it remains just as damaging for Native audiences. The Natives are clearly men, with masculine features, walking upright and possessing all the physical characteristics of humans, but their social and civil behavior is encoded as abject. When the Chief's son is killed, the settlers, after a brief gunfight, return to the ranch and return to life as normal. Sally, having recovered the puppies seems completely unconcerned by the sudden gunfire and death of the Native man. Indeed, the entire ranch house is mostly concerned with the trouble the dogs have caused.

As life returns to normal and Sally tries to arrange for the protection of her puppies from further harm, the Natives are able to recover the body of the Chief's son, in what would be the only attempt at civilizing the Natives in this film. There is a brief exchange in camp where the Natives are still lying about from the drunken feast the night before. The Chief, who was just lying in the dirt, awakens to find his son dead. His anguish, demonstrated by hyperbolic displays

of pantomimed grief, arouse the Natives and they begin an impromptu “war dance.” The title card reads, “The death of the Chieftain’s son fans the ever-ready spark of hatred for revenge.” Here the film plays into the lingering association with unbridled aggression between the Natives and Euro-American expansion. By this point in the film, the settlers and ranchers have been shown to be peaceful and industrious with a clear appreciation for family and civility, while the Natives are encoded as little more than animalistic savages who are just waiting for a reason to resort to barbarism.

The narrative progresses into the full-scale attack on the settlers by the Natives. It is clear by this point that the settlers are victims of undeserved savagery. The imagery of the Native’s attack on the outpost is savage and swift. The combat is mostly melee with a few instances of women under attack. The film is barely at the halfway mark and more or less devolves into a continuous battle sequence that moves from the town to the ranch. There are three independent sub-plots occurring during this moment: the ranchers defending themselves and sending for help, the mother and father in various places trying to recover their baby, and the townspeople trying to flee from the outpost to the nearby ranch. What we do not see is any sort of distinction between the Natives. There is no consideration for the Chief or any of the brothers, sons, uncles, or fathers, of the fallen Indian that sparked this entire exchange. Indeed, the entire motivation of the Indians is unexplored at this point. In other films, such as *The Searchers* (1956), that will be explored in later chapters, we see similar motions towards a destruction of the male body, which are encoded with purpose and degrees of agency to allow some level of sentiment or understanding for the conflict on display. In *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, the Native’s individual motivation is unsympathetic and disproportionate, so they begin to function as little more than an environmental threat. The only defining feature about the

Natives at this point that separates them from a wild animal is their human biology and their primitive organization.

During the battle, the Natives are savage but ultimately inept. They frequently stop to dismount in order to gain scalps, which only slows down their assault. The baby is featured heavily here as a continual point of contention between the marauding Natives and the besieged settlers. On three different occasions, the settler holding the baby is shot or nearly captured and a Native man goes out of his way to grab the baby. The first of these scenes is particularly disturbing, as the Native man appears ready to dash the child's body into the ground; unfortunately, this scene becomes the inspiration for one of the film's promotional posters. The film will conclude with a rescue of the baby by Sally, and a rescue of the ranch by the cavalry. There is no resolution for the Natives or their murdered tribesman. The ranchers even engage in a bit of a gag where the ranch boss threatens to beat the dogs when he discovers them in the house after the battle, but the other workers persuade him to relent, and he dismisses the whole thing. If only the Native men could have received as much humanity.

Ultimately, the film encoded the Indian as subhuman and motivated only by a hedonistic desire for drink and food while capable of intense brutality. This provides the perfect plot device for a film that wants to demonstrate the perseverance of the brave settlers that "won the west", but it also serves to orient the Native American characters as living only long enough to die. It is clear by the end of the film that whatever threat they might have posed; they were no match for the superior strength of the cavalry. They are dangerous, and they kill several settlers on screen, but no attempt was made to humanize their actions or to humanize their corpses. They are killed and the emphasis shifts back to the settlers.

Under such a dynamic, the body of the Native American male becomes a plot device, a set piece, which only serves to distance the settlers from the Indian's lack of humanity. It is telling that this film juxtaposes the treatment of two puppies to that of the Natives. Yet, it is the preferential and humane treatment the dogs receive, by Sally, her sister, and later the entirety of the ranch, which reveals an unfortunate undercurrent of association between the savage Indian and the potentially domesticated animals. This would play into later narratives, such as *Redskin* (1929) that suggests that one viable alternative to the corpse for the Indian, or one way for it to survive westward expansion is to, like the dogs, learn to live under the authority of the Euro-American settlers. *The Vanishing American* (1925) also explores the possibilities of taming the Savage Indian and producing a domesticated and humanized version of the Indian. Yet, as demonstrated below, the lingering images of abjection are only confirmed and expanded rather than corrected.

### **The Native American Body as a Vanished Relic**

The previous film depicted the Natives as largely nameless and cultureless, resulting in an abject image in its most basic form. There is no emotional attachment to the corpse image of the Natives in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*. There is only a slight feeling of physical revulsion. The emotional energy is directed towards the white settlers. The Native corpse becomes a thing, albeit a repulsive thing. Later films would try to humanize the Native more fully as fascination with the exotic Other grew. *The Vanishing American* (1925) is a film based on the novel by Zane Grey of the same name. This version of the film had a larger production value and running time than the previous film *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913), and as such was able to explore a more nuanced representation of the Native Americans. The film is set in Monument Valley, though the film implies that this geographical location is representative of the

larger Native American landscape. During the opening scenes of the film, this site witnesses several different waves of cultural developments. The film begins early in human history in the region and moves through a series of societies as they rise and fall in that region. The film emphasizes a motion towards a contemporary 1925 society and dismisses any value to racial and cultural history. By the 28-minute mark, nearly the same length as the entirety of *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, the film moves into the historical period that constitutes its main narrative: the early 20th century reservation period.

The main narrative follows the story of Nophaie, a Navajo warrior, and the mythologized savior of the people in the previous tribal iterations earlier in the film. During the main narrative, Nophaie must confront the white BIA officials who are controlling the destiny of Nophaie's people. He is a liminal character torn between his place among his people, in some cases even more traditional and spiritual than the other Navajo on the reservation, while also being more assimilated into the Euro-American culture. Much of the plot is concerned with the white "caretakers" attempting to extort the Navajo out of their horses for personal gain. At one point, the Great War breaks out and Nophaie, along with many of the other able-bodied male Navajo, elect to join the war in an effort to defend their country and prove themselves as "real Americans." Such a motion is less than successful as they encounter derision and further exploitation when they return home from the war. Ultimately, the film is an exploration of the pathway to salvation and long-term survival of the Native American through an allegorical association between the living bodies of the Natives and the passage of their culture and traditions into the past.

The opening title card is taken from Herbert Spencer's quote "We have unmistakable proof that throughout all past time there has been a ceaseless devouring of the weak by the strong

.... a survival of the fittest.” This frames the narrative around an assumed progress of culture as time, technology, and historical events progress. Spencer’s mutation of Darwin’s conception of natural selection was nothing new at the time.<sup>11</sup> During the 1920s, society largely accepted that certain cultural groups were better suited to rise to dominance. Whether we consider the religious connotations of Manifest Destiny or the political ramifications of westward expansion and the resulting Federal/Indian policies, it is clear that by 1925, society as a whole had accepted the validity of expansion and its resulting impact on the development of national identity. For white America, westward expansion worked.

Regardless of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s perception of Social Darwinism including its validity, origins, or benefits, by 1925 America had long since left the Native American man in the past. The days of the tipi and the tomahawk were over. *The Vanishing American*, though attempting to correct some of the blatant racism of previous films such as *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, still follows this trend and becomes one of the more destructive categories of films produced with Natives as their core subject matter. *The Vanishing American* attempts a more sympathetic look at Natives to help society reconcile the guilt of expansion and exploitation with a fabricated notion of inevitable progress. Therefore, framing the film around Spencer’s quote is a deliberate strategy.

The film progresses into a series of shots of various groups moving out of the shadows of Monument Valley and walking into the foreground. These groups change in technological sophistication to indicate a steady passage through time. By the fourth group, the film has

---

<sup>11</sup> John Offer revisits the true influence of Darwin on Spencer’s configuration and offers a more thorough consideration of the connection between Spencer and Darwin, which suggests that Spencer was less interested in pure superiority as a factor of survival, but of mere adaptability. Regardless, the intertitle card used in this film suggests that by 1920, the connection between Spencer and Social Darwinism had already reached popular culture and moved beyond the intentions of either Darwin or perhaps even Spencer.



moved forward in time enough to depict a cliff dwelling society. In the film, this passage takes only a few moments, but the course of time is not specific. The film lingers on the cliff dwellers and shows the viewer some of the culture and social organizations omitted in the earlier shots. Already, the film is giving the Native cultures represented more validity and screen time than what it received in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* and similar films. The film explores the religious society and attempts to recreate some of the spiritual dances and rituals that might have existed in this pre-contact society. If we can ignore the obvious redface, the film appears to be treating the Native culture honestly. Redface, as Michelle H. Raheja notes, is “the cultural and ideological work of playing Indian...closely aligned with the traditional role of the trickster figure” (Chapter 1). As we will see throughout this work and throughout Hollywood’s treatment of Native Americans, the redface regularly disrupts the boundaries of authenticity by suggesting that Nativeness is a mask that can be worn and removed to fit the needs of the narrative. Such practices can later be reclaimed by rejection with an insistence upon Native American parts be cast by Native American actors. However, even such a motion should be cautious of creating a new brand of inter-tribal trickster motions where one tribe’s specificity is replaced with a more pan-Indian sense of Nativeness. We will return to this point in later sections, but for now we must situate the use of redface into the generally repeated filmic practice and explore the film on its own terms. Under these conditions and with the framing of the film around the long passage of time and the Spencer quote, the film is already situating the cultures as part of a cycle of forward progression.

The film cuts to a landscape scene of Monument Valley with a new group of people walking towards the viewer from a distant land. The next title card reads, “The first of the race we now call ‘Indians’ – coming no man knows whence, thirsting for conquest.” There is a brief

cut scene of one of the cliff dwellers, Mog, lazily looking for gems when the new invaders catch him. At this point, we have two different entities that will now battle for supremacy on the still primal landscape of Monument Valley. Though these two entities are completely Native, they are given character and motivation even in the efficient storytelling of silent films at the time. Nophaie is strong with a commanding presence, but the cliff dwellers are already shown to be complacent with their protection and comfort. Thus, we have both hunger for progress and change in the newcomers and a desire for the preservation of an old path in the cliff dwellers. Already we are seeing a narrative sympathetic towards progress that will be essential later in the film's main story arc.

Now the cliff dwellers are preparing to defend themselves against this new threat. This is a spectacular scene with extras charging in from the distance and an ensuing battle at the cliff side. The scale of this scene is reminiscent of Griffith's earlier works such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Eventually Roya, the elder for the cliff dwellers, sees the inevitability of his people's fall and curses Nophaie and his warriors. The title card reads: "May Paya the Father drive you into darkness, as you drive us! May he send a stronger race to grind you in the dust and scatter you through the Four Worlds of Lamentation!" In a brutal finish, the invaders, led by an early incarnation of Nophaie, kill Roya, win the day, and celebrate. Roya's curse is symbolic of the perceived complicities of the Native Americans in their own destruction.

This opening struggle illustrates director Seitz's vision of pre-existing expansion and conquest cycles that the film encodes as predating European conquest. This *tu quoque* persist today as many Americans attempt to downplay Native genocide by suggesting that such actions were also committed by Natives before contact. Certainly, there is some historical accuracy to conquest, war, and the destruction of entire cultures prior to European contact, but here such

images are employed deliberately to encode the oncoming threat of the Europeans sympathetically. After all, if this localized region, and America more broadly, was already under a continual cycle of the creation and destruction of entire peoples, then the film's main narrative arc will have a much less sinister tone. Seitz is encoding the Native American man as accustomed to and even deserving of cultural genocide. Roy's curse is one that will come to fruition later when the Europeans encounter the Natives. The rest of the film is a series of exploitation and conquest, where the "stronger race grinds them into dust."

This period is followed by a time of relative prosperity as "the conquerors dwelt for ages in the land. They raided far and wide. Their numbers grew. They believed no race could be their equal." Yet, the Europeans have finally made their way into the territory. Through this brief glimpse into the Native's encounters with the Spanish, we learn that during this period, they have learned almost nothing of the European technologies, nor do they seem to recognize a horse as another mammal. There is a brief exchange where they try to steal a horse and "tame its fire," but ultimately fail. Seeing their bravest warrior shot down with an impossible shot by García López de Cárdenas, they come forward and prostrate themselves before his clear superiority.

The corpse to this point is encoded differently than those in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*. To this point, the Natives have still largely come onto the screen just long enough to die, but unlike the dehumanized and clearly abject imagery shown in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, this representation is more sympathetic, at least on the surface. Either the Natives are killed off-screen with title cards that reflect the natural passage of time, or they are killed by other Natives in an equally natural progression of war, conquest, and struggle. The Natives have character and complexity far different and more sympathetic than many previous films. Indeed, the fall of the warrior by Cárdenas' musket is the first death presented of a Native by a non-Native in the

film. Furthermore, this death is only after a moment of bravery and near triumph. The death also happens off-screen, and we never see the corpse. The most abject corpse image we have seen to this point in the film is the death of Roy. His death scene shows his killers casting his body down from the cliffs onto the shoulders of the massing warriors below.

After the fall of the Natives to the Spanish, the film cuts to another title card to indicate another long passage of time: “So began the conquest of the Indian. It was three hundred years later that the final chapter opened. The Indians had fought the Spaniards for three centuries. They had defied the whole United States Army for twenty years. A master plainsman, Kit Carson, was sent at last to quiet the country for all time.” At this point, the film suggests that even though the Natives have battled the Spaniards and other Europeans for over three hundred years, they have not progressed much in terms of technology, culture, and military strength. As such, Kit Carson attempts to reason with them, but the Natives ignore his efforts, forcing a conflict with the cavalry.

Yet again, the film continues its narrative of the inevitable passage of time and the conquest of the inferior race to the superior force. This point is punctuated by Carson’s declarations: “It is foolish for you to oppose the Government as it is for that goat – to butt against the tree to which it is tied! Furthermore, I want you to know that the Great Father at Washington promises that you shall live here in these canyons that you love, forever. We will help you to live as white men live. We will teach you to farm, to turn the desert into green fields.” Under such a declaration, the Natives would be foolish to reject what is clearly an offer to improve the Native’s way of life. Yet, Seitz, working with Grey’s source material, is clearly allowing the viewer to see these declarations in light of the reality that the film reveals later. There is no attempt to hide the subterfuge and eventual broken treaties from the audience. When the Natives

agree to the terms, the title cards read: “Thus Kit Carson promised...but within three years his lips were stilled forever. To those who followed him, the Indians were but incumbrances [sic] to the soil, to be cleared away with the sage brush and the cactus.” Under this carefully chosen dialogue, the white viewers can deny any culpability from themselves, for there were those like Carson who had the best of intentions, but these intentions were untenable against the force of Washington’s greed.

This period concludes when the film advances to the early 20th century on the Navajo reservation. The introductory title card to this phase of the film reads, “By the opening of the twentieth century, the Indians had been forced backward, into a desert country called by courtesy, a “reservation” – with one narrow strip of fertile fields, barely sufficient to provide corn for the winter.” The film is making some of the rhetorical moves displayed later in the 60s and 70s calling out the injustices done to the Natives, but at each turn, the film continues to slide back into projecting sympathy rather than showing survivance. This is still a film about Natives for non-Natives; a film made to ease into some troubling truths but not take any real chances with the subject matter.

The 1920s were a turbulent and radical period in American history. Following the end of World War I, the U.S. moved into a period of growing patriotism and economic prosperity. The beginning of the decade experienced a national fervor of exceptionalism. Indeed, this was a period rife with potential for progress towards a new destiny. The U.S. soldiers, including many Native Americans, had distinguished themselves in the first truly global contest, leading to a social paradigm that could have welcomed a renewal in favorable Federal/Indian policy. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case.

Though the beginning of the decade promised change and progress, the Federal/Indian relations remained strained. At this time, many Native Americans still did not have full citizenship rights, and there were motions to rectifying this problem. Though there were many prominent Native leaders with strong political influence and acumen in Washington, there was not yet a clear consensus on either side as to how to proceed. Treaties and reservation rights were tenuous and highly contested. Non-Natives openly questioned sovereignty, independence, identity, and citizenship. This would ultimately lead to a series of legislation that would change the face of Federal/Indian policy forever, including the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. While much of the U.S. was moving into cities and becoming increasingly urbanized, some of the reservation lands as well as those in Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) were still facing direct resistance among non-Natives. Between the Federal/Indian policy, invigorated patriotism, and continued discord among whites and non-whites, the 1920s were a tumultuous period. This allowed for works like Zane Grey's novel, once altered enough to suit the larger public sensibilities at the time, to find an audience.

Yet, despite the era's potential for change, it seems as though the emphasis on patriotism and national identity prevented historical accuracy. As noted above, the opening 30 minutes of the film is a montage of images dedicated to establishing the premise of the film's primary plot development. The depiction of the Natives during the cliff dwelling period is the most accurate and sympathetic representation of the film's entire narrative. Unfortunately, this period was brief and did not include any of the film's central cast. This is the only period in the film that shows the Indian's capacity for cultural and technological advancement without European influences. Additionally, with the juxtaposition of the zealous Roya and the lazy Mog in the cliff

dwelling scenes the film moves away from the dehumanizing aspects of previous films and works to show a more nuanced representation of Indian life outside of European influence.

*The Vanishing American* offers several key scenes to help understand the filmic representation of the corpse during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, *The Vanishing American* does take some steps to humanize the Native before reducing him to a corpse. One of the earliest examples we see of this is the death of Roya who is defeated by our first incarnation of Nophaie. Prior to his death scene he is shown to reject the lazy habits of his people, personified by Mog, and motivate them to return to a more spiritual and industrious state. The suggestion here is clear. The cliff dwellers are now in a state of lethargy spawned by complacency earned through technology. They have achieved a level of splendor that satisfies their basic needs. They are arrested in their cultural and technological development. Roya, seeing this degradation of the once innovative tribe, calls for a change. This change comes too late as a more aggressive and industrious tribal group, led by an early Nophaie, conquers the cliff dwellers. This early Nophaie is strong, his people are mobile and hungry for conquest, and his actions are in a way heroic. He is leading his people to victory.

Under this construction, the inevitable fall of Roya at the hands of Nophaie and his people seems not only inevitable but also sympathetic. Roya is decoded as a leader who is frustrated with the poor work ethic and spirituality of his people. Roya, in this scene embodies a very American ideal of propriety. If his people had maintained the same fervor of spirit and work, it is implied they would have been able to hold off the invaders. Roya's death then is an example of the tragic consequences of his people's inability to progress. His final moment on screen is a long shot with spears rising up in the air around his elevated and prone body. He is

physically punctured by the technologies of progress. His body then becomes the final symbol of the cliff dweller's inevitable doom.

The viewer decodes in Roy a the validity of the fall of the Native. The Native, through Roy here, does not deserve to thrive if the Native is unable to progress. The validity of progress is evident in the development of cities and urban environments, advancements in technology from the industrial age, and the power of capitalism. Indeed, the very film and theater house in which this film was viewed was further validation of westward expansion. Such advancements would not be possible if society was to become like Mog—lethargic and complacent—and any leader, such as Roy, who cannot motivate his people properly towards such progress is unfit to rule. Their death then becomes the death of our own tendency towards leisure and pleasure at the cost of industry and progress. Those features of the self must be cast off in favor of a more appropriate and American ideal.

Later in the film, we will see another demonstration of the corpse in the death of the film's protagonist, Nophaie, here played by Richard Dix. This latter Nophaie is different from the conquering version that overthrew Roy and the cliff dwellers. This Nophaie is presented as the ideal Native as conceived by Pratt. He is a liminal figure moving towards the salvation of the colonized self at the cost of the Native self. While there are several scenes in the film of children attending school taught by a white woman and learning to appreciate white America, Nophaie is the transitional character that represents an existing Native quality that must find salvation through Christ and assimilation. The children attending school are encoded with the promise of the inevitable assimilation of all Natives under an obviously superior white education system. However, Nophaie represents that moment of tension between traditional Native values and 1925 American values.



As the film progresses through the plot elements outlined above, we come to see Nophaie as a clearly sympathetic Native who not only cares for his local community, as any good American would, but also understands the validity of the American and Christian ideology. There are several scenes suggesting a courtship between Nophaie and Marian, where he expresses an interest to understand the Christian bible. Through this exchange and his willingness to try to reason with the white Agents on the reservation, Nophaie reflects the need for assimilation into an American social structure. Federal Agent Booker, as the primary villain, becomes the negative focal point allowing the film to encode the system as benevolent and the individual as corrupt.

During World War I, Nophaie and his companions are quick to join the military as a way of legitimizing their place as Americans. Though they were defending the same federal government that had robbed them of their lands and violated many of their treaties, they were also protecting their own lands. Much like *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, this film also values animals more than it does the Natives. When Captain Ramsdell arrives at the reservation, he is after horses not men. It never occurs to him to ask the Natives to join the fight. He instead asks that they offer the only thing they have of value: their horses. Yet, when Marian encourages Nophaie to provide the horses, she explains that the war is about Americans, and he too is an American. Nophaie takes this proclamation to heart. The title cards during this sequence reads:

MARIAN. Oh, I know – you have been unjustly treated. But Booker and his men did that – not the Government. This is still your country. You are an American as much as any of us.

NOPHAIE. American – me!

MARIAN. Yes, Nophaie! And this is a war for freedom, for the right. For oppressed people everywhere. Out of it will grow a new order ... a new justice...

Later, after Nophaie brings in the horses as promised, he adds.

NOPHAIE. More, too. Since we are Americans, we go fight. Maybe if we fight ... maybe if we die...our country will deal fairly with our people.

The film positions Nophaie as a transitional figure that is a Native becoming conscious of his American identity. This is the moment where the Native Corpse trope could give way to a progressive and enduring Native male survivance trope, yet Hollywood is not yet ready to make this transition. Though WWI certainly did claim many lives of Native American men, this film will not grant Nophaie a soldier's death. Instead, Nophaie and this culture must die on American soil, as a symbol of American progress. The corpse trope is not simply a matter of reflecting on the death of Native men; rather, it is an insistence on the necessity of this death in order for America as an idea to prosper.

The film utilizes character archetypes in order to reflect complex social systems onto a select group of characters. While this does allow the film to tighten the narrative and give the audience a clear set of decoding positions, it denies the complexity of the social decline of the Native male under American federal policy. We see this most prominently in Federal Agent Booker and his cronies as representations of the corrupt government. Through Wilson, Marian, and to a certain extent Halliday, the viewer is able to imagine a successful and prosperous reservation were it not for Agent Booker's greed and corruption. Through Nophaie, the viewer is able to see the potential for prosperity under a wise Navajo leader if it was not for the unsophisticated actions of the rest of the tribe. Audiences can despise Agent Booker and his actions, and cheer for Nophaie and his intellectual and spiritual superiority. Fortunately, director Seitz reminds us that not all white men are like Agent Booker. Unfortunately, the film offers no fully realized Native success story. Even Nophaie's narrative serves to confirm the title's message.

Just as Nophaie represents the ideal Indian; intelligent, calm, and prepared for assimilation, his death represents the inevitability of such characters. For *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, and other such examples of the corpse, the Indian's death is equivalent to a subhuman and barely abject corpse image. Here, Nophaie is indeed humanized into an idealized Native, making his death all the more abject. The viewer is meant to regret the loss of Nophaie and his potentiality. After he is accidentally shot by one of his own tribesmen, we are given a long take of Nophaie's death in Marian's arms as she pulls the Bible she had given him earlier in the film from his vest. In his dying moments, Nophaie calls the Indian elders to him and declares: "It grows dark....dark. But through....a veil....I seem to see our people....coming....home." They respond: "Nophaie dies....and the dying speak true words." When Nophaie asks Marian to read to him as he dies, she opens the Bible to the passage from Mathew 40, "He that receiveth you receiveth me; and he that receiveth me, receiveth him that sent me." Nophaie says that now he understands the words of the Bible and dies.

This is the most overt display of the Native corpse yet in our discussion. Roy's death was more brutal perhaps, but the imagery was somewhat muted by the camera angle and distance from the body. Here the death is more personal. Nophaie is given more life, allowing the subsequent abjection of his corpse to be all the more repulsive. The revulsion at his death is transferred to the primitive actions that caused it. This climax should solidify the sympathetic theme of the film, but instead it serves to erase the Indian identity from the scene.

Sean Teuton suggests that such a scene represents a historic truth: tragic attempts at assimilation. When introducing early events that lead to the rise of Red Power, Teuton states that "We need a way to distinguish between cultural narratives that provide assessments of colonialism or protect human worth and narratives that condone imperialism or allow racist

domination” (Introduction). Teuton argues that experiential knowledge is a tool that can either aid or hinder nuanced cultural understanding. Without proper education, historically accurate and honest discussion, and popular narratives that face the cold truth of the past, audiences will not have the proper tools to make these distinctions. Natives will have the experiential knowledge, but they must still resolve the tension between that experiential knowledge and Hollywood’s encoding of them in film. As Teuton insists, “Nations are brutally conquered, but the domination of the people occurs within the person, in a slow erosion of one’s sense of self-worth” (Introduction). Yet, where in this film, or indeed 1925 American consciousness can the audience come to understand that Nophaie’s assimilation was an erosion of his identity? Audiences must develop the tools to decode this film contrapuntally.

Each example in the film of Nophaie wrestling with his own Navajo traditions versus the dominant white culture would seem to reflect a reality that faced many Native Americans during the turn to the 20th century. However, the context for the scene denies the viewer the chance to make an informed choice of one side over the other. It denies agency of sympathy. The film is careful at several turns to suggest that the most obvious motion for the Native American is, as the title suggests, to vanish into the past. In this scene, we see Nophaie dying in the arms of the white woman that he loves. He was killed protecting her and the rest of the white families, including Agent Booker, from his own tribesmen. His death allows any potential threat of miscegenation to fade and avoids any overt suggestions of the physical and cultural viability of such a union. The bullets of his out-of-control tribesmen killed him, even though they were justified in their anger. All of these elements coupled with the biblical reference encode the film with a specific message. Nophaie’s ties to tradition and ties to his Navajo culture were his undoing. As Jill Doerfler observes, “the “good” Indian actually isn’t killed by a member of the

“superior” race, but by his own kind. This, of course, serves to absolve whites and the U.S. government from any responsibility, while reinforcing the idea that the “superior” race will naturally prevail” (6). By constructing the death scene in this way, the film skips over much of the critical work that it seeks to explore in its treatment of Native American bodies by the non-Native world both in Hollywood and in the world at large.

When the corrupt Agent Booker finally pushes the Navajo too far in the film, they rally against him. Yet, he has managed to procure a machine gun that he sets up in the building to make their final stand. The machine gun is an icon of the advanced machinery that helped America and its allies win World War I, and it is now employed to battle the United States of America’s oldest enemy, the Native American. They turn the machine gun onto the Natives who, after fighting in WWI and learning advanced techniques of warfare, instead have reverted to the iconic image of circling the smaller band of whites and ululating as they shoot blindly into the building. It is a simple arrow, loosed by one of the Native elders, that pierces Booker’s neck. While the Native traditionalists and their anger is depicted as reprehensible, the purity of their anger is allowed a single moment of justifiable vengeance as the symbol of Native heritage in previous films—the arrow—becomes the undoing of the far more savage Agent Booker. Though Agent Booker also becomes the abject corpse, his actions as a greedy and dishonest agent distance him from 1925 American values, but almost every other white male character represents a more sympathetic ideal. He is encoded as the exception rather than the rule.

Taken together, the two deaths allow the film to make its position clear for the viewer. Nophaie’s progressive ways are ideal but put him at odds with his more conservative and Native tribesmen. His own people become his undoing. He represents the best potential for the Native American man because of his ability to transition into Euro-American culture, but his

people still represent the worst in their inability to assimilate. Agent Booker, by contrast, does not stand as an amalgamation of American greed. He and his cronies are reviled by whites and Natives alike. He, like the Natives in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, become sub-human abject corpses in the end. The whites, through overt separation from Booker throughout the film, are denied any culpability in his actions. As an offering of models of identity, the film offers little promise for Native viewers and fails to counter existing popular conceptions of Natives by non-Native viewers. If *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* left white audiences thinking the primitive Native deserved to die, *The Vanishing American* leaves white audiences comforted in the notion that Native Americans were destined to die.

*The Vanishing American* offers another and potentially more dangerous aspect of the corpse that is also worth exploring. As the summary of the film revealed, the narrative is clearly framed around the assumption that one inferior race must give way to a superior successor. While many films to this point and those following *The Vanishing American* utilize the abject corpse to situate the Native male body and his people as repulsive, *The Vanishing American* and other pseudo-sympathetic films make a point to show the Native male corpse as not only abject physically, but symbolically.

As we explored above, Nophaie comes to represent the pinnacle of Native cultural evolution during the early 20th century. He is noble and wise. This is a trope important to other films of this period as it allows the audience to maintain its romanticized and Fenimore Cooper inspired view of the noble savage. This image will endure up to present day receptions because it appears to present the Native in a positive light, but also suggests a stoic resolve that many Americans admire. Just as he is noble and wise, he is also strong and courageous. We see him come to the aid of Marian as Agent Booker tries to sexually assault her. We see him come to the

aid of the young Navajo boy, Nasja, who has been robbed of his horses by Agent Booker's men. We also see him, as discussed above, joining the war and distinguishing himself in battle, even going so far as to risk his life to save Captain Ramsdell, whom Nophaie believes to be in love with Marian and his potential rival for her affection. Spiritually, Nophaie is shown to be sophisticated in his tribal ways as he attempts to pray to the old gods for guidance, but he ultimately rejects his older gods in favor of Christ and the god of the Christians.

Title Card: "It seemed then that all the teachings of the white race fell away from Nophaie – Forsaken....flouted...utterly desperate....he ascended the tremendous shrine from which for centuries his people had prayed to their gods." Nophaie is seen practicing an ancient ritual that the film suggests he has nearly forgotten, yet when he touches his side and feels the Bible in his belt pouch, he abandons his ritual and casts off the sacred spear that he was using. "Suddenly the simple faith of his fathers seemed a foolish thing. He thought of Marian and of Bethlehem." --  
- "Oh, God, Help my People!"

At each turn, Nophaie comes to stand not just as a character, but also as a representation, a symbol of the cultural change that he embodies. His liminal state personifies the precarious identity of the Native culture at the time.<sup>12</sup> For each ideal that he comes to represent, he possesses a counter ideal tied directly to his Native heritage that is more consistent with American identity at large during this period. His association with his people, represented during his prayer scene where his brethren have reverted to their aggressive ways and are preparing to go to war with the whites, becomes his undoing. Just as the film allows his spiritual journey to represent a clear struggle for the Native American to assimilate to white Christian America, his death comes to symbolize the inevitable death of the Native culture that his other side represents. They cannot both survive. There is no future in America for the Native elder, the

---

<sup>12</sup> Victor Turner discusses a more specific anthropological understanding of liminality in which an individual is recognized by the respective culture as between states of separation and incorporation within the community. They are "neither here, nor there." Throughout this work and unless otherwise noted, we will broaden this term to include characters who exist outside of the cultural norms and are therefore capable of possessing characteristics from the past, present, and future (Turner 94-95).

Native soldier, the Native medicine man, or Native political leader. Just as his people carry Nophaie's body off into the hills following his death, so too must they fade into the distance. Their culture becomes as object as the body that they carry. The film encodes Native life as romantic and idyllic, but the superiority of Euro-American progress is the only natural course.

In comparison with the symbolic death of Nophaie, the film does offer an alternative subject position for viewers to suggest how the Native might survive. The children on the reservation have little voice in the film with the exception of Nasja who is likely to follow his idol Nophaie in the ways of his people. Instead, many of the children are educated at the white school by Marian. In one scene, they are shown with short-cropped hair, wearing overalls and dresses, and pledging to the American flag with their arm outstretched and palms down. We must forgive the palm down salute shown here. It reflects the pre-Nazi era WWII conflict and was much more common at the time as a form of salute to the flag. What is of importance here and in other scenes with the children is that each scene reflects a clear and positive motion forward. The children are learning to read, write, and speak English. They appear happy and seem to enjoy their time in the classroom. Indeed, there is even a scene where Agent Booker picks up one of the children in order to show his favor to them in front of Marian, and the child begins to cry, suggesting that even these children are aware of Agent Booker's vile nature.

When we consider the scenes with the children in school juxtaposed to scenes of Nophaie and Nasja, we have a clear motion towards white American progress. The viewer romanticizes Nophaie's Nativeness, but the real potential is in the children who will learn early about the superior white culture. As the film closes with Nophaie's funeral and the elder members of the tribe carrying Nophaie's body into the hills, Nasja is the only child to go with him. The schoolchildren are always separated from the struggles as they are already on the other side of



the inevitable transition. With Wilson now the Federal Agent in place to help the elders make their peace with the whites, the film assumes a clear departure of the old ways and a natural survival of the assimilated youth. In this sense, the viewer is allowed to feel a sense of loss for the agrarian and pastoral life. Yet, this traditional lifeway is clearly encoded as abject and progressive society as preferred. *The Vanishing American* shows its viewer that the primitive self, represented here by the various incarnations of Native Americans, is one that is attractive and even romantic in some senses, but ultimately it is violent, unsophisticated, uneducated, spiritually doomed, and incompatible with the natural progression of white society. In the death of this primitive self, the modern viewer sees his or her own primitive qualities manifested only to meet an inevitable doom. The viewer can recognize the self in the primitive but must reject that primitive self as abject in favor of the dominant culture of mainstream white America.

*The Vanishing American* is a complicated contribution to the history of Native American representation. It is at once beautiful and appealing to its way of understanding Native way of life and the problematic relationships they have had with their colonizers. However, without historical context and an understanding of how this film is truly situated within the larger framework of Native representation, the beauty and sympathy of this film can lead to further misunderstanding for uninitiated viewers. Michael J. Riley states that “the similarities of the Indians to living, breathing people are replaced with similarities to a stereotype of an idealized savage and their presence in this film remains largely that of a popular construction of the dominant media -- yet it stands as a compelling and poignant statement just the same” (70). By the mid-century mark, Native American men are barely recognizable as anything rooted in tribal reality. They are ghosts of their former selves. They are apparitions at the margins of American prosperity. Yet, the civil rights era and the renewed calls for resistance of Native Americans in

the 60s and 70s will provide the proving ground for the reclamation of Native American identity as a whole and Native American masculinity as a critical component of this mission of recovery. It will still take multiple generations before these apparitions are given new life in the hands of Native filmmakers.

## Chapter 2 – Corporeal Awakenings

Film has several unique characteristics that make it ideal for identity recovery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. First, visual imagery allows films to perpetuate myths of erasure, but this quality also offers the best possibility for subversion. Just as the films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century confirmed assumptions about Native Americans by presenting visual “proof” of their savagery, primitiveness, and inevitable decline, films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can return the Native to the screen with renewed agency. New films can give evidence to the survival of Native cultures into present day. Furthermore, film allows Native audiences to see themselves in fully realized and sympathetic subject positions that can heal the fractured sense of identity imposed on them by previous representations in film. In effect, film can give us back our heroes, our voices, our language, and our bodies on screen and allow both Native and non-Native audiences to acknowledge the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s attempts at erasure as malicious, but ultimately unsuccessful.

Second, the 21<sup>st</sup> century film industry has a lower barrier to entry than ever for both producers and consumers. Technologically speaking, films are easier to produce with the power of modern smart phones and low-end digital video camera setups costing as little as a few thousand dollars. Online and free tutorials, editing software, and distribution also reduce some of the barriers to entry for filmmakers. Additionally, the availability of films through online streaming further enhances the available toolbox for new filmmakers. Independent film workshops and other programs help new filmmakers to begin producing effective films without the need for studio support. Furthermore, Native authors, artists, and actors over the past decades have continued to provide a wealth of source material that provides a healthy foundation for filmmakers to continue the recovery efforts started by some of the producers discussed in this

work. This lower barrier to entry for filmmakers helps mitigate some of the power of the Hollywood hegemony over representations of Native American masculinity.

Finally, the barrier to entry as a viewer of films is lower than it has ever been. Henry Jenkins considers the relationship between product and audience consumption as a collaborative framework, or a collective intelligence, borrowing the term from Pierre Lévy. Jenkins argues, “Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (Jenkins 3-4). As Native consumers of cultural productions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are able to collaborate and cultivate knowledge and rely on our lived experiences to navigate between truth and fiction in how we are represented. There is no unifying pan-Indian experience to establish veracity, but there is a pan-Indian interest in rooting representation of Native Americans in real experiences, both culturally and individually. A more sophisticated viewer might find greater levels of complexity such as the contrapuntal readings offered in this work. This is not necessary for a film’s success because of our collective intelligence. Furthermore, film allows non-Native audiences to “spontaneously consent” to tribal renewal and identity recovery as more culturally grounded films emerge from within the Native communities.

Identity recovery is not as simple as producing a few good films and saying, “look here, this is what we are really like.” Film is only one part of one aspect of an entire system of erasure, but unlike public education or federal policy, which moves slowly and requires the consent of non-Native members of the community to mobilize, film—as part of the larger media complex—is the result of individual filmmakers and producers. As such, each contribution can enter the entirety of the media sphere much more rapidly and contribute to cultural change much more efficiently. In other words, film offers one of the best chances at immediate relief to

Native viewers in need of avenues of positive identity recovery. Casting Native actors in contemporary and realistic scenarios, when combined with the ability of film to affect strong emotional responses, empowers the medium with more cultural mobility than most other media. To that end, this chapter will continue to focus on the Native body and the corpse as a primary mode of erasure, but with a particular interest in more modern films that attempt to subvert this trope.

The Native American corpse is an image of erasure of Native American masculine identity. This corpse is present throughout the Classical Hollywood film era, as seen in *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* and *The Vanishing American*. The trope appears in the supposedly sympathetic films of the 60s and 70s, as seen in films such as *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), *Little Big Man* (1970), and *Soldier Blue* (1970). However, it is not until Native filmmakers begin to make their own recovery films in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century that we begin to see a substantial capacity for identity recovery in film, as seen in films such as *Smoke Signals* (1998), *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007), and *Winter in the Blood* (2013).

*The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* presents one of the first and most rudimentary usages of the Native corpse. It mobilizes only the essential human qualities of the Native body: its capacity to stand upright and achieve organized violent rage. At the point of death, the Native corpse in these films is unsympathetic and as such becomes little more than a mobile set piece for the sake of advancing the hegemonic narrative of white survival in a harsh frontier. In later decades, the increased presence of Natives, even at the fringes of dominant white society, and the increased need for more complex narratives in film results in the mobilization of the Noble Savage trope. This led to films such as *The Vanishing American*, which humanizes the Native and problematizes his death. Yet, the inevitability of Nophaie's death and the carefully

constructed confirmation of the vanishing American myth serves only to add an additional layer of erasure through the death of the culture as symbolized by the Native corpse.

The late 60s and 70s presented a cultural climate in need of counter-narratives, and with the public rejection of the Vietnam War and the visual images of the massacres of innocents in Vietnam, the public was willing to accept a new characterization of Natives as victims instead of savages. Just like *The Vanishing American*, these films will mobilize the Noble Savage to gain sympathy for the Natives on screen and heighten the sense of disgust at the slaughter of the Natives in films like *Little Big Man*. However, these films will also fail to recover any lasting identity for contemporary Natives and serve to further lock Natives into a 19<sup>th</sup> century past. At each new incarnation, the Native continues to recover some level of humanity, but he fails to overcome his erasure fully and rarely survives into a contemporary setting.

Our largely deconstructive work in Chapter 1 sought to tear down an overused trope that had a harmful psychological and subsequently ideological impact on both Native and non-Native audiences. Here in Chapter 2, I argue that this same mechanism for subjugation and erasure can empower Native communities to subvert their filmic oppression. Yet, we must be continually vigilant against over-reliance on deconstruction as a subverting force against misrepresentation. Realist theory reminds us that we, as Native scholars and consumers of texts, already have everything we need to tell the difference between authentic and in-authentic, or more importantly, harmful and beneficial. Craig Womack argues that isolating Native values is a rather simple process stating that traditionalism is, “anything that is useful to Indian people in retaining their values and worldviews, no matter how much it deviates from what people did one or two hundred years ago” (Chapter 1). As we move our discussion into the 21<sup>st</sup> century at the end of this chapter and look closely at *Four Sheets to the Wind*, we will see an effective example

of this type of traditionalism in a contemporary setting. It needs only to protect the values and experiences of the contemporary culture that is represented and succeed as a film worth viewing inside the Native community, and hopefully in non-Native communities as well.

By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Native filmmakers begin to produce films which emphasize the narrative and geographical place first over the Native characteristics of their subjects. *Four Sheets to the Wind* succeeds as a vehicle for the revival of the Native American identity by focusing on the lives of contemporary Natives in a way that confirms their survival into the 21<sup>st</sup> century without ignoring the effects of cultural and economic erasure of the previous century. The characters in this film are nuanced, sympathetic, and tragic, but also humorous, sexual, intelligent and above all contemporary. They face the same Native American corpse trope used in previous films, but instead of this trope serving as the end of the Native characters in the film, it becomes the starting point for the growth of each character. Director Sterlin Harjo and the primary cast of *Four Sheets to the Wind* are all Native American, but the fact that the characters are Creek/Seminole, or that they live in Oklahoma is only a feature of the story. As an independent film, it is able to escape Hollywood's need to appeal to the widest possible audience. Instead, Harjo is able to focus on telling the story that he envisions. Unfortunately, this intimate focus results in a much smaller audience than Hollywood can produce, and its total impact on popular culture is limited. As a part of the continual motion of the film industry, *Four Sheets to the Wind* serves as evidence of the potential of such narratives to tell a compelling story.

What follows here is a critical analysis of both *Little Big Man* and *Four Sheets to the Wind* to seek out the presence of the Native corpse and map out his revitalization and his restoration of voice and purpose. While the revitalization of the corpse alone cannot fully correct

a century of filmic erasure, it is the first step in establishing the Native American man as a viable and engaging subject. Both films struggle to understand how to handle the death of the Native man, or how to give that death meaning, and filmed nearly forty years apart, they remind us of the slow progress of social change in the Hollywood film industry. Yet, both films serve to illustrate the potential to encode Natives sympathetically while still requiring the non-Native audience to view the film contrapuntally to extract its complete cultural relevance.

### **Early Subversions of Erasure**

Director Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970) is a frame narrative that tells the story of Jack Crabb, played by Dustin Hoffman, a white son of pioneers killed by the Pawnee tribe. The Cheyenne tribe discover Jack after the Pawnee attack and raise him as one of their own. The film opens with the elderly Crabb narrating for a historical ethnographer who hopes to learn something of the "way of life of the Indian" from Crabb. Crabb is reported to have lived among the Cheyenne during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This opening scene allows the film to frame itself as a story within a story where Crabb is both the narrator in the present and the protagonist of the story in the past. Already, the audience is given a buffer into the life of the Native American. While this might seem like an invitation to white audiences into the closed spaces of the tribal histories, it instead reinforces existing differences between white culture and Indian culture.

Nevertheless, Crabb's narration quickly takes us into the lives of the Cheyenne who discover Crabb and his sister after the Pawnee raid. The Cheyenne band that discovers Crabb are led by the venerable Old Lodge Skins, who adopts Crabb as one of his own grandsons. Crabb comes to learn that the Cheyenne are a proud and resourceful people who care for him and help him grow into a man. The Pawnee on the other hand are a vengeful and violent tribe and subject



to much of the film's negative criticism of Natives at this time. Crabb then goes on a series of journeys of self-discovery where he vacillates between the Cheyenne and white America.

Penn encodes Crabb's movements into and out of the Cheyenne tribal structure as idyllic, humorous, industrious, and wise. Crabb's movements into and out of white society is violent, greedy, hypercritical, and deeply flawed. This juxtaposition would seem on the surface to subvert previous representations of Natives; however, when viewed contrapuntally, this narrative only serves to reinforce the abjection of the Native corpse and reify the Vanishing American myth. As the narrative progresses, the Cheyenne suffer terrible losses at the Sand Creek Massacre and Washita River Massacre. Near the film's close, Crabb meets up with General Custer as he is about to engage the Cheyenne at the Battle of Little Big Horn. Crabb survives the battle and later meets up with Old Lodge Skins. The film closes with Old Lodge Skins conducting his own funeral ritual.

With this narrative construction, there is a great deal of room to explore Native American identity, yet there are so many death scenes of the Native American in this film that choosing specific examples can be challenging. This is one of Hollywood's many chances to subvert the Vanishing American myth and reject the abject Native image. We have explored several moments where the corpse, through its abjection, serves as a distancing tool for the viewers to process the death of the Native American. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was less than a generation removed from some of the most volatile periods of federal/Indian relations, so the corpse could not be ignored. As such, previous films capitalized on this truth but gave the viewer a corpse that was void of humanity and stripped of its sympathy, or the corpse became symbolic of an unfortunate but inevitable progression of white superiority. In order to offer a reversal of these tropes or subvert the undertones of the repeated Native death scenes, *Little Big*

*Man* needs to focus on the lives of the Natives before the death, but also emphasize the survivance of the Natives following the onscreen deaths. *Little Big Man* allows us to sympathize with the Natives and mourn their deaths, but still exoticizes and even romanticizes them as Other. They are exotic and romantic, noble and proud, but they are still in buckskin, still alien, and still uncivilized according to conventional white American standards.

While the film is taking particular aim at the Vietnam War and using the sympathetic Native as a placeholder for sympathetic North Vietnamese and Communism, its message is not one of equality, but of celebrated difference.<sup>13</sup> By emphasizing the ways in which the Native life is different from the white mainstream culture without assessing white culture honestly, films such as this only advance the claims of superiority. *Little Big Man* takes several jabs at the absurdity of these notions, but the underlying truth is that the film is still a white man's apparatus. The lens is still the gaze of the white director. The lingering image the film presents is that of the survival of the central white character who is saddened by the loss of the entire culture.

Julia Kristeva argued that the corpse fails to be sympathetic if it is the ultimate in abject imagery. Abjection is a reaction to the most basic form of understanding, of acknowledgement. To accept the corpse as the self without life is to accept that life is only a temporary break from the eternal reality of death, which pulls us closer to the Real. This truth is abject, and we cast aside associations with the corpse as a means of rejecting our individual mortality. Filmmakers encode the Native corpse as abject because it directly represents the uncivilized past and the Lack at the core of the colonizers seeking to eschew it as they move towards civilization. To reject abjection is to disrupt the polarities of the binary of life and death and to view the presence

---

<sup>13</sup> Margo Kasden and Susan Tavernetti discuss the cultural connection between this film and the existing press coverage as well as the larger 60s counterculture connections (Kasden 130-131).

of death as life affirming rather than life rejecting, and in so doing come to terms with the true nature of that Žižekian “less than nothing”, which precludes and includes us all. To revive the Native corpse, the film must emphasize the life of the Native, but also emphasize the enduring life of those that live on. The culture must survive. The people must survive. Filmmakers must overtly demonstrate the Native American’s transcendence from their historical death. *Little Big Man* gets us halfway there. It restores the life to the Native prior to becoming a corpse. It allows the audience to see the Native life as analogous to non-Native life. Yet, if the dead bodies and the disappearing culture are the final image, then abjection remains. In a standard funeral ritual in America, survivors gather to view the corpse and mourn the deceased, but following the funeral is a renewal of relationships with the living. The family endures and though the physical object is abject, the non-physical being persists in the lives of the sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, siblings, and community. *Little Big Man* does not restore these necessary survivors at the film’s conclusion.

If the corpse must be shown, as indeed it is in vivid detail in *Little Big Man*, it must allow viewers to regain a sense of identity and connection to the Native Americans presented. *The Vanishing American* tried to make us sympathize with Nophaie before killing him, but that only served to solidify the more damaging assumptions that such a death was inevitable and indeed necessary. For *Little Big Man*, the strategy seems to be an elevation of the scale and detail of the death scene. Instead of focusing on a few key examples of Natives killed on screen, *Little Big Man* attempts to return the sympathy to the corpse denied in previous films by showing repeated scenes of women, children, and unarmed men dying for no apparent reason. They are all killed, often with little chance at reprisal or self-defense, and the camera does not shy away from showing the bloody price paid for American colonization and by extension the dangers of

American interference in Vietnam. In the funeral scene at the close of the film, where Old Lodge Skins, the film's most sympathetic and fleshed out character, goes to meet his death the film offers one singular attempt at a "resurrection" of the corpse.

The Sand Creek Massacre is one of the film's attempts at subverting the abjection of the corpse through its vivid details. Penn has already encoded the Cheyenne as sympathetic and morally righteous. The Cheyenne have taken Crabb into their care and taught him to fight and hunt with bow and arrow. They taught him about honor and compassion, and through their example, he came to learn the value of family and ceremony. Crabb and Old Lodge Skins face the killing ways of white men when they discover the remains of a Cheyenne encampment after an attack by the cavalry. Crabb asks Old Lodge Skins why they would do something so awful like killing women and children. Old Lodge Skins responds, "Because they are strange. They do not seem to know where the center of the earth is." The white men are only acting on Lacanian desire, but Old Lodge Skins seems to possess some inner awareness of the futility of this externalization of incompleteness. At this point, the narrative of the film is clearly sympathetic to the Cheyenne and wants to show them as fully realized characters. They organize a counterattack against the cavalry, but it is clear that they are justified in their anger and are contemplative of the battle that lies ahead. This is in contrast to the attacks made against the whites in the previous films where the Natives acted out of rage with little regard for the gravity of an attack on the whites, Nophaie withstanding. It is in this attack on the white cavalry, in which the Cheyenne prove ineffective, that Crabb first leaves the Cheyenne when he proclaims his white ancestry to avoid death, shouting "can't you see, I am a white man?". Crabb confirms the inauthentic nature of his Nativeness and one of the inherent flaws of cultural appropriation and redface when he is able to cast off his Nativeness at will when it benefits him.

Later, Crabb begins working under Silas Pendrake and Mrs. Pendrake. Silas comes to represent the morally superior stance of the Christians regarding the Indians as he claims: “The boy’s deprivation has been more spiritual than physical. Indians know nothing of God and moral right. They eat human flesh, fornicate, adulterize, misogynize and commune constantly with minions of the devil. It must be our task, nay our Christian duty to beat the misery out of [him].” The viewer, informed by the narrative up to this point knows that Silas is wrong, but as he is delivering his diatribe, he is sitting in the comforts of his large city home with all the trappings of wealth for late 19<sup>th</sup> century America. This contrasts to the simpler means of wealth of the Cheyenne seen in previous scenes and encodes the film with clear social commentary on the hypocrisy of Western Ideology. Penn is aware of this contrast, and he is using these two settings deliberately to compare the Pendrake’s wealth with the Cheyenne’s apparent poverty. This contrast is bookended with a scene of Mrs. Pendrake giving Crabb the “greatest bath he ever had in his life” as she scrubs his body and sings to him a blend of two gospels *Bringing in the Sheaves* and *Hanson Place*.

Later, Silas catches Crabb in the hay barn with a girl and beats him. Mrs. Pendrake treats his wounds and preaches to him that it is worth the sacrifice to be good and pure even though she has already tried to seduce Crabb at least once. Then Silas nearly drowns Crabb during a baptism, and when Crabb goes on a shopping trip with Mrs. Pendrake, he discovers Mrs. Pendrake having an affair with a shopkeeper. Crabb now seeing the hypocrisy the Pendrake’s brand of Christianity narrates, “That was the end of my religious period. I haven’t sung a hymn in 104 years.” Each of these scenes further encodes the white world with a layer of religiously justified cruelty and judgement. Yet, the characters in question are such caricatures that they allow white audiences a layer of deniability. Penn does not encode all whites as hypocritical,

especially considering the central character of Crabb, so the Pendrakes become a possible exception rather than the rule.

From here Crabb leaves the Pendrake's and takes up with Mr. Merriweather, and later he reunites with his sister who teaches him how to use a pistol, though he finds that he does not have it in him to kill a human being. These sequences serve mostly to characterize Crabb and by contrast provide commentary on the standard tropes and cultural assumptions that occupy most Westerns. Penn deconstructed the myth of the righteous Christian in the Pendrakes, and here he takes aim at the gunslinger and soldier. He has provided an alternative look at the Wild West. Yet, the film leaves the Native behind, choosing to define them by their contrast rather than their own strength of character. Again, Native lives, or rather a simulacrum of Native lives, are used to define the white experience.

*Little Big Man* is a film conscious of its social commentary. It is seeking a counter narrative and uses irony and role reversal to allow the viewer to see the "truth" that previous films have denied. Yet, the film is much more comfortable lambasting white society in each representative scene than it is in truly exploring the nuances of Cheyenne culture. We are given characterization of the Cheyenne in a few key scenes that depict, with relative accuracy, the *heemaneh*, contrary, and other key culturally specific elements. However, Arthur Penn acknowledges that he did not intend to make a historically accurate film.<sup>14</sup> Instead, we have Penn's attempt at a picaresque narrative focused on Crabb. As such, the narrative's potential to address the mistakes of past films is muddled by the film's focus on the liminal character.

---

<sup>14</sup> Dir. Arthur Penn acknowledges that this film is primarily a picaresque narrative and not an accurate account. During one interview he also goes so far as to acknowledge a deliberate change from the source novel to the film: the non-death of Old Lodge Skins. (Chaiken 81-84)

By the time the film reaches its first major death scene, its version of the Sand Creek Massacre, the audience has been primed to consider the Cheyenne as a sympathetic and innocent people caught up in the advancement of the West. The Cheyenne are presented as a childlike race who is unsure how to navigate the malicious and violent white expansion effort. As Crabb, now hired as a muleskinner for General Custer, is recruited to participate in a “battle” he and the rest of the men are told “spare the females and children if possible.” As the massacre progresses on screen Crabb quickly discovers that the soldiers and their Pawnee allies have no intention of sparing anyone. The action is fast paced with rapid cuts and little blood or gore. Yet, the audio tracks of this scene are full of screams, grunts, and gunfire, which will contrast sharply with later battles in the film.

Crabb once again deserts, swims across the creek, and is attacked by his old mentor and friend, Shadow That Comes in Sight, who tries to kill him. A sergeant shoots Shadow That Comes in Sight in the back and technically saves Crabb’s life, only to then promise to hang Crabb for desertion. “There is no describing how I felt. An enemy had saved my life by the violent murder of one of my best friends. The world was too ridiculous to even bother to live in,” narrates Crabb in voice over following this scene. Penn has reminded his audience that no matter how absurd the scene might appear, it is too close to the reality of history to dismiss. The massacre scenes were quick and chaotic without allowing the viewer to linger on any particular death, but the struggle with Shadow That Comes in Sight and his body washing down the creek are slowed down, and the viewer is allowed a moment to feel the death of the Native. Prior to this moment, Shadow that Comes in Sight has proven himself to be both stoic and wise, cliché yet sympathetic. He was the first Cheyenne to encounter Crabb, and his actions onscreen are consistent with the Noble Savage Trope. To Penn’s credit, Shadow That Comes in Sight is not

only shown as sympathetic and good, but his treatment towards Crabb and Crabb's subsequent affection for the man allows him a more nuanced humanization. His corpse, like Nophaie's, becomes a more powerful symbolic representation as his characterization is more closely aligned with the assumed values of the viewer. Yet, we have already witnessed the death of sympathetic Natives, so Shadow That Comes in Sight and any other Native must symbolize more than just lamentation and sympathy.

The power of the corpse in this scene is juxtaposed with the birth scene that follows. As it turns out, Shadow That Comes in Sight was protecting his daughter who was giving birth at the time of the attack. Crabb finds her in the bushes and watches her give birth to her child. Crabb becomes the viewer's voyeuristic lens that gazes at the coming of life, while so much abject death is occurring in the background. This is the critical recovery scene necessary for films to begin the process of overcoming cinema's attempt at Native identity erasure. Shadow That Comes in Sight's struggle leads to his death, and in his death, he becomes that abject corpse. Shadow That Comes in Sight's abjection allows the viewers to distance themselves from the reality of the Native American male experience. The newborn child becomes a reversal of this image, forcing Crabb, and the viewer, to see the continuation of that life and all the cultural identity that it carries. This is the film's ideal moment to emphasize survivance over erasure, yet the film misses its mark. Crabb will now raise the child as his own. The birth scene is mediated through Crabb's gaze suggesting the process of identity recovery is only viable when there is a white savior to facilitate Native survivance. Interestingly, the film carries Crabb and his young bride and bastard child back to the Cheyenne where Crabb seems content to take care of his new bride. Yet, this union only leads to more death.



The next death scene is a recreation of the Washita River Massacre. In this scene, Custer is directly involved, and unlike the Sand Creek Massacre, where the audio focuses on the sounds of slaughter, Penn accompanies this slaughter with the historically accurate *Gary Owen* playing over the carnage. The music makes the scene all the more unsettling as it is a marching song, but the images on screen are not of battle or contest, but of death. This scene is more graphic than the Sand Creek Massacre, and it is undercut by an ironic exchange between Crabb and Old Lodge Skins who is now blind and believes that he is invisible to the soldiers. At first Old Lodge Skins is prepared to die with his people in the massacre, but Crabb convinces him to run across the river.

OLD LODGE SKINS. I am blind. I cannot fight them, but I won't run. If it is my day to die, I want to do it here within the circle.

CRABB. Grandfather, the river is part of the great circle of the waters of the earth.

OLD LODGE SKINS. That's true, but the soldiers would kill us before we can get to the river.

CRABB. Grandfather, you didn't see any soldiers in your dreams, and that means they can't see you now.

OLD LODGE SKINS. You think so?

CRABB. Yes! Yes! What else could your dream mean?

OLD LODGE SKINS. I think you're right.

CRABB. Then let's go to the great circle of the river.

OLD LODGE SKINS laughing. I've never been invisible before.

Here, Penn juxtaposes the cavalry music, gunshots, and dying in the background with the absurdity of the venerable Chief thinking he is invisible. The dialogue between Old Lodge Skins and Crabb provides this scene's singular motion towards recovery.

Old Lodge Skins becomes the walking corpse. Invisible to the soldiers who will kill anything that moves. Crabb is able to move with him, as he is already a liminal character caught between Native and non-Native boundaries. As the rest of the Cheyenne are dying in brutal fashion, Old Lodge Skins is the walking antithesis to this destruction. He is old and completely

invested in his native tradition. He is peaceful, yet willing to go to war to save his people. He is accepting of his fate, but also able to see his own permanent invisibility. The abject death that would lead to his erasure in the film is subverted by an acceptance of an assumed invisibility. It is his acceptance of his invisibility that saves him. Ojibway Film critic Jesse Wentz argues that *Little Big Man* “was an attempt to portray aboriginal people as non-stereotypes, or at least attempt to flesh out the characters that they could portray on screen. It played a lot with satire and sending up those stereotypes” (Diamond). Certainly, this scene is conscious of its satirical spin on the Vanishing American trope and uses it to great effect. Unfortunately, instead of true recovery, we have returned to Pratt. Old Lodge Skins will not assimilate, so he must vanish and die.

The subversive nature of this scene and Old Lodge Skins’ ownership of his own invisibility is complicated by the harsh reality of the massacre. Once Crabb helps Old Lodge Skins across the river, he turns back to view the rest of the slaughter. Again, the viewer gets to watch the scene through Crabb’s perspective, and we see Custer give one of his most unsettling lines in the film after he orders his men to shoot the Cheyenne’s ponies.

CUSTER. You think it’s shocking to shoot a few ponies? Well, let me tell you, the women are far more important than the ponies: the point is they breed like rats. However, lieutenant, this is a legal action, and the men are under strict orders not to shoot the women. Unless, of course, they refuse to surrender.

This characterization, much like Agent Booker in *The Vanishing American* is problematic, as Jacquelyn Kilpatrick notes, “it allows an audience to see massacres...as the result of an individual’s madness, not the result of a philosophy of a culture or broader federal policy” (90). Allowing characters like Custer and Booker to stand as singular examples of hatred and racism allows audiences to dismiss such actions as cultural and historical aberrations, especially when the majority of the characters in the respective films are sympathetic. This is not to suggest that

all non-Natives contributed to the attempted genocide of the Natives; however, the systematic destruction of Natives certainly suggests a majority participation. Furthermore, Penn uses these massacres scenes to provide commentary on the atrocities of the Vietnam War and the war crimes perpetrated by U.S. soldiers. These obvious allusions mark the ultimate encoding of this already unsettling massacre. Kilpatrick adds, “No one watching the film at its release could miss the obvious connections being drawn [between this massacre and similar instances in Vietnam] – the greedy, violent white men, the heartless and murderous military, even the Asian look of Little Big Man’s wife” (93). From this scene, the film cuts between shots of the soldiers shooting the screaming ponies locked in the corral and killing the women who “refused to surrender.” The soldiers brutally murder Crabb’s four wives, Sunshine and her three sisters, during this series of cuts. The music and the background noise fade as Sunshine emerges from the tipi carrying her and Crabb’s newborn baby. The child’s screams are haunting as the young woman tries to flee across the river. A soldier shoots her once, and she falls to her knees but rises again. The second shot silences the child, and the third kills Sunshine. A few frames just before she falls shows the child wrapped in his bundles covered in blood.

It is here that Penn seems to be moving towards an attempt at recovery of identity by supplanting the abjection of the Native corpse for the more inhumane violence of the soldiers. Penn encodes sympathy for the innocence of the Natives in these scenes. The corpse still maintains its abject qualities as it invites the viewer to either turn away or feel a sense of disgust at the gore. However, the soldier’s abhorrent violence dominates the viewer’s attention as the continual cuts from one death to the next carry only one constant: white violence. Here the violence itself is abject. As political commentary, these scenes allow Penn to show the audience the violent nature that they need to cast aside or the unfortunate fate of the Native Americans in

this film might befall a similarly threatened culture in Vietnam. It is as if America should have already cleansed its savagery in Native blood and should now be above such violence.

These scenes show that Penn has anticipated Richard Slotkin's understanding of violence. For Slotkin, white American settler's "concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history." He goes on to add that "a people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions." While it seems as though Penn and other directors such as Ralph Nelson with *Soldier Blue* (1970) and even John Ford with *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) are attempting to remind their American audiences of the truth of their myths, Slotkin ultimately concludes that America and the West was largely viewed as a regenerating force for white American settlers, but "the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (4-5). Penn has ignored the structures of violence and expansion in favor of a more traditional and ambivalent villain. As abject as the violence and murder is in the massacre scenes in *Little Big Man*, the film fails to link that violence to the prosperity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Furthermore, as much as this scene invites the viewer to re-evaluate the trope of the Native corpse, it ultimately fails to recover any identity that the trope has served to erase. Many of the character's we have come to know, including Sunshine and her sisters are still dead. Crabb's child and the child that was born during the Sand Creek massacre also die. The potentiality of survivance is subverted with brutal finality. Penn's primary motivation here does not seem to be the recovery of the Native identity, but the condemnation of the killers of such a

peaceful people as a way of providing commentary on the Vietnam War. The scene is encoded for Native audiences to recoil at the violence and rage at Custer. This is not new ground, and the lingering sentiment is not one of survival but confirmation of oppression. *Little Big Man*, like *The Vanishing American* before it, equates the atrocities to key figures and distances the general American community from culpability.

The film, and others like it released during this time, have come to represent an analogy for the violence of the Vietnam conflict. Here, Penn is conscious of the changing cultural climate at this time and uses the historical massacres on American soil to stand in for the foreign struggles happening in Southeast Asia. Cinema audiences in the 1970s, including Native audiences, would have recognized that “these images made strong reference to the just-published newspaper accounts of the criminal massacre of women and children at My Lai, carried out months before by Army Lt. William L. Calley, Jr., and some of his troops” (Kasdan 130). The complex layers of social commentary in *Little Big Man* situate it as an important film for this period. As alluded to above, this period of counterculture and open resistance to hegemonic norms provides a fertile ground for revision and subversive encoding. Yet, this scene is another example of the film’s inability to effectively recover Native identity. *Little Big Man* relies on non-Native actors for Native roles, white characters for cultural mediation, and the violence of the white soldiers for abjection. These narrative choices overshadow a historically authentic depiction of the Cheyenne. Ultimately, the film falls short of its potential as a medium for a resurrection of the Native corpse and a recovery of lost identity. It is in the film’s standout performance by Chief Dan George in a scene without death that offers the best hope for such a recovery.

In a reunion scene following the Sand Creek Massacre, Crabb discovers that many of his Cheyenne friends are now dead and his grandfather, Old Lodge Skins, is now wounded and blind from previous fighting. As he calls off a list of named Cheyenne introduced earlier in the film, Old Lodge Skins reveals that each are now dead. Crabb asks “Do you hate them? Do you hate the white man now?” Old Lodge Skins pulls a scalp lock out of a bag and says, “The Human Beings, my son, they believe everything is alive; not only man and animals, but also water, earth, stone, and also the things from them like that hair. The man from whom this hair came, he’s bald on the other side because I now own his scalp. That is the way things are!” The camera closes in on the last line and Chief Dan George speaks with gravity and a haunted look in his now sightless eyes that we have not yet seen in the film to this point. He is changed by the struggles and the cycle of violence. “But the white man, they believe everything is dead: stone, earth, animals, and people, even their own people. If things keep trying to live, white man will rub them out. That is the difference. You will stay with us, my son.” From this early scene, Old Lodge Skins represents the moral center of the film and solidifies the film’s central message. The deaths of the Cheyenne are a tragedy, but one that is inevitable. This conversation serves as a turning point for Crabb, but by this stage Old Lodge Skins already knows how this will play out. He can see the futility of resistance, yet he cannot see any other way to go on, except to continue living as Human Beings.

Following the Washita River Massacre and the Cheyenne victory over Custer at Little Big Horn, the question of resistance and hatred towards the white man is revisited. Old Lodge Skins says, “Whatever else you can say about them, it must be admitted, you cannot get rid of them. There is an endless supply of white men, but there has always been a limited number of Human Beings. We won today. We won’t win tomorrow.” The struggle in the film to this point

has been a continual battle of the Cheyenne culture and humanity against the brutality and unending violence of the expansion of the whites. Eventually, the viewer is granted a different look at the corpse as Old Lodge Skins prepares to die on his own terms and in a peaceful ceremony.

As Crabb helps Old Lodge Skins to his burial site, he watches his grandfather go through his death ritual and proclaim:

OLD LODGE SKINS. Come out and fight. It is a good day to die. Thank you for making me a Human Being. Thank you for making me a warrior. Thank you for my victories, and for my defeats. Thank you for my vision, and the blindness with which I saw further. You make all things and direct them in their ways Grandfather, and now you have decided the Human Beings will soon walk a road that leads nowhere. I am going to die now, unless death wants to fight. And I ask you for the last time to grant me my old power to make things happen.

Old Lodge Skins then lies down to die. Yet, as he lays there, it begins to rain, and he does not die. “Am I still in this world? I was afraid of that. Well, sometimes the magic works, and sometimes it doesn’t.” Crabb then helps him to his feet and they walk back to camp as the internal narrative ends. As they walk back, they talk about copulation, suggesting that while death does not take him, life persists. The film cuts back to the elderly Crabb finishing the narration. The Historian’s final line: “Mr. Crabb, I didn’t know.” His arrogance and search for the “Indian way of life” proved to be more than he bargained for. Penn may prefer that the audience see this narrative as the Historian has seen it, but the Gaze is still Crabb’s: the white male mediator.

In this final sequence, the film allows the only fully realized Cheyenne character to choose their own death, but that choice is denied him and the viewers. This would be the moment of recovery of identity as it shows the potential to subvert the Vanishing American myth by revealing that although the death and destruction that permeated the bulk of the film was real

and took a tragic toll on the Cheyenne people, they would endure through *Old Lodge Skins*. Unfortunately, the film cannot capitalize on this potential as it has already acknowledged the futility of resistance and the inevitability of the destruction of the Cheyenne as *Old Lodge Skins* had already made clear. “The Human Beings will soon walk a road that leads nowhere.” Instead, Penn gives us Crabb’s final narration as a sign of resolution. Indeed, Penn argues that the original ending in the source novel would have rendered the film too dramatic and impact his intended style. Penn states that he “wanted to show that not only were the Indians going to be destroyed, but they were also condemned to live” (Chaiken 84). While Penn’s sentiment is certainly valid, the reality of Native American survivance into the 60s and their overt movement to reclaim their political agency in the 70s seems to have escaped his notice. In the same interview Penn claims that they lived among the Natives on the reservation during filming. Yet, he was unable to notice the vibrancy of culture around him or the building up of political action.

The film succeeds on many levels in spite of itself. Rebecca Kugal recognizes that depiction of the Cheyenne was, “much like Native people [she] knew. They did things like offer you food when you came to visit, they paid attention to their dreams, they nonchalantly asked you questions about your sex life, and they understood family in expansive, encompassing terms”. Ultimately, the film still lands where most of the films of the late 60s and 70s landed as it inevitably “inverted the typical Indian film one last time, leaving the audience feeling sorry for the Anglo protagonist, not the Native people” (82). The only person to survive the narrative into the present day of the film is Crabb who is identified as “the only white man to survive the Battle of Little Big Horn.” He is not a Cheyenne elder. Crabb and the viewer are white spectators in the same tragedy we have witnessed in previous films. Even with the revision of the battles into massacres and the humanization of the Cheyenne in direct contrast to the barbarity of the whites,



the corpse remains our lingering reality of the Cheyenne as the film closes. *Little Big Man* is able to challenge the inhuman portrayal of Natives in films like *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, and to explore a more culturally pure representation than the assimilation narrative of *The Vanishing American*: therefore, it manages to subvert some of the erasure of Native identity in cinema in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its focus on the white mediator to tell the Native story would dominate films for the next several decades, but it would take Native filmmakers to truly revive the corpse and recover the lost identity by taking the Native out of the historically locked 19<sup>th</sup> century and away from the white gaze of the sympathetic spectator.

Ultimately, the film shows a great deal of promise, but leaves the audience where they began: full of misunderstandings and a misconception of a historically locked tragedy that, according to popular culture, should be lamented but not rectified. What is the alternative? Are we Native men still faced with assimilation as the only viable course? We lost, so now we need to change to meet the cultural mood of our conquerors. This does not match the reality of our history or our present lived experiences, forcing even Native audiences to view this film contrapuntally. True, we cannot go back to buckskins and tipis, or lodge houses for my Cherokee ancestors. We still need a viable alternative that does not include the abandonment of tribal past or a return to “primitive” roots. We need filmmakers to encode the film overtly with due attention to Native lived experiences and Native contemporary realities. We need films encoded with opportunities to work in the same system of whites, while maintaining our own destiny, our own sense of self and progress. *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007) is the first of four films studied in this section that reveals the possibility of Native experiences and survival. It deals honestly with Natives in our present condition and truthfully with the deep-seated anxiety and pressures that come with generations of oppression and isolation.

### **The Transcendence of the Death of the Body**

*Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007) directed by Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Creek) is a film set in small-town Oklahoma at the turn to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The film centers on the Smallhill family as they cope with the death of Frankie Smallhill, the family's patriarch. Frankie dies just prior to the opening of the film and is buried according to his wishes by his son, Cufe Smallhill played by Cody Lightning (Cree), in a nearby pond. This leads to dark comedic undertones as the family decides they must have a funeral. Since Frankie's body is at the bottom of the pond, they decide to have a closed casket funeral with several watermelons imitating the weight of a real body inside. These early scenes serve to orient the viewer with the primary characters of the film and give us initial clues to their inter-family relationships.

Unlike the previous films discussed here, *Four Sheets* is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so it pulls the Native American out of its traditional time-locked and buckskin clad existence of most of the films in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Here, the film offers subtler clues to the Native heritage of the Smallhill family. The film opens with Frankie, played by Richard Ray Whitman (Yuchi-Muscogee (Creek)), narrating one of the Creek tales of Rabbit in the Muskogean language. There are a few bits of jade jewelry and other subtle tribal accoutrements, but the Smallhill family is much more contemporary and urbanized than any examples we have explored to this point. Certainly, this is not the first film to show Natives in a 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century setting, but this film rarely addresses its own Native subject material directly. Indeed, the film is presented more as a small-town Oklahoma film first and a Native film second.

*Four Sheets to the Wind* centers on the lives of the surviving members of the Smallhill family, each trying to move past the death of Frankie in their own way. Cora, Frankie's widow, finds comfort in a new companionship of one of Frankie's old friends, a burly but gentle white

man named Sonny. Miri, Frankie's daughter played by Tamara Podemski (Ojibway), who has moved away from home and lives in the nearby city of Tulsa, retreats into alcohol and casual relationships with men to cope with the loss of her father. Cufe, oscillating between his times at home with his mother and visiting Miri in Tulsa finds comfort among his family, but confides in Francie, played by Laura Bailey, a young white girl who lives across the hall from Miri in Tulsa.

As the film progresses, its narrative focuses on the three family members moving away from and back towards each other both physically and emotionally. Cufe serves as the primary character that pulls the viewer through the various scenarios in stoic silence that mirrors that of his late father. Interspersed throughout the film are several points of narration by Frankie, each in his native tongue that allows the viewer to piece together the family's history at points when the plot is more ambiguous. These minor details set this film apart from previous narratives. Frankie, not Jack Crabb and other white men, becomes our gaze. Cufe, is our guide in the narrative, not a stereotype or a prototypical white settler. Sterlin Harjo lets the Natives tell their own story. His gaze is their gaze. Harjo does not just speak for his people in this film, but he gives voice directly to the subaltern in the narrative itself. We get to follow the contemporary Native American male and see the Native and non-Native community from his perspective.

The film explores several lingering issues facing Native Americans today: alcoholism, suicide, depression, poverty, and cultural invisibility. However, Harjo is careful to also show what is often missing in Native films: connection to place, kinship ties, humor, love, and respect. Harjo's treatment of the Natives and his emphasis on the everyday experiences of the Smallhill family are a testament to his desire to tell an honest story. *Four Sheet to the Wind* serves to defeat the Vanishing American myth, revive the corpse, and aid in identity recovery. This would be enough to count this film as an important film for Native American identity, but it also

deliberately calls attention to the realities of death in Native American communities and subverts all previous attempts at erasure through the corpse trope by giving the corpse some of the richest and most meaningful characterization in the entire film.

Most films from the 20<sup>th</sup> century used the corpse as a tool for erasure. They denied the Native man characterization, and therefore identity, and instead presented a physical symbol of violence or a primitive past. Films with shallow or no characterizations, such as with *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* offer no source of Native identity structure to decode or discover contrapuntally. The non-Native audiences develop a sense of recognition of an Indian that is predicated on this shallow representation, which they then project onto all Native Americans. For over a century this image has persisted, and American audiences still seem hungry for more examples.

*The Vanishing American* took this reduction a step further and introduced elements of culture and character to the Native before killing him. This set the stage for renewal, but the result of the narrative was the same: Natives had to die, and their culture had to vanish. Native audiences may find a potential for subversive viewings in the romanticized characterization of Nophaie. He is the stereotypical Noble Savage and provides elements of cultural truth in the treatment of his people by white settlers and bureaucrats. For white audiences, the film's final image of the Natives disappearing into the hills with Nophaie's corpse ensures that any association with this character is an association with the past. White audiences are presented with a version of the truth that they project onto the Natives at large. Natives are dead, their culture is dead, but white America has preserved their noble ways and will carry on their traditions as appropriators of their heritage.

During a period of resistance and counterculture, *Little Big Man* and similar films seemed poised to right some of these wrongs with subversive encodings. The film follows in the tradition of pseudo-sympathetic films like *The Vanishing American* in its deliberate attempt to characterize the Native and explore their culture. The characters are rich. Their dialogue is in some ways genuine, and between the Cheyenne and the Pawnee, *Little Big Man* attempts to explore the nobility and the savagery of Native history. Unfortunately, *Little Big Man* and other resistance films of the period were more concerned with using the film's subject matter as an analogy for causes more relevant to 1970s America, such as resistance to the Vietnam War atrocities and supporting the Civil Rights Movement. To its credit, the film manages to explore some of the key features of Native erasure, but much of this work is mitigated through the white narrator, and the film itself is framed around the white narrator being the lone survivor. Under this framing, the film fails to take the vanishing American myth and the Indian corpse trope seriously and ultimately fails to achieve a complete resurrection of the corpse.

Each of these three films presents its own brand of erasure of Native identity. They either reduce the Native to the corporeal or mobilize its spirit for the sake of more expansive cultural erasure. They ignore the contemporary realities of the Native American and favor a 19<sup>th</sup> century view of noble/ignoble savage that is, at its core, primitive and doomed. *Four Sheets to the Wind* revives the Native identity by first reviving the corpse. Harjo begins his film with the death of the family's patriarch, but through Frankie's narration of the film in his native tongue and the survivance of his family after his passing, Harjo shows that the Native is not dead. Although mortality rates are especially high in Native communities today, their culture is not lost. Harjo reminds us that tribal existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is very real, and they still feel the pain of historical abuse at the hands of non-Natives.

A close look at the opening sequence of *Four Sheets to the Wind* is instructive here. We began our detailed examination of the corpse trope in film by looking at *the Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, but the major thrust of this work is to formulate a method of revitalization of the Native American man in film. Sterlin Harjo's film offers the culmination of a century of erasure and abjection. He understands the lineage and lingering relevance of the corpse in Native communities and in film and gives that corpse the first words we hear in this film. *Four Sheets to the Wind* opens with a musical score over title credits. There is an image of a sunrise and the slight sound of a breeze in the background. Then Frankie speaks in Creek with English subtitles:

*I was once told by my grandmother a long time ago; Rabbit ate Bear whole. She said that Rabbit told bear that he had a belly full of honey. This made Bear curious, so he went into Rabbit's mouth and down his throat into his belly. This made Rabbit full for years to come.*

Cufe drags Frankie's corpse to a nearby pond as Frankie's narration continues. A lingering shot shows a dilapidated sign that reads: Private Property No Trespassing. The scene is private, so the camera and the viewer are certainly trespassers into this private moment.

*Once in a while, something great happens in Oklahoma...not often, but once in a while. For Cufe Smallhill, on this day, something did happen...*

The scene cuts back in time, to when Cufe awoke in his parent's house and discovered his dead father in the chair. This scene is both underplayed and tragic but mixed with the dark humor necessary for survivance.

*Cufe's father never had that much to say, but on this day, Cufe's father was even quieter than usual.*

Cut back to Cufe dragging his father into the pond. He submerges his father into the still waters and smokes a cigarette. Cut to his mother, Cora Smallhill, waking to find the nearly empty bottle

of pills next to the chair where Cufe's father committed suicide. Cut back to Cufe sprinkling cigarette tobacco onto the water.

*Now with the death of his father, Cufe's family only gets smaller.*

Unlike the previous films in this chapter, Frankie is not used as a plot device to advance the story of the whites. Nor is his death used on screen to create a sense of the abject. The audience is only allowed to see the corpse postmortem and each shot of Frankie's body is overcut with his own voice speaking to the audience. His son is always in direct physical contact with his body and by extension he is subverting abjection. We are not allowed to separate Frankie's corpse from his life. Harjo does not allow the abjection of previous films. Even his burial is counter to the previous film's depiction of the Native death scene. He does not die a violent death just before the screen cuts to more action. He does not die a bloody death for a lingering camera shot. His burial is not one of disappearance into the distance lands. Instead, Cufe carries his father to the water, according to Frankie's own wishes because "[Frankie] told me the other day that he never wanted to be buried. That funerals ain't nothing but a big circus."

This scene frames the narrative of the film. However, instead of focusing on the life and subsequent death of the Native as a singular timeline of events, as we saw with Nophaie and many Natives in *Little Big Man*, *Four Sheets to the Wind* focuses on the continued narrative of the family and friends that survive Frankie. His death is not the ending of the film's journey, but a new beginning. Harjo picks up where other films leave off. In order to fully subvert the Vanishing American myth perpetuated by the trope of the Indian Corpse, films have to first address the reality of death in the Indian community. Second, they have to make an effort to explore the life of the corpse before it died. Finally, they must explore the impact of the death of the Indian through an exploration of the surviving kin. The film must either exist in a

contemporary late 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century period or clearly suggest an endurance of the people into the present day. This is necessary in order to encode the Native with a contemporary characterization that non-Native audiences can decode as surviving westward expansion and the 19<sup>th</sup> century in general. In *Four Sheets to the Wind*, Harjo manages to execute each of these demands. In this first scene, the corpse is given life and voice in 21<sup>st</sup> century Oklahoma, and his wife and children will carry on his lineage. His recollection of an oral tale told by one of his elders and now told to the audience continues the tradition of cultural preservation and ensures that Frankie and the Smallhill's are not severed from their past. The corpse is only an aspect of the physical being, but he is also a man, a father, a husband, and he has life outside of his body, before his body, and after his body.

Frankie's narration foreshadows the plot that is about to unfold. *Once in a while, something great happens in Oklahoma...not often, but once in a while. For Cufe Smallhill, on this day, something did happen.* For previous films, the death of the central character or the unnamed extras signals the end of that character's contribution to the film. In this scene and with these lines, Frankie is telling us that his death is not the end for Cufe but a happening that will lead to something momentous. As the film progresses and Cufe's character evolves as a result of his father's death we come to realize that not only does Frankie's death allow for survivance of his family, but in each case, Frankie's death becomes a source of renewal and discovery. In a sense, the family's refusal to abject Frankie's identity, even if the body is "at the bottom [of the pond] all screwed up", subverts the need for resurrection by disassociating the true essence of the character from the corporeal form. His body becomes something of a joke as they plan to hold a funeral anyway and are forced to pretend that the body is being buried in the ground.



The funeral scene, with the weighted coffin, further explores the relative insignificance of the corporeal body as family and friends gather to mourn and remember Frankie's life, not his physical being. Returning to Kristeva, the corpse is abject in its capacity to force the viewer to see themselves in the most horrid state: absent of life. The corpse shows its own mortality. It is a constant reminder that the viewer will someday become a dead being, existing only in decaying physical form. It is this abject quality that early films employed to allow the audiences to view Euro-American efforts towards Native genocide without facing any internal guilt. The viewer does not see a life once lived, but an abject physical thing that is absent of life and unworthy of sympathy. It deserves only revulsion. What we find abject about Frankie's body is overshadowed by what we find endearing about his character and spirit. He does not remind us of our own mortality, but our immortality in our kinship bonds.

At Frankie's funeral, his family and friends gather to remember his life and support each other as they prepare to move forward after his death. Miri, who had been living in the city returned to be with her family, and she is moved to tears at her father's passing. Cufe, having already buried his father once and aware of the absurdity of this farcical funeral, is more affected by his family's emotional state than he is by the passing of his father. The viewer sees Frankie through the survival of his family and friends. Audiences are denied the chance to dismiss his identity as unalive or abject. His spirit, the very aspect missing in the abject corpse, is the only aspect of Frankie present in the funeral scene. Harjo and Whitman explore the dying Native American man again in 2009's *Barking Water* where Whitman plays a terminally ill patient who goes on a road trip to see his family before he dies. In *Barking Water*, we come to know Frankie, Whitman's character's name in both films, more intimately through Irene: his traveling companion and ex-lover. In *Four Sheets to the Wind*, Frankie's voice over is one of

introspection and evasive peace as he considers his life and his family after his passing, but *Barking Water*'s Frankie must face his life directly for the audience as he reunites with old friends and family along the way. Combined, Harjo demonstrates the complexity of the reality of death and trauma in Native American communities.

In *Four Sheets to the Wind*, the emphasis is on Cufe and his family *after* the death of Frankie, leaving much of Frankie's insights to the voice over. Harjo reserves the bulk of the emotional exploration for those coping with life after a loved one has died. *Four Sheets to the Wind* offers two other avenues of exploration of the recovery of Native identity in the face of inevitable death. After the funeral, Miri and Cora talk about Cufe leaving the family house. Miri offers to let Cufe stay with her for a while, but the lingering tensions between Miri and Cora resurface as Miri tries to discuss Frankie's death.

MIRI. I can't believe he's fucking dead.

CORA. Can we not talk about this?

MIRI. Well, we just had his funeral. How do we not talk about him?

CORA. It's depressing.

MIRI. Well, yeah, how did you think it would be?

CORA. So you still have that job?

MIRI. Forget it.

CORA. Fine.

MIRI. Fine. I knew this would be a pain in the ass.

CORA. Quit your cussing. It's your daddy's funeral.

MIRI. Fuck you!

CORA. Fuck you!

Miri and her mother will continue to exist in a state of perpetual tension for most of the remainder of the film, but this scene marks Miri's character as one in need of resolution. As she tries to address Frankie's death, Cora shifts the conversation to Miri's life, which Miri avoids. Later scenes will reveal that Miri is living a troubled life away from her family in an effort to establish an identity separate from the suffocating small-town life of home. She lives in Tulsa, a relatively large city in Oklahoma and finds little comfort in the various physical relationships she

has with the men of the city. She drinks hard and barely subsists off her job. Here, Harjo is addressing two kinds of poverty—money and intimacy—which continue to plague Natives into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the Smallhill home, there is a clear feeling of comfort and warmth in the home, but there is no extravagance, and one of Frankie’s only heirlooms that he can pass to his son is a beat-up old pickup truck. Yet, the money is less a concern as the Smallhill family has come to terms with their financial existence, seeming to focus instead on family, friends, and community over material gain.

Miri, on the other hand, is living in Tulsa and trying to make it alone; however, in this existence she is very much a slave to her financial situation. At one point she even acknowledges that her boyfriend at the time is undesirable, but he “always picks up the tab.” On the surface, it seems as though Miri has identified the poor town and the poor family home as a source of abjection that she wishes to escape in order to establish a more desirable identity. However, as the film progresses, we see that she is depressed by her shallow life and nearly kills herself in order to escape her despair. Again, it is Frankie that comes alive again for the viewer to offer some insight into what might have sparked this internal struggle in Miri.

*Once, when Miri was young, she came to her mother with a problem. Her mother said go ask her father. So, she went to her father for help, and he just sat there not saying anything. She never asked anyone for help again.*

This laconic voice over is indicative of the problem of identity facing many Natives today. While Frankie presents the moment as an isolated instance, it is more likely an example of repeated attempts by Miri to connect with her family and find support yet finding only silence. The answers she seeks are not to be found in Cora, who has no identity of her own to offer, or Frankie, who has no voice. Childhood experiences like these led to a fragmentation of her identity as she was forced to abandon the central strength of her Native identity in favor of

finding herself outside of her kinship. The men she discovers see her as an object, and her jobs commodify her at the lowest possible rate. She is of little physical value away from home and of no value at home. Frankie's death will set her on a spiral to near death where she will be forced to face her own emptiness. She is an abject corpse that has not yet realized it is dead. She survives the hard living and a suicide attempt, but the empty shell left behind becomes the open vessel necessary for revival when she returns home to her mother and brother.

While the film does not clarify Miri's ultimate fate, we are given a glimmer of hope. Following the suicide attempt, Miri is different. Her posture is more enclosed. She seems to want to melt into herself. When she sits next to Cufe on the porch, she has lost all of the "life" that she once had in previous scenes. She is exposed here. The violent savagery of self-destruction, the aggressive love, the alcoholism, and the raging personality all fade to reveal emptiness and pain.

CUFE. Why'd you do it Miri?

MIRI. I don't think I meant to.

She moves into his shoulder, wanting his comfort, but seems to be holding back. Yet, when he finally puts his arm around her and reassures her, she allows herself to break down. There are no words at this point, just a shared moment of despair. She knows that she is sick. She knows that she is hurting and that any road to recovery might not be possible.

Cufe, knows that he is dealing with a soul that is more like his father's than his own. Together, they are an amalgamation of Frankie's personality played out in living character as a way of reviving and revisiting the character of Frankie. Cufe has his quiet and reserved spirit. He is unable to outwardly connect to most of the people around him. Though the people around him are drawn to Cufe, he is more hesitant to open up. This creates barriers of entry into his world. Miri on the other hand hides in plain sight. She welcomes men into her bed and is a

powerful presence in a room, but that is all a mask, a persona, that she plays to hide the same internalized resistance to connection with anyone or anything. Ultimately, her journey towards death and her potential for recovery signify the continual process of life, death, and rebirth that is experienced by all Natives as their sense of self continues to endure in contemporary America.

Finally, Cufe offers the most promising example of revival of the Native American corpse and a recovery of the associated lost identity. Frankie's death is the catalyst for Cufe's exploration of self. Where previous films might end any identity of the Native with the death of the character, *Four Sheets to the Wind* used the death of the father as the genesis for life of the son. The film's narrative reveals in cross dialogue that Cufe is living a quiet and introspective life much like his father. Indeed, the film makes it clear that Cufe identifies clearly with his father, both as a person and as a man. There is no idolization of the father, as Cufe seems aware of his father's complicated relationship with Cora and Miri, but Cufe understands his father's personality and sees it as a mirror of his own. Through Cufe's internal drama of recognition/misrecognition, Native men can see their own experiences played out and therefore validated onscreen.

With such a strong sense of association to Frankie, his death should serve as the ultimate example of abjection to Cufe as he should see his own death in the corpse of his father. By so clearly identifying and mirroring his father's personality and existence and still living at home with his parents, Cufe should also see his own mortality in abject display. However, Harjo is careful to fill Cufe's days with tasks that keep him from dwelling on his father's death or his own mortality. After the discovery of Frankie's body, Cufe is tasked with giving him the burial he desired. Then he has to comfort his mother and explain his actions. Then his mother tasks him with getting his cousin Jim. There is a brief moment in his father's truck where the camera

lingers on Cufe with a hint that an emotional catharsis might occur, but he looks over and sees the relics of his father's life in the cab next to him: work gloves, hammers, and a plastic bag full of worn dominoes. Cufe is not yet ready to see his father as gone, so he puts the truck into drive and leaves.

Following the funeral, Cufe's personality is explored further. Audiences come to see Cufe as the quiet character that says little but leaves an impression on those around him. When he travels to Tulsa to stay with Miri for a while at his mother's request, he meets Francie, one of Miri's neighbors. Through his relationship with Francie, we get a bit of a reversal of the trope of the white tourist in Native territory that we saw in *Little Big Man* and more recently in *Dances with Wolves* (1990). The white character typically takes the audience into the lives of Native culture and comes out of it improved by the experience having mined the best qualities of Native life. In *Four Sheets to the Wind*, Cufe becomes the Native character touring the white party scene with Francie and coming away from it with a little character growth. However, his growing relationship with Francie, who comes to represent the promise of life outside of the Native community without the need for assimilation proves to be Cufe's point of awakening.

Francie becomes the person that Cufe opens up to about the death of his father, and it is through these exchanges that the viewer comes to understand Cufe's connection to Frankie. This relationship anticipates the triangulation of masculine characterization that we will explore later in this work. Cufe's deepest self is revealed through his interactions with the women in his life, and through these revelations, we also come to understand Frankie, our Native corpse, better. Cufe and Francie's sexless yet deeply intimate relationship is built on communication and a close personal connection that is juxtaposed to Miri's shallow sexual relationships. Cufe's masculinity subverts the stereotypical toxic masculinity in films, as well as the castrated Other, as this

relationship is allowed to thrive. What Miri seeks physically from her lovers, Cufe finds spiritually in Francie. When Cufe asks Francie about the pictures in her apartment, she tells him of some of her travels, but points out the empty frames as memories not yet made. Cufe then sees himself as a possible addition to her future and seems intrigued by the idea. Yet, despite his growing appreciation for Francie and the promise of exploration that she represents, Cufe still maintains that close connection to home. He travels back and forth between Tulsa and home and seems to be the only one capable of walking in both worlds. He exemplifies the possibility of survival in both spheres.

Frankie's suit, which Cufe wears on several occasions, is a recurring symbol of Cufe's ability to pass between cultural worlds. Cufe puts on his father's suit at the funeral and for the first time assumes the skin of the Smallhill patriarch. He again takes it with him, at Cora's suggestion, when he travels to Tulsa for the first time. He is wearing part of the suit when he meets Francie for the first time, and it is in this suit that he dresses when he goes to a party with Francie. As he is getting dressed for the party at Miri's house, he wonders if he should continue to wear it. Looking into the mirror with Miri behind him offering encouragement, he says: "I need a style" as though he is aware of his need to distance himself from the skin of his father. Miri assures him that he looks good, but sensing a change in him asks, "since when did you start caring about how you looked anyways". Later at the party, Cufe is sitting on a couch in his father's suit when a white man asks him "Where have all the Indians gone?" Cufe is confused by the question, but the man stops him and tells him not to answer but asks him again "Where have all the Indians gone?" The skin of his father is not the skin of the filmic Indian. This is not the buckskin and feathers of his ancestors, but an old suit of his fathers. His closest indicators of his Native identity for the non-Native observer are his skin, his name, and the relics of his father,

but the white man does not want an answer to the question. This white man on the couch is more content dwelling on the supposedly unanswerable question. For that man, and non-Native audiences whose knowledge of the Native world is informed by Hollywood's Indian, the Native had already vanished and there was no recovery. For Harjo and his audience, the Native, through Cufe, continues to move on with increasing hope for the future.

Cufe continues his relationship with Francie but is pulled home where he hopes to earn enough money to travel with Francie. During a conversation with Cora about his plans, she advises him to not let someone support him or they will start to resent him for it. This exchange mirrors the Native tribe's forced acceptance of Federal aid after their means of subsistence was taken from them. In this instance, both the tribes and the non-Native community have developed resentment towards each other. Cora asks about the girl but seems indifferent to really getting to know anything about her. Her concern seems to be that Cufe will either become like his father and have empty relationships or that his relationships will be built around sex like Miri's. Eventually, Cora supports his desire to leave on a journey of discovery and later finances his trip. For Natives, this is a moment of independence as Cufe can rely on his community for aid, not a non-Native. Through Cora as the anchor of the family home, each member of the family is now in a position of promise. Miri may recover from her depression. Cora, now financially independent, can explore relationships on her own terms. Cufe has the freedom to explore himself, his relationship with Francie, and the world around him outside of the family home, while still finding strength with his family. Frankie's narration again explains this change in the Smallhill home.

*That night...Cufe fell into a deep sleep. He had visions of life...and of love, and of traveling. Then he had visions of his sister and his mother and even a few of his old father. Cufe never gets up early. When he was a child, he would fall*



*asleep in the shower before school. But the house was different that day. The whole family had slept under one roof.*

Cufe leaves to visit Francie and presumably to travel with her. Cora is woken by the sound of the familiar screech of the truck's fan belt. She goes to see Miri, who is framed in a soft light of the morning sun coming into her room. Her face is softer and more vibrant in this deep and peaceful sleep than we have seen throughout the rest of the film. Cora crawls in bed to lay with her and brush her hair out of her face, as she might have done when she was a little girl.

*I know something wonderful happened that day in Oklahoma. It was a silence that everyone shared...and I know...it resembled something like love. People come around in circles. Never ending circles. But you're never that far away from home.*

We see Francie placing Cufe's picture in one of the empty frames on her nightstand. He has become one of her memories now. Cufe, while on the way to see her is blocked by a herd of cows in the road right where he took Frankie to the pond. He decides to get out and go to the pond. Again, Frankie speaks for the family and helps us to understand them better.

*My Grandmother used to always tease me about her stories. She'd say, "You better learn how to exaggerate and tell stories. How do you expect your children to learn anything?" I don't know if I taught Cufe and Miri much.*

Cufe has a moment of reflection at the pond. He is still struggling to say goodbye to his father. He can feel his father pulling him to this spot, but he cannot seem to settle the death into his past and move forward. Looking down he sees a fishing hook and recalls telling Francie about how his father had to set his hook for him when they would go fishing as he never could do that part. Cufe now has to set his own hook. Frankie's understated importance on his life is given a final acknowledgement.

*People all of my life have said "You never talk." I just like listening, I guess.*

In Frankie's life, he was unable to open up to his children, which has a different effect on each of them. We expect the family to find closure, but Frankie's narrative explains that in the Native community there is no closure. There is no closing of the circle of all our relations. Frankie's body is a corpse, but he subverts abjection. Harjo insists that Frankie is not his body and therefore he cannot be abject, even if his corpse is. He is alive in Cufe, Miri, and Cora just as his grandmother was alive for him in the stories. The cycle, no matter how painful, continues to endure. Cufe was not allowed to answer the white man's question "Where have all the Indian gone?" However, Harjo's film answers the question quite clearly: they never left.

*Four Sheets to the Wind* is framed around the death of Frankie, but the internal plot structure of the film shows a continuation of the spirit of Frankie in his children. His narrations in his native tongue are telling in how Harjo wants us to see the lingering presence of Frankie on the family. This film shows clearly that there are features of death that linger in the contemporary Native communities. There are walking dead, such as Frankie, who are so internalized that those around them find it hard to connect with them. Yet, as we find through Frankie's narration, it is a life not easily articulated in words. There is a quiet movement to survivance that is difficult to translate. There are feelings of loneliness, despair, and to a certain degree even joy that cannot be communicated clearly. There are those, such as Cufe and Frankie, that when together seem to understand each other without the need for this communication.

The film makes it clear that Cufe is neither unintelligent nor oblivious, but he is not entirely comfortable outside of his element. Relationships such as Miri and Frankie as well as Cora and Frankie reflect the difficulty of maintaining familial bonds when that gulf of communication is so vast. Yet, what we see through Frankie's suicide and Cufe's journey

through the film is a difficulty in expressing what is unknown. None of the characters seem entirely certain who they are in relation to their social surroundings. They understand themselves in an internalized realization of self, but they understand that this vision of self is not compatible with the non-Native world. They pull inward and only reveal some of their deeper character when they are in a safe place. Miri on the other hand, tries to bend herself to the world around her. She seeks out answers in the environment, in the people, in the job, in anything but within herself. She is certain that there is something holding her back from happiness. First, she leaves home, then she moves from one boyfriend to the next, and moves from one job to the next. She finds comfort in a bottle, but not in a relationship with those around her. It is not until the end of the film, after she has attempted to kill herself that she is forced to come to terms with her problems. It is not the home. It is not the family. It is not the job, the money, or the men that have held her back. It is a longing for internal strength that she cannot recognize and seems unable to cultivate.

To revive the corpse, Harjo has given it life beyond the grave. To prove that the Native American has not vanished, Harjo has given him clear presence on screen like few films before or since. To subvert the abjection of the Native body through a reduction to the corpse, Harjo has focused on spirit and the memories of Frankie and made light of the importance of the body. You cannot kill the Native American identity through a reduction of the Native to the corpse. Native identity, though certainly tied to the physical world, is so much more than the physical being. Certainly, the death of the Native onscreen for over a century has wounded the Native's sense of self in a non-Native world and created a simulacrum of ideas of Nativeness that non-Natives continue to project onto the Native bodies today. These wounds must be healed through films like *Four Sheets to the Wind*.

The abject corpse was and remains a common trope in film to repulse the viewer from the image and even inspire fears of mortality and corporeality. We are weak physical beings, vulnerable to injury and death from a variety of causes. The abject Native corpse is an extension of this trope, which is conflated with the abjection of the entirety of the Native community. Each Native death on screen has come to represent the death of all Natives. After a century of such portrayals, Hollywood has contributed to a cultural climate of systematic erasure of Native peoples. Natives cannot see themselves in Hollywood, and non-Natives cannot reconcile the images they see on-screen with the reality they see in 21<sup>st</sup> century Native communities. The education system does little to overcome this dynamic, and the voice of many Natives is continually silenced. If they speak too loudly, they call attention to their savage past and confirm the necessity and righteousness of Native corpses in early films. If they speak too softly or not at all, they risk confirming their own tribal vanishing.

While films like *Four Sheets to the Wind* move the lens into contemporary Native communities and give Native and non-Native audiences a revived Indian that they can see and grow to understand, these films are still a tiny portion of the market share of films today. They cannot compete with the mainstream offerings of Hollywood. It is not enough that Harjo and similar filmmakers can get it right or start the conversation in earnest. If the films cannot become part of popular culture, then their potential for social change is limited. The hegemonic dominance of Hollywood demands that such films and filmmakers find a place in that system in order for the next century to be one of hope and renewal instead of revulsion and abjection. As recent films like *The Lone Ranger* (2013) and *Hostiles* (2017) have demonstrated, Hollywood is still encoding the Native as an abject corpse. Audiences must still view films contrapuntally to understand Natives today as the preferred reading in these films still misses the mark.

### Chapter 3 - The Fathers of the Matriarchy

The Native American corpse trope reflects early trends in Hollywood of reducing the Native American male to an abject image for the purposes of defining the white male characters as heroic and ideal. Native Americans could not find themselves in these misrepresentations because there was no meaningful connection to their own subjectivity. Non-Native audiences were incapable of understanding this failure and were therefore invited to not only legitimize this misrepresentation but to project this image onto the bodies of Native men at large. Yet, even as films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century moved to resurrect the corpse; the corporeal body alone was not enough to reflect the Native subject position. As a mirror of the Native subject position, films had to present a recognizable object. This object can never fully encapsulate a Native American man or his masculinity. It is only a film after all. However, deliberate and conscious actions to understand and represent the Native American man in all his complexity and potency is necessary to establish identity sovereignty.

Throughout this work, I assert that modern tribal identity is structured through the clouded lens of American Federal and State policy. Native American's understanding of themselves culturally, historically, and personally must necessarily include and address the presence of American legal and federal intrusion as well as general colonial legacies. Walter R. Echo-Hawk discusses the historical and contemporary presence of tribal sovereignty through the courts and acknowledges that addressing historical trauma must be a key feature to any restorative justice (99-110). Echo-Hawk argues that the *United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* of 2007 is a necessary step in achieving that restorative justice declaring it "a land-mark event that promises to shape humanity in the post-colonial age" (3). Yet, as recent events in Oklahoma legislature to challenge the sovereignty of my own Tribal

Nation demonstrates, we still have a long way to go before restorative justice can take hold. Part of that mission must be to address the popular perception of Native Americans, which is a mission the courts are ill-equipped to handle. As recently as 2020, the Cherokee Governor of Oklahoma has challenged the gaming authority of Oklahoma Tribes in an effort to acquire more funding for Oklahoma governmental programs despite of, or perhaps in pure ignorance of, the importance of Tribal Governments in local communities beyond the 4-6% in gaming revenue that the state collects. Simon Romero and Graham L. Brewer of the *New York Times* write: “Fifteen years ago, Oklahoma’s tribal gaming industry didn’t exist. Now the state has more than 130 casinos that employ tens of thousands of people, making the tribes the state’s third-largest employer.” This is but one of many examples of Tribal Nations exercising their sovereignty and providing for their communities only to have their resources, yet again, coveted by state and federal officials.<sup>15</sup> Throughout American history, Native Americans have fought for their sovereignty in every arena that they have available, and that fight persists today. Film as one of many cultural productions that present images of Native Americans must serve that same mission of the preservation of sovereignty in the cultural arena. Identity and sovereignty are more than pure physical survival. They require social presence and agency.

The same mechanism for subversion used to revitalize the corpse can also be used to reinstate the Native American man with positive and even heroic qualities by looking at the mechanisms of their previous erasure. Through this subversive act, the corporeal body can then exist in a socially recognizable space: the site in which our projected identity resides. This

---

<sup>15</sup> See also Donald L. Fixico’s *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century* for a robust exploration of past and recent movements by Tribal Nations to secure and maintain resource rights in the face of encroaching capitalism. See also Fixico’s *Termination and Relocation*, for a history of the end of the Treaty policy of Federal Tribal relations and a movement towards assimilation. Laughlin McDonald’s *American Indians and the Fight for Equal Voting Rights* picks up where Fixico leaves off and moves the conversation into the present day with a discussion of Voting Rights as the next horizon of social justice for Tribal Nations and its citizens.

section will explore the heroic archetype as one of many sites of masculine representation in which the Native American male identity exists. It can be produced and demonstrated for both Native and non-Native audiences under the right conditions and in the hands of the right filmmakers. We need a methodology of looking at the film as an object of representation and looking within the film at the objects that are being represented and look at the possible subjects within the film and how they see themselves as part of that social order. To do this we will borrow some terminology from four key theorists in the area of Psychoanalysis, Semiotics, and Anthropology.

This work asserts that film is a political act that participates in the ideological discourse between dominant cultures and the represented subordinate cultures. Archetypes, signifiers, mythologies, and mythemes are tools that can help us structure our conversation around the very real and very complicated process of ideological transmission and our quest for subjectivity. For Jacques Lacan, the signifiers in the Symbolic Order structure the Imaginary Order in ways that allow for communication between interlocutors (*Écrits* 27-29). The archetype, as Carl Jung understands it, calls to this same Symbolic/Imaginary exchange to create often repeated and recognizable subconscious configurations (4-6). Roland Barthes then asserts that these configurations, once articulated, can enter the cultural sphere as points of communication that add a new layer of meaning onto the process of signification that is often politically motivated, what he calls myth or mythologies (231-242). Although Barthes argues that mythologies are *de-politicized*, he clarifies that this is an act that “permanently embodies a defaulting” where the myth moves to naturalize that which it represents and obfuscate its political meaning thereby render its default decoding as self-evident (255). Claude Lévi-Strauss’ mytheme becomes the micro units of articulation within this signification structure (*Structural Anthropology* 211). As

with Lévi-Strauss, we must recognize that even at the level of “*gross constituent units*” meaning is only achieved when they are brought together in relational sets or bundles. In this way, the archetypal “hero” as a concept resonates across cultural and political boundaries, and the form and motivation of that hero and the related mythemes that reveal these forms and motivations carry with them a set of political and psychological meanings.

Crucially, we must resist the urge towards universalization and transhistorical fixity. Jung’s archetype is an effective way of understanding and labeling collections of symbols that register in the conscious and unconscious order: hero, villain, father, family, civilian, savage, and so on. However, unlike Jung, we do not want to assume that an archetype will have the same meaning across time and in various cultures. Similarly, we do not want to assume a universal intentionality or reception in the political component of the articulation of mythologies. Structures in language, psychology, and in film are definable and knowable, but they are not inviolate. Lacanian psychoanalysis aligns with my understanding of the subconscious, but as a system of analysis, it is necessary to instill qualifiers to a given reading. In this work, we focus our efforts on Native Americans and non-Native Americans as broad cultural and political categories consuming similar filmic images in different ways. Ultimately, it is within this framework that the archetypes and their constituent mythemes, have communicable meaning. Furthermore, it is within these subcultural groups that these archetypes, once expressed and received will become relevant political mythologies in and out of the filmic experience. It is within these subcultural groups that the image of Native American men and the boundaries upon which he is defined have personal, psychological, and political relevance. Finally, once articulated and understood as a system of signification, the entire process opens itself up to manipulation, which allows for counter-mythologies and sites of resistance and re-articulation.



For this section, we want to look at the heroic archetype, consider the various mythemes that have characterized him for American audiences, and explore the political ramifications of this archetype occupying a persistent filmic position, which has remained largely in the hands of the non-Native American hegemony. These archetypes have allowed films to encode the non-Native masculine subject position as the ideal subject position to which Native men should aspire, but in recent years, Native filmmakers have appropriated the lens and redefined the nature of the archetypal hero in a number of ways. This new heroic model is at once recognizable to Native men as it more closely aligns with their lived experiences and inhabits a space in which the Ideal-I for Native men and boys might reasonably reside. Additionally, through an inversion of existing objectification techniques in film, this Native American heroic figure is also a recognizable archetype for non-Native audiences. Let us first consider the mythemes that constitutes a filmic hero.

Film and television situate the hero figure as one who must overcome great evil. High drama and tension elevate the hero above the actions of the common man and into the realm of Achilles, Ulysses, Beowulf, and all the other precursors to the modern Western hero. These heroes must be strong, courageous, and intellectually capable of facing the dangers of the narrative. The hero in this sense is more than just the foil for the antagonist. He must eliminate the antagonist through his insistence on his own superiority. This hero, like Shane, Batman, the Pale Rider, and countless others, usually cannot survive in a time of harmony. John G. Cawelti gives a robust exploration of the various incarnations of the Western hero's journey from outsider to savior to potential insider, noting that there are certain exceptions to this expulsion principle. Yet, he adds that even in the early stages of the Western the choice of the hero was the choice between violence and civilization, but one that was also essentially between two

competing sides of the hero himself, noting that the “classic hero usually cannot resolve his inner conflict by committing himself to one of the two courses of action or ways of life that divide him” (95-98). Perhaps this nearly unpassable veil between civilization and heroism through violence is best articulated in the closing scenes of John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), when John Wayne’s The Ringo Kid, having fought off the Apache with the stagecoach and flouted the law by fighting the Plummer’s in town, and the prostitute Dallas are allowed leave town together to presumably live out their lives outside of town and outside of civilization. Doc Boone acknowledges this benefit to the kindred outsider when he says to Curley, “Well, that saved them the blessings of civilization.” For these two outsiders, the best they can hope for is a life away from the civilization that would shun them both. Yet, as liminal characters themselves who lean towards civilization, Doc Boone and Marshal Curley Wilcox recognize their value and release them from the need to make the impossible choice.

Whether it is the classical hero in the vein of The Ringo Kid, or the post-Western deconstruction in Clint Eastwood’s many iterations, there remains an inextricable link between the violence of the hero and the violence of the villain that ensures a perpetual struggle. If this hero is also tied to a culture or set of cultural values, and if the antagonist not only threatens the hero but also the values of the represented culture, then the hero has the opportunity to become a culture hero. When the way of life of the people is threatened, the culture hero will emerge and fight the battles for the people, but the struggle may change the hero so completely that he must die or leave the community as though the mere battle with the culture’s antithesis has tainted him too much to remain in civilized society. Unlike The Ringo Kid, or Clint Eastwood’s Pale Rider and other silent gunmen, some heroes like Wing Foot and White Eagle are able to find a level of

harmony with their culture after their acts of heroism, so long as their deeds are not tainted too much in violence.

This hero archetype has become as powerful as it is efficacious. He is cliché, and yet he endures because all societies want to believe their best values can win out against any threat. Cultures respond when those values are embodied in a central figure. This symbol of cultural values engages in the allegorical struggle with the antithesis of those values. It is a cathartic wish fulfillment that sustains people when day-to-day drudgery and despair calls their lives and agency into question. As an object, the abject corpse is the psychic break from the us/other and as such has been used to dehumanize the Native person to an abject thing, an object of repulsion rather than a reflection of a viable identity. Its persistence in film has often served to define the white hero of the Western by marking that physical boundary between savagery and civilization and granting an outlet of violence for the hero that does not violate the core values of Western society. Therefore, as part of his humanization, the revitalized adult Native man must emerge in a form that is understandable from a psychoanalytic perspective. He cannot survive if the white American hero is defined by his destruction.

While the idea of the heroic figure is archetypal and persistent throughout history, the exact definitions of this hero and his mythemes, have changed over the years. So too have the qualities and characteristics of the threats the hero must face and overcome to achieve heroic status. What is particularly problematic for Natives and non-Natives in relation to heroic narratives is that for the first seventy years that Native Americans have appeared in film, they have been encoded as the necessary evil that defines the white male hero. This hero must embody what is ideal for non-Native American audiences: strong, assertive, and individualistic. He must protect American virtue, often personified in the White Maiden. He must be capable of

violent destruction in the defense of this virtue. Frequently, the Native American man is the threat to these values and must be destroyed. He is rarely the true antagonist to the white male hero. On an archetypal level, the true antagonist to the hero is that which threatens what he represents. If American values are defined as individuality, exceptionalism, capitalism, technological progress, and moral and ethical superiority, then the true antagonist is the antithetical values to these qualities. Community participation, cultural pluralism, natural conservation, ecological harmony, and ideological tolerance threatened the values of American virtue in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Native American male is inscribed with all of the negative components in this ideological spectrum and none of the positive values. He puts his tribe above American progress, though his tribe is rarely more than one-dimensional. He is racially coded with skin color, attire, and language that is cast as foreign, though he is the indigenous presence. His insistence on the preservation of the culturally specific and historically bound territory that provides food, shelter, and spiritual connection to his people is recast as an insistence on the ownership of land beyond his needs with potential he is incapable of recognizing let alone harvesting. His treatment of his elders, children, and family are rarely explored, and all notions of tribally specific gender practices are ignored.

By casting the Native American male as an antithetical representation of American values, he is denied the ability to recognize himself in the realm of the Other as presented on screen. Furthermore, non-Native audiences are incapable of connecting the filmic Native male with the Native men they encounter at large. The true Native American male becomes unrecognizable in this cultural landscape. He is interpellated as the antithesis to American exceptionalism. He cannot be seen in his true subject form. He can remain an outcast, as many

have through self-isolation from the non-Native world, or he can circumscribe himself within the boundaries of interpellated Nativeness. He must act the part. Over time, and with repeated hegemonic encoding and subsequent decoding, Native American masculinity becomes a hyperreal object of non-Native desire and an unrecognizable object of Native desire. Desire, in this instance, draws from the Lacanian configuration, which is the motion towards completeness that is destined to failure through the inability to fulfill the inherent lack. This hyperreal production cannot even begin to fill the lack at the core of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Native American psyche. Lacan argues that we can never completely fill this lack, but even the negotiation between lack and desire, between object/subject is denied to the Native American male when he is improperly interpellated by non-Native filmmakers and further re-interpellated by the audiences of these films.

Decades of oppression without a heroic figure can lead to a feeling of hopelessness and despair. In addressing the legacy of trauma of conquest on lingering struggles with trauma by Natives, Walter R. Echo-Hawk states, “the impact of that traumatic history upon their social pathology is seen in the appalling life and mental health statistics that mark tribal communities today” (*In the Light* 101). He goes on to list a number of symptoms of this legacy of trauma many of which center around shame and frustration at the lack of agency. Heroic models, both in mythology and in reality, are necessary components to the abolishment of this shame and a reclamation of agency. Conversely, without regularly recurring heroic models to emulate, society at large will tend to normalize the absence of culture heroes as self-evident. Couple this lack of heroic models with centuries of genocide, murder, and increased oppression, and the marginalized culture may even start to normalize this reality on an individual level. Without heroic models, young men are denied recognizable signs of overcoming the oppressive reality of

their lived experience. Sons see emasculated fathers, and fathers see their own emasculation in the eyes of their sons.

Tribal communities are in a unique position of limited sovereignty, where we are keenly aware of our perpetually colonized status, unwilling to fully assimilate, and yet unable to cast off our oppressors. We have lost much of our agency, and the richness of our cultural history is commodified and co-opted by our oppressors. We are silenced, and our stories are told by our new masters in an image that fits their narrative. Under such conditions, we have entered into a filmic territory of subalternity. Spivak argues that the subaltern, or the subordinate group that is defined and categorized by the oppressor, is unable to escape the confines of their oppression in order to speak out and correct the narrative. There is a real concern that any who manage to escape the cycle of oppression are naturally ideologically distinct from their subaltern roots as a consequence of their movement into the dominant social order. This renders the voices of the subaltern mute as no one within the socially subordinate group are given voice. Ultimately, Spivak declares that the “subaltern cannot speak” (Appendix iv). Jodi Byrd and Michael Rothberg consider the intersection of subalternity and Native studies more fully and conclude that the “...shift from the conditions of (failed subaltern) production to the conditions of (failed elite) reception is one of the things that makes the dialogue between postcolonial studies and indigenous studies simultaneously possible and desirable” (5-6). In this sense, our voices, even at the level of subalternity, are indeed viable particularly in their unique capacity to deliver the lived experiences missing from the films about us. Thus, while Spivak concluded at the end of her seminal work that the subaltern cannot speak, Byrd and Rothberg argue that it is less about the Native capacity to find their voice, and more about the capacity for the hegemonic order to receive that voice without commodifying it. In the realm of filmic narratives, the Native

American culture hero and community activist is all but invisible here. He appears on the fringes of films that seek to commodify Native struggles and use them to elevate the empathetic nature of the white protagonist. This seems to be the first arena of correction.

Film is just one of the many possible mediums of representation that can return the voice to the people and the sovereignty to the minds of the tribal communities. Our culture heroes can and have returned, but we must develop the eyes to see and the hearts to receive them. For a male culture hero to re-emerge as distinctly Native and distinctly modern, he must also be able to walk in the spaces of the modern Native male and fight the cultural battles of modern Native lives. He must be recognizable in his community, and he must be explicitly tied to that community. He cannot simply be a hero against the villain. He must be the culture embodied against his oppression made manifest. This new monster is one of alcohol, depression, poverty, and powerlessness. These signifiers of the negative qualities of Native American life that justified our oppression must be recast as signifiers of that oppression and stand as opportunities for emancipation. Unfortunately, this new monster has the hero always and already surrounded. Over the last century, the Hollywood film industry has consistently denied the Native male a heroic model, and only rarely gave that model a viable and distinctly Native social space in which to thrive. Instead, Native men are encoded as villains, sidekicks, or placeholders for the much more desirable white heroic figure. A true Native culture hero would need to facilitate the needs of the tribe in meaningful and contemporary ways. For most tribal groups today, such a heroic figure must also be grounded in family and kinship ties.

Among the various techniques that were used to erase the native male social space in both reality and cinema were depictions of tribally specific cultural, spiritual, and religious characteristics. These elements are often dismissed or presented as fictional mythology, or

folktale, where the culture is presented as primitive or arrested in its social development. As Vine Deloria Jr. notes, “the stereotypical image of American Indians as childlike, superstitious creatures remains in the popular American mind—a subhuman species that really has no feelings values, or inherent worth” (7). Deloria is keenly aware of dominant position of the colonizer to declare and control the message of knowledge. Michel Foucault speaks to this tension between reality and representation and notes that there are “two important kinds of power...the power of knowledge of the truth and the power to disseminate this knowledge” (*Power/Knowledge* 34). In this sense, film is but one of many ways in which the dominant order does not only distribute knowledge that it deems suitable for the maintenance of power, but that the very ability to disseminate it, the Hollywood film industry in this case, is a form of power itself. It is less that Natives are incapable of possessing scientific understanding or mainstream religious practices, and more so that these concepts must be tied to the more desirable state of civilization where the Native cannot reside if the civilized/savage binary is to survive. Indeed, their presence and their childlike beliefs are required to circumscribe the borders of savagery. The spiritual and religious aspects of the tribes are generally juxtaposed to the Protestant Christian rituals and practices and as such are assumed to be pagan and by extension inferior in comparison. Even as the films have transitioned into more contemporary settings, the depictions still suggest a divide between the legitimate cultural and spiritual practices of assimilated Euro-Americans, and the illegitimate and therefore primitive, cultural and spiritual practices of the more traditional Natives.

Unfortunately, in many of the narratives discussed in this work, the justification for much of the conflict between Native and non-Native groups can only be fully understood through careful examination of the cultural divides at play in both instances and taking both cultural views seriously. By disregarding or underplaying this specificity, the narrative, deliberate or not,



becomes increasingly biased towards the dominant cultural group in the film and in society at large. By employing a contrapuntal approach to these films, we can gain a better understanding of the cultural specificity otherwise omitted. We can reveal the encoded bias in the hegemonic reading and use these revelations to chart a better filmic course for the culture hero.

As the cultural, spiritual, and religious specificity is reduced or erased, so too is the power and agency in the social space of the Natives diminished. Spiritual leaders who are denied credibility by filmic techniques and narrative motions, lose their power of legitimacy in their community. For example, remember our discussion of the death of Nophaie in *The Vanishing American* as he calls for the reading of his favorite Bible passage as he dies in the arms of the white woman who will go on to teach the youth of his tribe after his death. As Angela Aleiss points out, this “appeal to Christianity, however, emerges as an empty gesture that points to racial assimilation as the inevitable solution” (*The Vanishing American* 468). Nophaie dies and is carried off into the hills, taking his cultural knowledge with him. From that loss, also extends the loss of other power dynamics within the tribe, such as governmental structures, familial hierarchy, and even educational viability. The shaman, medicine man, or spiritual leader becomes a charlatan, and all those who follow in their teachings become delusional. The tribal council is reduced to chiefdoms and the presentation of a representative government becomes a primitive stand-in for monarchies. Within the familial space, the men who are reduced to ignorant or ineffective brutes lose the respect of the youth who would be expected to follow their lead.

Among the various methods of denial of the social and cultural viability of the tribal groups are Boarding Schools and their associated assimilation practices. Boarding schools were not only a very real threat to the preservation of traditionalist lifeways, but also a popular

cinematic trope. The Boarding School represents the space where tribal life meets federal policy in real-time. The youth who represent any potential to preserve traditional values and ideas are targeted, often against the will of their parents, and forced into assimilation practices. Among these assimilation practices are the prohibitions of tribal language use, long hair, traditional dress, and even traditional Native names. The spiritual teachings of their elders are replaced with forced indoctrination into Protestant Christianity, and their sacred rituals are rejected out of hand.<sup>16</sup> Each of these prohibitions were re-enforced with violence and in some cases torture, all with the expressed aim of “helping” the native youth transition into a modern American society. This experience was not only traumatic but also ineffective on several levels. As Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder note, Native students in boarding schools often, “returned to their families unprepared to resume their tribal life but unable as well to carry on as ‘whites’ (5). While it is true that not all Boarding School experiences were involuntary or even cruel, historical evidence suggests the practices were often far worse than even the most graphic of early cinematic presentations. Whether they succeeded in assimilating the Native American to Euro-American culture and language or as Reyhner and Eder argue, only manage to destabilize their existing culture rather than providing a new one, the ultimate result is an experience that bred hatred and distrust in the education system which would in turn exacerbate the difficulties of assimilation.

Regardless, these sites become a merger of both Ideological and Repressive State Apparatus’ as the tools for non-violent indoctrination are combined with very real instances of violent enforcement of assimilation practices. They become the mechanism for assimilation but by the inherent limitations of “hailing” the Native Students as Savage Other in need of

---

<sup>16</sup> See Angela Aleiss’ *Making the White Man’s Indian* to highlight early Boarding School depictions and assimilation practices in films from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See also, Elisabeth M. Eittrheim’s *Teaching Empire* for a careful semi-ethnographical look at the early Boarding School experiences from the teacher’s perspective as they struggled but endeavored to advance the imperialist agenda in the school system.

assimilation they produce an object that has no true subject. This we will return to later when we consider the split as subject in Native American consciousness, but here it is important to clarify that under the boarding school system for Native Americans, both what is attempting to be produced and what is consequently destroyed is neither an assimilated American nor an actual Native, respectively. Consider the breakdown of young Voices that Carry in *Into the West* (2005) as exemplary of the continued portrayal of Native American abuse in the boarding school system. However, the intersection between the Repressive and the State is perhaps made most clear with the assimilation of Charles Eastman's character in the film adaptation of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (2007), where his teacher refuses to call on him or give him voice in the classroom until he chooses a Christian name. Although she does refer to him by his Dakota name, Ohiyesa, she refuses to accept his answers, or his participation in the classroom, until he selects a Christian name. By this point he has already given up his traditional clothing and cut his hair, but his breakdown must be complete. She gives him the illusion of choice in how she will address him, but she has, in truth already interpellated him as Christian but without a name. Eventually he relents when he feels compelled to correct her on her mistake of the name a Tribal Chief.

TEACHER. How shall I address you?

OHIYESA. Charles.

TEACHER. Charles. [She says with a smile] Yes Charles, what is it you would like to say?

OHIYESA. And this is how I came to be called Charles. [He recalls with lingering sorrow]

She uses the misrepresentation of the Chief in order to prove a point to Ohiyesa that any cultural currency he hoped to achieve could only be given by her, not demanded by him. He had to first internalize his own assimilation before she would validate his existence. While Ohiyesa's scenes at the boarding school are designed to cast the Teacher as malicious, the fact that adult Ohiyesa,

now going by Charles, is granted education, influence, and prestige concludes for the viewer that the process, though tragic, was part of the process of improvement of the Native.

As the native youth are removed from their homes and placed in Boarding Schools, they are also removed from their homeland and their geographical connections, which are often tied into their cosmological ontology and epistemology. This separation from the roots of their tribal histories creates a severance between their cultural past and their assimilated present. Under such duress, it becomes increasingly difficult for children to resist forced assimilation. This repeated abuse begins the association between fear and tradition, pain and history, and trauma and language, which endures today as many of these children are now elders in their community. These elders are now guarded in their cultural knowledge and apprehensive in their trust of outsiders. Some have even abandoned their own languages and histories outright, unable to overcome the fear and trepidation associated with their past experiences while others refuse to teach such knowledge.

Ultimately, both in reality and in film, Boarding Schools sever ties to home, erase cultural identity, and delegitimize the social order of the tribe. The individual familial relations or kinship ties become damaged and, in some cases, destroyed. Most tribal groups organize their male social order on a series of related hierarchies such as Elders to Grandparents, to Uncles, to Fathers, to Nephews, to Sons, where each link in this chain of personal influence and teaching creates not only a path to knowledge and growth but also a spectrum to measure one's own place in the social hierarchy. For Lacan, this means that the images in film reflect a realm of the Symbolic that is incompatible with the realm of Imaginary that occupies the lives of Native men. What we see in the non-Native society, in the Other, is not adequate to stimulate the drive within the individual to emulate. The filmic signifiers of Native masculinity do not match or even call

to any existing signified. This is an intergenerational system of erasure. The kinship arrangements are often tribally specific and at times even unique to a particular family group, but across all tribal groups studied for this project, there exists a unanimous reliance on an understood kinship spectrum to organize the society. When films reduce, misrepresent, or even erase these crucial kinship dynamics in their presentation of the tribal community, they not only damage the richness of the narrative they are trying to present, but they suggest to both Native and non-Native audiences a social order that is in all ways inferior to that of the Euro-American ideal at the time.

Kinship, like family, is an essential component for social development. For my purposes, I distinguish between *kinship* and *family* to reflect degrees of relations. *Family* here will connote direct social and biological relations, e.g., mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, and perhaps some extended relatives living in or near the home. *Kinship* is more broadly used to include relations throughout the community and the tribe. For many modern Americans, family and kinship would be essentially the same, but for pre-colonial and modern Natives alike, kinship is much more complex, and the bonds of the bio-family are only a small part of their network of relations. Furthermore, each tribal group may have unique kinship ties, and these ties have evolved since colonization and the turn to capitalism. Where once a tribal council might be essential to the organization and wellbeing of a localized tribal group, negotiate inter-tribal issues, and maintain seasonal and ceremonial concerns, now a tribal council must run their tribe more like a business with the profits, losses, and allocations of funds highly contested. Additionally, with the modernization of the tribes comes a more abstract conception of tribal kinship. However, this is not inevitable, and several recent films have shown the capacity to present counter-narratives to this cultural and political direction.

Kinship and family remain a central concern to the question of identity. My readers need only to consider their own lives to understand how much the sense of self is informed by their family and kinship ties. Men are fathers, uncles, brothers, sons, and grandfathers. They are providers, councilors, protectors, students, and teachers. In the larger kinship structures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century they are also community leaders, professionals, laborers, church officials, club members, and even taxpayers and voters. Each of these examples shows how our lives are defined by our contributions to the home and community. We represent our people and contribute to our tribe by our individual efforts outside of direct tribal interaction. Our tribes are strengthened by these endeavors and as such we are strengthened by the unified endeavors of our tribe. The nuances of these relationships are what constitute modern kinship. Our role in the home informs and is informed by our role in the community. By restructuring the narrative to include these new kinship dynamics and community roles, films will more accurately present the Native American male in recognizable mirrors of genuine and desirable Native masculinity. These community bonds are not just characteristics of tribal life, but mythemes of our heroic mythologies and central to the production of our Native heroic archetypes.

While this may seem obvious, when we take a moment and try to remove the features of our sense of self that are not predicated on our family and kinship ties, we see just how integral these ties are to our development into adulthood and the continued sense of purpose as adults. Not only are we driven by our kinship ties, but we rise and fall with the collective. Our sense of self is elevated when the family is prosperous, and the community is vibrant. Conversely, when the family or community struggles or even deteriorates, we often feel emasculated, powerless, fearful, and at times angry and frustrated. It is in this precise intersection of self and kinship that the culture hero can originate, for it is here that we find

examples of essential tribal and cultural specificity manifested in modern form. Through effective renderings of this heroic figure, films can move the image of the Native American male towards an Imaginary other that is compatible with a contemporary ideal.

For Native men today, such feelings of pride and frustration with the success and failures of our tribes and families is built on several generations of successes and failures that are now so acutely tied to economic viability that many have replaced their sense of personal contributions to family and kinship with financial responsibility. This is exacerbated by the current positions of tribal nations as limited sovereignties existing only by the allowance of our conquerors. Not only must a tribe be federally recognized to receive that limited sovereignty, but each tribe's rights are only as secure as the federal government will allow. Treaties can and have been violated, broken, or ignored. Tribal nations can and have been dissolved. Even our sense of tribal identity is tied to blood quantum, a federal invention designed to ensure the gradual disappearance of all native blood claims. While we cannot force the federal government to act in a certain way regarding tribal rights, we can as tribal nations and individuals defend and support the rights that we have and continue to struggle for greater freedoms. To a certain extent, we have more legal and political empowerment now than we ever have in colonial history.

This historical reality reveals the potential early films had to explore, preserve, and articulate the positive and negative truths about Native families, their kinship ties, and their connection to land and place. In many instances, this meant films admitting to injustices and atrocities committed against the Natives by Euro-Americans. Films needed to depict events that were in some cases still a part of living memory. Yet, only through admission of harsh truths can we begin to chart a path forward and begin a process of cultural and historical healing. Rarely did such moments occur in early films. Our task in the first films analyzed in this chapter will be

to isolate moments of kinship, family, and land ties that articulate a tribally specific reality that Navajo, Kiowa, Comanche, and non-Natives can consume and integrate into their 1920s era world view of Native/Federal relations. These films explore pre-colonial imagery, colonial assimilation, land exploration, and the divide between a traditional past and a modernized American future.

There is a great deal of potential here to expose unfortunate truths and explore important cultural histories. My efforts are primarily concerned with establishing a methodology of analysis that will not only find moments of misrepresentation, but also highlight successful representations. Films are typically complex and the manner in which these films are experienced and consumed by the audience, Native and non-Native alike, is even more complex. We cannot predict exactly how a film will be viewed, nor can we accurately state how a film was viewed by audiences of the past. Yet, we can and will explore the methods of transmission, the narrative offered, the details presented or ignored, and propose possible reactions and receptions to such movements by the audience. Through this early examination, we can chart a path forward to look at contemporary films and measure their successes and failures. We will continue to develop a language of inspection for films that hopefully will inform the production of films in the future. Focusing on social location will further establish components of agency necessary to deliberately construct narratives and imagery that revitalizes cultural individuality and suggest future models of contemporary social dynamics centered on traditionalist values. At the intersection of family, kinship, and land for modern Natives is the birthplace of contemporary Native culture heroes and a restoration of the masculine male social space.



In *Daughter of Dawn* (1920), we see a docudrama that utilizes an all-Native cast in an attempt to tell an authentic Native story. Indeed, there are several moments where they capture elements of Kiowa kinship and land ties but as the film focuses on a romantic love triangle, its tribal specificities are subtle and difficult to unpack for those not of that tradition. This stands as an example of the potential for good and ill of Native films with non-Native Directors. It shows the viability of such a narrative and production while misleading audiences with some of the nuances. *Redskin* (1929) moves the narrative forward into post-colonial America where exploitation is replaced with treaties, land purchases, and political arrangements that are encoded as beneficial to all parties. During the early 20th century, Natives in film were still considered social outcasts and culturally inferior. Their way of life was viewed as inherently primitive and in need of protection and support, but it could survive so long as it moved in a generally progressive direction towards westernized thought. This film illustrates some of the practices employed by federal agents to capture, educate, and assimilate Native youth. Furthermore, it examines the continued exploitation of Native peoples when their lands are found to still be resource rich. This highlights one of the many examples of Natives trying to survive on lands that could barely sustain them with food, water, shelter, and prosperity. Once Euro-Americans discover their lands to be rich in natural resources, such as oil, the lands are suddenly valuable to the western world again. Rather than purchase or lease the land legally, *Redskin* highlights the typical path of exploitation where the land is stolen rather than purchased. This film encodes cultural assimilation as the only viable solution to exploitation.

What we find in the analysis of these two films is a series of representations that are encoded as Native and sympathetic. They appear on the surface to be telling our stories and offering us models for emulation. Yet, as our examination will reveal, these models say more

about the non-Native filmmakers and the non-Native audiences that these films targeted than they do about actual experiences of Native life at that time. As such, they fail to present viable models for Native audiences while at the same time perpetrating a hyperreal version that the non-Native world imposes on them. These films become mythologies about the Native American heroic archetype for non-Native consumption. They signify what the non-Native world wants us to be, not what we are or were. Should Natives choose to reject this signification, they are then interpellated as not “real Indians” by the non-Native world.

### **Early Attempts at Culturally Specific Heroism**

By examining the influence of Hollywood films on Native American masculine identity in *Daughter of Dawn*, we see one of the earliest examples of an independent Native film, which on the surface might put it at odds with the general trajectory of this project. Yet, as we discovered previously, independent films are often directly tied to the Hollywood industrial scene. Independent films either function as a reaction to or rejection of Hollywood offerings or serve a niche market that does not fit the Hollywood scheme of profit driven creative production. In the case of *Daughter of Dawn*, we see a convergence between the Hollywood filmic system and a quasi-independent director searching for a new style. Director Norbert Myles is formerly associated with the Hollywood film production environment and the influence of his time there is evident in a number of scenes. Yet, despite his experiences during the early days of the film industry, Myles was already functioning on a progressive level (Kelley 291-92). In 1920, the film industry as a viable cultural force was barely a decade old, but the Native American/Euro-American relations were already centuries old. Myles builds on this tension by using an American style of filmmaking and narration in conjunction with one of the few early efforts to construct a feature length narrative from a Native perspective. There are three areas of

consideration that will help illuminate *Daughter of Dawn*'s efficacy as a viable Native masculine representation: the chief, the brave, and the villain. At the intersections and boundaries of this tripartite of power, we see the film's notion of the hero and by extension we come to understand him as a model for the masculine ideal. Eve Sedgwick builds on Sigmund Freud as she formulates a triangulation model for the location of masculinity and male sexuality, arguing that "in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence" (Chapter 1). Sedgwick goes on to discuss how the homosocial desire not only marks out territories of power but also frequently uses the exchange of women as a transactional proxy for the passage of power and desire. *Daughter of Dawn* hinges on a similar framework of triangulation and transactional exchanges where we learn more about the central characters through their interactions within their respective triangles than we do through their individual actions. Because of the apparent authenticity of this filmic production, we are further encouraged to decode this ideological framework as a representation of the Kiowa and Comanche cultural reality and miss the cultural and historical nuances inherent in these interactions.

Beginning with the chiefs presented in this film, we can unpack the represented authority figures that the film offers. It is important first to note that not all tribes operated under a chieftain system, and indeed many tribes preferred a council of elders to decide their day-to-day matters. Furthermore, such councils often served different purposes depending on the needs of the tribe and the skill sets of the sitting council members. The Iroquois Confederacy is one of the more famous examples of tribal government that took specific tribal leadership and expanded

it to a multi-tribal form of representative government. The Iroquois Confederacy not only had a war and a peace council consisting of prominent men from each tribe's individual clans who all spoke with equal weight, but the council's members were selected by a different council of prominent female leaders, which established a bridge between the sexes as well as the different tribal and cultural groups. While this only stands as one example, there seems to be a consistency throughout much of tribal leadership in the eastern and western reaches of the continent, at least in the early stages of post-contact tribal life. Many tribes rarely operated under a monarchy or singular chieftain system in which there was a single unilateral leader that decided any and all matters of tribal life.

The Plains Tribes, such as the Kiowa and the Comanche represented in this film, did have a more localized governmental structure of smaller bands under local chiefs that would be allied into larger forces when necessary. Yet, this film does not offer its viewers much an explanation of the nuances of tribal leadership under this structure. Without at least explaining that these particular Kiowa and Comanche were smaller bands of much larger tribal organizations, it becomes largely unrecognizable from most other filmic representation of tribal leadership throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When films lean into a pan-Indian homogenization or a conflation of Plains Tribes with all things Indian, then such governmental structures as indicated in *Daughter of Dawn* and *Redskin* can appear as universal when few alternative models are represented in film and popular culture. Overtime, this results in an impoverished view of the complexities of the hundreds of different tribal nations and their governmental structures.

Of all the pre-1970s era films analyzed in this work, *Daughter of Dawn* stands as one of the highlights of tribal representation, and in many ways the film was far ahead of its time. However, an all-Native cast portraying a tribally specific Native tale must “get it right” and

explore the complexities and nuances of tribal life. Angela Aleiss discusses the short-lived rise of films like this that make a conscious effort to capture Native Americans in an authentic light, which she refers to as “docudramas”. While she acknowledges that these docudramas were successful, they failed to have an enduring impact on the everchanging desires of audiences for Native American imagery in films and Hollywood’s attempts to capitalize on these desires. By 1923 with the release of *The Covered Wagon*, directed by James Cruze, the critical and financial appeal of docudramas was replaced by the heroic Cowboy and villainous Indian epics, at least for a time (*Making the White* Chapter 2). As films serve as a product for audiences, both Native and non-Native, to consume a cultural image, missing the rare opportunity to show complexity in favor of simplicity, particularly for a group as marginalized as traditional Native Americans, is a tragedy in all respects.

This particular film explores four different examples of the chief character for all its accuracy and complications. Audiences then are given a chance to see in no uncertain terms what is considered the sympathetic and desirable model for tribal chief and what characteristics should be cast off. The first example is that of Chief Chain-To, played by Chief Hunting Horse of the Kiowa Tribe. Chief Chain-To serves as the only speaking Kiowa member besides those in the love triangle. The triangle consists of two young Kiowa “braves”, White Eagle, played by White Parker of the Comanche Tribe, and Black Wolf, played by Jack Sankadota of the Kiowa Tribe and their quest to woo the titular princess and daughter of Chief Chain-To, Daughter of Dawn, played by Esther LeBarre of the Comanche Tribe. To complete this narrative is Red Wing, played by Wanada Parker of the Comanche Tribe, who has unrequited feelings for Black Wolf. Red Wing’s character seems positioned as a way of legitimizing Black Wolf’s masculinity.

The story is set post-contact but contains no visible signs of European influence except the presence of horses. The Kiowa, the central tribal group represented in the narrative, have sent out scouts to find buffalo herds as the camp is in desperate need of the meat. White Eagle, who at the beginning of the tale is a poor yet resourceful brave, finds the herd and reports back the chief. Much of the narrative beyond this point centers around the tensions between White Eagle and Black Wolf to win the hand of Daughter of Dawn, with a minor sub-plot of invading Comanche to heighten the tension.

For his part, Chief Chain-To is the prototypical Hollywood Indian Chief. He is always dressed in regalia with an impressive feather bonnet. Myles admits that the Native cast was encouraged to bring their own tribal regalia as costumes, but how much of this was then adjusted for the style of the film is unclear. He speaks with a mixture of clipped language, translated in the title cards into English, and Plains Hand Talk. Kay Yandell's insightful exploration of 19<sup>th</sup> century non-verbal modes of communication explains that the Plains Hand Talk, or Indian Sign Language, is part of a larger collection of what was known colloquially as moccasin telegraphs. "The moccasin telegraph comprises several different types of signal code, each adapted for different conditions. These include heliograph codes flashed from polished pieces of mica or silver, robe or blanket signals, wampum texts disseminated between towns by wampum runners, and...Indian Sign Language (30).<sup>17</sup> Yandell's work helps reinvigorate the use of non-verbal communication technologies employed by Native nations prior to and long after contact. The use of Indian Sign Language here in *Daughter of Dawn* by Chief Hunting Horse, a former scout

---

<sup>17</sup> Kay Yandell's work is thorough and instructive, but for specific readings and explanations of Indian Sign Language see also W.P. Clark's *The Indian Sign Language* which explores this technology in robust detail, and William Tomkins' *Indian Sign Language*, which is much more succinct than Clark's, yet with more robust illustrations.

in the Sherman/Custer era, was likely authentic and accurate to the lines he is delivering.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, much of the nuance of Indian Sign Language, along with all other telegraphic methods of Native Americans has been overlooked in film. As Yandell argues “the moccasin telegraph can help construct gender, bind nations, and enact a metaphysical sense of belonging in those ways most empowering to the societies that produced it” (54). Chief Hunting Horse the man, and Chain-To the character, demonstrate a small sample of this communicative tool that could have served as an additional layer of humanization and complexity to Native American men and masculine representation had films chosen to display them in their original vibrancy rather than omit them or reduce them to pan-Indian pantomimes and vague gestures.

When Chief Chain-To speaks to what can only be assumed as a council of tribal elders, though they are given no titles, dialogue, or agency throughout the narrative, his words are heeded and obeyed without question. As a marker for the role of the Tribal Chief, Chain-To demonstrates three key characteristics: authority, eloquence, and purpose. First, in each scene his orders are given, and they are followed without question: “Go in search of White Eagle and learn whether he has seen game we have long been look for – Our women and children can go hungry no longer.” The young brave that he sends on this mission leaves without question or hesitation. The rest of the silent council sit or stand without comment or interjection. As a source of authority, Chain-To proves early in the film to be a sympathetic and likable leader. His tribe seems to trust his judgement, and his motivations are benevolent. In urging his men to seek out White Eagle, he also confirms his purpose as chief: to protect and to provide. In the competing representations offered by films like *Battle at Elderbush Gulch*, the chief also serves

---

<sup>18</sup> Both Hugh D. Corwin’s *The Kiowa Indians* and Wilbur Sturtevant Nye’s *Bad Medicine & Good* offer fascinating accounts of Kiowa and Comanche interactions around the period in which *Daughter of Dawn* would be set (mid-to late 18<sup>th</sup> century), including sections specifically dedicated to Chief Hunting Horse and his time as a scout.

the role of provider and protector, but his tribal group lacks much characterization. A similar character type will pervade Hollywood films for decades. The Chief is an authoritarian figure whose rule is unjust and whose actions call to question his tribe's support. Yet, here Chain-To demonstrates his capacity to be a man of purpose and respect.

Myles juxtaposes Chain-To with Chief Big Bear of the Comanche who is played by Belo Cozad of the Kiowa Tribe. Where Chain-To's opening line is one of concern for his braves, and his people, Big Bear's opening lines are less sympathetic. "Big Bear, Chief of the Comanche's, who believes that might makes right. Our braves who are driving the Kiowa's ponies are slow – go – hurry them...Should the Kiowas find the trail – we will send their ponies into our country – later we can follow...Be keenly watchful – Bring word quickly if you see the Kiowas so that we may prepare – Go!" These intertitle cards establish a dichotomy of industrious and resourceful Kiowa versus the thieving and malicious Comanche. From a Euro-American perspective, the character of Chief Big Bear plays into the myth of the marauding and dangerous Plains Indians who roam the plains and steal what they cannot earn. On the surface, the dynamic between Chain-To and Big Bear serves to show the audience what social order is more favorable and what tribal dynamic is more productive. Certainly, Chain-To would still serve as a model tribal member in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but if we look closer at the dynamic, we will see an overlooked and poorly represented reality of tribal life for the Comanche and the Kiowa.

The idea of raiding a tribe to steal women and horses is not only culturally accurate to the time, but also necessary for many inter-tribal relations. Yet, in the interest of keeping the narrative simple, it was necessary to demonize one side of this dynamic. This decision ignores the importance of key rites of passage for young Kiowa and Comanche men to prove themselves in battle and earn respect among their people as fearless and capable warriors. Indeed, the



wealth of Black Wolf that was alluded to in the early scenes likely came from just such a raid. Furthermore, the dichotomy presented in the film suggests that only industriousness, arguably a Eurocentric value structure, is a viable cultural model for success. Take only what you earn because hard work is the morally justifiable path over shortcuts, theft, and exploitation. Considering the hypocrisy of such a stance from the Euro-American colonizers, this superficial presentation fails in most regards. In truth, pre-contact tribal life included raiding and battle from all tribes, the Kiowa among them, and to take horses and women in battle was a mark of honor. Furthermore, battles were often fought on a much smaller scale with counting coup and defeat primary over the killing of the opposition for pure conquest.

While both Chain-To and Big Bear represent opposing perspectives on tribal leadership and moral relativism, White Eagle and Black Wolf represent the opposing pathways to authority, respect, and tribal leadership emphasized by their mutual pursuit of Daughter of Dawn's hand in marriage. This love triangle adds necessary tension to the narrative, but it also provides the models of male spaces in Native American tribal life prior to Euro-American contact. White Eagle's stoic resolve and dedication to his task proves his worth in the eyes of the Chief. His scouting discovers the buffalo herds, an important detail on many levels. For White Eagle to stand as a hero to his people, he must possess the ideal values of those people and willingly sacrifice himself for the betterment of his people. A culture hero, while possessing all the characteristics of a standard hero must also have culturally specific moments of heroism that not only provide for and elevate the people but do so in a culturally specific way. Concepts of bravery, courage, and hard work are universal. Providing food for one's people at the potential cost of one's own life in that pursuit is certainly a heroic endeavor. Yet, for White Eagle to seek out the buffalo herds in this narrative not only solidifies his place as a hero, leaving the safety of

his tribe to seek the herds alone on the dangerous plains, but the buffalo is a particularly sacred animal who has practical and spiritual importance to the people. He is not just bringing his people food, but he is restoring to his people their spiritual and cultural center.

The importance of White Eagle's discovery is evident when the men prepare for the hunt and the women prepare for the feast that will follow. Looking at the buffalo hide tipis, the buffalo hide clothes and the other tools, jewelry, and items that surround the minimally populated set of the Kiowa village is enough to illustrate the social importance of the buffalo. Yet, it is the energy with which the people engage in the hunt and the celebration that demonstrate how necessary this particular animal and the discovery of the herd is to the Kiowa people.

The culture heroes need not be men, and indeed women often played an important role in the cultural history of tribal groups. However, this film restores the capacity of a tribal man to provide sustenance of the body and cultural strength to his people. By the 1920s, Native men were living a dual life of tribally specific gender dynamics that may or may not have included Western notions of masculinity, while at the same time being held to a larger national standard of masculinity for self-worth. Regardless of what tribally specific gender structure existed pre-contact, for Kiowa men and tribal men at large, life in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very much one of industry, capitalism, and patriarchal dominance. For White Eagle to recover that patriarchal power on screen at this time not only re-asserts him as a culture hero pre-contact in a time of the sacred buffalo, but also positions him as a viable surrogate for 20<sup>th</sup> century blue-collar, working-class, masculinity inextricably linked to the ability of the male figure to provide for his family unit.

White Eagle's courtship of Daughter of Dawn is a further extension of his status as the heroic figure. He is consistent in his pursuit, but he is also gentle and kind. He even goes so far as to ignore or dismiss Black Wolf's more aggressive approach. This film predates both second and third wave feminism, and the MeToo movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, rendering Black Wolf's characterization problematic for modern day viewers, but such behavior would have also been antithetical to Kiowa culture prior to European contact. White Eagle is confident in his superior position with Daughter of Dawn and sees the chief as a necessary component to the courtship. In this consideration, he shows deference to the authority in his tribe, which will prove useful later when he is elevated to chief. Again, his actions are not only telling for society in general but also tribally specific. His deference to Chief Chain-To confirms the link between the men of the tribe and the tribal council. He is on equal footing with the Chief in terms of his membership in the tribe, but Chain-To's acceptance of him is critical to his elevation in status among the people. Furthermore, this relationship shows the reciprocal nature of tribal life where the elevation of the tribe is an elevation of the self, just as the elevation of the self within the tribe is an elevation of the tribe. This value structure is, again, one that resonates for the period of the film and the period on which the film is produced.

Black Wolf, on the other hand, is content with his wealth and determined to win over Daughter of Dawn at any cost, including assault and treachery. The opening intertitle card declares that Black Wolf is "much respected for his wealth and physical prowess, who plans to become chief by marrying the Daughter of Dawn." That his people respect him for his wealth and physical power is crucial to further establishing the value structure of the Kiowa represented and how that value structure plays out in the men who chose to identify with those characteristics. This intertitle card suggests that for a Kiowa man to gain the respect of his

people he must be strong and productive, and that such respect will confirm his masculine self-image. Black Wolf is wealthy, but he seems uninterested in helping his tribe, as the intertitle card also states that he plans to become chief through marriage, not deed. At the opening of the film, White Eagle is scouting for food to benefit the entire tribe, but Black Wolf stays behind to court Daughter of Dawn. Though we are told that he is respected by his people, a fact confirmed by the actions of Chief Chain-To and Red Wing, he proves to be a man of calculation and contrivances rather than action and production.

His ideology is in line with that of the Comanche, whom he will join later as revenge for being shunned by his people and his chief. At one point, Black Wolf finds Daughter of Dawn in the woods with a friend, and sensing the growing affection for White Eagle, Black Wolf sexually assaults Daughter of Dawn as though such an act would bind her to him without the need for consent from the chief. The assault of Daughter of Dawn by Black Wolf is a continuation of his allegorical representation of 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century Euro-American/Indian relations. Black Wolf is wealthy and powerful and that entitles him to what he wants, and advancement within the tribe will further enhance his power and wealth. Daughter of Dawn, the innocent and unclaimed woman, stands in as the presumably innocent and unclaimed land of the Natives post-contact. For her part, Daughter of Dawn not only fights against these advances, but chooses not to tell anyone about this attack, even White Eagle. White Eagle, by contrast, pursues her consent and desires a mutually agreed upon relationship with Daughter of Dawn, again serving as an important cultural value of property, ownership, and love. Additionally, this scene articulates another instance in which the Eurocentric approach fails to demonstrate the reality of tribal life by suggesting that purity until marriage is in some way sacred or profound. Women and men of pre-colonized tribes tended to be much more sexually liberated than the Euro-American

Protestant counterparts, and as such, it is unlikely that Black Wolf would have seen sex as a means of securing her hand in marriage.

Eventually, the narrative comes to a central climax when the Chief Chain-To declares that both Black Wolf and White Eagle must prove their dedication to Daughter of Dawn in a test of bravery. He tells them that they must jump off a cliff in an act of faith and bravery to prove their love of Daughter of Dawn. Tests of heroism and bravery are numerous, but there is little evidence to suggest such a test would have occurred. Oral history and contemporary tribal narratives suggest that true tests of bravery and courage involve the defeat of an opponent in tests of will, strength, skill, or through some other trial that would in some way benefit the tribe. To ask two capable and contributing members of the tribe to jump off a cliff where even the best outcome would likely cause more harm than good, is inconsistent with the communal approach of pre-contact tribal life. Regardless of the efficacy of the test, the outcome is predictable. White Eagle jumps, but he is injured in the fall. Black Wolf jumps to a lower and safer ledge and avoids injury. However, his refusal to make the full jump earns him exile from the tribe. At this point, the conclusion of the narrative is inevitable. Allowing Black Wolf to live, while consistent with notion of exile as the most extreme form of punishment, sets the scene for his defection to the Comanche tribe where he enlists their help in capturing the women of the Kiowa Tribe, allowing him to take Daughter of Dawn by force. The Kiowa then retaliate and, with a rejuvenated White Eagle, take back the women. White Eagle and Black Wolf battle to the death, with White Eagle emerging victorious. The film ends with White Eagle earning not only Daughter of Dawn as his wife, but also the title of Chief of the Kiowa.

Through White Eagle and Black Wolf's opposing journey to power, the film offers a particular view of tribal masculinity. White Eagle sacrifices his time to scout out the buffalo

herds for his people and participates in the hunt. He courts Daughter of Dawn with patience and gentleness. He braves the cliff jump. He even defeats Black Wolf in single combat. Through all this, White Eagle and *Daughter of Dawn* as a filmic representation, demonstrates devotion to the tribe, courtship practices, bravery, and skill in combat as markers of ideal tribal masculinity. Black Wolf by contrast shows that sexual assault, reliance on wealth, theft, cowardice, poor battle skills, and treachery lead to the downfall of the man and should be rejected by the tribal group. Such a dichotomy is still a viable form of masculine representation today and would serve a tribally realistic narrative for masculine imagery. Yet, despite the validity of these masculine ideals in the film, the film misses the tribal components necessary to give the events and the characters a Native context. *Daughter of Dawn* is unable to escape the influence of Euro-American 20<sup>th</sup> century film, even as it presents a 19<sup>th</sup> century tribal narrative devoid of any non-Natives. Its heroic models are not tribally specific. Its presentation of tribal society prior to westward expansion is reductive and lacking in nuance. It presents Native masculinity along a simplistic binary of two extremes personified in White Eagle and Black Wolf. Ultimately, *Daughter of Dawn* reveals more about early 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture's romantic view of their own pre-civilized existence than it does about pre-colonial tribal reality. As the film industry progresses, the colonial influence on tribal groups both in reality and in filmic representation remains a powerful influence that few films are able to fully escape.

### **The Native on the Monomythical Journey**

*Redskin* (1929) opens on an Indian reservation of the Navajo tribe. The film seems conscious of its place in the general canon of early 20<sup>th</sup> century films focused on Native social themes. Before the film even begins its treatment of assimilation and boarding schools, it shows Navajo Jim, played by Tully Marshall, who plays a good natured, thin boned, and sloppily

dressed cowboy and outpost owner. He is leaning back against the wall of his outpost and fires his six-shooter at a collection of cans nearby. When he hits on the first shot, the collection of Native women watching nearby seem impressed. This emboldens Navajo Jim to try again, but as he continues his gun falls apart in his hands and he struggles to regain his composure. The moment is lost, and the women nearby begin to laugh.

This opening scene, though lasting only a few seconds, efficiently establishes the dichotomy of Native/non-Native. Here we see the Native women representing the once naïve and primitive Native peoples presumably impressed by the technology and skill of the Euro-Americans, though it should be noted that later Navajo Jim alludes to his at least partial Navajo blood. Regardless, his technology and skill reveal themselves to be a façade and the fascination fades and becomes comical. This scene is accompanied by the intertitle card “Navajo Jim, the Post’s first licensed trader, had held it for thirty years – against sun and sand and savages,” and while the final adjective is pejorative, the juxtaposed scene and Jim’s behavior throughout the film belie this bigotry, leaving the intertitle card as more ironic than insulting. Navajo Jim stands in this scene as the prototype for the Euro-American arrogance and hubris that would play out in more sophisticated detail later in the film.

Just as with *Daughter of Dawn*, we want to isolate key markers of tribal masculinity and explore the intersections between reality and representation in the films. Similarly, *Redskin*’s depictions of chiefs, braves, and villains is telling in many ways akin to that of *Daughter of Dawn*. However, where *Daughter of Dawn* focuses on a pre-contact Kiowa/Comanche experience told through the lens of post-colonial filmmaking, *Redskin* situates a similar tale in post-colonial and contemporary early 20<sup>th</sup> century with additional element of assimilation practices exemplified by the Boarding School experience. Where White Eagle and the Kiowa of

*Daughter of Dawn* faced hunger, in-fighting, and tribal conflicts, Wing Foot and Corn Blossom will face similar issues while also battling with the retention of their cultural and tribal values in conjunction with the adoption of Euro-American education and capitalism. White Eagle becomes a hero to his people by returning the buffalo to his tribe and representing the best of the Kiowa core values. Unfortunately, Wing Foot must accomplish similar feats by battling both the conservative and regressive tendencies of his elders and fending off the rapid advancement of American progress on his tribal land. Whatever image emerges from this struggle must still act in the best interest of the tribe and maintain the core values of the pre-colonized tribal experience if that figure is to satisfy the demands of the culture hero. He must not only be heroic, but he must be heroic in the name of his kinship and family ties.

Following Navajo Jim's opening scene, the medicine man Chahi, played by Bernard Siegel, instructs young Wing Foot, played by Phillip Anderson, on his destiny within the Navajo Tribe. "Chief's son, some day you will be called to lead your Navajo people. Follow their ways. The crooked path of the White Man is the way of snakes and jackals." With sheep grazing in the distance and the two generations of Navajo sitting on a patterned blanket, the narrative establishes its darker message. Wing Foot, identified early as a chief's son, is much like we saw in *Daughter of Dawn*, assumed to have an important role to play in the tribe due to his lineage. As the Navajo are already on a reservation and as the following scene will validate, this is a late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century period in which the Navajo people have already dealt with the white man and effectively lost much of their autonomy and cultural freedom, and as such Chahi has little trust in them. By demonstrating the importance of elders to pass on cultural knowledge and values, the film confirms the break between the Navajo society and that of the white society we will see later in the boarding school. The conflict facing Wing Foot, and shared by the film's



audience vicariously, is at this stage in the narrative a conflict between the sympathetic Navajo path, which is assumed to be reliant on heritage and tribal history and a rejection of expansionism and the associated white progressive technology, education, and values.

This conflict is confirmed in the next set of scenes revealing the BIA Agent John Walton, played by Larry Steers, arriving on the Navajo reservation to collect Wing Foot for his Euro-American education at the boarding school. Wing Foot does not want to leave, and his grandmother tries to hide him, while Notani, his father, tries to forcefully keep him on the reservation to be raised and educated by his people. For Notani and Chahi, Wing Foot is the representation of the future of tribal tradition. He is destined, in their eyes, to become an important leader to the people, which means he is a crucial part of the survivance of his people into the future of Navajo society under the subjugation of white society. Though Notani and Chahi see Wing Foot as a resistance figure, the film and Walton want to position Wing Foot as a transitional figure that will help bring the Navajo into the new millennium through assimilation and education. For the Navajo, Wing Foot's preservation of tribal heritage is a preservation of resistance to the oppressors. For the Federal Government and America at large, Wing Foot's assimilation is the promise of full integration of all Natives into this new world order. In the following intertitle exchange that accompanies this set of scenes, the film provides the subtext for the actions depicted on the screen.

GRANDMA. That was your mother's book of the White Man's songs - - and she could read them! She would be here now - if old Chahi had let me call the white doctor when you were born. Hide! It's the White Man from the School again!

AGENT WALTON. They told me I'd find Notani's boy here. I'm sorry, Grandma - but you'll all be proud of him when he comes back to you. He should have been in school two years ago.

NAVAJO JIM. Let him go, Notani. Look at me - where'd I be now without my education?

AGENT WALTON. You're too smart to make us bring out the troops again!

NOTANI. Go with the white man. But come back to me - an Indian!

In this exchange, the film reveals several key elements that provide the necessary tension as the film progresses. First, Grandma and Wing Foot discuss the book in her hogan, one of the traditional dwellings of the Navajo constructed of wood and mud, which served as a dwelling and at times a spiritual site in the community (Kluckhohn 87-91). During this exchange, we learn that Wing Foot's mother was educated and possibly even non-Native. This subtle nod to miscegenation and Wing Foot's mixed blood heritage is crucially understated here. Navajo tradition would not yet have adopted the anti-miscegenation ideology that blood quantum laws would necessitate, but white society of 1929 would likely not have accepted the mixed-blood heritage of Wing Foot as easily, nor the seemingly mutual relationships of Wing Foot's white mother with Wing Foot's Navajo father. We also learn that Grandma functions as a transitional and possibly progressive figure by suggesting that Wing Foot's mother died unnecessarily because Chahi, the medicine man, was so distrusting of the white doctor's medicine.

These two points demonstrate that prior to abduction and relocation to the Boarding School, Wing Foot was already predisposed to literacy and study, and his upbringing was a mixture of traditional exceptionalism and distrust of white men and a progressive acceptance of the values of white education and knowledge for the Navajo people. Wing Foot is poised to become a culture hero before he leaves the reservation. He was raised as a young boy to be a liminal figure between tradition and assimilation. What is at stake here is the ramification of Wing Foot's heroic destiny in the lived experiences of the Navajo going forward. The film then has tremendous cultural weight riding on their treatment of the assimilation practices further into the narrative. The Navajo tradition and the white education vie for dominance in the future of the Navajo people.

As the scene progresses, the film also reveals a number of darker elements that seem to confirm Chahi's distrust of the whites. Walton is not only there to take Wing Foot to be educated under the white man's boarding school system, but he threatens to use violence if necessary as he has done in the past to force compliance. While he argues that the education will make the Navajo proud of Wing Foot, he fails to see the implied violence and racism in his own assumptions and declarations. Navajo Jim offers the film's commentary on this notion by defending the value of his "education." While Walton is smartly dressed and possesses the authority of the federal government, the Navajo men wear traditional clothing and still live in hogans. The juxtaposition of dress, mannerisms, and language confirm the popular assumption of white superiority that pervaded minority relations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the subtext for the scene offers a different interpretation. Boarding Schools present an inherently oppressive system for Native communities in particular. The Navajo were hesitant to send any of their children to these schools, but particularly the son of a chief that showed intelligence and promise. As Peter Iverson notes in his history of the Navajo Nation, "the Navajo of those days would not send the bright children to school, only the orphans and slaves" (13). This scene suggests a much deeper incursion into Navajo culture through these assimilation practices. The kinship and family ties of the Native communities are integral to their tribal education system. It is through these ties that youth are taught the histories and values of their tribe. They learn their tribal language, oral traditions, and cultural values as part of their upbringing. While any non-Native education system will threaten these cultural ties, the Boarding School system specifically targets these values through family separation, tribal language prohibition, and ideological reprogramming all enforced through physical trauma.

Notani, the Navajo Chief and father to Wing Foot, here played by George Regas, is aware of the dangers of the boarding school experience. Regardless of any value the education might provide in contemporary society, he appears to be familiar with the physical abuse and cultural assimilation inherent in the system. He tells Wing Foot, “Go with the white man, but come back to me – an Indian!” Notani will give up his son, as he has no choice, but he challenges Wing Foot to remember who he is and retain his heritage as he goes on this journey into the white man’s world. Notani calls for the very transition that assimilation policies continually subverted. While Richard H. Pratt declared that we should kill the Indian and save the man, Notani defies such notions and argues that Wing Foot save the Indian to preserve the man.

Eventually, the scene ends, and Wing Foot is taken away to live at the Boarding School. There he encounters his teacher, Judith Stearns, played by Jane Novak, who is involved in a relationship with John Walton. Wing Foot also meets Corn Blossom, who is fascinated by Wing Foot, but when Wing Foot learns that Corn Blossom is a Pueblo, he declares that the “Navajo hate Pueblo!” This tension will become important later in the film as the Pueblo and Navajo prejudice not only underscore the transcendent power of love, but also the obstacles presented by tribal specificity and practice. The Boarding School would have all Indians live as one identity and ideology, while ignoring generations of tribal relations. These tribally specific histories perpetuate violence that is intolerable in the new world of the United States of America, but they are also rooted in generations of tribal histories and heritage practices that cannot easily be separated from the contemporary tribal identity without damaging the tribal identity in its entirety. As the film continues, Wing Foot and Corn Blossom become friends despite their tribal animosity. Their friendship first begins when Wing Foot is beaten by Jon Walton for refusing to salute the American flag.

Just after Wing Foot's introduction to Corn Blossom, he is put in the care of Pueblo Jim, a Pueblo boy who drags Wing Foot into the boy's locker room. The other boys watch, but they do not intercede as Wing Foot is made to give up his traditional dress. As Wing Foot protests the removal of his clothes, the other young boys turn away and quickly begin to wash themselves as though they have already learned how dirty their Indian history is and want to re-affirm their commitment to a cleaner and better life. It is also clear that the boys recognize the danger that Wing Foot is in, likely from previous abuses they also received themselves from Pueblo Jim, and do not want to incur any further punishment. They have been taught to fear their impulse to resist. The scene closes with Wing Foot fighting the boys who are trying to undress him. Again, this moment of tension allows the film to choose its path of representation. Should Wing Foot grow and evolve with and because of his resistance, then the film presents a pro-resistance and anti-assimilation narrative. Unfortunately, this film depicts the all too historically accurate breaking of the boy who would later grow into the hero he was destined to be. Therefore, the ends will apparently justify the cruelty of the means depicted in these early scenes.

A young boy in school uniform, with his hair cut short blows a bugle to signal the start of the school day in a very militaristic fashion. The children are standing with the girls on one side in uniform dresses and the boys on the other in uniform jeans and button-down shirts. Gone is the unique and culturally vibrant dress seen in the Navajo camp scenes. Now the intention is to show assimilation and homogenization, not diversity. The boys are then shown lined up as Agent Walton marches past them. He calls for an about-face and the children turn as one, showing their military discipline and training. As they are going through drills, Wing Foot is dragged into formation, still openly resisting. Near the boys, the young girls are also in similar formation. Judith is standing with them and though she is still wearing a white dress, she, unlike

the teachers behind her who are in full uniform dress, is also wearing a patterned jacket in the Navajo style signifying her position as sympathetic and progressive to the Natives.

When Wing Foot refuses to salute the flag as commanded, he is threatened with physical punishment. While Walton is making these threats, he does not show any anger, only rigid commitment to the cause and justification for his actions, as though he is only doing what is necessary without being emotionally invested in the moment. As a proxy for Federal Policy, Walton demonstrates the necessary though at times violent coerced conformity needed to break the Native from their traditional values and to accept the values of their oppressors. Native Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were often resistant to assimilation. The only way for them to progress into modern society is through the violent eradication of pre-colonial identities. The ramifications of this reality are still felt today. Wing Foot stands his ground as Judith and Corn Blossom look on with expressions of distress and admiration, respectively. When Walton leads Wing Foot away to be punished, Pueblo Jim laughs. While Judith tries to protest, John insists on discipline and leads Wing Foot away for his whipping. Here we are seeing a division of the two approaches to education. Judith is positioned as the sympathetic educator who seems more concerned with getting to know the children and teach them, where Agent John insists on order and assimilation. After Wing Foot is beaten, he is walked back to the flag by Walton where we can see that he is both in pain and physically broken down by the abuse. He is ordered again to salute, and this time, with tears in his eyes, he is forced to comply.

It is following this exchange that the relationship between Wing Foot and Corn Blossom begins, and this relationship structures much of the rest of the film. The school serves as a place of pain and loss of tribal ways, but also as a place of education and enlightenment. Through Wing Foot's acceptance of his teachings and his ability to excel in the classroom and as an

athlete, he demonstrates the possibility of being both a proud Indian and a valuable American citizen. Through his relationship with Corn Blossom, he also demonstrates the value of putting aside tribal differences and historical animosity in favor of a more progressive Pan-Indian perspective. Together they stand to represent the ideal assimilated Indian pair.

The flag scene transitions into another flag that is now on the grounds of the university where Wing Foot is studying as a young man. Now he not only comes running into the courtyard in full suit and tie with his hair slicked back, but he also stops and snaps off a crisp salute to the flag. His assimilation is complete, and the health and vibrancy demonstrated by Richard Nix's portrayal suggests that the assimilation was for the better. Corn Blossom, also in contemporary Euro-American dress of the time watches with admiration. Wing Foot is greeted warmly by his fellow students, and this pleases Corn Blossom even more. This clearly suggests that through Corn Blossom's teachings, as a young boy Wing Foot was able to grow as a student and embrace the Euro-American ways. Not only are they assimilated but their relationship is thriving under these conditions. Corn Blossom and Wing Foot share an exchange where they re-affirm their commitment to each other, a bond they formed as children, and dream of a future that seems completely separate from the Indian lives they left behind as children. Wing Foot is announced as the first Indian to enter into Thorpe College and Corn Blossom will go there to work and be near him.

After a short interlude where Corn Blossom is called home to be with her sick mother and Wing Foot is mocked by the white students who demonstrate stereotypical racism and insensitivity towards his heritage, the film moves into its third act. Corn Blossom's life on the mesa with her Pueblo people is on display. We see the Pueblo in their traditional dress as they inspect the gifts that Corn Blossom has brought to them. Pueblo Jim, Wing Foot's former

tormentor is now apparently a sullen drunk who is spiteful of the white world, though he seems fascinated by the possibility of objects of wealth from the white world. It is unclear here where Pueblo Jim's early assimilation has gone wrong. Perhaps this is just another moment where Hollywood cannot seem to show any tribal group sympathetically without also reminding the audience that not all Natives are amiable. Unlike *Wing Foot*, Pueblo Jim assimilated for power and cruelty, not for self-improvement. The violence seen in previous films, along with continued termination policy is encoded as justified through Pueblo Jim's aggressive and baser demeanor. Corn Blossom's father and Jim argue that she has been tainted by her time at school and as such endeavor to bring her back to Pueblo ways. They then begin to strip her of her clothes roughly and sexual assault is implied. Two close-ups of two other Pueblo women, one younger and one older, show looks of apathy and an almost intoxicated expression suggesting that such an act is not uncommon and that they either do not care to intercede or know better. Corn Blossom's father then throws her into a room, with her clothing torn as she weeps.

This scene's violence and overtly racist tone against Corn Blossom's assimilated ways mirror the response that *Wing Foot* received at the white school where he was mocked for being too Indian. The film argues that both versions of racism could be overcome if both parties could accept the validity of the assimilated Indian as no longer primitive, yet still capable of representing sympathetic Native values. In essence, both Corn Blossom and *Wing Foot*, through their successful assimilation and Pan-Indian relationship stand as the prototype for Federal ambitions to civilize the Native people in mid-century America. On the Navajo reservation, it is rumored that oil has been discovered and prospectors are already moving in to lay claim to the resource rights before the Navajo can learn the value of their land. Yet, in a standard Hollywood



contrivance, Wing Foot discovers the oil first and just happens to be sophisticated enough to know its value.

The film concludes in a bit of high drama as Wing Foot must race to rescue Corn Blossom from her abusive Pueblo people before she is married to Pueblo Jim while also racing to secure the oil rights. Naturally, he is able to do both and through a bit of negotiation, he makes a deal with the Pueblo that they can have his share of the oil money in exchange for Corn Blossom and talks of peace between the two people. Ultimately, the film leaves the audience with the notion that peace and prosperity can be had by both Native and non-Native Americans if they can only learn to live together and educate themselves. There are evil or malicious people on both sides, but such moments are fleeting and short lived compared to the benefits of the assimilated lifestyle and education that the federal government offers. While the film makes no illusions as to the pain of the loss of one's heritage, it insists that such loss is acceptable in place of the potential to gain the knowledge of Euro-American society. Indeed, Euro-American society is now a fixture of American life for the Native peoples and their only true and viable course of action is to accept this and learn to play by these rules.

*Redskin* offers a particular view of Native American men. Wing Foot serves as the film's model for the contemporary Native man, one who is educated, traditional, honorable, and capable. He is willing to stand up to his people's conservative ideals in favor of a more progressive future. Pueblo Jim, Notani, and even Chahi serve as the negative example of hyper-conservatism, ignorance, and obstruction of forward progress. The viability of the Navajo's struggle against white encroachment on their land and their way of life is dramatically undercut by the speed and fluidity of Wing Foot's rescue of the oil for the Navajo people. The oil then serves as a marker of all the natural potential value of the Native people if they only have the

knowledge and civility to recognize their place in the white world. As a Culture Hero, Wing Foot's heroic journey takes him away from his people to acquire the education he needs to save his people from exploitation. Where White Eagle needed to find the buffalo to restore balance and harmony to his people pre-contact, Wing Foot must find economic sustainability for his people in order to ensure lasting harmony post-contact.

What is unfortunately missing in this film, is the cultural relevance of oil for the Navajo. Though their people's tribal history is tied to the land and the oil offers them the ability to remain in the geohistorical space and receive some degree of financial compensation, the extraction and exploitation of the oil will prove counter to the ecological ethics of tribal groups. Ownership of the land is saved, and the future of the Navajo is presumably saved, but at what cost? It is unclear in the film what will be sacrificed for this progress and preservation into the future. For America in the late 1920s and just prior to the Great Depression, the discovery of financial wealth would have had far more social relevance than the conservation of the land and the preservation of traditional tribal values.

For audiences of this film, the Native male occupies a space of transition. The film was released in 1929, a year of both positive public opinions on capitalism and prosperity and a turning point in the excesses of the 1920s. Viewing the film in theaters in the spring of 1929, audiences might have seen a film championing the potential of capitalism and its ability bring wealth to the masses, even uneducated Natives. Yet, by the end of 1929 and in the coming years of the Great Depression, the greed of the white men in the film, along with the harsh treatment experienced by Wing Foot at the hands of the hyper-rich white society that had likely disappeared by the end 1929, would have offered a more condemning view of capitalism. Such

economic and social dynamics would likely overshadow any cultural or gender specific messages the film might have had to offer audiences of its time.

Today, the film can be viewed as an example of Hollywood's interest in all things Native at that point. The film must be given praise for its depiction of a Native man, who is strong, capable, and intelligent. Indeed, it is suggested that Wing Foot would have gone on to become a wise leader of his people even without the education and assimilation that shaped him.

Unfortunately, the treatment of Pueblo Jim, Notani, Chahi and others suggests that Hollywood still had not figured out how to depict a viable angry Indian without resorted to stereotypical xenophobia and luddite conservatism. The world that it depicts is not one that matches the reality of Native men during this time, nor Native men today. While film can only present a limited version of society and that society need not be wholly grounded in reality for it to stand as a sufficient model for representation of Native men, it must adhere to realities grounded in actual lived experiences of Native people.

Both films are historically locked and therefore out of touch with 20th century lived experiences of Native men. Both films present Native masculinity and heroism from the perspective of the white male gaze and therefore miss much of the representations of masculinity seen in Native communities. Not only are these films a reflection of a simulacra of Nativeness, but they have come to supplant the real Native experience. On a psychoanalytic level, *White Eagle* and *Wing Foot* call to an Imaginary other that is inconsistent and dishonest. Though their heroism is admirable, and their actions are sympathetic, they are not fantasies that activate the desires of emulation in Native boys and men without also encouraging a movement away from the needs of the tribe and the already potent internal strength of Natives. They may signal the heroic archetype, but it is a concept derived from outside of the Native unconscious, consisting

of mythemes that mirror the ideal masculinity of the non-Native world. They show us how the non-Native world wants to see us. These are films about us, but they are made by non-Natives and for non-Natives.

Through non-Native filmmakers, writers, directors, and actors for the most part, these films fail to give voice to the subaltern or even attempt to represent the voices of the marginalized. We need films that put the lens in the hands of insiders and reflects heroic and masculine images that match the lived experiences of Native audiences. We need to flip the encoding/decoding paradigm and encode films with realist images for Natives to decode and non-Natives to read contrapuntally. By situating the gaze in the hands of Native filmmakers, we increase our chances of producing images that reflect how we want to be seen by signaling new archetypal models composed of mythemetic features rooted in a broad range of Native experiences. We need films by us and for us.

#### Chapter 4 – Live like a Hero Going Home

To this point, we have considered a number of perspectives in our mission to map out the paths of erasure of Native American men in film and the necessary steps for revitalization. The Native male body has been reduced to an unalive thing, an object without identification that was then revived and given voice in recent films such as *Four Sheets to the Wind*. Then we considered the commodification, reframing, and co-opting of Native societies and Native heroic models in order to further reduce the capacity of Native men in film to stand as viable models for emulation. White Eagle from *Daughter of Dawn* and Wing Foot from *Redskin* both inhabit a recognizable place as the heroic protagonist in their respective narratives, but mythemes of their characterization signify a Nativeness grounded in non-Native mediation.

This trend is consistent throughout much of the Hollywood film industry and persists well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with films like *The Lone Ranger* (2013), where the representation of Tonto is not only problematic and miscast, but a revitalization of the Native American man as seen through the white Gaze. *Wind River* (2017) gives up on this pretense entirely and calls back to the *Dances with Wolves* trend of transplanting the white male hero into the Native space to save the Indians from the villainous whites. Unlike *The Lone Ranger*, *Wind River* gives power and voice to an excellent supporting cast of Native actors and calls attention to the exploitation of Native American women but insists that the saviors of this threatened culture be white. Jeremy Renner's character, Cory Lambert, is a solid and complex heroic figure and Renner embodies the qualities of a white man who has given his life to a Native tribe. However, for a Native male to view this film and seek out models to emulate, they will find only elders, drug dealers, and a grieving father.

Once again, our true culture heroes are either whitewashed, unrecognizable to Native audiences, or unheroic for non-Native audiences. We are the subject of another culture's journey into prosperity. We are villains at worst and collateral damage at best. For our culture heroes to have any validity they must face off against our true oppressors, but such a narrative is beyond comprehension. Instead, we must look inward and see the poison that has crept into our culture after centuries of struggle. To restore balance and achieve that cultural center, we must first face the enemies in our homes and our communities. Our culture heroes must chart a path forward that helps us reclaim agency within our own sovereign domain first, before we can ever hope to have the strength of facing outside forces.

Euro-America has grown strong through our subjugation and appropriation, but their appropriation demands that we remain a pure culture, historically bound. Our culturally rooted morality is broken down into unrecognizable pieces and reformed into a mockery of its former self. Once reformed, our perceived heritage becomes the new standard by which we must live as constant confirmation of another's ideal. The masters have spoken for us, written for us, acted as us, directed us, commodified us, co-opted us, and corrupted us against ourselves for generations. When we Native men look into the mirrors of society, film in this case, and see ourselves reflected back, it is a hollow image with no power and no purpose; a relic long since harvested for anything of merit. Our land belongs to them.<sup>19</sup> Our resources belong to them. Our women belong to them. Our sons and daughters belong to them.<sup>20</sup> Our heroes and warriors belong to

---

<sup>19</sup> See *Denying Access: NoDAPL to NoNAPL* for an overview of the Standing Rock Protests. See also *The Seventh Generation: Youth at the Heart of the Standing Rock Protests* which focuses on the youth and their involvement in this protest. See Donald Gunderson's piece for Minnesota Public Radio that revisits some of the protesters 5 years later who describe the transformative experience.

<sup>20</sup> See "BRACKEEN V. BERNHARDT – INDIAN CHILD WELFARE ACT" as covered by the *Native American Rights Fund*, which is one of many reports following the developments of the *Indian Child Welfare Act* of 1978, which was revisited as recently as April 6<sup>th</sup> of 2021 where the 325-page opinion upheld and yet further complicated the issue of the adoption of Native American children by Native families.

them. Tonto, Geronimo, and Crazy Horse are just a few of the Native American heroic icons commodified to meet the needs of white audiences. While we are subaltern, we can indeed speak for ourselves, but we must also develop the capacity to listen and recognize our own voices again.

The bulk of early films situates Native men in 19th century pioneer struggles where they are often the foil to white expansion and prosperity. Some films explore the impact of Boarding Schools and life under federal agents. Occasionally, early films will situate a token Native into predominantly Anglo-American environments. In the first example, Native men are seldom seen in the complex kinship arrangements that would have existed at this time. Films placed Native men on the warpath, and as such they represented a militant role for their community, but this role does not capture the nuances of the various male roles during the periods depicted in the respective films. Hunters and craftsmen as well as leaders and statesmen are largely ignored. We see the white settlers kiss their wives and children goodbye and re-affirm the meaning and importance of their mission to explore and discover, to conquer and settle. Yet, early films typically separate Native men from the family unit, and we see only violence without context or cause. For Native males in the first half of the 20th century, this created a limited sphere of influence from the media. As Natives were transitioning into their new social situation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had little from media and public education to guide their transition. Images of Native men in the 19th century in complete and accurate kinship arrangements, successfully navigating their social spaces were mostly absent. Images of the Native men in full transition were exceptionally rare. A fully assimilated Native man immersed in the dominant Euro-American society offers Native youth limited models and is not the only pathway to prosperity for Native men.

The social reality for many Native tribes in the early 20th century was a constant negotiation of power/subjugation and dependence/autonomy. The non-Native community, fully invested in the capitalist machine, could envision no way forward except full assimilation. Native males of all ages during this period had to re-define their roles in their communities. They had to discover new definitions of masculinity and strength in a social world full of emasculation and disempowerment, yet many managed to do just that. They found jobs, started their own businesses, and managed to unify and support their tribes despite heavy federal involvement and regulation. They even managed to find ways to educate and support their children in traditional values and cultural norms despite assimilation practices that included abduction and captivity in boarding schools. Statesmen became lawyers. Council members and elders became chiefs and politicians in their states and counties. Yet, much of this effort and success was ignored in early to mid-century films.

Jumping ahead several decades we have a pair of films that should be viewed together, *Thunderheart* and *Incident at Oglala*. These films are both produced and directed by Michael Apted with the documentary inspiring the fictional film. Of interest to our work here is the 1970s era role of activism and resistance by Native men against the continued oppression and exploitation of Native peoples on and off reservations. As the first two films analyzed in the previous chapter highlight, there is a general misunderstanding of experiences and lived realities of Natives in the past, but these two films bring this conversation to the near present. The role of men in the community is defined by their ability to have purpose and position. These films move the issues into late 20th century where life on the Pine Ridge reservation, and in many Native American communities around the country, had deteriorated from decades of poverty and neglect. These companion films both dramatize and document several key moments of struggle



between Native resistance groups and federal agents and sympathizers. The films highlight the cultural divide experienced by the Lakota during this period as many members fought for traditional cultural values and lifeways while many others fought for progressive assimilation and modernization. These dividing lines were often concurrent with blood quantum and family ties that contributed to perceptions of blood purity as equivalent to cultural purity. The potentiality of early 20<sup>th</sup> century films to facilitate recovery and healing to help America come to terms with its recent histories was lost through ignorance and neglect. In the 70s and twenty years later in the 90s when the incidents and recordings of these films took place, the need for recognizable demonstrations of recovery and revitalization remained. Here we see how the connection between family, kinship, and land are so integral to the sense of self for the contemporary Natives. This series also revisits the exploitation elements explored in *Redskin*. However, the outcome is much more honest, and therefore much bleaker, at least in the documentary

Finally, a close look at *Skins* (2002) once again revisits the Lakota Sioux and Pine Ridge reservations. Here we have a more nuanced exploration of family and kinship that examines the effects of alcohol and poverty on two Lakota brothers who take different paths in life. The film advances the story began in *Thunderheart* but allows the actors to explore more personal and intimate connections. The struggles of the tribe to find financial and cultural sustainability on the reservation are still present and keenly expressed through Graham Greene's portrayal of an alcoholic man struggling with the demons of his past, and Eric Schweig's portrayal of a vigilante BIA police officer disillusioned with the official legal capacity to achieve social and cultural justice. However, the militant resistance and fervor for change that was explored in

*Thunderheart* are replaced by individual narratives trying to battle the fallout and dismal results of the 70s and 80s.

### **Hints at the Return Narrative for Heroic Evolution**

*Redskin* (1929) offers an early look at Hollywood's treatment of the assimilated Indian, whereas *Thunderheart* (1992) and its companion film *Incident at Oglala* (1992), both directed by Michael Apted, offer a return to this premise. These two further emphasize the return of the assimilated Indian to Native land after a long removal from traditional life. *Redskin* argues that Native men are better off if they are assimilated and educated in white society; however, *Thunderheart* revises this narrative and asks audiences to rethink their notions of Indian/white relations as well as Tribal/Federal policy. *Thunderheart* suggest that assimilation can kill too much of the Indian in the man; therefore, traditionalism might offer the only viable method of recovery and salvation. This sympathetic narrative is at odds with films of the first half of the century, but more closely aligned with the protest films of the 60s and 70s. Yet, when examined closely, these films still struggle to present a viable Native masculine identity that is not heavily dependent upon white interference and mediation.

Much like *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Thunderheart* allows the white protagonist, here represented by a mixed-blood assimilated Federal Agent, to enter into the traditional Native world as an outsider and leave a better Indian than the traditional natives. This common trope reaffirms the original idea that the best Indian is one who can exist in the white world while maintaining desirable Native characteristics. The heroic journey of White Eagle and Wing Foot to seek out that which the tribe needs and return it to the people is turned on its head here as Levoi seeks out what he needs from the tribe and takes it back to his white world. When considering the role of the hero, the culture, and elements of masculinity defined in a film, it is

not enough to simply identify viable sympathetic Native men who act in heroic ways, but contrapuntal analysis demands that we consider who and what is being saved and for what reason. At the close of the film, we must ask whose lives are improved and carefully examine the state of the tribal identity following the heroic journey. When *Thunderheart* is juxtaposed with *Incident at Oglala*, we come to see that the assimilated protagonist is a misdirection of the real power of the narrative. *Thunderheart* fails to demonstrate the ability of the Native people to endure into the present day and survive against all odds as both traditionally Native and progressive.

*Thunderheart* opens with a scene of Native men dancing in a circle with singing in the background. This scene fades into a shot of a man running across the prairie with the morning sunlight behind him. The imagery here is reminiscent of Abel's running scenes that bookend *House Made of Dawn* (1985) and call back to ideals of Natives running across the land free and full of natural vigor. It is the physical connection between the man and the land that this man calls home. This same connection is shattered moments later when bullets rip through the body of the running man. His lifeless form falls into a ditch, and he becomes the Native corpse, abject and isolated from the connection previously established. His freedom and heritage as well as his power and place among his people and the land are reduced to a lifeless body. With this fracturing of relations between the man and the world he inhabits, the film establishes a need for a culture hero to emerge and heal the physical and psychological wounds established in the opening shots. What is the threat that has killed this Native man? What is required in order to overcome this threat? Where will this required object come from and who can recover it? What is the purpose of the murder and who stands to gain by it? These are the encoded questions that *Thunderheart* presents to its audience.

As if in answer to the encoded questions, the film shifts to the next scene where we see a talented young FBI agent Ray Levoi, played by Val Kilmer. He enters the office of FBI Director William Dawes, played by Fred Dalton Thompson. Director Dawes' name is an obvious allusion to Senator Henry Laurens Dawes, the author and lead advocate for the General Allotment Act that would seek to dissolve reservation policies in favor of a thinly veiled termination policy associated with degrees of Indian blood. Much like the Dawes of the film, Sen. Dawes is believed to have acted under what he considered to be the best interest of the Native people. However, as historian Alexandra Harmon notes that after his initial reasoning for General Allotment was that communal land ownership did not produce the necessary selfishness for civilization, and yet some tribes specifically the Civilized Tribes had managed to do just. According to Harmon, Dawes was forced to change his rhetorical approach to the tribes when he observed that many "'keen, able, enterprising businessmen...'" had 'appropriated everything for their own benefit' especially tribal acreage" (106). The parallel between the historical and the filmic figure who takes his name is clear. A belief in what is good and right for the Native Americans takes precedent over their own self-determination, even if such precedence leads to ethical inconsistencies. Both men seem to favor policies and actions that would save the Indian, in this case assimilate and civilize them, rather than advocate for adherence to their demands or respect for established treaties. From a legislative standpoint, both men act on what they believe to be the best course for the Natives, but from a cultural and practical position, their policies create far more harm than good.

As for Levoi, the film encodes him as completely assimilated and totally capable of passing in the white world. Levoi's successful assimilation into the white world is a reversal of Wing Foot's difficulty to make the successful transition. Levoi then becomes the model for what

Agent John Walton had envisioned for Wing Foot. Lavoie is presented as a promising young field agent. Dawes asks about Lavoie's adopted father, a Colonel, suggesting an appreciation for his white lineage. Dawes also asks about Lavoie's birth father who was half Sioux making, Lavoie at least 1/4<sup>th</sup> Sioux. Lavoie discounts this, but the subject does remind him that he was seven years old when his birth father died. As the Colonel is his adopted father or stepfather, his relationship to his Indian father and his Indian past has been co-opted entirely by the white world. The Colonel stands in for the paternal presence of the United States who can also adopt the Natives as their own, guide them into full assimilation, and grant them greater political and cultural capital.

Lavoie is to investigate a series of murders on the fictional Bear Creek Reservation, which is modeled after Pine Ridge or Rosebud Reservations in South Dakota. The murder was supposedly perpetrated by ARM (Aboriginal Rights Movement), a nod to AIM whose political actions covered in the documentary *Incident at Oglala* inspires the fictional works on this film. Lavoie is to go in as an Indian Federal Agent to improve relations.

DIR. DAWES. They say they have gone there to defend the traditional natives against the pro-government natives. Its turned into a civil conflict, Indian against Indian. Whole place is a tinderbox. Now this is a murder investigation, but it's also about helping people caught in the illusions of the past come to terms with the realities of the present...You're going in there as who you are, an American Indian federal officer. I happen to believe that with a Native American in there that we can diffuse the tension and improve relations. As long as our P.R. officer is disseminating information that we're sending the Indians one of their own, I don't think anyone is going to be asking you to weave any baskets or make it rain.

Dawes' words here echo the general public sentiment towards Native Americans at the time of the film's setting. The rise of AIM in the 70s divided American sentiments. Their efforts were met with a mixture of sympathy and derision. The film dismisses the viable grievances of the disenfranchised and underrepresented in the United States. As Dawes is in a

position of respect and power, representing not only white-collar ideology but the validity of the Federal Government and its respective policies, the film initially argues that ARM is the enemy. ARM is not only counter to the safety of the Sioux tribal members as indicated by the murders they are supposed to have committed, but they are also an enemy of the Federal Government. Hollywood has repeatedly missed key opportunities to show real Native heroism in favor of a more sinister and colonial centered perspective. Native heroes need not be perfect, and their motives need not always decode as pure and altruistic, and the resistance movement of AIM is no exception. Unfortunately, Hollywood tends to err on the side of the negative and avoid the positive interactions.

While the film is fictional, it is based on actual events that occurred on several Indian reservations between the 60s and early 80s. Apted's documentary *Incident at Oglala* illustrates just such a series of murders and conflicts on which this film is based. Dawes' explanation of the situation mirrors that of public sentiment at the time of the reservation conflicts and the perception of AIM, but *Incident at Oglala* establishes a different narrative through its interviews with key members of AIM.

JOHN TRUDELL. The killing had to stop. It had to stop. When you've got old people, when your elders live in a climate of total fear, and not an unjustified fear, when they're the targets, it's an intolerable situation. Something must be done.

LEONARD PELTIER. We can't just be going around here claiming to be AIM members and we're concerned about people and everything else. I said, we've got to really start doing stuff. Building community gardens, chopping wood, hauling water, whatever they needed done. That's your responsibility. That's what a warrior's responsibility is. It's not just prancing around with a gun in their hand and thinking to show everybody they're tough. In our society, that's not a warrior's role.

JOHN TRUDELL. The violent rap that we got laid on us, it was all our people [AIM members] that died...All through the course, all through the years of all of this, all I did was talk. And they cracked down hard just for that.

Both John Trudell, who plays Jimmy Looks Twice in *Thunderheart*, and Leonard Peltier who was convicted of the murder of two Federal Agents and is currently serving two life sentences in Federal prison, were a part of the AIM movement as documented in *Incident at Oglala*. In their interviews for the documentary, they suggest a very different resistance organization than the one depicted by Dawes at the opening of *Thunderheart*. Here, we have an example of the difference between the lived experience of the insiders, Trudell and Peltier in this case, and the perception of the general public regarding Indian relations. Dawes' perspective is very similar to the general popular opinion regarding Native activism and indeed the very sentiments expressed and exercised by the Federal government at this time. Yet, as we see in Trudell and Peltier's testimony, they see themselves as culture heroes, or protective warriors at the very least.

Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allan Warrior explore the historical events of the rise of AIM and its cultural impact in their 1996 book *Like a Hurricane*. In it they write, "The American Indian Movement, which the people of Pine Ridge would call upon to support their efforts, would emerge as the single most influential Indian organization in the country – not just in the cities, where their message had already been gaining a place of prominence, but among the reservation people as well" (112-113). As Trudell and Peltier confirm, AIM sought to bring to their suffering people what they desperately needed to help them overcome the obstacles they were facing. Just as Wing Foot and White Eagle before him were tasked with battling the dangers threatening their people, exploitation and hunger, respectively, Trudell and Peltier, along with the other members of AIM were charged with battling the murders, threats, and exploitation of the Sioux and other Natives in the 60s and 70s under continued Federal policies. For the Sioux in the 70s, there was no Wing Foot to protect them from land rights and resource

exploitation. By the 1970s, many Native American tribes had already endured decades of exploitation that *Redskin* anticipated. This further illustrates one of the fundamental flaws of previous films that spoke for Native Americans instead of with them. Wing Foot's heroic status is based on a romantic lie. *Thunderheart*, by contrast, establishes ARM as the enemy in the beginning, but this conflict is turned on its head as the film progresses.

Later in *Thunderheart*, we get to meet Jimmy Looks Twice, who is wanted for the murder of Leo Fast Elk, the man shot at the film's opening. By the time he encounters Jimmy, Levoi has already witnessed the poverty and violence of the reservation life. Yet, at this point he is still very much the assimilated Indian in his view of his people. He does not see a people in peril or a heritage and culture in danger of eradication. He does not see a tribal group suffering under the oppressive Federal policies that stifle economic growth and foster abuse and addiction. He sees the Euro-American narrative of individualism over communal identity. The hardships on the reservation are encoded as a choice, regardless of environmental pressures. Such an image and reaction is as justifiable for the mid-90s audience of the film as it is for the mid-70s setting of the film's narrative. The adults we see in the opening shots of the reservation walk about aimless or drunk. This poverty is encoded as self-evident proof of the Lakota's refusal to work to improve their situation. This, of course, misses the underlying socio-economic obstacles combined with absurd bureaucracy that stifles economic growth on many reservations. Further, this assumption of willful poverty ignores the persistent racist treatment faced by many Native Americans off the reservation who cannot "pass" as white in the way that Levoi has. When he first arrests Jimmy, Levoi finds him in a smoke lodge where Jimmy proclaims that the Federal Agents are violating a sacred ceremony. This ceremony is not respected by the arresting agents



and as Levoi is setup as the protagonist and Jimmy the fugitive, the audience is encouraged to also dismiss the associated ceremony.

By this point, the film offers two potential heroes for the narrative, the assimilated mixed-blood in Levoi and the full-blood idealistic traditionalist in Jimmy. Levoi is loaded with the usual mythemes of the Regan/Bush era archetypal hero, while Jimmy signifies the stereotypical criminal and social outcast. Levoi is clean cut and wears the suit of the Federal Agent, while Jimmy is shabbily dressed in denim with his hair cut into a mohawk. Levoi is encoded as a representative of law, order, and civilization, while Jimmy is an agent of chaos seeking to disrupt the power structure on his reservation. Yet, in all the scenes involving the two men, it is Levoi and the federal agents who engage in acts of violence and disruption while Jimmy and his traditionalist friends use their voices and actions for peace. The agents then ally themselves with the GOON squad and the corrupt Jack Milton, a stand-in for the real-life Richard Wilson as depicted in *Incident at Oglala*. GOON stands for Guardians of the Oglala Nation, which were effectively a militarized arm of Tribal Chief Richard Wilson. Additionally, Levoi finds himself spending more time with the Tribal Policeman Walter Crow Horse, here played by Graham Greene. Crow Horse advocates for a traditional way of life and opposes Milton and the GOON squad. Ultimately, the film pivots on two competing narratives, the civilized and legal Federal agents and GOONS, and the primitive and regressive traditionalists in Crow Horse and Looks Twice.

The tension between native and assimilated and between traditional and civilized serve as a backdrop for both *Thunderheart* and *Incident at Oglala*. Both films serve to highlight how complex this continued struggle actually is and how the struggle is regularly played out in the lived experiences of Natives on and off the reservation. Levoi's assimilation is a negative

characteristic. It hardens him to the plight of his people and distances him from seeing solutions to real problems. Yet, as the film progresses and Levoi becomes “more native” through his interactions with Grandpa Reaches, Crow Horse, and Jimmy Looks Twice, he becomes more sensitive to the environment around him. This sensitization is further elevated by visions he begins to have while on the reservation which bring him to terms with his Native father and his father’s apparent alcoholism. Furthermore, Levoi’s disillusionment with his superior officer Cooch allows him to separate himself from the corruption of the Federal government and the greed and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system.

The constant threat of exploitation runs through each film in this section. In *Daughter of Dawn*, Black Wolf sought to exploit his position of power to further exploit *Daughter of Dawn*’s connection to the chief and his own promotion within the community. This exploitation is thwarted by the film’s protagonist and culture hero: White Eagle. In *Redskin*, the Navajo are first being exploited by the Federal Agents in order to assimilate their youth, which will have the long-term benefit of opening up their tribal land and sovereignty to more Federal control. Later, the Navajo are more directly threatened by the exploitation of oil speculators. In both cases, Wing Foot is able to thwart the exploitation by his refusal to accept full assimilation and his preservation of his people’s land and resource rights. In *Thunderheart*, land exploitation is again the dominant threat that leads to murder and harassment of the Sioux. Like *Redskin*, this exploitation is demonstrated through the slow decline of the way of life on tribal land through continued Federal involvement and mismanagement. Here Milton attempts to steal the land rights of the Sioux uranium mining, a move that will gain Milton and his men huge financial kickbacks.

The film concludes with Jimmy in Federal custody, but Levoi manages to stop Milton and Cooch from completing their goals. He does so with the help of Crow Horse and the people of reservation. Levoi acts largely in the name of Federal law. Crow Horse and the people of the reservation act on behalf of their own tribal safety and sovereignty. Levoi may have been instrumental in stopping the exploiters, but it is clear that he has done nothing to stop the long-term exploitation of the Sioux. For this, we can only assume it will be Crow Horse, surviving members of ARM, and the Sioux themselves. Unfortunately, history proves that between the events of the film in the early 70s to the early 90s the exploitation of Natives on and off tribal lands has only persisted. With continued land disputes in Standing Rock and other locations, the exploitation of the Sioux remains a constant threat.

By the film's conclusion, Levoi has a full character turnaround. He is more sympathetic to the Native concerns and in touch with his own Nativeness. He, like Wing Foot before him, is able to use the skills, knowledge, and contacts he has made during his assimilation period to help better his people. Yet, unlike Wing Foot, Levoi takes a different direction at the film's close, and it is assumed that he will move back to the city, though now he plans to advocate more overtly on behalf of the Sioux. Crow Horse reminds him that if he ever needs a place to return, that the reservation would still be there. Apted even goes so far as to allow Grandpa Reaches to gift Levoi with a sacred pipe before he leaves.

This concept of allowing the Euro-American protagonists to enter Native spaces and co-opt their spirituality, sensitivity, and wisdom, while maintaining the ability to pass in the non-Native world was perhaps best illustrated in *Dances with Wolves* (1990). In both *Dances with Wolves* and *Thunderheart* we see our protagonist grow from his time with the Natives and gain wisdom and some form of spirituality. Yet, by the close of both films, the Native tribes

represented are either unchanged or worse off than they were before the arrival of the protagonist. The lingering issues of exploitation, corruption, and greed still linger over the destiny of the Natives. The root causes behind the poverty, hunger, addiction, and depression experienced on the reservation are left unresolved. Levoi's heroic journey is one that seems destined to benefit a different culture. This prevents him from serving as a true cultural hero to the Sioux or Natives in general. His cultural appropriation and tourism further serve to reinforce the negative stereotype in both Native and non-Native spaces that suggests that all a good white man needs is a little Nativeness to sort out his corruption. The tribal groups represented become passive and their value becomes limited only to how they can help improve the central white character. The tension between tradition/progress or heritage/assimilation are played out in the experiences of the central character, but in Levoi's case, he is able to move on as a more complete person. For the tribe, these tensions still remain, waiting for their true culture hero.

### **Locational Heroism for Modern Native Men**

*Daughter of Dawn* established the potential for film to depict the richness and diversity of Native life prior to European influence. Yet, because of the time period of the narrative, it was unable to address the lingering issues facing Native men today. While White Eagle and Black Wolf serve as positive and negative cultural models, respectively, their time-locked status diminishes their potential to offer a viable model for today's audiences. Moving forward into *Redskin*, we are treated to an updated post-contact look at native life, and we see the difficulties and problems associated with termination policies and assimilation practices. These tensions, still keenly felt by Native communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, allow Wing Foot to have more cultural viability for today's audiences; unfortunately, his heroic journey combined with the film's conclusion suggests that the state of Native life will improve only under the assimilation

practices addressed in the film. Wing Foot will remain with his people and become their new chief, and his white contacts and white education will help him manage the newfound oil wealth that will presumably help his people prosper.

Considering the date of release of *Redskin* (1929), such a conclusion makes sense. During this period, Federal policy and propaganda still argued for the viability of assimilation as a necessary and effective tool to help Natives advance into the modern world. However, what is not answered in *Redskin* and what could not be fully answered for several decades is the impact of assimilation and termination policies on the Natives who remain on the reservation and try to walk that line between modern Indians and traditional Natives. This continued insistence on a double consciousness leads to a fractured and chaotic identity that requires some form of resolution to escape the resulting cycle of despair and displacement felt by many contemporary Native men.

W.E.B. Du Bois' conception of double consciousness situates the identity of the African American in a perpetual state of fissure where "one ever feels his twoness" or a state of both American and African American (4). This inherent fracturing is similar to Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity in that it insists on an opening up of multiple cultural perspectives at the same time with the capacity to travel between realms of identity without committing to or succumbing to any single one (3-7). Whereas double consciousness suggests an identity of twoness, hybridity suggests a multiplicity of possibilities. While both concepts in their own way destabilize an essentialist understanding of identity and foreground the socially constructed nature of identity, neither is able to adequately account identity as process. By revisiting Lacan, we come to understand that the importance of the subject is not, rather than is. While Du Bois positions the black American experience as comprised of two competing wholes, and Bhabha emphasizes the

capacity to navigate a multiplicity as a way of avoidance of essentialism, Lacan's subject as split emphasizes the incompleteness inherent in all as formative to subjectivity. Lacan explains "that the interest the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it-namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the objet a" (*Four Fundamentals* 83). To put this in an example, Levoi is called out for his Native heritage at the beginning of the film, but that is not Levoi as subject. Nor is his unwillingness to lean into his father's heritage a figuration of Levoi as subject. To move towards one, is to threaten the destruction of the other. Instead, each of these reflects the incompleteness of Levoi, and it is only in these multiple and unique utterances of lack that we find Levoi as subject, a being with a gap capable of being filled at any time by features of Native, Lakota, Male, White, Authority, Revolutionary, and so on.

Through this configuration, the Native American masculine identity is not merely a classification of multiple consciousnesses, or a liminal space between competing identities; rather, it both constitutes and is constituted by a lack which is still yet situated in a uniquely Native American experience. Linda Alcoff adds that "A realistic identity politics, then, is one that recognizes the dynamic, variable, and negotiated character of identity. It is one that acknowledges the variability in an identity's felt significance and cultural meaning. Yet it is also one that recognizes that social categories of identity often help-fully name specific social locations from which individuals engage in, among other things, political judgment (*Reclaiming Identity* 341). By joining Alcoff and Lacan here, we come to see that the subject as split is not only viable and natural, but that its specific social location within the Native American community reveals its inherent authenticity in the lived experiences of Native men today. Yet,

this identity is not immune to destruction, especially under the pressures of assimilation and cultural annihilation.

*Thunderheart* demonstrates what happens to our culture hero once he is assimilated beyond the point of traditional ideology and is asked to return to his people to help them through a time of struggle. Through its various male characters and culture roles, *Thunderheart* asks its audience to consider identity and the complexities of a Native identity in a post-contact, post-colonial world where tensions are high, and the future of a people rest in the hands of the select few. Still, we are left with an unsatisfying treatment of the Native male navigating through his own assimilation and modernization as Levoi, unlike White Eagle or Wing Foot, is not motivated to protect his tribe at the beginning of the film, nor does he feel at home with this Nat. people. He is moved to continue to advocate for the Native tribe, and even continues to have visions of his ancestors, but his future is positioned away from his Native community. Unlike Wing Foot, who took the best of the white man's world and brought it back to his people, Levoi has reversed this narrative and co-opted the best of the Native world and will now take it back to his assimilated world. *Thunderheart* fails to demonstrate how contemporary Native males find their place among their people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century America. What sort of cultural hero and model of Native Masculinity represents the lingering tensions of American/Native American identity in the new millennium? Is it possible, to have the heroic journey without ever leaving the reservation? Must audiences choose between the Wing Foots or Levois, or is it possible to resurrect the White Eagle and update the model so that audiences can see a Native man motivated by family and tribe to fight for his people without reliance on the Euro-American influence to help him succeed?

For *Skins* (2002), Dir. Chris Eyre walks the line between traditional native values and contemporary native issues. He does not shy away from the alcoholism, abuse, poverty, and depression hinted at in *Thunderheart*, but he also does not rely on the great white hope to liberate the struggling natives. Rudy, played by Eric Schweig, is a tribal police officer working the reservation. His brother Mogie, played by Graham Greene, is a Vietnam Veteran and struggling alcoholic. The film pivots on the personal struggles of both men as they try to come to terms with the suffering they feel personally, and that which they see affecting their people. For Rudy, the struggles of his brother with alcoholism serve as the symbol for all that is wrong with tribal relations at that time. Director Chris Eyre argues that the system does not work for people like Rudy, Mogie, and the Lakota on the reservation. The legal system that should protect them, and the medical system that should serve them are incredibly lacking on the reservation, and the bureaucracy in place prevents forward movement to resolve the gap in protection and coverage (Eyre Audio Commentary). Rudy is frustrated by the presence of several liquor stores just outside of reservation borders where alcohol is illegal. He sees his people struggling daily to cope with substance abuse and depression while just on the other side of tribal lands white businessmen are profiting off these very struggles. The natural resources and land disputes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century have now devolved into simple bids for barely subsistent Federal money.

Recognizing the need to produce a film that not only captures a conventional Hollywood style narrative, but also adds a level of realism and immediacy, Eyre modifies the film medium to his advantage. *Skins* opens with a documentary montage with Eyre narrating the current struggles lingering on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The montage tracks over various images of poverty and despair, and over monuments and signs signaling the landmarks of the reservation and nearby locations. This cinematography calls back to *Incident at Oglala*, but instead of



separating this reality from the fantasy of the two films as Apted chose to do, Eyre has blended the two together: consciously combining the truth associated with a documentary style and the representational aspects of film narrative. Eyre has also noted that these shots were taken from outside sources, which likely allowed him to save money. It was likely much cheaper to reuse the aerial and establishing shots over large areas of terrain than it would have been to capture the shots himself, even though the footage is of much lower quality than the rest of the film cinematography (Eyre Audio Commentary). This reflects a fundamental component of modern technology and techniques finally allowing Native filmmakers to bypass the financial barrier to entry into the film medium. He reuses this disruptive technique later in the film as he creates a story within the story. Not only is he re-appropriating the technology to better suit his needs, but he is subverting the convention of presenting fantasy as reality. The montage then moves from monuments to images of alcohol abuse as the narration changes to clips of news reports addressing the poverty and addiction on the reservation. As the drunks are rounded up and thrown into jail cells by the dozens, the camera then moves back to an aerial establishing shots of a residential area. The grass here is yellowed, most of the property is bare dirt, and the houses are uniform and bleak. The population and the landscape are devoid of the life and the vibrancy promised in *Daughter of Dawn*. Eyre clearly establishes Pine Ridge as a place in need of a hero to bring life and prosperity, hope and culture back to his people.

Eyre also seems keenly aware of the political nature of the film he is producing. Indeed, Eyre deliberately addresses the broken political promises and the hypocrisy of the government. The following excerpts of the dialogue during the opening montage illustrates four key perspectives that Eyre tries to bring to bear on the problem in this film: Government, Economic, Statistical, and Personal.

“We’re coming from Washington to ask you what you want to do and tell you we will give you the tools and support to get done what you want to do for your children and their future.” From a clip from then President Bill Clinton.

“In the shadow of one of America’s most popular tourist attractions, South Dakota’s Mt. Rushmore, some sixty miles southeast lies the poorest of all counties in the U.S.: the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.” Chris Eyre’s narration during the establishing shots of the surrounding monuments.

“40% of residents here live in substandard quarter...75% unemployment. Death from alcoholism is 9 times the national average. Life expectancy here is 15 years less than most Americans.” Lifted direction from the news reports that Eyre co-opted for the film.

“I believe that America is big enough, powerful enough, and rich enough to really deal with the American Indian in a way that should be done.” Pine Ridge resident, Milo Yellow Hair.

As these excerpts of dialogue reveal, Eyre, within just a few minutes of the film’s opening is inviting many divergent perspectives and voices to address the issues. The connection between then President Clinton and Mt. Rushmore will play out again later as the monument to great U.S. Presidents is juxtaposed to an instance of another presidential promise that yielded very little.<sup>21</sup> Eyre’s association of the Rushmore site in relation to the Pine Ridge Reservation further illustrates the economic disparity between the consumption of Native land and culture and the support of Native lives. The statistics sited in the news reports combined with the heartbreaking images of alcoholism and abuse clarify for Eyre’s audiences that this is not merely sensationalism or some grim dystopian fantasy. These are the damaged lives of America’s oldest residents living a harsh reality in the heart of America. Finally, Milo Yellow Hair’s brief moment in the film offers a personal and human voice to a possible solution. He argues that

---

<sup>21</sup> See Evelyn Nieves’ report “On Pine Ridge, a String of Broken Promises” for a look at how little has changed since Clinton’s visit.

there should be no need for this level of suffering with all the wealth and prosperity of the nation, but he does not expressly state that he wants a handout. He, like many Natives, only wants “what should be done,” and in the case of Pine Ridge that can be as simple as paying the Sioux what is already owed them by the federal government and returning to them as much of their land and sovereignty as possible. The enormity of this problem, combined with the uphill political battle, leaves many Natives feeling hopeless. It then falls on the fictional narrative to offer a possible pathway forward, a path that Native and non-Native audiences can recognize, if in different ways.

Following the opening documentary style montage, the film moves to a night shot of a man, Eric Schweig, with panty hose over his face, eyes and skin blackened and distorted, driving a police cruiser with the lights out. He rushes into the bathroom and starts to clean his face. He pauses briefly and notices a spider walking across the sink. Eyre ambiguously encodes Rudy as a potential villain. Schweig, as Rudy, narrates the scene as the Adult Rudy has a flashback to a time when he was young and bitten by a spider and his brother carried him to the hospital for treatment. “Iktomi, the trickster spider, a Lakota spirit, had reappeared in my life. I was 10 years old when we first met in the outhouse one spring morning.” The scene shifts to a shot of young Rudy in the outhouse when he screams that a spider bit his nuts. His brother carries him on his back to the hospital as Rudy continues to narrate. “That was no bug Rudy, Iktomi got you. He likes to sneak around and mess with people’s lives.” Young Mogie tells Young Rudy following the spider bite in the outhouse. “My older brother, my c’iyé, Mogie Yellow Lodge saved my life that day. He carried me and my swollen testicles to safety. He said he would only save a brother’s life once, and after this I was one my own.”

Eyre merges the documentary narration with the first active scene of two Natives working together. We see Rudy and Mogie in one of their first defining moments as brothers. Yet, the presence of Iktomi is not incidental here. Iktomi is a popular Trickster figure even in contemporary literature and oral narratives for the Lakota and other plains tribes. As Michelle H. Raheja notes, “The trickster serves a savvy, pedagogic function that predates European settler colonialism, often sacrificing something special in order to do good, or placing himself or herself outside the boundaries of the community in order to make a didactic point” (Chapter 1). Here Iktomi is able to move between space and time and visit Rudy at two different periods in his life to not only show him what must be sacrificed for his people, but also to teach him of the interconnectivity of the reservation’s struggles. For a standard linear perspective on time, as is traditional in most narrations, it would seem as though this is either two different entities, or that it is in some way a superstitious understanding of two coincidental events. Yet, it is just such tribal specificity that helps distinguish this film from traditional Hollywood productions. This is the first marker we get that this film is an inside job. Iktomi and other Tricksters have long been considered potential culture heroes for their respective tribes. Unfortunately, Tricksters are not always seen as benevolent. Rather, Tricksters are, at their core, agents of chaos and change. It is not always clear to the audience, the people, or even Iktomi, if the Trickster’s actions will benefit the tribe. What we do know here, and what Rudy seems to confirm with his bridging of time and space through Iktomi is that his life is about to change yet again. By revisiting that memory of his brother saving his life, both Rudy, and the audience is able to juxtapose that scene and his brother’s role as caretaker with the next scene between the two that paints a very different picture. Placing Rudy’s first appearance in the film *en medias res* reminds us that the story we

are witnessing is part of the ongoing cycle of Native narration. It has no clear beginning that can be defined in a single film.

From this point, the film jumps back in time again to show Rudy driving to a grocery store with “Sioux Nation Shopping Center” in bold red painted across the wall. It is these little shots that remind us that we are not on a set here, but on the reservation. Eyre has argued that it was essential for him to tell this story on the reservation in order to place the characters and their narrative in their actual surroundings. He wanted to ensure that this was seen as a living story, not a reproduction of a reproduction. Already, he is taking strides to resist the limitations of authenticity of the film medium. Additionally, this scene places us in a third timeframe for the film. The opening shot was in the future, the outhouse scene was in the distant past, and now we are in the narrative’s assumed present. Rudy buys a few groceries and is in good spirits as he converses with a young man working at the grocery store. The levity of the exchange will contrast sharply with later scenes.

CORKY. Nice day for a race, init?

RUDY. What race is that?

CORKY. Human Race.

This is one of the subtler scenes that might fly past most audiences. What we see here is a rather mundane exchange, but Eyre is not just establishing that Rudy buys his alcoholic brother food and provisions, he is providing us with an early scene of hope. Corky is a young Native male who has a job, a good sense of humor, and a positive outlook. Furthermore, he and Rudy are on a first name basis suggesting the closeness of Rudy, who is a Tribal Police Officer, to the youth in his community. This is the environment that is foundational to establishing a viable Native future. We need this shot in the early scene to encode Rudy and his community with the potentiality for success.

When Rudy arrives at Mogie's house, a location piece not a set creation, we see several cars in the yard in various states of disrepair and a shack that looks like it has several extensions and additions from a central building. This is a building that once had potential and is now in the steady yet timeless decline of dereliction. The setting is fitting for the character who lives here. As the audiences' eyes move from left to right in the frame, we see the transition of the building from a log house to prefabricated additions, to a particle-board structure leaning and decaying. The house, like the man who lives here, suggests a passage of vibrancy and promise, to eventual decline. Most of the scenes we see of the interior later occur in a small space, and we can only assume they are limited to the poorer parts of the house as though Mogie is no longer worthy of the larger and cleaner side of the residence.

The next scene shows Rudy, now in uniform, driving up to find Mogie and his friend Verdell sitting in front of a liquor store in the middle of the day. They are already drunk at this point. Rudy is clearly upset to find Mogie here but based on his ability to find his brother so readily, it is clear that this is not an uncommon occurrence. We later discover that White Clay is a known location for the resident of Pine Ridge to go to buy alcohol. Alcohol is outlawed on the reservation, but White Clay is just a couple of miles across the border into Nebraska and not subject to the laws of the reservation. It is here that most of the Natives go to purchase and consume alcohol. This is one of the elements that the film, due to its limitations, is not able to properly convey. Film can show despair and heartache, but in a two-hour narrative, it is difficult if not impossible for a film to fully depict the day-to-day grind of sadness and loss felt by the people in impoverished communities. The film dramatizes one scene of their interaction, but such societal, communal, and kinship destruction is part of a protracted state of endless disappointment. It is this longevity of hopelessness that is necessary to understand in order to

grasp the cyclical nature of the abuse and violence experienced in these communities. This is a life of continual unemployment, idle sadness, and a directionless existence.

Intergenerational poverty and societal oppression have real consequences that are only partially explored in this film. These conditions lead to other associated social problems such as substance abuse, domestic assault, and other forms of physical abuse that creates cycles of trauma. However, the same realms of abuse, the family structure, are also essential for cultural healing. Familial bonds in particular are necessary for coping with these intergenerational struggles from outside forces. Family units that are able to maintain strong male role models are crucial in developing tribally specific and recognizable masculine figures for each successive generation to emulate. Films like *Skins* must insert these strong male characters into the interstitial spaces between family and community, tribal and non-Native, in order to re-orient the pain of trauma towards positive figures. Rudy's social and familial position is initially one of frustration, but his journey and ours as viewers becomes one of reconnection and rehabilitation. This initial scene between the two brothers helps establish the pivotal dynamic that governs the narrative and informs our understanding of Rudy, Mogie, and Herbie.

As Rudy tries to talk to Mogie, his brother ignores him and Verdell drunkenly tries to intercede. Eyre does not shy away from the Drunken Indian Stereotype here. The two men appear shiftless and in an inebriated state of humor and idleness. On the surface they are comic relief, but that comedy belies the tragedy of the moment that the rest of the film will try to explore. This is a powerful scene that allows Graham Greene to immediately embody the spirit of an alcoholic. Greene is able to reclaim the image and recast it not as a stereotype or even an exploitation of the truth. Instead, Greene embodies this character with such dedication and attention to detail, that it is difficult to see where the actor ends, and the representation begins.

He captures the subtle swaying of the head, the intense eyes closed to the sun as he looks away from Rudy, and the disoriented shuffle as he stands and stumbles into the store.

This is characterization that any child of an alcoholic will recognize instantly. As Mogie enters the liquor store, he uses the two dollars that Rudy just gave him to buy two cheap cans of malt liquor. The liquor store, located just across the border of South Dakota in Nebraska is little more than a plywood shack, a cash register, and a series of coolers full of beer. The film had earlier established that liquor was outlawed on the reservation, so these little towns are home to white store owners who make their wages on addicted Natives spending their meager earnings on liquor that they cannot get just a few miles north on the reservation.<sup>22</sup>

The scene then shifts back to Rudy as he drives around town with the police dispatch calling out several mundane complaints that we assume Rudy has to handle as part of his day's task: the perpetuity of the struggle in action. Near the end of this day, he gets a call to investigate a group of teenagers making noise at an abandoned house. He enters the house and finds Corky from the grocery store scene earlier, who has been beaten to death. When he tries to pursue an assailant, he trips in the dark and hits his head on a rock. Here we have a montage of images as Rudy loses consciousness.

First, we see the picture of Native council members and chiefs, then a shot of a girl with a bloody nose holding a baby, an image of a Native man from the Wounded Knee occupation of 1973, Corky's beaten face and the shoe of the assailant, Leonard Peltier's arrest image, and finally the image of Iktomi as the spider walking across that sink that we saw earlier. Rudy, in this moment is infected with the spirit of Iktomi who reminds him of his past, his present struggles, and the failed attempts of recent history to right the wrongs of his community. The

---

<sup>22</sup> The town of White Clay was forced to shut down their Beer operations in 2017.



image of the chiefs calls to a time before removal when Native men still had hope of agency and securing sovereignty. The girl with the bloody face is a foretelling of an event that will happen later in the film. The occupation scene confirms the government's inability hear the Native people and act on their struggles. This is Iktomi's answer to the promise made by Clinton at the film's opening. The image of the deceased boy brings these progressive images of struggle and failure into the present moment. Peltier stands again as a marker of the failure of the government to not only hear the cries of the Native struggle, but to villainize those that take up arms in resistance and label them terrorists and vigilantes.

Iktomi is asking Rudy: What can you do? What will you do? Are you prepared to be that agent of change and chaos? We are reminded of Corky's joke. This could have been a great day for the human race; instead, it is only one more in a series of destructive ends to humanity's hope. Yet, as Corky pointed out, this is not just a Lakota problem, but a human problem. Following Rudy's fall, the investigating FBI agent cautions Rudy to be careful when talking with Corky's family as it is unlikely that the case will be solved. This suggests a pattern of unsolved cases on the reservation and an apathetic approach to the investigation of such cases.

Next, Rudy is visited by Herbie: Mogie's teenage son. This scene establishes the close bond between Herbie and Rudy. Mogie's condition prevents him from being active in Herbie's life, and it falls on Rudy, his uncle, to fill that void of paternity and guidance. It is not incidental that Herbie is similar in appearance, mannerism, and age to Corky. Herbie has been asked by Mogie to go to Rudy and get money. Rudy is polite to Herbie, but he dismisses Herbie's claims that Mogie is trying to sober up. The commonality of this exchange and its impact on Herbie is apparent by the familiarity of their speech and Herbie's effacing mannerisms. Herbie wants to believe his own words, but he knows that Rudy's skepticism is probably accurate. Through the

youth like Herbie and Corky, Rudy and the other elder Native men on the reservation have an opportunity to upset the cycle of abuse and violence. The kinship association and their importance on the healing process is crucial to understanding the necessary involvement in the Tribe in the recovery of Native Masculinity.

At the picnic, Rudy tells Mogie that he has promised to play in a game of football and Mogie asks to play too. This is the first words uttered by Mogie that are not filled with contempt, humor, or drunken nonsense. His brief moment of sincere hope is quickly squashed by Rudy who tells Mogie that the game is only for tribal council members and police.

MOGIE. Can I play?

RUDY. Sorry man, that's between us Dipshits and Dildos on the tribal council.

MOGIE. You mean you don't want no winos playing.

It is clear that Rudy does not want Mogie to play in the game and embarrass him, but Mogie does not push the scene any further. Instead, Mogie continues to rely on humor to process his displacement among his own people. Unfortunately, none of the other tribal members seem to appreciate his antics. After Mogie trips his brother during the football game that he was not invited to, he steals the ball and runs off. Rudy, with the rest of the council members and the cops behind him confront Mogie, and Rudy demands that he returns the ball. Pantomiming the celebration gesture that Rudy had just made in the game, Mogie says "What's this? Showing off is not a Lakota virtue." Rudy grabs for the ball, but spills Mogie's beer on Mogie's favorite shirt. Mogie is upset at being embarrassed and tries to hit Rudy. The two struggle briefly before the other men pull them apart.

RUDY. You're an asshole.

MOGIE. Peckerhead

RUDY. What did you say?

MOGIE. Nice picnic, peckerhead.

Rudy attacks Mogie, trying to choke him, but he stands there unmoved as the cops pull Rudy off of him. Up to this point, Mogie's humor has been his armor, but now he is truly insulted, and in his prideful state he refuses to let the scene affect him. However, Rudy clutches at his chest as though he is in pain. Mogie's stoicism evaporates, and his face is filled with concern for his brother. The tension between the two takes a backseat to the potential crisis of his brother. Rudy is not so easily moved to compassion and lashes out at Mogie. Rudy: "I am sure I am never going to drink with you again, you crazy son of a bitch." Mogie sees how much his drinking and subsequent antics might have cost him.

The next several scenes continue the film's motion to establish the chaos in Rudy's life and his community. Eyre is establishing the need for a hero and the unstable conditions for such a heroic event. With no system of restitution in place and no easy path towards healing the wounds of Mogie and his community, Rudy will resort to vigilantism in order to restore a sense of balance to his people. Rudy is not only trying to heal his community, but by taking action he is reclaiming his agency, a central component to the restoration of Native Masculinity. The emasculating effects of powerlessness must be overcome through action and opportunity. Even as a Tribal Police Officer, Rudy is unable to do much to protect or heal his people. Through Iktomi, he will create opportunities of restoration for both himself and his people.

Later, when Rudy is driving home, he recalls a time in the past when he and his brother were playing in a high-school football game. Their mother and father are there, and their father is already getting drunk from whiskey. Their mother and father fight in the stands, and their mother is knocked down, and her skirt flies up over her waist in an embarrassing display in which no one is willing to intervene.

SONNY. What are you looking at? Remember me? I was the one out there running over you fuckers. I was the fastest Indian out there. [When Rudy and

Mogie run from the field to intervene]  
 SONNY. Here comes the savior warrior. Come save your mom Mogie.  
 MOGIE. You're a jerk dad.  
 SONNY. I'll kick your butt too you little Mogie shit. Get that thing outta here.  
 And Rudy, you can carry them outta here.

This scene refers back to the cycle of alcohol and limited success. Rudy and Mogie like Corky are encoded with the markers of youth and promise. They distinguish themselves on the football field. Sonny is jealous of their attention and already well into his own alcoholic abuse. We can only assume here that Sonny was once a star in his own right, but much like the majority of Native men on the reservation, he was unable to sustain that success into adulthood. His resentment of his son's success and his frustration at his own current inadequacies add to his abusive tone and actions towards Rudy and Mogie. His treatment further suggests a cycle of abuse that the boys likely experienced at his hands as they were growing up.

When Sonny arrives at their mother's home later that night, the boys are still in their football uniforms waiting. Mogie furiously throws Sonny on the ground and hits him over the head with a rock.

RUDY. Mogie!  
 MOGIE. The old bastard asked for it.  
 RUDY. That don't matter. He's still our dad.  
 MOGIE. Rudy, I ain't laying claim to this son of a bitch no more.

This is a scene of transition. Mogie is ready to leave behind the violence and abuse of his father and refuses to claim him. In this refusal, he is also refusing to claim that lifestyle as his own. He rejects his father as a man and as a model for adult masculinity and kinship. Unfortunately, the scars of youth can set in long before our psyche has had a chance to resist the damage. Moments like this, combined with his experiences in Vietnam, ensure that contrary to his claim, Mogie will lay claim to that lifestyle and that series of choices. However, Mogie is not a violent and aggressive drunk like his father was, at least not with Herbie.

After a brief encounter at a local convenience store, Rudy discovers the two boys who murdered Corky earlier and tracks them to a field where he finds them drinking. They are not only caught in the same cycle of alcoholism, but they seem to revel in it. These two represent the prototype for the stereotypical drunk Indian. Their consumption is encoded as one of choice and enjoyment. While we do not know what has led them down this path, they seem to have no desire to break from this cycle.

BLACK LODGE BOY. My mom's tripping out again. Preaching and shit. 'You still got time to go back to school'. The only time I can ever handle that shit is when I am fucking ripped man.

TEDDY YELLOW LODGE. Thought I told you to get rid of those boots man. At least clean em. If anyone gets suspicious, they can trace them back to Corky's punk ass.

BLACK LODGE BOY. If I had some other shoes, I'd get rid of these shit kickers. You know what the fuck I'm gonna do? I'm gonna keep this shit on. I'm gonna let all these little mother fuckers, these little faggot ass little fools know what's up. Not to be fucking around with me and my money.

Rudy returns to his car and disguises himself. He is now disguised as we saw him at the beginning of the film with the black shoe polish and the hose on his face. Having heard the boys confess to Corky's murder and showing no remorse, he attacks the boys with a baseball bat and shatters their knees. Rudy yells, "I'm the ghost of murdered Corky." Eduardo and Bonnie Duran consider the effects of psychological trauma on the formation of identity of Native Americans, arguing that "Once a warrior is defeated and his ability to protect the community destroyed, a deep psychological trauma of identity loss occurs". They go on to argue that this repeated state of ineffectiveness can create "feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are compounded to such a degree as to make the choice complete psychosis or splitting of the ego into at least two fragments" (36). For Eduardo and Bonnie Duran, this trauma and helplessness manifest itself in a number of ways ranging from domestic aggression, as seen in this film with the Blue Cloud incident and Rudy's own past, to shame and isolation as seen in Mogie's wish to

isolate himself from his family when he is drinking. Rudy failed to protect Corky from these boys, just as he continually fails to protect his brother himself. Rudy will also face a fracturing from this repeated trauma and hopeless struggle. For Rudy to proceed as a hero, he has to first identify what it is his community actually needs. He has to find the imbalance, and then provide the necessary stimuli that will move the community back to balance. For Rudy, the imbalance is in the unjust system on the reservation, and the inability of he and his fellow tribal members to seek justice for crimes committed. The Lakota are destined to internal struggle and abuse as part of the federal policy for termination and genocide, so Rudy employs his own method against that struggle. Yet, he is targeting only the symptom. Very soon he will realize that such actions often create problems of their own that must be solved. This is a common element in Trickster stories, where the Trickster will often cause more conflict before his actions can lead to a state of balance.

Rudy later visits a local medicine man, Ed Little Bald Eagle, played by Myrton Running Wolf. He brings Ed tobacco in the form of cigarettes, a modern-day representation of traditional tobacco offerings, a sign of respect and restitution for the advice and services that Ed will provide. Ed notices that Rudy is not himself and Rudy confesses that he has been messing around with a married woman, Stella, and that he hit his head on a rock.

ED. Rocks can be very spiritual things Rudy. Our sacred Black Hills, Paha Sapa, where America carved its Presidents into the sacred rocks.

RUDY. I've never given much thought to rocks, at least on a spiritual level.

ED. Skins have forgotten the forces that live around them.

RUDY. I think Iktomi is playing with me.

ED. Most people think of Iktomi as coming in the form of a spider. He could just as easily be a rock, and maybe he entered your brains when your head hit that rock. Some offerings of chanlihuapacta would be a good start and make some tobacco ties. Things don't get better; I'll hold a healing ceremony for you. Remember, human beings don't control anything; spirits do.

Eyre is subverting the stereotype of the Native shaman by showing Ed as a thirty something man in contemporary clothes sitting on his porch rather than in regalia, elderly, and living in the wilderness or some shack such as Grandpa Reaches. This allows the tradition that Ed represents and that Rudy respects, to exist in a contemporary setting. We cannot dismiss so easily the vibrancy of this spiritual practice if it is practiced by a recent generation. Grandpa Reaches allows *Thunderheart* to suggest that the spiritual nature of the film is locked into a pre-modern era, one that admittedly Crow Horse and Looks Twice respect. Ed, however, is modern, insightful, and the exchange is an identifiable one, at least for Native audiences.

Rudy continues his vigilante ways and targets the liquor store next. He sets fire to the building, only to later discover that Mogie was on the roof of the building, attempting to steal beer. Mogie is tragically burned, but survives; unfortunately, Rudy learns that Mogie has terminal cirrhosis of the liver and will die soon. Following Mogie's injury, Rudy seeks out Ed to have a healing ceremony to get Iktomi off his back. We see a brief scene of several men, including Rudy preparing to go into a sweat lodge to participate in an Inipi Ceremony. Ed narrates the ceremony as the camera remains at a distance.

ED. Hau Rudi. I'm glad you have come here today. We all know why you are here, so all of us are in here and we are going to gather our minds, and we are going to make our minds and our hearts and our prayers as one. And we are all going to pray for this young man, and we are going to help him to see and to hear the things that he must hear and to see the things that he must see. So, at this time, we are going to pray. Then a prayer in Lakota language.

Rudy is later called in to investigate reports of a drunken fight at the Blue Cloud residence. When he arrives, we see Mr. Blue Cloud is violently beating Mrs. Blue Cloud. When he is pulled off of her by Rudy, he offers little resistance, but insists that it is her fault. He claims that he did not mean to hurt her, but she made him do it by messing around on him. As Rudy is subduing Mr. Blue Cloud, he looks over and sees Mrs. Blue Cloud holding their baby with blood

on her face, the same image he saw earlier in the film when he hit his head on the rock. This was a moment he was supposed to see, and now he has to try to figure out why he is seeing these images and what action he is supposed to take.

The Blue Cloud scene is telling in its willingness to explore two critical issues to Native American representation today. First, the alcoholism is an obvious catalyst for their violence, and the film is loaded with commentary on the effects of alcohol on the Native body and the Native community. Yet, we also see dimension of the powerlessness of the Native male within their community. This by no means excuses the actions perpetrated by Blue Cloud against his wife, nor does this make any exceptions for domestic violence or violence of any kind, but there are clear social and economic indicators that not only contribute to high rates of domestic violence but also facilitate the continual cycle of abuse. Blue Cloud's claim that she was messing around on him calls back to the paranoia and depression associated with the emasculation of a male cultural group. Blue Cloud's inadequacies are played out in the blows to his wife's face. He is raging against himself but using her body as the staging point for this rage. He represents an illness that has no easy cure.

The cycle of abuse was noted before Rudy even got that particular call. Rudy: "Don't tell me Geraldine, drunks fighting again am I right?" Geraldine: "Nope, drunken brawl is the way that it was called in. That's different right?" Rudy and the law enforcement officers on the reservation have seen this cycle played out so often that they have internalized the occurrence and again resort to humor as a coping mechanism for dealing with this tragedy. Eyre argues that it is the poverty that is at fault here and certainly there is truth to this claim, but a symptom of poverty for men of Native communities is a loss of agency and power, a loss of pride and honor. They are unable to fulfill their roles in their community and they are unable to do anything to



regain that control. After 120 years of reservation existence, this loss of agency is partly internalized. Our fathers could not fight back their own despair and disenfranchisement, and their own lack of pride and honor manifested itself in alcohol, violence, abuse, or perhaps even just withdraw as we saw with Frankie Smallhill from *Four Sheets to the Wind*. Our fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and older brothers, all become markers for our potential pathway. As they failed to navigate this state of loss, so too do we see our own destruction. It takes a rare human being to prosper in these surroundings.

This loss of agency and historical imprint of despair is evident again in the next scene in the home of Aunt Helen, but here we get to see Mogie recovering from his wounds and interacting with Rudy and Herbie in a domestic space. Herbie, in response to an anecdote by Mogie, asks about American Horse. Mogie: “Your uncle will tell you so listen up.” This again is an interesting scene in that it subtly reveals some of the nuances of the relationship between the three Native men. Mogie, being the oldest and the originator of the conversation should have access to tell this story, but either he is too emotionally connected to the story or because he is deferring to Rudy as the traditional teacher of Herbie, it is unclear. Regardless, Herbie responds with deference and listens to the story. As Rudy is telling the story of American Horse, Herbie responds with questions that Mogie then begins to answer. As Mogie moves in to finish the tale, his emotional connection to the slaughter of the Lakota, and American Horse as a testifier at the trials following the massacre, overwhelms him. He tells Herbie that twenty-two of the men of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were awarded the Medal of Honor. To alleviate the tension at the table, Aunt Hellen speaks of Herbie’s points he scored in the last football game. Mogie yells: “I don’t give a rats ass.” Mogie has broken this moment of connection to Herbie. Mogie’s tension with his past, his own military history, and his feelings of frustration with his present personal and tribal

condition prevents him from finding that place of love and comfort necessary for interpersonal communication and relationships.

After Helen and Herbie leave, Mogie asks Rudy to tell him what he is hiding. When Rudy reveals that he is a vigilante, with an exaggerated seriousness, Mogie just laughs. Again, Mogie's method of seeing the humor in all situations colors his initial response. When Rudy tries to explain that he is doing this vigilante work to help his people and his family, Mogie continues to laugh as though it is absurd to not only act for your people, but that any one person can be that "hero" or savior. This myth had long since died on the reservation. Mogie has not bought into the mythologies of white heroism, and he has learned that Native mythologies cannot work that way. When Rudy also reveals that he was the one who burned down the liquor store, Mogie is shocked. Rudy asks what he can do to repair the situation, to make amends and restore balance between the two. Mogie: "Help me blow the nose off George Washington at Rushmore. You know, for our people, give them a good laugh. Maybe that's all we need." Rudy scoffs: "Where do you get these ideas." Mogie laughs and shakes the beer can he is holding. Mogie sees the value of humor to heal the wounds of his people. Yet, here Rudy is still too serious to see the scenario in those terms. He wants action, but he also knows that his actions have consequences, and they are not helping. Regardless, Rudy certainly does not seem to see the value of laughing at his people's problems or trying to drink them away.

By the film's conclusion, Mogie has died from the abuse his body has endured during the struggles of his life. Rudy, through a willingness to honor Mogie's memory, defaces the Rushmore Monument. He comes to understand by the film's conclusion that it was never his job to save his community. Only Hollywood creates such heroes, and only Americans carve the faces of these supposed supermen into the sides of sacred mountains. Eyre illustrates through the

relationship between Rudy and Mogie that the pathway to healing and restoring balance is not through large scale heroic endeavors and certainly not through violence and vigilantism. The Native men must come to see their role as much more localized and focused. Each instance of the film that reflects tragedy, abuse, and loss could have been subverted with strong Native male heroic models such as Rudy. Forgiveness of past mistakes and a restoration of familial bonds allows Rudy to heal the wounds he is feeling within himself. Rudy ends the film in a rare state, bursting with laughter. Maybe Mogie was right, maybe all we need is a good laugh to remind us that despite the bleak conditions of our lives, we still have our family.

There are many aspects of Native identity and Native masculine identity that inform and are informed by their representations in film. How the Native men look and how they behave on-screen matters. Casting Native actors to play Native men matters. They must be depicted as viable social identities, with dynamic family and kinship relations. Any attempts to show them as heroic must address the most pressing needs of contemporary Native communities. As this work argues, Native masculinity is in many ways constructed, but this constructed nature does not render it inauthentic. Indeed, one of the first steps at reclaiming sovereignty over our own identity is to reclaim the agency to choose how we want to see our ourselves and how we want the world to see us. Our heroes must be grounded in the results of these choices. The depictions of our masculine models must exist in a space that is both Tribal and personal.

White Eagle is a Native man driven by loyalty to his people, respect for his elders and traditions, and tenderness for those that he loves. Wing Foot was removed from much of his traditional surroundings, but ultimately, he demonstrates the same necessary components of Tribe and family first. Levoi, the hero with the most social distance from his family and tribal traditions, is more a witness to the power of family and community rather than its defender. He,

like *Wing Foot*, is too assimilated, and their stories are too heavily reliant on the capacity for Hollywood Indians to co-opt the best of Native traditions and merge them into a Euro-American hybridity. It is through Rudy and Mogie that we see the results of Native oppression played out in their double-consciousness and fractured family ties. Where *White Eagle* remained loyal to family and tribe throughout, Rudy and Mogie had to journey back to family and tribe after suffering from the pulls and influence of Euro-America. In the end, Rudy and Mogie manage to reclaim some measure of Native masculinity, not through distancing themselves as heroic figures, but through re-affirming their love for one another. Native Tribes are extensions of the family unit. The kinship and familial bonds are reciprocations of each other. A true Native hero has the ability to restore the power of those bonds and mobilize them to fight off the oppression and suffering still experienced by Native men and boys today. Just as the film medium is an effective tool for subverting the erasure of Native men through appropriation of the medium's mechanisms for tribal use, so too can Native men subvert the degradation of tribal ties through reaffirming familial love and honor. When a film manages to do both, as *Skins* does, Native and non-Native audiences can begin to see the Native male's heroic potential.

As we look back at the previous chapter, we see two instances of early Hollywood cinema producing what, on the surface, appears to be sympathetic narratives about Native American lives. Indeed, the protagonist of each film is presented as a heroic figure who, in various ways, manages to provide for his people what they need in a time of struggle, and through their courageous acts restore some level of harmony to their people. These broad stroke characterizations would suggest that these figures stand as representations of culture heroes. However, when viewed critically, it becomes clear that the mythologies presented here say more

about non-Native American ambivalence towards Native American oppression and cultural genocide than they do about the actual subjects these films seek to represent.

When we parse out the mythemes of *White Eagle* and *Wing Foot*, we find an articulation of heroism that reflect non-Native values. *White Eagle* is articulated with qualities that signify communalism, personal achievement and success, and adherence to the social order. *Wing Foot* is articulated with qualities of physical strength, conformity, assimilation, and capital ownership. While it is true that both men make the lives of their people better by the end of the film and are subsequently rewarded for their efforts, the people that they are saving are largely invisible and the mythemes that constitute their heroism are not clearly attached to the cultures which they serve. They are devoid of nuance and cultural specificity. They are encoded as archetypes of the Native American hero from different angles. When these archetypes are presented as part of a cycle of similar narratives of pseudo-sympathetic representations of Native American heroism, they lead to a new mythology that, like those unsympathetic narratives discussed in Chapter's 1 and 2 call towards a simulacrum of representation. They exist in a signification exchange that only leads to an encounter with an equally fabricated reality of identity. To put it more simply, they are fantasies disguised as culture heroes.

To understand the full dynamics of the emptiness of the signification at play in both films we need to first revisit the mechanism of representation. For Lacan, the Real is not a register that can be expressed in language or signification, and yet it is always present and underlies every exchange between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. As individuals, we mediate our experiences in these exchanges between the Symbolic and the Imaginary as a way of brushing up against but never fully engaging with the Real in what we might refer to as necessary fictions. When a film

exists as a manifestation of these necessary fictions from the perspective of non-Native filmmakers then it must be read as a manifestation of the Gaze of that subject position.

*Daughter of Dawn* presents Daughter of Dawn the character as our surrogate from which to understand White Eagle. We are meant to see him as she does, just as we are meant to see her as White Eagle sees her. This is the construction of the film's narrative. However, what we are actually seeing is White Eagle as Director Norbert Myles sees him or at least wants him to be seen by Daughter of Dawn. Again, it should be stated that I attribute the gaze and the general production of the film to the Director with full awareness of the multiple points of influence on the finished product. This is a simplification device meant to serve the analysis while not detracting from the core argument. We cannot know, in any one scene or filmic moment who is ultimately responsible for the final product, but the Director is generally considered to be the most influential figure on the final results of the film. That *Daughter of Dawn* chooses White Eagle over Black Wolf is as much a reflection of the values of Myles as it reflects the values of any actual Native American. This is not to say that White Eagle would not be considered a viable lover and heroic model in the Native American community. Indeed, that is what makes such representations so troubling. We want to believe in him. We want to believe that he represents us. We want to see ourselves in him. We want to be seen as he is seen.

Similarly, *Redskin* presents Corn Blossom as our surrogate from which to understand Wing Foot, but in reality, we are following the Gaze of Dir. Victor Scherzinger and his vision of the Native American hero. Just as with White Eagle, we are meant to identify with his struggle to resist conformity and yet cheer in triumph at his ability to take the best from both worlds and be a hero to his people. After all, both he and White Eagle succeed in their missions, enhance their tribes from their actions, and win the affections of their love interests at the film's close. At

the core of both mythologies is a central message that once followed leads to nowhere for Native American men in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century: they must be the savior of their people, for Native communities cannot save themselves, and only through a Euro-centric archetypal model can the Native man succeed.

In *Daughter of Dawn*, Chain-To, the council of the elders, Black Wolf, Daughter of Dawn, and even Red Wing are there to serve the narrative of White Eagle. Their prosperity from his deeds is ancillary to his ascension. We come away from this film knowing little about the Kiowa people or the ways in which they are similar or distinct from the Comanche other than the physical accoutrements that are nearly indistinguishable between tribes and a general philosophy of hard work versus theft. While the presence of an all-Native cast who brought much of their cultural reality to their performance, as well as the presence of such figures as Chief Hunting Horse, White Parker and Wanada Parker, both children of Quanah Parker, the famous Comanche Chief, added significant cultural capital to the production that could have served as a template for a reformation of Native American filmmaking, this film stands largely as an outlier full of lost potential. Under these conditions, *White Eagle* exists in a vacuum of masculinity that has no social reality outside of this film that has gone largely unseen.

In *Redskin* we are given a bit more characterization of the Navajo people through brief conversations with Wing Foot's father, grandmother, and grandfather, but again we have a narrative where the community is there to serve the story of the protagonist. In both instances, non-Native audiences cannot help but Other the tribes being represented and reduce them to a vague sense of Nativeness that is not grounded in any reality. Native audiences might be able to make better distinctions of the cultural accuracies and inaccuracies and even fill in some of the

gaps in the kinship representations, but in the end, they too are left with models that have no inertia outside of the films in which they exist.

This is not to suggest that non-Natives cannot make meaningful films about Native Americans or that all Native Americans will inherently produce more accurate films about their culture than non-Native Americans. Rather, this analysis shows that the ultimate horizon of each mythology must call back to the subject position of the creators of that narrative. *Daughter of Dawn* and *Redskin* do reflect an accurate and meaningful mythology, but that mythology is of non-Native American fantasies about Nativeness, not about any actual lived experiences of Natives regardless of any points of accidental intersection. There may be moments within the film where the Native actors pull from their experiences to deliver a scene, but the power dynamics in play are such that each scene is mediated through signifiers that originate outside of that culture. In effect, these narratives are also a part of the history of Native Americans, but it is a history of projection and commodification rather than representation.

To understand this position more fully, we need to look at other films that move the narrative closer to the realm of meaningful signification. We need films that allow the cultures being represented to have a voice. We need films that allow the individual characters to have agency and purpose outside of their interactions with the non-Native world or persist in a pre-colonized fantasy of Native experiences. Through continual motion towards unsignifiable aspects of Native American experience, films can expand on the very limited tapestry of representation in such a way as to expand the landscape of heroic models with more accurate cultural connectivity. It is not a matter of seeking out the true representation of Native American masculinity, but a continual push to explore the many truths that exist and can exist into the future.



As we move into the later stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we start to see films move in a new direction of signification. While the Real remains at the periphery of Native American psychology, these new archetypes that subvert previous encodings of heroism call to a more progressive and generative mode of representation. Levoi continues the previous trends in heroic representation of the white savior with only a few twists, but to tell his story we need Walter, Jimmy, and Grandpa Reaches. In these three, the peripheral and supporting characters, the film is building the mythemes necessary to present a more appropriate model of modern Native American masculinity and heroic subjectivity. Just as the previous films were a manifestation of the Gaze of the filmmaker's vision of Native American identity, these new films are manifestations of the Gaze of more progressive filmmaker's vision of Native American identity combined with the organic emergence of onscreen performances of the Native actors.

Walter, Jimmy, and Grandpa Reaches are not encoded as heroic because of Apted, but in spite of his narrative adjustments. They call back to Trudell, Peltier, and the tribal elders more than to any American notion of heroism and exceptionalism. Their mission is the mission of the tribe. Unfortunately, the mythologies of salvation and subordination still persist in Apted's narrative vision, and the films primary subject position, Levoi, is a call back to old archetypes. Fortunately for Native audiences, the performances of Graham Greene, John Trudell, and Ted Thin Elk produce heroic models that exist in that recognizable space necessary for Native men to see themselves. This space of recognition, combined with the historical reality upon which the film is based, allows *Thunderheart* to contribute to the movement towards new mythologies of Native American heroic models and masculine imagery.

By the time *Skins* is released, filmmakers and audiences are hungering for more representations that push up against the Real of Native American psychology in order to

facilitate that painful yet vital *jouissance* of the filmic experience. Both Rudy and Mogie are fully encoding with a diverse range of heroic and masculine mythemes that collectively contribute to a new mode of representation. This new representation is not a new creation in Native communities. It is simply a more accurate presentation; therefore, a more effective necessary fiction. Through its presentation, Eyre has begun the work of producing new archetypal representations of Native American men.

Rudy embodies anger and frustration. His actions reflect the need for agency and the lengths to which Native men are forced to go in order to reclaim this agency. His relationship with Stella demonstrates his sexual potency and viability as a love interest. His love and tenderness for Mogie, Herbie, and Corky humanize his vigilantism and help temper his rage as the film moves towards its close. His heroic journey is less a traveling outward to acquire any elixirs of salvation, but a journey inward to rediscover the elixirs that were already there.

Mogie embodies sadness and trauma. His actions reflect the need for healing and therapy to help Native men to cope with the injustices of their lives and the intergenerational traumas that many of them face. The tensions they feel as men of two worlds, as Native men, and American men, along with the seemingly perpetual subjugated status all demand some form of release. For Mogie, that release is only achieved in a bottle, but this bottle pushes his further away from the true medicine and therapy that could heal him. He too must look inward, and though he finds it too late to save his life, his journey concludes with the realization that family is the core of who he is.

Collectively, these new modalities signify a shift in heroic mythologies. They signal a move towards a vision of Native American men that is grounded in the lived experiences of Native directors, writers, actors, and audience members. Through their filmic existence, they

provide a necessary counter to the centuries-old, flawed representations. Once decoded by Native and non-Native audiences for the heroes they are, complete in all of their imperfect complexity, they stand as signifiers of a reality of hope and agency long ago denied to Native men. Through these examples, Native men can not only see themselves represented, but they can see themselves being seen.

## Chapter 5 - Border Crossings

In 2002, Seymour Polatkin emerged onscreen in *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002) and conquered the dynamics of Native American sexuality with his many offscreen exploits. He had consensual sexual relationships with men of virtually every race and color and even a woman, but no Native American men. Onscreen, we see his intimate moments with Agnes, a Native American and Jewish woman, and Steven, a white man. We see his conflicted and sexually charged relationship with Aristotle, a Native American man from his reservation. We see men offer themselves to him on numerous occasions. Though the film was not widely viewed, it does mark one of the earliest examples of a Native American male exploring his sexuality without judgement and revealing his intimate self without commodification. He is complex and compelling and one of the first examples of such sexual agency of Native American men demonstrated onscreen. Yet, to understand the significance of this early 21<sup>st</sup> century achievement, we must yet again revisit the mistakes of the past.

The previous section illustrates the necessity of resurrecting the Native American male corpse as a first step in subverting modes of erasure by 20<sup>th</sup> century Hollywood cinema. Films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must view the Native body as alive, vibrant, and capable of agency. Films must give the body both choice and voice. However, an animated body, even one with limited agency, is still only a physical being. Corporeal essence alone is not sufficient to revitalize a person, much less a culture. Identity is produced in social interaction. We are most clearly defined in relation to others. We most clearly understand ourselves through our understanding of how we are seen by others. To this point, we have explored the death of the Native male in Hollywood films for nearly 100 years, only to find that his resurrection had to begin, yet again, with his death. The nameless savages from *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913), Nophaie from *The*

*Vanishing American* (1925), and Old Lodge Skins from *Little Big Man* (1971) are just some of those who died so white America could thrive. Their bodies became the landscape of Manifest Destiny. Frankie Smallhill, in *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007), resisted this appropriation of his body through his children: Cufe and Miri. Frankie had voice, he had agency in choosing his own death, and through Cufe and Miri he demonstrated survivance. Frankie narrates the film, and he is a continual spiritual presence in the lives and hearts of Cufe and Miri. Frankie's perseverance is not historically bound; rather, it is immediate and purposeful.

Chapter's 3 and 4 moved us beyond the body as we looked at key social roles such as the culture hero. The hero must be Native and exist or resonate in a contemporary cultural setting. The hero must be aware of the greatest needs of the tribe and of the nation and seek to restore those needs through action and influence. Currently one of the most urgent needs for Native male hero figures is that of the family figure, be it a father, uncle, grandfather, brother, or even the son. The Native man can do the most good for his people and his community by first seeing himself as a vital part of the community. Recovery on this level has already proven effective at subverting the *Vanishing American* trope by presenting a visual and social sphere in which Native and non-Native audiences can see the Native male as socially viable. However, remaining at this level will do little to overcome the lingering double-consciousness felt in the wake of identity recovery. There are still too many layers of social pressures, both inside and outside of the contemporary Native community, on the Native American male to easily chart his own path forward into ideal masculinity. Regardless, through cultivation of the self and the kinship relationships on screen the Native filmic hero can demonstrate not only the recovery of the Native body, but the actualization of the Native human being as a community figure.

Resurrecting the corpse and establishing clear social roles are essential steps in introducing the Native American male as fully realized human being. Yet, to complete his transformation from an abject thing to a complete and nuanced human being we must be able to penetrate into his interpersonal space. We must be able to see the Native American male at his most intimate and his most vulnerable. Taking a closer look at the intersection between Lacanian “desire” and *jouissance* here can help elucidate the importance of representations of interpersonal relationships. Lacan helps us understand that the Real always exists at the core of our psychological existence. It lurks in the corners of our subconscious, and our drive moves us towards and away from it through the interplay of our Symbolic/Imaginary fictions. The Lacanian desire then is the inertia created through the movement towards a fulfillment of that lack at the core of us with our separation from the Real. He writes that “nowhere does it appear more clearly that man’s desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other.” (*Écrits* 43). By engaging in deep and interpersonal relationships, we position the Other as a complete subject without that lack through which we can find fulfillment. The desire is never fulfilled and that remaining tension that pulls us back towards a new object of desire is expressed through *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is that pleasure derived from the pain of the encounter with and movement away from the real, or more specifically an encounter with our own lack. To put this more plainly in the case of our filmic analysis, we can look at our original discussion from the beginning of this work as we considered *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015).

Johnny, in seeking to find his place in the world, first assumes that it will be fulfilled through his relationship with Aurelia, but she not only seeks to distance herself from him

physically, but also geographically. While they do have many intimate and even sexual encounters both displayed and implied onscreen, the inertia of their relationship is towards separation. Johnny has an inverse of this tension with his sister Jashaun. Through their relationship, we see that Johnny can stand as the object of another's desire, familial love in this case, but one in which he does not find sufficient satisfaction. In the end, he and Aurelia separate, and he and Jashaun are able to lean on each other, but in his absence from her Jashaun has also grown as an individual and their relationship will now have different dynamics. We, as viewers of these larger relationship movements as well as the micro-moments within the film are given our most complete look at Johnny through his desire/unfulfillment or *jouissance* and how that shapes his decisions and growth as a character and a subject. Žižek claims that "jouissance is thus not a positive substance caught in the symbolic network, it is something that shines through only in the cracks and openings of the symbolic order—not because we, who dwell within that order, cannot regain it directly, but, more radically, because it is generated by the cracks and inconsistencies of the symbolic order itself" (*Less than Nothing* 783). In this way we can understand Native American masculine identity more fully when we position the characters in situations that produces those cracks through which pain/pleasure can emerge.

Throughout the film, we could also look at his drive towards self-destructive behavior, with his bootlegging job, his fights with other criminals, his drug and alcohol use, and even his amateur boxing as intersections between desire and fulfillment, but for our purposes we want to focus on the relationships that contain these dynamics. These relationships and how they are depicted onscreen, allow the actors/characters to move into that subjective space, but they also allow the partners in these relationships to respond to these motions. Audiences then can decode

these relationships as markers of fulfillment upon which they can map out their own incomplete experiences.

By creating a space for the Native American male to have these types of deep interpersonal relationships, we get to see them brush up against the Real and come to understand them both in how they process these moments, and perhaps more importantly, how the other characters in the relationships respond in kind. In our first chapters we looked closely at the concept of abjection, and for Kristeva, we came to understand how horror and revulsion drove us towards and away from the Real. Trauma is a key component to the formation of the subject as it marks those intersections with the Real. In these next two chapters it is pleasure and fulfillment and our desire for it that will move us closer to the Real, and by viewing Native male actors/characters on this trajectory we will be able to see ourselves in similar fashion. Through honest and dynamic renderings of the Native male in more interpersonal relationships outside of the family unit, films can provide the final missing component to identity recovery and presentation. *Nophaie* and *Old Lodge Skins* had a connection to the community, but such a connection was filtered through white eyes and white sensibilities. Their community was exploited to acutely define those encoded as their cultural betters. Even Frankie's presence in the narrative and in the lives of his family after his death is undercut by the nature of his suicide. He rejected the life that was never really his and the world he never occupied fully.

Once the Native male body is alive, he can reclaim social agency and define his community presence. He is able to exist internally and externally. He has life and is part of life. In the next two chapters, we will take the Native male one step closer to full personhood by giving him back his intimate relationships and exploring his sexuality as a component of intimacy. Granted, the role of the father, uncle, grandfather, son, and brother are intensely



intimate relationships at times, but these are roles of blood and of family. We do not choose our fathers and brothers. We do not choose our family. I had no more say in who my father was before I was born than I did in the degree of Cherokee blood he passed down to me. I accepted him as my father, so to a certain extent there is an expression of agency and choice, but I could never deny his physical role in my life. In our previous chapter we saw a different version of this agency as Mogie chose to reject his father and his abuse. While these are necessary spheres of social interactions where much of our signification of masculinity occurs, they remain forces outside of our control. Yet, in the spheres of social choice, no matter how limited, the Native male is moved closer to a position of agency. The voluntary nature of intimate relationships helps disrupt society's pressures to create docile bodies of Native men.

Hollywood, and Euro-America by proxy, can only appropriate Native sexuality after they have reduced it to a commodity for consumption. Hollywood can put redface on white actors, use turkey feathers for unblessed and unearned eagle feathers, and hold their braided wigs on with culturally inaccurate headbands, but true sexuality is far too intimate.<sup>23</sup> Mimicry and appropriation fails to truly celebrate or complicate sexuality. Sexuality is personhood distilled to its most vulnerable, and imitation dilutes the very hopes and fears that give sexuality its potency. For Lacan, the repetition of desire is inescapable and though sex and sexuality can be structures that lead towards encounters with the Real, that piece of ourselves beneath our fictions, it is a motion without a true destination. Slavoj Žižek adds that while we cannot escape the repetition of negation, it is in that space that we can find our subjectivity.

White Eagle, in *Daughter of Dawn* (1920), had life and love in his world, and he existed in a social space of reciprocity. Through his success the tribe succeeded, and through the tribe's

---

<sup>23</sup> *Reel Injun* explores a number of these techniques of coopting cultural identity and repackaging it as authentic Native heritage for consuming audiences.

success, he was further elevated. Unfortunately, White Eagle's example in Hollywood was more an aberration than a common reality, and his narrative exists only in a romanticized version of the past. He exists only for white consumption and Native longing. His intimate interactions with Daughter of Dawn are encoded as transactional while within the social space of the tribe and only marginally physical when they are in more isolated settings. In this way, their relationship is encoded as something that exists outside of the community sphere.

The resolution of the romantic pursuits of Wing Foot exists in a similar state.<sup>24</sup> Though he is granted life and endures to the end of the film similar to White Eagle, and though his achievements by the end of the film are heroic, the implied centrality of his assimilated education and worldview underscores his Native achievements. For each instance of community improvement and progress, he must pull from his white education for success. Both men earn the love of the women they pursue, White Eagle and Daughter of Dawn end the film rowing off in the distance and into the past, while Wing Foot and Corn Blossom, as products of white education, become the symbol of assimilation as they represent a new future for both tribes. Wing Foot's love for Corn Blossom is given more screen time and the final image of the film is of them embracing while wrapped in a blanket placed on their shoulders signifying their union to each other and their tribe's mutual acceptance of this union. Wing Foot is a movement forward in the representation of Native American male sexuality and agency, but the underlying message of assimilation and appropriation of Native American culture by non-Natives tarnishes the individuality and Native specificity of this romantic representation.

Such an enduring trope of white superiority even in the lived experiences of otherwise strong and capable Native men, is further explored with Levoi who demonstrates the postcolonial

---

<sup>24</sup> *Redskin* (1929)

vision of Native men fully assimilated.<sup>25</sup> Levoi is the realization of the potentiality seen in Wing Foot. He becomes the culture hero in the film while the surviving traditional Natives either die or remain on the periphery, incapable of personal or even tribal sovereignty without white cultural mediation. There are hints at a romance between Levoi and Maggie Eagle Bear, but the primary purpose of her presence in the film is to soften Levoi's ambivalence towards his heritage and to bridge the gap between him and Crow Horse. In the end, she dies, but her presence fills the homosocial space between Levoi and Crow Horse. Each of these examples ignores the reality that the community hero need not be a grand figure, but one who sees their community and kinship role as one of production and change.

The community hero does not change for change's sake and does not necessarily know or understand what changes need to be made, but they do recognize the fundamental need to mobilize reform efforts to see the community grow and prosper. We see this in *Thunderheart* (1992) and even more effectively in *Skins* (2002). Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior's *Like a Hurricane* offers a nuanced discussion of the origins and practices of AIM, which bridges well with *Incident at Oglala* and continues into the present day with protests such as those taking place at Standing Rock. Though this historical and contemporary trajectory of resistance and renewal, we see the legacy and persistence of community action. For the film, Rudy exists in a contemporary space, addresses contemporary Native problems, and reclaims his own sovereignty and that of his people through his vigilantism. Just as the film argues, such cultural change is not always for the better, and this conflict is the ideal space for the Trickster figure to emerge. As an agent of chaos, the Trickster, and by extension Rudy, not only elicits change, but also presents further discord from which harmony might be achieved. Rudy begins with a journey to save his

---

<sup>25</sup> *Thunderheart* (1992)

people, his “tiospaye, his oyate” but eventually realizes that he must first save his family. His acceptance of this truth is the first filmic example of the Native male declaring his own agency and accepting his social role as one defined by the bonds of family and kinship that we have explored in this work. While Rudy does demonstrate the capacity for sexual choice and seems to have a healthy sense of his heterosexuality, his relationship on screen is not only brief and superficial, but also with a married woman, a point that gives him enough psychological discomfort that he seeks out a healer to pray for his recovery. As a lover and a hero, Rudy is still a tourist not yet grounded in his own reality and the true needs of his community. Rudy does not choose his family, nor can he reject them when they are an embarrassment or problematic, but he can choose his lovers, and they must choose to reciprocate his affections. This allows the audiences, both Native and non-Native, to consider what character traits Rudy possesses that warrants physical attraction and intimacy.

To understand the ways in which sexuality and intimacy can lead to a healthier sense of subjectivity we need to synthesize Jacques Lacan’s *The Real*, while exploring Michel Foucault’s articulation of the relationship between power, knowledge, and the body as a space for discipline. For Lacan, the Real is always present and just beyond our capabilities to communicate and understand. Our subject-selves are similarly ever present but elude definition and fixity. Instead, we understand ourselves largely as objects among objects. We see others and we wish to be seen by others. We create and present an image of ourselves that we wish to be seen by others, but it is one based on our perception of the completeness of others. We have a vague sense of agency in this process. It feels like we are who we present ourselves to be. However, the subject-object parameters of the self, though mediated through language or more accurately through the Imaginary/Symbolic exchange, are also influenced by and influence

external social realities. Our physical as well as our psychological lives, are a constant exchange between the internal subject and external object and all the prevailing forces that influence the two. Lacan's assertions here may suggest that Native American male is as much a fiction as it is a knowable subject position, but through an assumption of the three psychological registers of Lacan we can instead assert as much legitimacy to the Native American male experience as any other.

Julia Kristeva's framework of abjection helped us understand how the body can be used to devalue, dehumanize, and erase the Native American male when he is reduced to only a corpse. Similarly, Carl Jung, Roland Barthes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss provided us with a necessary framework for dissecting the Native American heroic figure as a site for the Ideal-I and a sympathetic objective other. To understand how sexuality can provide a further glimpse into the subjective self of Native American men, we will need a similar framework of analysis. At the core of each of these motions is an assumption of the efficacy of the Lacanian unconscious model to explain the relationship between us and them, between the subject and the object.

Michel Foucault, though certainly not a Lacanian himself was interested in relationships of power, discipline, and control. Foucault understands subjectivity more as an active process rather than an actual and true reality. To this point, he is aligned with Lacan and his understanding of the Real as a collapse of communicable and knowable truth. Yet, for Foucault, the processes of subjectivity, whether an active pursuit of the individual to discover the true self or the results of external forces, does not uncover a true subject that is hidden beneath the surface; rather, these processes are themselves a form of subjectivity. While Foucault does not accept the notion of self-discovery in this respect, he acknowledges the importance of this

pursuit on the individual. As such, his understanding of the relationships of power that influence and are influenced by our pursuit of the self are tools that can help us explore how sexuality and intimacy, when effectively demonstrated on screen can move the narrative, actor, and audience closer to a state of shared *jouissance*.

By understanding that both Lacan and Foucault are operating under the same assumptions of the self-annihilating self, we can then extract from Foucault a method of analyzing the various external/internal forces that are necessary to navigate in order to touch on the subjective self, such as it is. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault articulates three essential elements of understanding crucial to our work. First, he highlights the ever-present threat of surveillance and its impact on our own self-discipline and self-regulation (201). Second, he argues that power creates an array of pressures on the individual that both restricts and defines the nature of the subjective self (202-204). Finally, these two motions of control serve to render the individual both codified and docile, and sexuality is one of many of these points of control (136).

By employing this framework of surveillance, power, and control onto the representations of the Native American male in film, we can not only reveal the tools of erasure but also the tools of reification of his designated inferior status. Once this process of the destruction and reconstitution of the Native American sexual being is established, we will have a better chance of reading Seymour Polatkin's transgressive struggles. In so doing, we can better understand how Seymour is decoded by Native audiences as an embodiment of the very inconsistencies and complexities inherent in the lived experiences of Native American men today.

Sexuality is not a choice, yet the realization and expression of that sexuality is very much a choice, just as the level of intimacy associated with a sexual relationship is a distinct choice. It

is perhaps the clearest example of full agency a Native male has. Furthermore, in a healthy relationship, sexuality demands reciprocation. It is society condensed into a single expressive and communal moment. All parties involved agree to the terms of the relationship, and it lasts not a moment longer than all are willing to continue. It demands communication and rewards honesty. It reveals weakness and vulnerability and restores passion and vibrancy. Unlike any other family and kinship arrangement or any other social engagement that a person might encounter, the sexual experience is uniquely and consistently personal. It is the expression of the self at its most pristine. Deep interpersonal intimacy is life attempting to escape the Symbolic/Imaginary.

Male sexuality, particularly Native male sexuality, is also very complicated. It is a common trigger for jealousy and fears of inadequacy, which invites fear and mistrust. In unhealthy situations, this fear and mistrust can lead to violence and abuse. Unfortunately, the same innate intimacy that gives sexuality and sexual experiences their capacity for pleasure and autonomy, also gives it a singularly unique capacity to bring pain and subjugation. Film, as a visual medium, has consciously used sexuality or avoided its use to efficiently load a scene or a narrative with intensity, whether it be pleasurable or painful. The body is the first and most primal site of erasure and kinship is the most effective form of identity containment, but the sexual being of the Native man is perhaps one of the most sinister component of identity destruction. The sexual being of the Native man, unlike any other category of representation, escapes the confines of the film and enters into the public consciousness as objectification and horrification. For Native men, much of Hollywood's history of their sexuality has fallen into two basic categories that both deny the pleasure and beauty of sexual intimacy and restrict sexual agency.

As already demonstrated in this work, Hollywood is rarely able to consider the Native male in any degree of complexity. The film industry as a whole is unable to consider the Native male sexual identity as anything other than the polarities of the Noble/Ignoble Savage. Typically, one of the two polarities are paired with the White Knight, and the two engage in a triangular relationship with a White Maiden. The filmmaker's decision to create a dramatic or a romantic film determines which of the two is used. Regardless, the Noble/Ignoble Savage is nearly always used to further advance the tension between the two primary white characters, and his sexuality is only used as a tool. Occasionally, a film might have both versions of the Native male pursue the same woman in which the White Knight becomes more of a backdrop in order to explore other prominent themes of miscegenation more fully. As the film industry matured and as filmmakers, along with society, began to explore social themes more critically, more nuanced representation of Native male sexuality emerged. Yet, it is only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we are given a film that presents a nuanced and complex Native male whose sexual expressions are by choice. His journey of discovery is presented almost entirely onscreen from the Gaze of a Native male director, producer, and writer. However, before we can understand the importance of Seymour Polatkin, we must first consider the Noble/Ignoble Savage.

The Ignoble Savage is perhaps the most common sexual representation of Native men on screen. He comes in a few subcategories, such as the Nameless Shadow where his identity is linked only to his tribe or the more generic "Indian Menace," and he remains on the screen only long enough to give the White Knight something to shoot at and earn the affection of his love interests. His motivations, such as those seen in *Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913) and many other films rely on the Nameless Shadow to provide danger and tension that metonymically



represents the dangers and tensions of the West to white female purity.<sup>26</sup> *The Plainsman* (1936), *The Searchers* (1956), and *Ulzana's Raid* (1970) among others, gives the Nameless Shadow a name, and occasionally some screen time and dialogue, but his characterization remains static, and his purpose is limited only to violence and rape. Taken by himself, the Ignoble Savage offers little in the way of understanding Native male sexuality except to suggest that they can only acquire wives through capture and sex through rape. They omit far more of the Native male sexuality than they reveal. If anything, they reveal more about the anxiety of the White Knight and his sexual inferiority.

The Ignoble Savage embodies a tension and aggression that is no longer suitable for civilized society. He exists on the plains, or in the smoke-filled ruins of raided cities. He is a distant threat, but one that warrants constant vigilance. While the white pioneer is a character of higher civilization who seeks to tame the savage frontier, he is by his very nature uncivilized himself. He is drawn to the untapped reaches of the world where he can scratch out his own living and exist by his own wits. On screen he is given language, technology, purpose, and morality, but at his core he is a character of unresolved primal need that he must conquer in order to be civilized. The Ignoble Savage is the manifestation of the savagery that the white pioneer must destroy figuratively and literally in order to tame his own savage impulses. Furthermore, the Ignoble Savage's sexual aggression and violence adds the necessary sexual tension to the pastoral dreams of westward expansion that the more puritan ideals of the pioneers cannot allow.

The Ignoble Savage and the violent sexual threat that he represents is so closely related to the enduring fears of miscegenation that most half-breeds, as they are often pejoratively called onscreen, are associated with such a union. Martin's character in the *Searchers* declares himself

---

<sup>26</sup> M. Elise Marubbio's *Killing the Indian Maiden* (2006) offers a similar analysis but from the perspective of the Native female, whose film representation she refers to as the Celluloid Princess.

1/8<sup>th</sup> Cherokee, and we find out later in the film that Scar was likely the one who killed his parents. While the film does not reveal the exact nature of Cherokee blood in his family line, Scar's association with the scalp of his mother and his representation of the Ignoble Savage is suggestive of a similar union by Martin's great-grand parents. The violent nature of the Ignoble Savage's sexuality, combined with the destruction of the delicate purity of the White Maiden, leaves any subsequent mixed-blood issue as the worst of all possible alternatives. One possible exception to the Ignoble Savage as the violent progenitor of mixed-bloods in film is the Squaw Man trope discussed in detail by M. Elise Marubbio.

The Squaw Man is one part of the triangle between what Marubbio calls the "Sexualized Maiden" and his more appropriate white lover. For Marubbio, the Sexualized Maiden is a source of desire for the central white lead, whom she refers to as the Squaw Man, as he is represented in *The Squaw Man* (1914, 1918, 1931). The Squaw Man also represents the savage and uncivilized desires of the white man that must be satisfied with is Sexualized Maiden, and he in turn attracts the maiden with his white purity and civilized nature. She states, "a more erotic figure than the Celluloid Princess, the Sexualized Maiden embodies enhanced sexual and racial difference that results in a fetishizing of the figure" (7). When juxtaposed to the more pure white female characters, the Sexualized Maiden is situated in "a racialized and sexualized hierarchy in which the Native American woman appears racially and culturally inferior to, and sexually more aggressive than, the white woman" (20).

Marubbio goes on to add that the Sexualized Maiden almost always has to die in order for the white male lead to reconcile his savage lust with his more sophisticated nature and safely pursue his more appropriate relationship with his White Maiden. In most instances, the Sexualized Maiden and the Squaw Man union results in a mixed-breed child, often a son. While

the son is born from a relationship of love, or at least lust, his existence still calls attention to the unnaturalness of miscegenation for film audiences. He, like the bastard mixed-breed offspring of the Ignoble Savage is just another living embodiment of miscegenation gone unchecked.

In order to alleviate the fears in the white community of sexual violence and miscegenation during westward expansion and as a warning against miscegenation and integration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, films often suggest that death for a White Maiden is preferable to her capture by the Ignoble Savage. This tension and resulting imagery is played out in several films into the 1970s. *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913) and *Stagecoach* (1939) both show lingering shots of a gun held near the woman's head as the Ignoble Savage closes in. *The Searchers* (1956) centers its entire plot around the pursuit and imminent murder of a White Maiden who has already been captured by Comanche raiders. *Ulzana's Raid* (1970) takes this threat one step closer by not only showing a white mother killed by the White Knight before capture, but also a surviving rape victim later in the film as a way of reminding the audience just why the first maiden had to die.

The Noble Savage, by contrast to the Ignoble Savage is a near opposite in characterization. While both characterizations tend to sexualize the Native male character, the Noble Savage is usually filmed sympathetically through lighting and cinematography. He is often shirtless or appears shirtless somewhere in the film, is rarely heavily painted or tattooed, and his garments tend to be more muted in color and design. He not only desires the White Maiden, but she desires him in return. His affections are tender, and his friendly association with sympathetic white characters, usually through a liminal mediator, renders his affections for the White Maiden as exotic and romantic rather than dangerous. The Noble Savage will also speak at least a little English and demonstrate social and cultural sophistication in contrast to the

Ignoble Savage. In effect, the Noble Savage is the promise of the pre-aculturated and distantly primal Native male that assimilation and integration is intended to save.

Regardless of his sympathetic portrayal, the Noble Savage is rarely allowed to fulfill his loving interest in the White Maiden for he, just like Marubbio's Sexualized Maiden, still represents an untamed savagery and primal connection to the land. The Noble Savage is as much a metonymical representation of the unconquered West as the Ignoble Savage, but where the Ignoble Savage is encoded with violence, the Noble Savage reifies the calm and tranquil beauty of nature left uncorrupted. Unfortunately, the Noble Savage, as part of the Noble Savage/Ignoble Savage/White Maiden triangle must also confront his own savage nature in his battle with the Ignoble Savage. Through this conflict, which he rarely survives, he either defeats but reaffirms his own savage potential or he is killed by his savage other. It is in this intersection between the Noble and Ignoble Savage, that the White Knight enters and restores civilization to the unwinnable struggle.

Foucault deconstructs the assumption that puritanical societies repressed sex and spoke little of it by arguing that repression is less about the prohibition of sex and more about the exertion of power onto the bodies of the labor force to define and construct the discourse of sex (*History Part 1*). When the Noble/Ignoble Savage/Maiden triangle is viewed through this understanding, we see that these films reflect a desire to explore rather than prohibit miscegenation and the exploration of sexual desire for Native male bodies. Yet, this desire must be encoded as prohibited within the confines of the film in order to maintain the illusion of equal prohibition in the real world. Under this structure, the films could present multiple layers of fantasy fulfillment and scopic drive. "The eye and the gaze-this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field" (*Four Fundamentals* 73). The film, the act of

viewing the film, and the context of the images within the film pushes towards encounters with the Real that is experienced even when it cannot be named or identified. It regularly brings the audience into confrontation with the presence of miscegenation and violence resulting in an anxiety that is never fully realized. The film binds the tension within a fantasy world that allows for and even invites immersion into the film's presented terrors. The entire process of scripting, filming, screening and then publicly prohibiting scenes of suggested miscegenation grants non-Native audience their *jouissance* at the expense of the Native bodies, while simultaneously reinforcing the trauma of oppression for Native audiences.

### **Early Examples of the Noble/Ignoble Savage**

The triangle between the Noble/Ignoble/Maiden is best demonstrated in the many film versions of James Fenimore Cooper's popular *Last of the Mohicans* (1826). In Cooper's novel and in most of the screen adaptations, three central characters fill three roles of the triangle. In the novel and in all film adaptations, Uncas as the last full-blood son of Chingachgook, are the last of the Mohican tribe, which was a literary contrivance and not based on historical fact or present-day Mohican tribal reality. They are still here. Please do not kill them. Magua is a Huron scout who has it in for Monroe, a Scottish Officer in command of Fort William Henry in 1757 and seeks to kill Monroe and capture his two daughters Cora and Alice. Uncas and Magua battle for the safety and affection of one of the Monroe sisters in each iteration of the story. In the novel and the 1920 version, Cora (dark hair) is the third part of the triangle. In the 1936 version it is also Cora, but in this one she has blond hair and has the characteristics typically associated with Alice in the novel. By the 1992 version Alice (blond hair) is the third part of the triangle.

This change in character of Cora/Alice is not incidental. In the novel and in the 1920 version, Cora is dark haired and mixed blood herself (Cooper 201). As such, the first two incarnations of the story present her as already pre-disposed to unnatural affections towards the Noble Savage: in this case Uncas. Her own mixed heritage positions her as a liminal figure between the sophisticated white European upbringing of her father as she lives a luxurious social life of an Officer's daughter, and the suggested baser characteristics she inherited from her mother. Both works position her as a strong and capable character, but her white acculturation and relation to the more pristine Alice, renders her a White Maiden in this triangle. The 1936 and 1992 films instead use the characteristics of Alice (named Cora in the 1936 version) in place of the source material's Cora as the love interest of Uncas. This change is significant as it shifts the racial connection between the mixed-race Cora and her attraction to the Noble Savage, and instead repositions the more innocent and purer White Maiden figure of Alice.

Regardless of which Monroe daughter fulfills the female part of this triangle, Magua and Uncas remain at opposite ends as the Noble/Ignoble Savage, respectively. We will focus our analysis on the 1920 version directed by Maurice Tourneur throughout this chapter and only call attention to the 1936 and 1992 version when appropriate for the given position. The sexualization of Magua is consistent throughout each of the iterations. The first onscreen moment for Magua depicts him as shirtless and tattooed in vivid colors. His hair is pulled back and his facial tattoos give him a permanently menacing countenance. We see him first playing with a knife as he leans back casually against the wall. The phallic symbolism of his knife as he leers at the Monroe sisters before they leave the fort is an ominous foretelling of his intentions to come later in the film.

We learn, as the film progresses that Magua hates Monroe for an offense that Monroe visited upon Magua. In each version, the offense is a bit different and steadily escalates until the 1992 version where we learn that Magua blames Monroe for the death of his family. Yet, at the beginning of the films we are not given this information and Magua's Ignoble Savage persona is achieved mostly by his contrast to Uncas and by the manner in which the other characters react to his presence. Played by Alan Roscoe in the Tourneur version, Magua is first stopped at gunpoint at the gates of the fort by British soldiers. Later, as Alice and Cora are exiting the lodge house in the fort, Alice reacts with fright to the image of Magua playing with his knife. While Heyward, one of the film's White Knights, tries to re-assure them, Magua seems to enjoy their discomfort. This is later solidified when a young officer is taken aback when Magua subtly threatens him with the knife and demonstrates his skill and familiarity with the blade. Magua's phallic blade is not only sharp, but Magua is so familiar with the blade that he tosses it in the air, catches it, and even waves in front of the officer. This clearly intimidates the officer, who runs away in fear. As a metaphor for Magua's sexual power, the knife is a source fear and danger to the young White Maidens and a source of intimidation and emasculation for the White Knights.

By the 1936 version, Magua's face paint is gone and the distinctions between him and Uncas are less pronounced. Magua has a mohawk haircut while Uncas is a younger more sympathetically lit character throughout the film and wears less exotic long braids and a head scarf. By 1992, Magua's characterization is expertly captured in the breakout performance of Wes Studi, whose rugged facial features contrast to Eric Schweig's more youthful and flawless features.

As the stories progress through the iterations, Magua becomes less stereotypically presented and more nuanced. His exoticism is defined most by his position within the

Noble/Ignoble/Maiden triangle. From the beginning we feel the tension of his presence and his wanton aggression towards the whites. Tourneur's version is the only silent film of the three examined in this work and relies more on visual cues than dialogue to present his characters. Each time we see Magua, his presence is lit so that his facial tattoos are visually pronounced, and his expression is either one of contempt or outright aggression.

By contrast, Tourneur's Uncas is first seen outside the fort looking inward. He is tall, stoic, and heroic. Where Magua is first seen approaching the fort as a scout. Later inside the fort Magua becomes more intimidating and dangerous. Uncas is initially associated with the woodlands and natural surroundings that still encompass the fort. He is the beauty and purity of nature that draws the morally righteous pioneer deeper into West. He is Eden revisited, and his sexual presence on screen is one of safe longing for a life long since lost to civilization.

When Tourneur's Uncas enters the triangle for the first time on screen, he fills the doorway to the living quarters of the Monroe sisters. His stoic presence captivates Cora who is seen on several different takes just gazing at his appearance "her girlish fancy investing the young Chief with a halo of romance." She even mutters to herself, "Surely, among his own people he is a prince." Uncas is filmed with a long shot to capture this impressive height and physical presence, but Cora is filmed with a close-up that frames her enraptured face and rising breasts as she breathes deep in his presence. Magua is sexualized by his aggression and inherent violence, but Uncas' power is in his regal bearing. Her assumption that he must be a prince situates him in sharp contrast to the "Indian Scout" Magua.

Eve Sedgwick works through psychoanalysis, linguistics, and anthropology to uncover a way to use the erotic triangle "as a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification



by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment” (Chapter 1). Through this conception of the erotic triangle, we can approach the Uncas/Magua/Cora triangle from a number of perspectives. First, the narrative itself utilizes the Otherness of all three characters to represent the social outliers of the puritanical Euro-American colonies. This is not to suggest that colonialists were not sexual beings or that they lacked sexual desire, but that they felt an anxiety about this desire and the apparent need for subduing that desire in order to preserve the social order. Never mind the reality that brothels and formalized prostitution are a uniquely civilized occupation. Uncas embodies latent and innocent desire, a non-violent love that remains all-consuming while devoid of aggression. Magua is desire without tenderness, aggression without compassion. Cora, as a mixed-blood object of desire, is the space in which that tension between purity and power must be resolved.

Second, the film as a political device asks the audience to consider the triangle as a representation of the lingering issues with miscegenation facing American citizens in the 20s, 30s, and even into the 90s. Angela Aleiss discusses the uses of miscegenation in her critical work *Making the White Man's Indian* and concludes that, “the subject of racial miscegenation was tricky: unlike the movies' Black Americans, Native Americans could marry whites without fear of censorship reprisals...the state [of California] forbade Black/white unions until 1948, but Indian/ white marriages were acceptable.” (*Making the White* Chapter 2). She, like most scholars of Natives in film, understand that treatment of Native/white miscegenation allowed for critical commentary on interracial marriage and sex in ways that social restrictions and oversight, through institutions like the Hays Code, would not allow. Sadly, we have not been able to resolve the tensions that miscegenation seems to elicit in so many Americans, and films like *Last of the Mohicans* allows the tension to manifest itself between Native/non-Native in contrast, yet

again, to the more recognizable threat to miscegenation of Black/white. Natives at this time were largely considered historically bound, vanishing, or relegated to reservation life, and as such were not considered much of a social threat. Black men by contrast were much more urbanized, and racial tensions were in some ways higher than ever. Public policy during this period reflected this dynamic through the various Jim Crow laws that permeated the South in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While both groups faced varying forms of segregation and discrimination policies, the black community suffered the bulk of the overt urban violence and outward discrimination. They were the more visible threat, and as such, filmic commentary that overtly addressed the Black Brute stereotype were more controversial, though perhaps no less prevalent. The Ignoble Savage served as a softer stand-in for what remains a racial fear of the corruption of white purity. Uncas contrasts the Black Brute/Ignoble Savage persona by suggesting that there might be some aspect of the racial other worth saving. Indeed, each version of *Last of the Mohicans* sees the various surviving white characters coming away from the adventure matured by their experiences in the Native world.

Ultimately, *Last of the Mohicans* lives up to its name when Uncas and Magua finally engage in a physical confrontation at the end of the film. In each instance of the film and in the novel the outcome is basically the same: Magua kills Uncas, Cora dies, Magua dies, and Chingachgook is now the last of the Mohicans. Tourneur's version offers an interesting exchange at the point of climax. Following Magua's "winning" Alice as his prize, he is granted until nightfall to get as far away from the Delaware encampment as he can. Cora reluctantly agrees to go with him, offering to take the place of the more fragile and purer Alice with the Ignoble Savage. As Magua and Cora approach a cliff, she escapes from him briefly and makes her way to the edge of the cliff. She threatens to jump to her death if he comes another

step closer. Cora is so repulsed by what the Ignoble Savage intends to do to her, that she is choosing to take her own life. A darkly comical scene unfolds as she and Magua have a stalemate to see who will bend first. She ultimately falls asleep from exhaustion, and Magua who has been waiting silently for his chance, moves into grab her by the wrists.

Cora is now hanging over the edge of the cliff and doing all that she can to get Magua to release her until she sees Uncas appear on the cliff top. Suddenly she changes tactics and holds onto Magua's wrists, either to save herself now that her love interest has arrived or to hold Magua down and give Uncas a chance for an easy kill. Regardless, Magua is now forced to abandon her and cuts her hands free with a knife, letting her fall to her death. He and Uncas then battle on the cliff's edge and then down into the valley below where Cora has fallen. The black and white hues of the 1920s film combined with careful lighting has the two men's struggle fall into deep shadows where the lines blur between the Ignoble Savage and the Noble Savage. Ultimately, Magua kills Uncas, as he does in all versions of the narrative, but in Tourneur's version, Uncas rolls towards Cora's corpse, and in his last dying moment reaches out his bloody hand to take hers in death.

By this point, Chingachgook and Hawkeye arrive to see Magua escaping and Hawkeye shoots Magua who also falls to his death. Now the film returns back to the Vanishing American trope as the only Indian left alive of the primary cast is the aging Chingachgook and his friend Hawkeye who is the prototype for the white savior figure we will see time and again in film. Hawkeye's characterization, along with Heywood who survives in this version, are now assumed to take up a new triangle with Alice. Both men have coopted various components of the Native world, and the triangle at the beginning of the film can resolve off-screen between the much less savage though still somewhat wild Hawkeye, the enlightened Heywood, and the still pure White

Maiden Alice. By 1936 this new triangle is fleshed out even further when Hawkeye and Alice clearly have affections for each other. Michael Mann's 1992 script, which is essentially a retelling of the 1936 version makes the full transition that the previous films imply.

*Dances with Wolves* (1990) creates renewed interest in Native American period pieces, and Kevin Costner's character Dunbar becomes the reborn White Savior figure who is able to live among the Natives, quickly learn all of their skills, and come away from it better than any native-born tribal member. Michael Mann, riding the success of *Dances with Wolves*, modifies the Hawkeye character to play fully on the potentiality of the White Savior post-appropriation. While Daniel Day-Lewis' screen presence ensures that he would have likely stolen the film no matter what the script demanded, Mann's version sees Day-Lewis' portrayal of Hawkeye as much more vocal, eloquent, and capable than either Chingachgook, Uncas, or even the Heywood. He is the best white man and Indian in every seen. Rather than wait until the end of the film to step into Uncas' role in the erotic triangle, he and Heywood vie for Cora's affection from the very beginning, though Heywood never really has a chance against Day-Lewis' overt sexuality and primal manliness.

In Mann's version, we still have a Magua/Uncas/Maiden triangle, but in this version, the simpler and innocent Alice stands in as the Maiden as both Alice and Uncas are cast as somewhat childlike in their view of the world. While Eric Schweig does what he can with script he is given, Mann insists on filming Uncas in long shots intermixed with close-ups that linger on his inquisitive face. Mann allows Uncas, like the 1936 version, to serve as a supporting character to the more recognizable white pioneer in Hawkeye, so his growing affections for Alice remain in the periphery. Magua is still set on destroying the Monroe line, but in this film, he is much less worried about taking either of the women as a "squaw." It is only after the

Huron leader Tamenund insists that he take Alice as his wife to ease the friction between the Huron and the British, that he agrees to do so, but his violent sexuality is underplayed in Mann's version. We still have the battle between Uncas and Magua and the suicide of Alice to avoid her fate with Magua following Uncas' death. Yet, this entire triangle that dominates the novel and the 1920 film is a subplot to the Hawkeye/Heywood/Cora triangle that fills much of the screen time.

Indeed, Mann is so certain that audience would prefer to see the white lead characters end up together at the end of the film, that he imbues Hawkeye with all the Native characteristics that previous films only suggest he will adopt following the struggle between the Ignoble Savage and the Noble Savage. For Mann, there is no need to see how this struggle will resolve in order to guide audiences to understand the necessity of the white savior to preserve all that is best in Indian culture and cast aside the Savage Other. Instead, Hawkeye has already appropriated all that he needs from his adopted Indian father, Chingachgook, and surpassed his adopted brother, Uncas, in almost every way except exotic sexuality. Hawkeye is shirtless, rugged, bold, and tender. He is the tamed savage personified, and his presence serves mostly to co-opt what little importance the otherwise stereotypical Noble/Ignoble struggle could offer.

While the Noble/Ignoble struggle is certainly reductive and damaging, it managed to keep the Native male sexual presence alive on screen, and in the imaginations of audiences for decades. Before Mann, Uncas was the gone-too-soon model for what Native male sexuality might offer. His affection for Alice is undeniable as is his tenderness. He willingly risks his life for her on several occasions with no more assurances that she might reciprocate his affections than the occasional intense glance. Uncas is the natural world in masculine form, manifested to court the White Maiden with the promise of love and verdant affection and with just the right

mixture of wild excitement to captivate Cora from the opening scenes of Tourneur's presentation. His death, like many other Vanishing American mythical images, is tragic. Audiences mourn the loss of a culture that much of America was trying to forget still existed. For Mann over 70 years later, the beauty and promise of Uncas was simply not as interesting as the far superior and fully acculturated Hawkeye. Uncas' sexuality, while still a choice and still sympathetic, is never really a source of hope for audiences. The narrative was too familiar, and the fears of miscegenation were still too uncomfortable for mainstream audiences to accept.

While the hope of Uncas and the tragedy of the Noble Savage would fade into obscurity for much of Hollywood outside of the occasional remake of Fenimore Cooper's tales, the Ignoble Savage trope would reappear sporadically well into the 70s. Often, as mentioned before, he would remain as a static plot device in the Nameless Shadow variety, filling the screen in marauding hoards to threaten the purity of the White Maidens and the lives of the white settlers. By 1956, following the end of two world wars in which Native men distinguished themselves in many different instances and were now treated as patriotic soldiers around the country, at least on occasion, the Ignoble Savage seemed to be on the steady decline. Films like *Broken Arrow* (1950) would revisit the Squaw Man trope and *Jim Thorpe: All American* (1951) would revisit the Wing Foot concept from *Redskin* (1929) through the fictionalized account of the world-famous super athlete and Sac and Fox tribal member, Jim Thorpe. However, most westerns, if they were being made at all, tended to focus on pioneer dramas and would use the Natives as backdrops and plot devices. Yet, John Ford was compelled to revitalize the Ignoble Savage once again in epic style in his 1956 masterpiece: *The Searchers*.

By 1956, racial tensions in America were complicated by heroic participation of minorities groups in both world wars. Native and African American soldiers were coming home

as honored heroes, and films that continued to try to whitewash the American war efforts were increasingly problematic. Yet, federal policy and much of public sentiment managed to push back any gains minority groups might have earned during this period. Jim Crow was still in full effect in much of America, but having just settled *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, the public conversation of racial segregation and minority rights had once again entered major public consciousness. For some, that meant doubling down on old prejudices and conceptions of men of color.

John Ford, tapping into these growing tensions and seeing the potential to revisit older pioneer tales in the wake of America's critical role in the outcome of World War II, joined forces with John Wayne once again. Only now, Wayne's persona that first took life as Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (1939) has matured, fought in the Civil War for the South and returned to his family a bitter and murdering racist. Most of the critical attention given to *The Searchers* (1956) centers around Ford's directing and Wayne's standout performance, playing against type and reaching acting ranges rarely seen throughout his then 30-year career. *Red River* (1948) had already exposed audiences to Wayne's range as an actor, but his turn here as Ethan Edwards revealed a side of Wayne and a side of the pioneer White Knight unseen to that point.

### **Embracing the White Savage to Avoid the Noble Indian**

In addition to the well-deserved critical attention Ford and Wayne received for their work in *The Searchers* (1956), the film also manages to advance the Noble/Ignoble/Maiden triangle seen in previous decades. Yet, here the erotic triangle has, like Wayne's career, matured to the point that it could complicate previous conceptions of the dynamic and subtly ask audiences to consider the unexplored motivations behind the Ignoble Savage and the limitations of the Noble Savage as a viable alternative. Scar, played by Henry Brandon—another white actor in redface—

appears onscreen for the first time nearly 20 minutes into the film. We see him first as a shadow filling the moonlight over young Debbie, played by Lana Wood. She turns to look back at him when she sees his shadow cover the grave marker where she is hiding. The so-fast-you'll-miss-it-if-you-blink carving on the marker shows a Mary Edwards, Ethan's mother, killed by Comanche, alluding to a possible cause for Ethan's hatred for all things Comanche in the film. As the camera turns to capture Scar in a close-up, we see the Hollywood stereotype of the Ignoble Savage. Brandon's long sharp nose, strong jaw, and weather-beaten face is further enhanced by yellow and red war paint, decorated braids and a pair of obligatory eagle feathers stuck into his hair. With these clear mythemes, the Nameless Shadow coalesces into a powerful figure whose countenance is one of control and calculation rather than brutal and primal savagery.

As the film progresses, we come to learn more of Scar's persona and motivations, but for now he is the face that will drive much of the plot going forward. His presence, when juxtaposed to young Debbie's innocence and fear makes it abundantly clear that the violence and inherent sexual aggression of the Ignoble Savage is no mere threat. When Ethan returns to the Edwards Ranch, he discovers that not only has Debbie been abducted by Scar and his Comanche, but that Debbie's mother, Martha was raped and killed onsite. Her body is never revealed onscreen, but her tattered and discarded dress combined with Ethan's refusal to allow anyone to see the body leaves the brutality to the imagination of the audiences.

This deliberate manipulation of the audience's imaginative fears is further utilized when Lucy Edward's body is discovered later in the film but also kept off screen. Again, the film lets the emotional response of Ethan and the fear of the other men with Ethan heighten the tension. Ethan, having followed a group of Comanche that had split off from the main force, returns to



Martin and Brad empty handed. He is clearly distraught and stabs at the ground with his knife. He refused to tell them men what he has seen, nor explain why he has lost his Civil War issued gray coat. Later, Brad catches up to the Comanche and believes he has found Lucy, but Ethan finally reveals the truth. Brad and Lucy were courting and set to be married, so Ethan wanted to spare him the details, but when Brad refused to accept Ethan's denial of Lucy's place in the camp, they have the following exchange.

ETHAN. I found Lucy back at the Canyon. Wrapped her in my coat and buried her with my own hands. Thought it best to keep it from you.

BRAD. Well, did they? Was she?

ETHAN. What do you want me to do? Draw you a picture? Spell it out? Don't ever ask me. Long as you live, don't ever ask me more.

The film emphasizes the sexual undertones of the abduction and the fears of rape and miscegenation throughout its epic five-year span. Debbie's abduction when she is just a child by the imposing Scar, the rape and murder of Lucy and Martha, and the continued attempts by Ethan to kill Debbie rather than let her live with tainted purity all remind the audience throughout the film that the Ignoble Savage seeks only to assault the White Maiden. Scar is denied motivation for Debbie's abduction or the rape and murder of Lucy and Martha. While no motivation can justify rape and kidnapping, the refusal to explore any such motivation renders the action as shallow and plot driven. For most of *The Searchers* we are reminded that death is the best option for Debbie now that she has been living with a "buck"—a term used by Ethan throughout the film to indicate a Native man, but it is just one of many such derogatory terms used to dehumanize the Native and reduce him to a slur rather than a fully realized human being. Two scenes illustrate this point fully.

Three quarters of the way through the film, Ethan and Martin have finally located Debbie in Scar's camp, but she is now older, approximately 15 and played now by Natalie Wood. She is

now one of Scar's wives, and though the age of 15 is far too young by 21<sup>st</sup> century standards for marrying age, it would not have been unusual for the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In her reveal scene, we learn not only of her marriage to Scar but, that she appears to have assimilated to Comanche life, learned their language, and even seems healthy, though she does not appear to recognize Ethan or Martin. When the two men leave the camp without Debbie, she chases them down and asks them to leave. She declares: "I remember. From always. First, I prayed to you, come and get me, take me home. You didn't come. These are my people. Go (in Comanche)! Go! Go Martin Please!" Having heard this, Ethan then draws his pistol prepared to shoot Debbie where she stands. Only Martin's shielding of Debbie with his own body, and an attack by a Comanche saves Debbie in this scene.

Later in the film, after Martin and Ethan have returned to the Jorgenson's just in time to prevent Laurie Jorgenson's wedding to another man, she and Martin discuss what Ethan will do next. Laurie wants Martin to stay with her and get married as she has loved him since they were little kids, but Martin cannot let Ethan go after Debbie alone as he knows what Ethan intends to do. Laurie, normally a compassionate and somewhat progressive character for the film, reveals that even she thinks that it would be best if Ethan succeeds in his mission rather than let Debbie live as a Comanche wife. They have the following exchange:

LAURIE. You're not goin', not this time.

MARTIN. Are you crazy?

LAURIE. It's too late. She's a woman grown now.

MARTIN. But I gotta go, Laurie, I gotta fetch her home.

LAURIE. Fetch what home? The leavings a Comanche buck sold time and again to the highest bidder, with savage brats of her own?

MARTIN. Laurie, shut your mouth.

LAURIE. Do you know what Ethan will do if he has a chance? He'll put a bullet in her brain. I tell you, Martha would want him to.

MARTIN. Only if I'm dead.

This exchange, combined with several other scenes, are meant to reveal the psychology of Ethan's character and the apparent justification for Debbie's murder. Yet, if viewed contrapuntally from the perspective of Debbie and Scar, we see Ford's position on miscegenation and the unviability of inter-racial marriage, as well as the racial hierarchy of the film's characters. Scar's position as the Ignoble Savage is never in doubt. Not even the revelation that Scar has lost two sons to white men, thus fueling his own parallel hatred for Ethan, justifies kidnap, rape, and torture, but it adds a level of nuance to the unexplored Ignoble Savage trope from previous films.

Debbie, now a wife of Scar, appears to be unharmed and enculturated into the Comanche community. She, and his other three wives, are even sitting in a place of honor in Scar's lodge when Ethan and Martin arrive. She refers to the Comanche as her people and implores Martin and Ethan to leave her and her people alone. Even though she happily agrees to go with Martin at the film's climactic scene, Ford has already alluded to the complex truths of captivity arrangements during this period. By many accounts, captives taken as children like Debbie, suffered a mixed bag of harmful and benign treatment under the Comanche.<sup>27</sup> Reports of torture, rape, mutilation, enslavement, and even forced marriages are common among many historical accounts of the Comanche, so our limited screen time in the Comanche village and our limited understanding of the still largely one-dimensional Ignoble Savage Scar renders any accurate notions of her true state of mind at the time of her rescue difficult. Cynthia Ann Parker, one of the captives on which this film was based, had reportedly integrated so completely with the Comanche tribe that she did not want to leave her children and her adopted family when her rescuers finally found her.

---

<sup>27</sup> See Wallace, Ernest. *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* and Fehrenbach, T.R., *Comanches: The History of a People* for a thorough discussion of the nuances of life for Comanche captives.

While Parker's captivity narrative was somewhat of a sensation during its time, audiences can only rely on the details of the narrative that Ford offers to ascertain the politics presented in the film. Debbie was a captive and likely abused in the early stages of her captivity. By the time Martin and Ethan have found her, she seems to have made her place with her people and initially rejects rescue. Historical account suggests that once Debbie has assimilated to the Comanche culture and especially after she had become one of Scar's wives, she would have no longer faced torture or abuse. I should note here that the classification of rape through coercion and shame is a complicated perspective to consider. From a 21st century Western perspective, there is not really a distinction. Rape is rape. However, it is unclear if Scar or even Debbie would have considered sex an act of violence by this point in the narrative. Her social role was established as part of her initiation into the tribe and acceptance of the tribe's conventions would have gained her much easier living standards. We do not know if Scar's society would have considered the abduction and marriage of Debbie an act of abhorrent violence. The story told by *Carrying Her Sunshade* shares a similar trajectory to Debbie's story and by her own accounts, this experience was both terrifying and yet normalized (Fehrenbach 268-271). At worst, by this point in the film Debbie was likely a low-ranking wife in Scar's family and assigned menial chores that the more senior wives did not want.

One additional scene helps shed light on Ford's vision of Debbie's condition. As part of their quest to find the band that had captured Debbie, Ethan and Martin come across a fort where several Comanche bands have camped out for the winter. In the fort, they are shown several young white girls to see if any of them might be Debbie. Those few former captives that were still alive had gone mad from the apparent torture they suffered at the hands of the Comanche. Their fear and madness are not only palpable on screen, but their maddened wails cause Ethan to

turn back around before leaving. Here the film delivers one of the most hate filled menacing images of Wayne captured for the film. Weather beaten, exhausted, and faced with the results of captivity by the “bucks” Ethan looks at these innocent girls driven mad by torture with murder in his eyes. They are not only suffering a fate worse than death, but their continued existence, and Debbie by proxy, is an affront to his sense of justice and morality.

It is only through Martin, that Native men are offered any sympathy and any hint of normative sexuality. While Ethan tries to position Martin along with all other Natives, despite his mixed-blood heritage and white upbringing, Martin is still largely accepted by the settlers of the community, and the Jorgenson’s seem more than willing to accept him as one of their own and allow him to marry their daughter Laurie. At one point in the film, when Ethan and Martin are visiting the Jorgenson’s, Laurie even gives Martin some of her brother’s old clothes. Brad had already died at this point in the film by chasing after the Comanche who had raped and murdered Lucy. Just as easily as a change of clothes, Laurie and the Jorgenson’s are able to see Martin enter into their family and become one of their own.

However, the scene discussed above between Laurie and Martin reveal that he, like Uncas, is just as much a Noble Savage as he is a white settler. He is not only willing to lose his prospective bride, Laurie, but he is also willing to die fighting Ethan if necessary. Where Uncas was the foil to Magua in *Last of the Mohicans* and the two fought over the rights to claim/protect Cora, the erotic triangle is more complicated in *The Searchers*. Martin still chooses to love Debbie, but as a brother. Her love for him is also one of choice, and it is through this agency that the two become bound by a close and intimate connection that comes to define and even save both of them. Martin and Ethan both desire Debbie, but as an object, not as a lover. We do not learn, until deep into the film that Scar desired Debbie in such a way. In many ways, the film’s

focus on the captivity narrative over a romantic story changes the nature of the triangle from erotic to familial.

Ethan stands in for the Ignoble Savage for much of the film. He is violent and possessive with only a single purpose in mind: killing Debbie. His violence appears to come from some primal place in his past, but it still goes beyond the bounds of rational hatred as the film progresses. Like the Savage, he insists that his way is the only justified method, and his position of power not only allows him the right to violence, but it demands that this right be carried out by him alone. He, like Magua, seeks to use violence against the White Maiden, Debbie in this case, to restore his affronted sense of honor. Her consent is not a factor and indeed her declaration that the Comanche are her people only seems to incite his violence further. He seems willing to let her return with them when she first runs over the dunes after her initial discovery, but when she declares herself Comanche, Ethan draws his pistol in a flourish and demands that Martin get out of the way.

In both *The Last of the Mohicans* and here in *The Searchers*, the Noble/Ignoble/Maiden triangle drives the plot and gives the audience the necessary tension with no initial certainty of how the film narrative will unfold. Scar, the film's encoded Ignoble Savage, still dies at the end, this time killed by the Noble Savage Martin in successful defense of the Maiden. Yet, after Scar's death, we come to understand contrapuntally who the real savage was throughout this narrative. Ethan, riding into Scar's tipi during the climactic raid on Scar's camp finds him dead, but Ethan still dismounts his horse and scalps the Comanche Chief, thus taking his power and assuming his position as the film's primary threat against the Maiden. This assumption of the savage role reaches its height when Ethan chases Debbie to a nearby cave. He dismounts and moves to loom over her paralleling the early shot of Scar looming over the frightened child

Debbie. At this point, a shirtless Martin is chasing Ethan on foot with a hopeless expression that reinforces the danger that Ethan still represents. Ethan lifts Debbie up, and at the climax of the film's tension cradles her in his arms and tells her they are going home. At once, Ethan transitions from the Ignoble Savage surrogate back to the White Savior. Such a transition reveals the potentiality of dynamic characterization that is denied Natives when they occupy this same Ignoble Savage role. Rage, grief, and vengeance are defeated by the spark of nobility in Ethan. Native men are not encoded with this potentiality and must be killed in order to protect civilization.

The Native American men in this film are given a more complex sexuality and a more nuanced critique of their historical reputation. Hollywood utilized the Noble/Ignoble Savage binary to drive the plot of many westerns to this point, with most of these films falling into forgettable B Westerns category. These Dime Novel versions of Hollywood offerings, when taken as a whole, solidified the place of the Native male in public consciousness. He was dangerous but he was exotic. His place as historically bound and ultimately vanishing allowed films to continually present them as the unambiguous threat that must naturally fall to the superior white males in the film. *The Searchers* unpacks these assumptions and recasts them in ways that are both sympathy and problematic.

Scar's sexuality is still primal, and the death of Martha and Lucy clearly position his role in the film as the antagonist against white purity. Debbie's maidenhood drives Ethan towards a confrontation not with Scar but with his own hatred. Scar reveals that his sons have also died in the battles between the Comanche and the white men. He has taken Debbie as a wife but seems to have treated her kindly to some extent. He declares that the very presence of the white settlers on Comanche territory was an affront to Comanche honor and sovereignty. This declaration is

encoded as invalid in a post-pioneer world. Regardless, Scar's actions are encoded as mirrors of Magua's. His relationship with Debbie is unexplored except the few clues we have to her beneficial treatment compared to Lucy, Martha, and the hysterical white women from the fort. Her claim that she is now a Comanche could argue for a reciprocal relationship between herself and Scar. We are never told whether she has children, or whether she truly viewed her Comanche captors as family. We know only that she tries to drive Ethan and Martin away, either for fear for their safety or for fear for her Comanche people. At the film's climax, she happily goes with Martin and does not seem concerned by Scar's death or the death of the Comanche she has been living with for over five years. Ultimately, Debbie, provides few clues to Scar's true nature. We are left with an even more ambiguous tension between Scar and Ethan that vilifies Scar but also positions him as a parallel to the equally murderous Ethan. Whether it is the of rape and death of Martha and Lucy, or the capture of Debbie that drives Ethan to pursue Scar so doggedly, one thing is clear, the purity of the White Maiden is the defining point of tension between the two men. Scar violated this purity, and Ethan must set it right.

Martin, on the other hand allows audiences to entertain the possibility of Noble Savage. He is an Indian that dresses white, talks white, and even plans to marry a white woman. If anything, Martin's Indian heritage is an unfortunate accident that the white community chooses to overlook as though it was some innocuous birth defect. Yet, through Martin the film explores another dynamic of male sexuality. Martin appears to have feelings for Laurie, but his feelings of attachment seem to take second seat to his feelings of an outsider. When Martin finally asks Laurie to go steady with him, she claims they have been going steady since they were three years old. Ethan continually reminds Martin that he is not actually related to the Edwards. Martin's position in the white world parallels the unexplored position of Debbie in the Comanche world.



They are both outsiders who, through time and integration, have assimilated into the culture of their new families even if they do see themselves as outsiders. The Comanche, like most Native tribes at this time, would have had various adoption practices that allow a person, captive or otherwise, to become a full member of the Comanche tribe. Debbie's marriage to Scar is likely part of that adoption into their tribe. Similarly, Martin's adoption by the Edwards is part of his initiation into the white world.

Martin is young, handsome, and kind. His tenderness towards the Edwards and his reactions to the killing and fighting contrast sharply with Ethan's ruthless aggression. Like Scar, Martin's sexuality is left largely unexplored, but by looking at Laurie's appreciation for him and his reaction to her affections in several scenes we are able to discern a gentle and yet passionate courtship. His shyness mirrors that of Uncas as does his protective nature. Laurie's character remains strong throughout much of the film, and her willingness to wait for him to come back to her after the search is an endearing quality. However, it is her final request that Martin let Ethan do what he must and kill Debbie that solidifies her world view of Martin as a man and a lover, but not an Indian. She sees him as a potential husband and fully reciprocates his affections towards her in spite of his poverty and lack of a family name. Yet, her insistence that Debbie has been tainted by the Comanche informs the audience that she does not even see Martin as an Indian man who might sympathize with the Comanche or Debbie's new social reality. He is simply Martin Pawley. He is an Indian, but one that she knows.

The audience, through Laurie, can see Martin as a man separate from his Indian heritage, which is a vital component to any narrative that seeks to explore Native male sexuality with any complexity. His intimate relationships must exist outside of his Indian heritage if he is to have an identity not predicated on racial coding. However, films must learn to present Native men

outside of their tribal heritage, not in spite of it. The tribal heritage of Native men is not the only characteristic with which the Native male should be viewed, but that does not mean it is a characteristic that needs to be excused. This subtle distinction is important as we shall see in the next chapter. Unfortunately, this creates a barrier to authentic Native representation as the act of omitting or even whitewashing the man's Native heritage also renders any exploration of his sexuality devoid of Native specificity. A brief examination of the character Look, played by Beulah Archuletta, adds another layer to Martin's sexuality and his white assimilation.

Through their travels and trade deals with the Comanche, Martin inadvertently "buys" a Comanche woman, whose name is given in the film as Wild-Goose-Flying-in-the-Night-Sky, but she answers to Look as that is the first word Martin utters each time he tries to speak to her. Her screen time is minimal, and she serves mostly as a plot element and comedy relief, but in the brief time she is onscreen we see two key realities. First, Ethan not only seems to support this arrangement but finds humor in Martin's discomfort and naiveté. Second, Ethan does not seem to hold the same animosity towards Look or towards Martin's marriage to her as he demonstrated early in the film when he thought that Martin might have affections for Lucy. In essence, Look provides the platform for Ethan to express his perspective on miscegenation by supporting a Native/Native union where he would reject a Native/white union.

To his credit, Ethan does not seem to mind Martin's courtship with Laurie, but by this point in the film he has grown fond of Martin and softened somewhat towards him. He is an Indian, but one that Ethan knows. Additionally, Look's brief role in film reveals not only a woman who appears happy with the arrangement of a "bought" marriage to Martin, but she is also willing to immediately assimilate to Martin's life and follow him and Ethan. This is crucial as it provides another clue as to Debbie's state of mind regarding her place with the tribe and

with Scar if she were raised under similar circumstances. Finally, Martin's abusive nature towards Look belies his otherwise gentle nature regarding women, and while his aggressions can be attributed to embarrassment at Ethan's mockery, Martin's willingness to be physically aggressive with Look suggests his sympathetic treatment of Natives does not extend to true multicultural understanding or tolerance. Martin considers himself as part of the white community, and while he does not want to kill anymore Comanche than necessary during the rescue of Debbie, he has no overt sympathy for their cultural differences.

*The Searchers* does provide a more nuanced look at the causes behind the sexual aggression demonstrated by some men of Native tribes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The film also offers a White Savage as a racial parallel to the Ignoble Savage. Finally, the film does present a man hailed on screen as Cherokee who is allowed to have a reciprocal heterosexual relationship with a woman, a white woman in fact, that the community supports and the film tolerates even to the closing credits. Unfortunately, the film still advances more stereotypes than it subverts, and the full exploration of Native men with sexual agency eludes us well into the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the film complicates the dimensions of Native male sexual attraction and reciprocation, it fails to accept the sexuality on its own terms and without Western ideological judgement.

Furthermore, Uncus, Scar, and Martin serve as markers of abnormality upon which to circumscribe and subsequently police the Native American male sexual body. Non-Natives decode this representation as that which should be avoided if not outright destroyed and their own sexuality is established as normal and therefore rewarded, even if it is additionally inscribed with violence against the Native American man. Native audiences can decode this representation in similar ways but will likely arrive at different conclusions. Since the power structures in the

film suggest an inherent moral certainty and righteousness in white male sexuality and an abnormality in Native American male sexuality, then they too may decode their own bodies as sites of violation of the social order. When viewed onscreen this decoding also suggests an ever-present surveillance of their transgressions as demonstrated by Hollywood's capacity to show them their own violations of social harmony. In the next chapter we will examine the ways in which Native American men can subvert this normalizing of white male sexuality and call direct attention to the imbalance of power-knowledge in narratives controlled by white male Gazes.

## Chapter 6 – The Circle Begins to Close

As Hollywood and America at large began to accept the presence of Native American men in more sympathetic ways in the late 50s and early 60s, their visual representation began to improve. We start to see more complex social relationships with characters like Tonto from *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957). Native men are occasionally given life and voice, and their position within their localized community is fleshed out to some degree. Tonto stands out as an example of a Native American male whose identity and humanity is explored through his friendship with the Lone Ranger. Yet, even in this example, he is often the subservient of the two and his screen time does far more to advance the plot and the audience's appreciation of the Lone Ranger rather than expand on Tonto's humanity. He becomes a fully realized human by association alone.

Native men are still largely castrated as sexual beings or relegated to Ignoble Savage roles that threaten white purity. Here, we must take a moment to explore the concept of the phallus and its role in the psychoanalytic program. Slavoj Žižek argues that, "What makes the phallic signifier such a complex notion is not only that, in it, the symbolic, imaginary, and Real dimensions are intertwined, but also that, in a double self-reflexive step which uncannily imitates the process of the 'negation of the negation,'" which for our purposes clarifies that the phallus is more than the object-as-the-thing, but a mechanism and function of the symbolic order. Žižek adds that the phallus then registers on three levels or positions, "(1) position: the signifier of the lost part, of what the subject loses and lacks with its entry into (or submission to) the signifying order; (2) negation: the signifier of (this) lack; and (3) negation of the negation: the lacking/missing signifier itself" (*Less than Nothing* 592). Returning to our project of the discovery and articulation of the Native American masculine image in film, we can then understand that the phallus is more than a simple symbol for sexual power or even patriarchal

control, but a signifier of the lack, of itself, and call to missing signifier itself. For each instance that it embodies or signifies something, sexual power in this case, it also signifies the lack of sexual power, such as the castrated other status of the Noble Savage, and to the necessary presence of the sexual potentiality within both. The phallus and the related castration do not exist on a binary or a zero-sum analysis, but rather always exists and call to its non-existence at the same time. This realization then allows us to recognize that presence of phallic imagery is always layered in signification of masculinity, of non-masculinity, and of the inability of the Symbolic Order to signify masculinity at all.

This repletion of signification is present time and again in the films we have explored so far. For example, the presence of the Ignoble Savage, such as Magua, calls attention to the sexual potency of the Native male, which by its very nature threatens the White Maiden, such as Alice, and calls attention to the impotence of the white male, such as Heywood, by contrast. His mission then, is to defeat the Ignoble Savage and reclaim ownership of the mastery of this potency. Yet, this entire exchange continually calls attention to the constructed nature of masculinity, for there is no literal, physical, or even symbolic passing of masculinity taking place that does not return back to the Symbolic Order. By understanding this exchange, we can then come to more interesting conclusion about the ultimate death of Magua, Heywood, Uncus, and the survival of Hawkeye by the end of the film. This theater of signification does have real currency in many films, particularly when the masculine filmic image is controlled by non-Natives and uses Native bodies and culture to define non-Native masculinity. Fortunately, such motions can be reclaimed, if not fully transcended.

Rarely do audiences get to see Native men on screen in healthy intimate relationships that are allowed to achieve full reconciliation. The friendship bonds formed by the Lone Ranger and

Tonto demonstrate the capacity for the exploration of personhood when Native men are given healthy associations with other characters, but such films also insist on advancing lingering Native stereotypes in other ways. Audiences need to see Native men in healthy relationships that demonstrate intimacy and reciprocity in order to see these men as vulnerable yet viable men outside of their kinship ties.

### **Employing Native Trauma for White Ambivalence**

Unfortunately, Hollywood was largely unable to produce a film that could feature 20<sup>th</sup> century men, hailed as Native on screen in a reciprocated romance devoid of sexual violence until the late 1960s. Abraham Polonsky's *Tell them Willie Boy is Here* (1969) explores the relationship between two young Paiutes at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The titular character Willie Boy, played by Robert Blake, is a young Paiute man returning to the tribal community in the Morongo Valley of California in 1909. He is recognized right away when he nears town by a local cart driver who gives him a lift. Yet, when he enters town, it is clear that he is here for only one reason: to find Lola and marry her. The following exchange between Willie Boy and the driver is instructive here:

DRIVER. Mr. Calvert said you've been a foreman on a ranch in Victorville for a while  
 WILLIE BOY. Yep.  
 DRIVER. I hear a white woman owned it.  
 WILLIE BOY. you heard right  
 DRIVER. And you left?  
 WILLIE BOY. Husband came home.

In this early exchange we are introduced to a new breed of Native male sexuality absent from previous films. First, Willie Boy is a strong and capable young Paiute able to hold a job as a ranch foreman, who does not seem to elicit any sexual aggression, but does have a reputation with women. Second, his laconic responses to the driver's questions reveal Willie Boy's desire

to silence any talk about his dalliances away from the village. We will learn soon that he and Lola had a brief romance before Willie Boy was effectively driven out of town by Lola's family, and it is unlikely that Willie Boy wants his exploits to cause friction between he and Lola upon his return. We also learn that his time away was spent with a white woman who was also married. We revisit the notion of the Noble Savage in this scenario as it appears as though the relationship was consensual, but without knowing anything more about the woman he was working for, we cannot characterize their relationship beyond implied sexuality. Ultimately, within the film's first few minutes we are introduced to a Native male with agency and sexuality normally reserved for white characters. His interracial relationship with the white woman also expresses Willie Boy's ability to exist sexually in both worlds.

Willie Boy arrives at the fiesta and immediately looks for Lola, played by Kathrine Ross. When he sees Lola through the crowd at the fiesta, she is dressed all in white, with dark skin, short dark hair, and a waiting smile for Willie Boy. Lola's white dress and short hair subvert the typical representations of Native women by removing the braids and buckskin or beaded clothing. Her white dress contrasts with her dark skin and plays on the mythemes of White Maiden purity. Willie Boy also recognizes her beautiful appearance and dress and likewise straightens his tie and adjusts his road-ragged appearance. When she sees that Willie Boy has noticed her, she smiles brightly, but then grows shy as he approaches and coyly brushes her hair away from her face. Several well-dressed women are standing at stalls nearby, but Willie Boy has eyes only for Lola. When they meet, he speaks directly to her, and she to him as equals. He is soft-spoken and gentle; she is receptive but playful. She is no squaw, and he is no savage. This is a courtship. Yet, this is a courtship that has Shakespearian obstacles as noted in their opening exchange.



LOLA. Why do you want trouble?  
 WILLIE BOY. Goes with you.  
 LOLA. I'm not worth it.  
 WILLIE BOY. You bet.  
 LOLA. Here comes your trouble: my father, my brothers.  
 WILLIE BOY. I'll see you in Calvert's orchard. Midnight.  
 LOLA. Midnight?  
 WILLIE BOY. You be there.

Within the first five minutes, the film has established the sexual prowess of Willie Boy, situated him in a Native space, and characterized his love interest with honesty and integrity. Though Willie Boy is no Montague to her Capulet—he seems to have no family to speak of in the film—Lola's family seems to hate him, and their relationship is frowned upon by her father and brothers. Yet, unlike Ethan and company from *The Searchers*, the disapproval has more to do with a general distaste for Willie Boy's character than his Native heritage. The narrative is based on a true story about a historical figure Willie Boy, but Polonksy is playing into the star-crossed lover archetype, and the subsequent meeting between Willie Boy and Lola's father creates the necessary tension to complicate their otherwise sympathetic courtship.

While such an archetypal romance in film and literature is cliché by this point, Willie Boy and Lola are one of the first examples of Native characters able to fulfill this role. The archetypes continue to endure into the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of the timelessness of the tensions that can arise when the naiveté of youth converges with the passions of young love. Regardless of the historical authenticity of the film in relation to the true story of Willie Boy and Lola (Carlota in the source novel), the film explores the necessary components of Native male sexual agency and representation largely missing to this point.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> *Jim Thorpe: All American*, *Redskin* (1951), *The Vanishing American* (1925) are limited exceptions to this concept, but their relationships remain superficially explored in their respective films.

Willie Boy and Lola have one of the first examples we explored in this work of a Native American male expressing sexual attraction, intimacy, and even vulnerability to a Native woman who returns his affections. Willie Boy's sexual attraction to Lola is predicated on her accepting him as her lover. He courts her desires rather than forcing his desires onto her as the Ignoble Savage, and his love for her is open and apparent rather than the castrated expressions seen in the Noble Savage's characters such as Uncas. In some respects, his masculine persona borders on cliché as he moves through town after his first encounter with Lola. Just as the sexual relationships demonstrated on screen reveal much about a character through the nature of those relationships and the reactions of the respective lovers, so too does *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* utilize supporting characters to provide the necessary exposition for the film's protagonist. Unlike the previous films on this list *Tell them Willie Boy is Here* does not demonstrate an erotic triangle in which the two primary characters compete over a single female character; rather, the two primary characters seem to exist in parallel with each other as they both pursue their own sexual encounters with different women. However, the audience is still granted that triangulation through the juxtaposition of the two characters and the various mythemes that encode their archetypal representation. Therefore, a careful examination of this parallel relationships still reveals much about both Willie Boy and Coop as we come to understand each separately.

Coop, played by Robert Redford, first enters the film on horseback, sitting high above the rest of the Natives as he moves through town "keeping order." His appearance is clean, his countenance is sure, and his demeanor is one of a man who has absolute certainty of his place in the world. He stops briefly by Lola's fruit stand, and she gives him a tomato, to which he tips his hat in thanks. By this point Willie Boy has already purchased some bootleg whiskey from a

local vendor and is sitting beside a nearby road drinking it when Coop enters the scene. There is a brief moment where the two recognize each other, and Coop smiles at Willie Boy before taking a suggestive bite of Lola's fruit before riding off. Their exchange confirms Willie Boy's reputation as a bad boy, and Coop's response reminds the audience and Willie Boy that unlike the rest of the town, Coop has no fear of Willie Boy. This parity positions them as equal rivals for masculinity as well as equals in their reputation with the locals.

The next scene brings the fourth character of the film's primary sexual explorations onscreen. Dr. Elizabeth Arnold, played by Susan Clark, rushes onscreen to meet with Coop. She, like Lola, is dressed all in white suggesting a nod to her own pseudo-purity. Her mannerisms are drastically different from Lola's as she berates Coop for taking so long to meet with her. She begins, "There are three men selling whiskey to *my* Indians. *He* can't do anything; these are *white* men [emphasis added]." Her initial exchange not only sets up her character in relation to the rest of the film, but also positions her as a point of contention with Coop. She is the reservation superintendent, and she emphasizes her perceived ownership of the local Indians. She reminds Coop of the legal limitations of the Natives to settle the matter on their own, which serves to explain the particular brand of paternalism she has developed for the local Natives. This will play heavily into the film's primary plot later, but for now, it drives Coop to his next action.

Coop, on the other hand, seems dismissive of the men, but when Dr. Arnold goads him, he escalates the action beyond proportion. Despite her beauty, Dr. Arnold has used every moment of screen time to remind Cooper, a local Paiute tracker named Chino, and Mr. Calvert that it is her intelligence and white presence that demands respect, not her feminine beauty or purity. Calvert's commentary on Dr. Arnold illustrates the impressions she tries so hard to

overcome, “That’s the way to be born if you gotta be born Coop. Boston money, smart, and snotty, and everything coming to you. The superintendent of this reservation has got the finest legs I have ever seen on man or beast.” Calvert’s reference to her education, rich upbringing, and sexual beauty seek to reposition her as subordinate to his white male superiority.

Barely eight minutes into the film and already it has characterized Willie Boy as a bad boy with a soft heart for a young Indian Maiden, Coop as a not-so-cool-headed sheriff with little patience or worry for petty problems, and Dr. Arnold as an overtly strong woman trying desperately to compensate for her own insecurities that she perceptively knows are recognized by the men in her community. She is nearly bursting out of the confines of the white dress in order to position herself as beyond moral reproach and outside the bounds of purity/impurity. Indeed, her own position of power over the Native people is a clear attempt to establish dominance in a world that would deny her a political voice and authority.

As if taking a cue from Calvert on the suggestion that Coop and Arnold should pursue each other, Arnold further goads Coop when he nears the vendors. She reminds him that the bootlegger is on federal land and that he must be removed. She throws a few fancy words at Coop and reminds him that she is giving him an order, yet as she does this she plays with her hair, and cannot look directly at Coop. As Coop engages the vendors, he attacks them physically and without much remorse. The vendors, just like those that have encountered Willie Boy, seem to know Coop by reputation and fear him. When Coop and the vendors fight, Arnold smiles briefly in the background, but the fighting causes the whiskey carriage to stampede into town and the scene shifts back to the fiesta that is now being destroyed by the fleeing horses. Arnold chases after the cart, and for a brief moment she and Lola share screen time. Lola is laughing at the events, but Dr. Arnold is furious, though she does regain her composure and apologizes. In

the space of a few scenes, which follow the arrival of Willie Boy and introduce the relationship between Coop and Arnold we see the chaos that these relationships bring to the community.

This chaos is signified most succinctly as Lola and Arnold watch the stampeding cart, spooked by her passionate manipulation of Coop, crash through the otherwise serene town.

Dr. Arnold's desire to force control where she realistically has none has only caused destruction of the very thing she wishes to protect. By contrast Lola, a Native of the community, is able to see the humor in the chaos of everyday life. Just as Coop and Willie Boy serve as character parallels, Dr. Arnold and Lola parallel each other's story in a number of ways that the film will soon reveal. Both are dressed in white to mark their position as the film's Maidens, and both are courted by the film's primary male leads. Yet, where Lola vacillates between coquettish and demure in the opening scenes, Dr. Arnold is commanding and forceful. Lola's is a love that can be wooed and earned, but Dr. Arnold's affections must be tamed. This is another reversal of the standard trope of positioning the White Maiden as pure and innocent and the Sexualized Indian Maiden as wild and primitive in her sexuality.

The next act of the film pushes into the evening and Willie Boy is killing time while he waits to meet with Lola in Calvert's orchard. He buys her a yellow kerchief but is insulted by the shop owner in the process. He does not take the bait, but his agitation is building with each moment he is in town. When he goes to a nearby bar, he listens as one of the townsmen opine about democracy and freedom, "I'll tell you what democracy is. Take that Indian over here. We let him come and go just as he pleases, just as if he still owned this country, just as if he was white and a man. That's what I call democracy, real democracy." Just after this pronouncement, to which Willie Boy sits mute, he is further insulted by another man playing billiards, but this time Willie Boy reacts and hits the man with a pool cue. The barkeep retrieves Coop in town.

When Coop arrives, Willie Boy is gone and Coop has to remind the man Willie Boy attacked that if he had really wanted to kill him, then he would already be dead. The actors portraying the racists come across as bullies, and Coop is not sympathetic to their victimization, and yet the rest of the men in the scene do nothing to push back against the racist's remarks. This allows the film to suggest that such behavior is still largely accepted, but there are a few, like Coop, who demonstrate some capacity for tolerance.

To this point the film has worked efficiently to establish Coop as a usually cool tempered law man who tries to act sensibly, but he can be provoked when pushed. Willie Boy is a man to be feared, and even Coop takes him seriously if there is a possibility of a fight. He goes so far as to take a rifle with him into the bar in case there is a shootout with Willie Boy. Yet, Willie Boy is already on his way to meet Lola. He is angry and violent, and his reputation precedes him, but he is in town only for her. By contrast Coop is just trying to maintain order, so he can go about his day. Each film analyzed by this point has tried to position the two central characters as polarities existing on a good/evil or ethical/unethical binary with the white character clearly playing the protagonist and the Native character serving as the antagonist. Yet, in order to achieve this the films of previous generations nearly always kept the Native character off-screen unless he was directly interacting with the white protagonist. This is a necessary step in avoiding the ambiguities of violence and racial tensions that most films try to gloss over. Yet, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* gives both characters near equal screen time and development, and what we find is that both characters are complex in their actions as well as their motivations. It is not a clear reversal where Willie Boy is the sympathetic character to the overtly aggressive White Knight trope as he does seem to bring some of the tension onto himself. Nor is it a standard offering of Ignoble Savage/White Knight.

In the space of this ambiguity, the film allows the romance between the two primary characters and their respective love interests to provide the moral compass. We cannot judge Willie Boy or Coop based solely on their actions with each other or the other men in the film, but the manner in which they treat Lola and Dr. Arnold, respectively solidifies the film's pull for the audience's sympathies. When night falls, Willie Boy has made his way to the orchard after retrieving a blanket from a local friend. Coop, having assumed that Willie Boy had fled for the night seeks out Dr. Arnold in her home. The following parallels to their nightly encounter effectively illustrate the power of sexuality and its related moments of intimacy to reveal the most vulnerable sides of the male character onscreen. To this point, we have seen clearly that both men are strong, capable, fearless, and intelligent. It is Lola and Dr. Arnold that will help us see that Willie Boy and Coop are vulnerable and insecure, respectively.

DR. ARNOLD. I don't want you here tonight.

COOP. I know you don't, but here I am. Now let me in. [She shuts the door on his face.]

COOP. You know it don't matter what you say right?

Dr. Arnold lets him in, but she cannot look him in the eyes as he enters her house. The house and the door serve as the physical analogues of the sexual tension between the two characters. Coop wants to enter her home, and her by proxy, but she shuts him out and closes herself off from him. He knows that she really wants him inside, so he persists. As he enters her house, she feels the shame and anxiety of the sexual encounter that is about to follow. She wants him inside, but at the same time she hates herself for wanting it. He has no desire to alleviate that self-loathing and instead uses it to force his way into her domain. Her refusal to look at him as he enters the house and walks up behind her fuels his passion. The rise of his passion at her vulnerability only enhances her anxiety and ambiguous arousal. The sexual play of their earlier encounters in the film come to fruition in this scene. She emasculated him in front of the men,

and he responded with violence that he perpetrated on the whiskey vendors. We see now that this was part of their power play where she would try to exert her authority and power in public only to be dominated in their intimate spaces. Coop, playing along with her flirtations must re-assert his dominance here. Power becomes a vital component to their sexual encounters.

Dr. Arnold and Coop's sexual scene is juxtaposed to Lola and Willie Boy's loving courtship. Coop had to seek out and conquer Dr. Arnold in the night to claim what he wanted by coercion or force if necessary. Willie Boy has made efforts throughout the day to prepare for his encounter with Lola: buying her a kerchief, securing a blanket, and arranging the meeting in such a way that she must come to him of her own volition. Just after the Dr. Arnold/Coop encounter above, the scene cuts to Lola walking through the orchard in the dark with minimal moonlight to guide her. Her white dress stands out resplendent in the dark and wild growth of the orchard. She is primal purity returned to a pre-colonized period of industry and conquest. She is the beauty and sexuality of youth in a world that has not yet corrupted her. She finds the yellow kerchief hanging from tree to mark the spot where Willie Boy has prepared the blanket. He approaches her from behind paralleling the Arnold/Coop exchange above, but in this scene the tension is one of anticipation not anxiety. Their attraction is apparent by her mannerisms as she turns immediately to face him with a smile on her face. Where Arnold could not face Coop in her shame and anxiety, Lola wants to see Willie Boy and finds joy in his presence. She has come to him willingly, and the purity that her characterization has established to this point becomes a gift that she voluntarily gives to him. After she plucks ever-present match out of his mouth and pulls his hat off, they embrace in a deep and passionate kiss.

The scene cuts back to Arnold and Coop, now in her bedroom. They are now inside her intimate space and have just had sex. Coop is getting dressed and muttering about how she will



eventually tire of the Indians and move away to save someone else, so he does not really matter to her. He does not want to say that he has feelings for her because that would reveal his vulnerability and damage his appeal to her. The sexual encounter has revealed his desire for her, and now he has to reaffirm his indifference to her. She, seeing through this characterization claims that he uses her to establish his manhood because there are no more Indians to kill or wars to fight. His power must be established in the bedroom.

To this point in the film, we have seen the presence of the male gaze on the production and its impact on characterization, cinematography, and social commentary. As these two parallel scenes suggest, women as much as Native men are largely present to enhance the characterization of primary male leads. What characterization we do get of Arnold and Lola that is not dependent on their relationship to Coop and Willy Boy is obscured by the need to objectify their bodies and their sexuality for the viewers. This film is still, in many ways, a white male fantasy, but it does add a layer of nuance to its representation of Native characters. Having established the relationship between Coop's power and his sexuality, Arnold goads him into anger.

ARNOLD. You can't even make yourself into a man killing Indians. That's all gone now. All you can do is humiliate me.

COOP. You can always say no.

ARNOLD. How could I resist you? You're brutal, course, violent, like a wolf in a cage. I use you the way you use me, and if you weren't a fool playing sheriff in a dusty little market town, you'd know that.

Coop grabs her on the bed again, and she tries to protest. She tries to equate his desire for her with the joy he feels when he fights, but he stops her from finishing the connection. He does not deny the truth or refute it, but he kisses her afterwards as if to express through actions that his desire for her is genuine, yet his desire remains only physical at this point.

The scene shifts back to Lola who is lying nude on the blanket that Willie Boy acquired earlier. She is discussing their future and the possible places they can go and how they can live. Unlike Coop and Arnold, Lola and Willie Boy are not talking their way out of intimacy and their relationship, nor is the vulnerability of their love a point of contention or worry. James Sandos and Larry Burgess recognize that “Willie Boy and Lola are the embodiment of true heterosexual love, avatars of a lost past. They represent marriage and family. Coop and Liz, alternatively, reflect the dark side of the 1960s sexual revolution...marriage and family have no place in their conversation” (113). While the details of the narrative seem to leave out several key elements of their romance, what is presented in the film suggests a mutually desirable romance between a man and a woman unconcerned with the larger politics at work in their coupling. Instead, they are individually fixated on the ramifications of their love and the ways they can proceed. For Lola, it is clear that they will be together, it is only a matter of where and how. For Willie Boy, he knows that he has not yet solidified his claim on Lola to the outside world. His vulnerability and fear of emasculation comes from outside sources, and it is there that he must assert himself and establish his masculinity. For Coop, that place of emasculation is in the vulnerability of his desire for Arnold, and it is in that space that he must regain control.

LOLA. I could teach school in Nevada, have my own schoolhouse. And maybe you can have your own ranch.

WILLIE BOY. I let your father chase me with a gun, because of you. I asked for you white man's way, and I asked for you Indian way, and he chased me with a gun. And I'm no man to be kept waiting. Not by him. Not by you.

Willie Boy is also offering us clues as to the remainder of the film's driving narrative. His reunion with Lola has proven that he cannot be stopped from getting what he wants by her family, but he now needs to make it official. He has tried to do this on several occasions, but each time his power has been stripped from him by a father that does not approve of him or their

union. His masculinity with women has never been in questions as previous scenes have established, but his power among his people and his community has been damaged by allowing Lola's father to chase him off. As much as he desires her, he cannot truly have her or offer all of himself to her until he reclaims his manhood by taking her as his wife, with or without her father's approval. Stripped bare physically and emotionally, he is at his most vulnerable when Lola's father, Mike, arrives. Willie Boy is faster than Mike and not only takes the gun from him but shoots him with it. He has reclaimed his manhood by stripping the life and the authority of Mike. That he was able to accomplish this when he was at his most vulnerable establishes him as one of the most self-assured Native males we have explored so far in this project.

What separates this act of violence and the subsequent acts that Willie Boy commits later in the film is the justification. In the first scene in the film that Willie Boy shows his violent side, he is provoked by white men, even beyond his attempts to remain calm. In this scene, his killing of Mike is in self-defense and his willingness to let the Lola's brother escape demonstrates his capacity for restraint. As the film progresses and he is forced into more acts of violence, each is framed around acts of honor or self-defense. These are the missing elements of the previous films where the violence is without reason or justification, as least not any socially acceptable ones. While the death of Lola's father, Mike, is tragic and Willie Boy's attack on the bar patron is out of proportion for the moment, the film encodes each scene with a layer of plausible sympathy. He is not quite noble, but his tenderness with Lola and the reasoning behind each act of violence precludes him from being fully ignoble, even if that is how the white villagers wish to see him.

Following this setup, the film moves into its main plot element. With only twenty percent of the film's running time dedicated to the establishment of these juxtaposed sexual

relations we have come to see Willie Boy as a sympathetic man who, though perhaps not very wise or cautious, seeks only to reclaim his love and marry her and in so doing, reclaim his masculinity. Coop, by contrast, just wants to maintain some sense of order in the town, including the routine he has established with Arnold. We have already seen several clues that Coop, though he enjoys the sexual charge that his violence elicits, does not like killing. He tosses his gun to Chino before he fights the whiskey vendors, and he is relieved when Willie Boy is no longer at the bar and looking for a gunfight. Later during the ensuing manhunt, he demonstrates on several occasions that he does not admire his father's deadly treatment of the Natives, but he also feels that the continued encroachment of white justice into Native culture is part of the cause of the racial tensions. Whereas Calvert and the others seem intent on forming a posse and hunting Willie Boy down for his crime of killing a man, Coop sees the parallel between Willie Boy's marriage-by-capture and his own volatile relationship with Dr. Arnold. Dr. Arnold, also sensing this similarity, takes a different approach and uses the Willie Boy/Lola situation to re-establish her power in the public eye and counter her internal shame at her desire for Coop.

As the manhunt unfolds, Willie Boy is again in control of his own destiny and though he wants Lola to accompany him, he only tries to force her once. Following a failed attempt to tie her up, he tells her that she can leave if she wants. Several times throughout the manhunt Lola tries to leave, but she always comes back of her own accord. Each time, she does not try to leave because of fear or anger at Willie Boy but out of a combination of shock and despair at their situation. She feels as though she is only going to slow him down and that her continued presence will only lead to Willie Boy getting killed. Her death near the end is left deliberately ambiguous as it is unclear whether Willie Boy killed her so that he could get away, or if she shot

herself for that very reason. Both possibilities lead to a similar conclusion. If Willie Boy has killed her, which is extremely uncharacteristic of Willie Boy to this point in the film, then he did so only after several intense conversations and likely at Lola's insistence. Such a moment would have occurred after they both had accepted the inevitability of their death. However, if she killed herself, which is far more characteristic of Lola so far in the film, then she would have done so willingly to both end her participation in this struggle, and to aid Willie Boy. If decoded hegemonically, audiences will assume Willie Boy killed her, which will give them a reason to justify his killing later. If read contrapuntally, we can see that Polonsky was both unable to clarify Lola's commitment to Willie Boy, but also unwilling to commit to his condemnation and has left the decoding of this scene as intentionally ambiguous. Consequently, Native Audiences will be able to see the agency in both characters both before the death of Lola and afterwards. The inevitability of their demise was insured the moment two Native characters attempted to find peace, love, and happiness in film.

Roland Barthes reminds us that "a myth ripens because it spreads" (263). By the 1970s, some of the original myths of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had lost their appeal and become stale. With the advancement of the Civil Rights Movements, AIM, counterculture, and America's engagement with a different kind of war in Vietnam, the classical myths of the individualistic cowboy, the mysterious yet heroic gunman, and the persevering pioneer, had lost much of their potency. These images were no longer depoliticized mythologies, as Barthes defined them since they were unable to hide their own artificiality. Their ideology was not only apparent but undesirable to a large portion of the population. Instead, new mythologies were starting to emerge and gain traction. The anti-hero in the vein of Clint Eastwood's "Man with no

Name” or Josey Wales were finding new audiences.<sup>29</sup> Yet, so too were introspective and ideologically progressive heroes like Atticus Finch and T. E. Lawrence.<sup>30</sup> Eastwood’s “Man with no Name” and Dirty Harry were actually just retooling of older heroic tropes with the villain being the system rather than the nature. Although they fought against villains, their appeal was their disdain for the rules and the establishment. Finch and Lawrence also pushed back against certain established norms of their respective narratives, and their seemingly benevolent actions towards marginalized people set them up as enlightened. In both instances, the product obfuscated the ideology inherent in the narrative. They had become new configurations of old mythologies. They were now depoliticized speech.

Unfortunately, these new heroes are hiding the same conceit as their predecessors. The anti-hero bends the rules to his favor, but only so far as the dominant order maintains its integrity for everyone else. They break the rules because they must, so that society can endure untainted. The progressive hero fights for injustice on behalf of the marginalized, but the systems of control remain in place, and they continue to benefit from this system. Similarly, Willie Boy and Coop present new faces of old mythologies. As James Sandos and Larry Burgess argue, “Willie Boy and Coop are 'brothers' and in conflict, the clash can only be resolved by death; Coop must recognize Willie Boy as his brother and touch him” (111). Coop makes this recognition in the film when he discovers that their handprint in the mud, where they have both drank from a pool of water matches each other in size. However, the film insists that their shared connection cannot overcome the inevitable clash, but for Coop/Willie Boy and for non-Native/Native men. Coop does not want to kill Willie Boy with the same bloodlust that the rest of the posse poses,

---

<sup>29</sup> See *A Fist Full of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) for the prototype of the deconstructed western hero and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) for the evolution of this character type into one with some restored morality and vengeance on his side.

<sup>30</sup> *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)

but he nevertheless carries out the mission and the result is the same. The Native American man must die, and his romantic and sexual viability must be eradicated, but this time the hero will feel bad about it. Similarly, Willie Boy presents a hero that has blurred the lines between cultural values and become more recognizable to non-Native audiences, while still possessing the trappings of exotic Nativeness. His death is heroic and sympathetic, but he is still dead, and his potency is still extinguished. In the end, we have another variation of Hawkeye and Cora surviving into the future, with Coop and Arnold left to carry on the mantle of sympathetic mediators for the uncivilized Native.

Ultimately, both Willie Boy and Lola are dead by the end of the film. *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* is a film that allows the Native man to reclaim his manhood and his sexuality onscreen. The title even refers to a point near the end of the film when Lola is going to run away from Willie Boy, and he calls out to her to tell the white men that Willie Boy is here, and that he is not going to run away anymore. His reification of his own identity coincides with the next scene of him where he is wearing his father's ghost shirt and running across the desert. He is not a man that is running away from the place where he will make his stand but a man that is running towards it. His identity in the film was not defined by his Ignoble Savage lust of women who do not desire him nor his Noble Savage longing for a love that can never be. Instead, the sexual aggression that Magua and Scar used to reestablish their masculinity in a colonized world of oppression and social castration is replaced by a character whose masculinity must be reclaimed from those that stole it. He comes back to town knowing that he must confront her father, and he knows that he cannot go on having ran away from a man. His desire for Lola is not the cause of his emasculation, nor is her body the space in which he will reclaim it.

Through *Lola and Willie Boy*, the film reveals the very real and lingering tension in Native communities throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Native men's divided consciousness as Native and American, as a colonized people with limited sovereignty, plays itself out in the economic, social, and political sphere. Film has largely ignored these issues in any overt way, leaving the audience to superficially consider the moral ramifications of expansionism and colonialism while still enjoying the thrills of white perseverance in the face of danger. By relegating Native men to a Noble/Ignoble Savage binary and forcing that binary to play itself out in a losing battle over a single white woman suggests that not only are Native men incapable of earning the affections of a woman without coercion or rape, but that the purity and moral superiority of the white world, metonymically expressed in the White Maiden, is the ultimate horizon of their internal desire to assimilate. *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* rejects this binary and gives sexual agency to both Willie Boy and Lola, and through this agency he exposes his vulnerability and his true feelings of social oppression. Mike stands in as the representation for all the obstacles a Native man faces in establishing his masculinity and identity in the Native community in a post-colonial world. Coop, as an agent of Dr. Arnold, stands in for the inevitable truth that white superiority will be the undoing of Native masculinity, resistance, and revitalization. In the end, Willie Boy and Lola had to die, and the hope of their love will largely vanish for another three decades of Hollywood films.

With over one hundred years of film behind us, surely, we have arrived in a social and political place where we can write, direct, produce and cast a film about Native men having complex family, kinship, and sexual relationships without resorting to stereotype and revisionism. It stands to logic and reason that with the desegregation of the military in the World Wars and the social bleed through into national desegregation into the late 50s and 60s that



Hollywood would have realized that America was ready to see Native men and women in complex relationships within their own tribes, with other tribes, and even with other races. By the 80s America had benefited not only from the Civil Rights movement and the subsequent resistance pieces in film, television, music, and art in general but we had also experienced Momaday, Silko, Vizenor, and more. Native art and music, though often coopted and manipulated by mainstream white consumers, remained in high demand. Throughout all of this, Hollywood still managed to make *Dances with Wolves*, then give the film multiple Academy Awards, and celebrate it as a Native American triumph. All of this could be excused as it is not the first time that Hollywood has mistakenly thought that it had solved the problem of racial injustice with one sympathetic film. And to Costner's credit, the film took steps to present Native Americans in sympathetic and even complex social organization. Graham Greene's performance resonated on screen, and the humor and compassion of his band of the Lakota tribe captivated audiences. The film's most unfortunate effect was not its renewal of Native American subject material for film, which had waned since the mid-70s, but that its reception was so strong that many outside the Native community did not bother to examine the film's undertones closely, and subsequent films quickly followed the trend of revitalizing the Native Other in order to reify the White Savior archetype. We have already looked at Mann's *Last of the Mohicans* and Apted's *Thunderheart* to get a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of films from this generation. Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* (1998), which I have largely ignored in this work due its heavy treatment by other scholars and owing to the desire to explore less popular works whenever possible, illustrated two very key points in Native American cinema: Native American films by and about Natives are commercially viable, and Sherman Alexie has a lot to say.

### **Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity**

In 2002, Sherman Alexie capitalized on the success of *Smoke Signals* to produce a new film based on some of his other works: *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002). Alexie would have greater control over this film and would utilize a more tribalized form of filmmaking. Alexie wanted to remove the hierarchy and authority structure associated with many Hollywood film products that relied on the whims of producers and investors to dictate the direction of the film. In that vein, Alexie tapped into Native actors, producers, extras, and crew in a community effort to see the film to its final conclusion. While *The Business of Fancydancing* was not as successful commercially or critically as *Smoke Signals*, its design, structure, and narrative allowed for a more experimental film product worth a critical examination.

The film's protagonist Seymour Polatkin, played by Evan Adams, is a semi-autobiographical Native poet from the Spokane reservation. Seymour is a gay man living off the reservation in Seattle with a white lover. He is educated and successful for a poet, with much of that success coming from his poems and short stories inspired by or directly lifted from his reservation community. His career in the film mirrors and embellishes that of Alexie's own growing career as a Native writer. Alexie, like Seymour, also moved off the reservation to pursue his career and pulled from his experiences as a Native man and from reservation life to drive his creative work. Similarly, Alexie received a level of pushback from his Native community for capitalizing on their experiences to fuel his work. This tension in Alexie is clear in a number of scenes in the film, but here we want to take a closer look at the role of the Native male sexual identity as it is explored in *The Business of Fancydancing* to gain an understanding of how film can produce intimate and complicated sexual identities for Native men that both inform their position in the film among the other characters as well as offer audiences insights

into their characters. As this chapter has argued, film has the capacity to follow a Native man into his most intimate circles. Through the filmic gaze, audiences are able to better understand the complexity of the Native male identity as it is performed and received while the Native man is at his most vulnerable. In so doing, audiences are able to “see” the Native American man as he is seen by his intimate partners. This recognition, or misrecognition, allows Native audiences to see in these characters a subjectivity that they can begin to see in themselves, with complexity and nuance.

The film opens with a shot of Seymour performing a Native circle dance traditionally performed by women and wearing a shawl. This intercut of dance scenes, combined with dance club scenes, will section off the narrative and disrupt the audience’s perceptions of identity and performance in the film. The solo dance scenes, such as the one at the beginning of the film, allow the audiences to conceptualize Seymour in a gender ambiguous characteristic. His physical appearance is clearly male, though somewhat effeminate, but his performance of a woman’s dance and the shawl call attention to the performativity of his gender. He can change the cadence and style of his dance and wrap his body in a woman’s shawl to become, at least for a time, a mimicry of a Native woman. When we learn in the next few scenes that Seymour is a gay man, this cross dressing and performance of the female gender become even more suggestive.

Following the establishing shot of Seymour dancing, the film moves into the character’s narration. Seymour is sitting in the window of a bookstore as if he is the display, and he is reading a version of Alexie’s poem, “How to Write the Great American Indian Novel.” The poem, and to a certain extent the film, articulate the absurdity of the conventions and expectations in film and literature by satirically listing the traditional components assumed to

warrant greatness in the given genre. A brief sample of the poem below reveals some of the political commentary the film will both subtly and overtly address throughout its narrative and imagery:

All of the Indians must have tragic features: tragic noses, eyes, and arms.  
Their hands and fingers must be tragic when they reach for tragic food.

The hero must be a half-breed, half white and half Indian, preferably  
from a horse culture. He should often weep alone. That is mandatory.

If the hero is an Indian woman, she is beautiful. She must be slender  
and in love with a white man. But if she loves an Indian man

then he must be a half-breed, preferably from a horse culture.

If the Indian woman loves a white man, then he has to be so white  
that we can see the blue veins running through his skin like rivers.

...

Indian men, of course, are storms. They should destroy the lives  
of any white women who choose to love them. All white women love

Indian men. That is always the case. White women feign disgust  
at the savage in blue jeans and T-shirt, but secretly lust after him.

White women dream about half-breed Indian men from horse cultures.

I suppose I could just save myself the trouble of writing this analysis and just let Alexie's poetry make the same points and with greater skill. Alexie is very conscious of his desire to play with the visual image on screen. Seymour's placement in the store window, combined with the poem he is reading demands that the audience consider the absurd voyeurism of Natives in film and novels about Natives. Alexie has put his Indian protagonist on display at the beginning of the film, and Seymour tells the audience what characteristics he would need to have in order to be a part of the Great American Indian narrative. Of course, Alexie will disrupt most of these conventions throughout the film.

Seymour and the rest of the cast will be tragic in many ways, but often not in the manner in which Hollywood is accustomed to seeing them. Their tragedy is not in their vanishing nor in their historically bound natural lifeways romantically lost in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The deepest tragedy for Seymour is his inability to walk in either world without guilt or resentment. The vibrancy and presence of the Native world in his poetry ties him to the reservation, and the authenticity of the relationships he has on the reservation ignite him beyond any that he has discovered in the city dance clubs or hotel rendezvous. Aristotle rages at the establishment and hypocrisy of the white world but cannot overcome his own sense of pressure to reach his potential. Mouse never bothered to leave the reservation and the beauty of his music only enhances the tragedy of his self-destructive life that leads to his death. Agnes roots the film's three main Native male characters through her interactions with each. Her love for Seymour is unrequited. Her love for Aristotle is complicated yet superficial. Her relationship with Mouse is tender and endearing.

While Seymour is in many ways the film's main character, it is difficult to call him the hero or the protagonist. His actions are often far from heroic, and his treatment of his friends is rarely sympathetic. However, audiences are able to see, through careful examination, that this film illustrates the subjective nature of heroism and sympathy typically displayed in film narratives. If the audience sees Seymour as a shining example of how to escape the poverty and despair of reservation life, as Seymour wants to see himself, then his actions are not only courageous and heroic, but worthy of our deepest capitalist sympathies. Yet, if we view him as Aristotle views him, we see a man who has abandoned his people, exploited their pain, and left those that cared for him the most behind in order to seek out and obtain a way of life that is as false and hollow as it is oppressive.

Clues to Alexie's perspective on Seymour and Aristotle are further established as the film progresses. Throughout the film, Seymour will read some of Alexie's poetry or stories while the film cuts through a series of scenes that are both complicated and enhanced by Seymour's readings. Shortly after the film's opening, we see a combination of images. Seymour is seen kissing the statue of Chief Seattle with a deep and uncomfortable kiss. Mouse, played by Swil Kanim, sits with Aristotle in a dilapidated house. Mouse is clearly drunk, but he pours rubbing alcohol in a glass and drinks deeply before laying back and putting his head on Aristotle's chest, who holds him tightly. Mouse is shirtless and their embrace is at once haunting and sexualized. Without the context of the intoxication, the emotion of the scene suggests a homoerotic bond, but the alcohol throws any such reading into question. We are not meant to read them in any particular way. As the film's intertitles reveal, we have an unreliable narrator.

"Seymour Polatkin is full of shit." *Indians.com* May 22, 2001.

As a stand-in for Alexie, most of the commentary is meant to suggest that both the film and Seymour should not be trusted as a narrator. There is clear truth and pain behind the images the film produces. Aristotle and Mouse share a deep and tragic connection, but that Alexie is full of shit reminds us that what we are seeing, as with Seymour, is only an interpretation, a simulation, of the reality that the two men endure. Regardless of the authenticity or reality of the Mouse/Aristotle scene, the pain of the substance abuse expressed by both men recalls similar scenes explored between Mogie/Rudy and Miri/Cufe.<sup>31</sup> We cannot, through any of these films understand the struggles that lead to such self-destruction, nor should films or popular culture in general seek to commodify this kind of pain. Yet, the imagery explored here, if treated honestly,

---

<sup>31</sup> *Skins* (2002) and *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007), respectively.

calls attention to the struggle in order to mobilize resistance. Then again, Alexie is still full of shit.

Next, we see Seymour getting ready for a book reading and signing while his white boyfriend Steven, played by Kevin Philip, watches affectionately. The two men share an intimate exchange that suggests attraction and familiarity without oversexualizing the experience. It is just such scenes, as with those in the Willie Boy and Lola love scenes, which allows us to see deeper into the central character by viewing the character as their lovers view them. For this scene, Steven begins by mockingly playing the part of the adoring fan and feeding Seymour all the typical banal lines that the fans might offer when they meet him for the first time. The two men are standing in front of a mirror and Seymour looks only at his reflection while Steven shifts his gaze between the reflected image and the side of Seymour's face and his back. The white man sees him, and sees Seymour seeing himself; however, he is searching for himself in this viewing to legitimize his place in Seymour's Ideal self. Seymour's focus is on his own self-image and how the world will see him, even as he puts on the armor of his vaguely Native suit. Steven's dialogue tries to penetrate through that reflection and see into the man that by all accounts he seems to genuinely love. Steven's appreciation of Seymour is expressed in his desire to recall one of Seymour's poems that reminds Steven of his own father. Steven exposes the wounds that his relationship with his father has created, which Seymour's poems have revealed but failed to heal. Seymour, fixating on the quality of the poetic lines, even saying the final verse with Steven, does not enter that vulnerable space to comfort Steven; rather, he dismisses the sentiment. "Well, I guess that's what poetry is for." The camera stays just off and to Seymour's right in this scene capturing Seymour's face in the mirror's partition resulting in a near continual splitting of Seymour's image. His reflection, broken by the different panes of

the mirror, is incomplete as he prepares to leave his lover's vulnerability for the adulation of fans whose connection to his work is only superficial.

Steven and Seymour are positioned in this scene as submissive/dominant through Steven's assistance with Seymour's dressing, and with his attention to Seymour's appearance. The focus of the moment is on Seymour's evening and his success. While Steven offers his pain to Seymour, it is Seymour who gets to decide to reciprocate or reject the exchange. We learn later in the film that Seymour also has a great deal of pain regarding the relationship with his own father, but this is only shared with Agnes, not Steven. Steven, and the audience at this point, is only able to see the reflection of Seymour that he is willing to reveal. Steven and the audience have to penetrate into the character of Seymour through his poetry, which we have already been told is unreliable. Regardless of the difficulty in characterizing the reticent Seymour at the film's openings, we can use Steven's gaze to understand, at least in the urban life, the world Seymour has created for himself. Seymour deals in pain as another vendor might deal in beadwork or buckskin. It is his profession, and he mines these resources for economic gain. True exposure of Seymour's identity and inner self is as elusive for the audience here as it is for Steven. By subverting the Gaze and placing the camera in Alexie's hands, and situating the white male as the voyeur, Alexie is telling us how he wants to be seen by the non-Native world, and through this exchange Alexie believes any such recognition should be guarded against for fear of further exploitation. Alexie caps this scene and transitions to the next on the reservation by showing Seymour in traditional fancydancing regalia performing a male dance. At once we see the conclusion of the bathroom scene with Seymour now leaving to "play Indian" for his fans and the reality of his Indian heritage on the reservation.



With establishing shots of the reservation, we see Native men riding modern day pony's—motorcycles—through the streets and other images of the land and reservation around Spokane before the film moves into the more confined and personal space of the house where Mouse's body rests. Agnes, played by Michele St. John, is in the room preparing the body for the funeral and wake. She places his violin over the body and wraps him in blankets before cleansing the body with tobacco smoke. Next, she kneels down to pray over him, reading from a Torah, while Michele St. John sings "Goodbye Mouse." Next, we see Aristotle, played by Gene Tagaban, preparing Mouse's traditional dancing outfit and Agnes and Aristotle embrace, establishing their primary emotional and intimate connection to this point. The scene cuts again to a brief dance cut only this time Agnes is dancing with the shawl and smiling in a close shot of her face, suggesting the previous scene of her and Aristotle comforting each other after Mouse's death on the reservation is a scene of happiness. It is clear as the film progresses, and with the mood of the music in each scene, that she and Aristotle are saddened by the loss of Mouse. However, such loss is not uncommon on the reservation, and Agnes's smile is probably a result of her connection to the family, community, and even Aristotle.

As the scene shifts back to Seattle, we are now in the darkened dance club that will intercut along with the fancydancing scenes throughout the rest of the film. These scenes help interpret the urban side of Seymour and the various kinship and intimate transitions he has had to make in order to leave the reservation and his normative heterosexual Native male lifestyle behind in order to become the gay, urban, Indian poet that he is now. During the club dance scene, he walks into the darkened room as the camera tracks his entry and movement from right to left. He walks with his hands in his pockets as if uncomfortable in his surroundings and even walks past an overweight and nearly naked man wearing leather straps and a cowboy hat. This

sexualized gay cowboy turns and tries to entice Seymour as he walks by, but Seymour is uninterested.

As he nears the center of the darkened room, now surrounded by club dance music, Seymour's voice pushes the music aside as the scene transitions to him speaking to a group of fans at a book signing. In this scene, he is narrating his difficulties in communicating his two-spirited homosexuality to his grandmother. He jokingly tells the room that she did not understand how that was possible and wanted to know the particulars about what gay men do in bed, and even offers to tell Seymour what she and his grandfather did in bed to help him relax. The punchline of his joke leads to his pitch of the poetry book he is there to sell and sign for the fans. "In this book, you can find out what I like to do in bed." The book, and the poetry within it, are examples of how Seymour chooses to express his sexuality and share that sexuality with strangers even though he is unwilling to open up on such an intimate level with his friends and family. He has effaced his personal identity and repackaged it for commodification and consumption. The fans at the book signing completely buy into this choice and his revelations and laugh at the joke, despite its unusual connotation. He will sell them his stories of his sexuality, but he will not share them with his family. Again, Alexie subverts previous movements in film by commodifying the sexuality of the Native male characters for white consumption, but this time for the financial gain of the Native.

The next scene introduces another recurring element in the film as Seymour is being interviewed by a truculent journalist who is unamused by his evasive literary persona. She is the skeptical voice of the audience and the fans of Seymour that wants to penetrate through the bullshit and get to the real story. By this point, we have been told that Seymour cannot be trusted, and we have seen Seymour in a variety of different scenes wearing different masks

depending on who he is with. The audience is hungry to know who this character really is and if he can be trusted. The interviewer pushes first to know what his last name, Polatkin, means but he evades her probing questions. Next, she wants to understand where his poems come from, but again he gives her the “standard literary answer number 1” and evades further with “standard literary answer number 2.” Ultimately, he internalized the origins of the poems and does not offer any acknowledgements to his sources of pain, pleasure, and loss that permeate through the works that he reads throughout the film. Yet, as if to really answer this question, Alexie shifts back to the reservation to show Agnes and Aristotle still preparing Mouse for his funeral. This is where the poetry and, by extension, Seymour’s identity comes from.

Similar to Frankie Smallhill, Mouse acts as the film’s Native corpse figure, which helps drive the plot from the past, through the present, and allow for some consideration of the future. He also helps us to come to understand Seymour through his own intimate relationships with Seymour as children. Several scenes show Mouse with a hand-held camcorder recording his times with his friends. This film within a film allows Mouse to escape the confines of death in the film and re-emerge as a saddened and angry former friend of Seymour who hates that Seymour has coopted his stories and pushed them off as his own. “He took my life man.” Mouse complains to Aristotle. Seymour has taken the stories of Mouse, Aristotle, and his own and mixed them together to repackage them as a new conception of reservation life. He too simplifies and commodifies the complexity of the lived experiences of Natives, even his own kinship circle. Seymour has harvested the pain and sorrow of his own friends for his profit. Yet, Mouse is still alive inside of the poems, even if the true identity of the poetry is invisible.

In contrast to Seymour’s evasive identity and personal feelings, Teresa, Mouse’s white lover, explores the highs and lows of Mouse’s personality during her brief eulogy. As she tells

the story of Mouse meeting her the first time near a river after she had just moved to the reservation, the scene cuts to an image of Mouse playing the violin for her. He is shirtless as she leans against his chest while he plays his violin. Alexie and Evan Adams discuss this scene briefly on the commentary for the DVD, and Alexie acknowledges the sexualization of the violin as a phallic symbol but says he did not intend to play into the interracial sexuality here. At least it was not a deliberate political choice, though he does acknowledge that he chose Cynthia Geary because she would stand out so strongly among all the Rez Indians in the film. Over this image, Teresa reflects how the first thing Mouse had said to her was, “What the hell are you doing here suyapi [white person], and when are you leaving.” While Mouse was, presumably, attracted to Teresa as their later relationship reveals, he first sees her as a white woman and not in a kind way. “That Mouse, he was never all that nice to me. But jeez he could play the violin. I’m gonna miss the way the river changed when Mouse was making his music.”

Her attraction for him was varied. His aggressive attitude, though not violent seemed to excite her, while his violin and his “music” would stir up feelings for her and help the “river change.” While we have already seen Mouse in two different scenes, one in a drunken stupor, and the other in a frustrated moment of anger at Seymour, we see through Teresa that these two characteristics were part of the collective that drew her to him. Mouse never left the reservation and his awareness of his Indianness was secure throughout the representations of his character in the film. However, his ownership of his own Indian identity, something both Aristotle and Seymour struggle with, also carried with it an ownership of the pain of his childhood and of the continued struggle of his people. Much like the sympathetic and reciprocated love affair that we saw with Lola and Willie Boy, Teresa helps us understand Mouse in ways that no other character can. Her choice to engage in a consensual relationship with a man that was not very nice to her,

combined with the images of them “making music” together remind audiences that Native men can be sexual beings with tenderness and passion, but that this sexuality can also carry with it pain and trauma that is much harder to commodify, unless you are Seymour.

Several scenes later, Seymour is in bed working on his poetry while Steven is trying to sleep, but the phone keeps ringing. Seymour is shirtless in this scene, but Steven is wearing a t-shirt. The intimacy of this scene comes from the familiarity of the domestic space that the two inhabit here. They are not making love, kissing, or even really touching, but their shared space in the bed and their small fight over the telephone creates a deeper level of exposure into the current state of their relationship. Seymour is somewhat selfish in this scene and refuses to answer the phone, but then becomes frustrated with Steven who will not tell him what the caller said afterward. Steven reluctantly tells Seymour that one of friends from the reservation, Mouse, has died. Steven’s tense and almost wounded temperament in this scene suggests that Seymour has kept a distance between Steven and the reservation to the point that he has never taken Steven to meet his family or friends. This is clearly a scenario in which Steven would feel resentful and even unappreciated, but it further helps us understand that Seymour is very much divided in his personal identity. It is less that he is ashamed of Steven, though there is some truth to that reading, and more that he does not want to have any connections between the new urban life that he is building for himself and the reservation world towards which he is so ambivalent. They have a brief exchange that, though meant to be humorous, reminds the audience that Seymour does have feelings for a white man, but he still possesses a critical judgement towards white colonial ideology and the history behind the racial tensions that help inform his poetry.

STEVEN. Funny how that works isn’t it. You being a racist jerk and still finding the need to get me naked.

SEYMOUR. I just pretend you're Custer.

The sexualization of the racial tension here is critical for a film that has the potential to subvert racial barriers and even play with notions of miscegenation. Steven is a white man, and though this film has pushed any notions of the erotic triangle far into the backdrop of the narrative, it still allows us to understand Seymour through the tensions of his interracial relationship. Later in the film, an intertitle card reveals that the bulk of Seymour's sexual encounters have been with white men, but none of them have been with a Native American man.

INTERTITLE CARD. I've had sex with one Indian woman, 112 white boys, sixteen black men, seven Asian men, three dudes of ambiguous ethnic identity, one really homely guy, and zero Native American men. - Seymour Polatkin

Fears of miscegenation often center around the rhetoric of purity. White Maidens presented as protectors of racial purity fueled the hatred and fear seen in *The Searchers*, and Alexie's choice to cast the Maiden as a white gay man undercuts the key fear associated with miscegenation. Steven and Seymour can never have interracial children together, which renders their sexual relationship irrelevant for such concerns. Yet, the film is produced in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century when America has, arguably, moved away from miscegenation as a cultural fear and towards homosexuality as the next horizon of erogenous hysteria. By further characterizing Seymour as the dominant character in their relationship and alluding to his affairs on the side, the film plays into the sexual aggression of the Ignoble Savage. Fortunately, the film removes rape and sexual violence from its narrative.

As the film progresses further, Seymour leaves Seattle to return to the reservation. As he drives away, he and Steven can be heard in a voice over fighting about Seymour leaving:

STEVEN. I'm coming with you.

SEYMOUR. No, you're not.

STEVEN. You're ashamed of me aren't you.

SEYMOUR. Yeah, I am. You're the opposite of Rez.

STEVEN. You know, they aren't your tribe anymore. I'm your tribe.

Seymour refuses to allow Steven to enter into that personal space, and while his response to Steven is cutting, we see later on the reservation that he has little pride in his tribe either. Steven, as a white gay man on the reservation, would pull attention away from Seymour, and while there is probably some desire to protect Steven from the abuse he might endure under that circumstance, it is likely that Seymour does not want either side of his life to merge as he knows that such a confrontation would ultimately expose Seymour for the fraud that he is. The community he left behind on the reservation that inspires his poetry is not nearly as romantic and idyllic as his work implies. The illusion of his Native world would shatter for Steven. Conversely, those in his reservation kinship circle would see that Steven is just another extension of Seymour trying to be something that he is not. Steven is a symbol of Seymour's rejection of the very Native identity that inspires his work. That Steven assumes that he can be Seymour's tribe only solidifies the gulf of understanding between the two worlds.

The film then fleshes out several sub-points that add nuance to the various characters. We see Aristotle and Mouse huffing gas to get high. Then Alexie inserts a docudrama set of shots that asks the characters and cast members at Mouse's wake to talk about how many Indian funerals they have attended. While these scenes do not advance the sexuality of Seymour in any way, they add further layers to the history behind his character. These are the reservation moments of trauma, community, and tribal understanding that constitute "all my relations." These moments are real and personal for the characters involved, and as we come to see more of Aristotle and his own self-destruction and of the community and their capacity to endure one death after another, we come to see more of who Seymour is and where his inner rage comes from.

When Agnes and Seymour meet for the first time as college students, they quickly form a romantic relationship. In one of the film's more moving scenes, we are again allowed inside of Seymour's character through the perception of the love interest. The film clearly shows the intimacy and affection Seymour has for Agnes, perhaps more for her than anyone else in the film, but his sexuality does not extend to women. She is, of course, upset by Seymour's coming out just after their lovemaking and through her pain and confusion we come to understand how insensitive it was for Seymour to use her in this way. She sees their relationship up to that point as a lie, particularly when he reveals that he has always felt that he might be gay. Seymour has used her to test out his capacity to be straight, just as white men have previously used the Native female body to test out their lust for something "primitive" and "wild". We will come to learn that he does genuinely love her in a platonic way, another rarity for Native men in film, but his love does not have a sexual component. She is devastated, and rightly so, which only goes to further distance the audience from Seymour as a sympathetic character.

Just after Seymour's coming out scene, Agnes is seen going to work on the reservation after graduating college. While she previously had little connection to her heritage, her time with Seymour seems to have awakened a connection to her tribe and Native people in general. The unusual decision for a college graduate to return to the reservation is highlighted by Mouse. Agnes meets him for the first time while he is hitchhiking and tells her that she is "doing this all backwards. Most smart Indians move away from the Rez." In a reversal of the White Savior trope, Agnes has met her traditional Indian, made love to him, and extracted from him an awakening of her own Native heritage. Unlike Dunbar, John Morgan, Levoi, and countless others, Agnes does not take her appropriated Native experience back to the white world.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Thunderheart* (1992).



Indeed, her Native experience with Seymour draws her deeper into her heritage. Alexie's subversion of these tropes is yet another example of the power of placing the camera and the narrative in the hands of a Native and an insider to explore Native lives more honestly.

The film then moves to highlight another central homoerotic relationship of the film between Aristotle and Seymour. First, we see Aristotle dancing in the club scene from earlier. He is wearing traditional dress and performing a variation of a tribal dance which stands out in the club environment, but his slow sexual movements remind us that Aristotle and Seymour have a tension between them that is ambiguous. We are never explicitly told if Seymour and Aristotle have a sexual encounter together or if these images are Seymour's insertion of Aristotle into his homoerotic fantasies, but later scenes establish that much of this sexual tension is on Seymour's side. After the club insertion, there is a storytelling scene about an apple stealing game they used to play as kids and Alexie has both Seymour and Aristotle tell the same story, while Alexie uses seamless cuts to blend the two men together as both connected and yet separated. Seymour is still wearing the suit he wears during the interview scenes and Aristotle is in denim jeans and jacket. The stories that have defined Seymour's career are further explored here as intrinsic to his relationship to Aristotle and his heritage.

Directly following the apple monologue scene, Seymour arrives on the reservation and is greeted by Aristotle who gives him an apple similar to those seen in the monologue scene from before. There is no dialogue in this scene, and although there is clear tension between the two men, the passing of the apple from Aristotle to Seymour is a metaphorical passing of knowledge representative of Aristotle's gifts of the stories that the two men shared as children. The sexual/religious allusions are further explored here with the apple standing in for the knowledge of each other in the biblical sense. Again, the extent of their sexual tension is left ambiguous,

but the symbolism of their exchanges combined with the tension the two men share while on screen together—whether real or imagined in Seymour’s fantasies—encodes each scene with unique intimacy. Aristotle, as a more traditional and in some ways aggressive Native man, and arguably the more intelligent of the two, is the foil for Seymour’s conflicted identity. Aristotle possesses a strong sense of Native presence, and though he struggles with the trauma of reservation life, as evidenced in his substance abuse, he chooses to stay with his people rather than exploit them.

Now that Seymour is back on the reservation, the film will continue to explore the drug use between Mouse and Aristotle as the history of the two men’s self-destructive behavior that leads to Mouse’s death catches up the film’s present timeline. Interspersed in this series are scenes of children sitting in a car outside of a bar as their alcoholic parents come out to the truck intoxicated and trying to drive them home. The tragedy of the cycle of abuse is explored in brutal detail here. While the stereotype of the drunk Indian resonated in many other films explored in this work, few 20<sup>th</sup> century offerings give an honest account of the reality of intergenerational trauma that permeates contemporary impoverished communities, including reservations. By focusing the film on Seymour as a flawed character, Alexie is able to address these concerns without exploiting them. He does not try to create a hero out of Seymour, but he does seek to complicate our rejection of him by arguing that his resentment toward his people and his past is justified, at least in Seymour’s mind. Mouse and Aristotle are continuations of the cycle demonstrated in Seymour’s alcoholic father, but Seymour sees this as a choice. If the trauma is something that can be avoided or overcome, then Seymour has to accept that his father either failed to escape the cycle of substance abuse or did not try. That frustration is manifested

in his resentment towards Aristotle. Yet, the unfortunate truth is that Seymour is right to an extent, and Aristotle could have escaped the environment, if not the pain.

Now at the halfway point, the film pushes further into the importance of Aristotle to Seymour and how they helped form their identity with and in spite of one another. Several cuts between the club dance scene, memories of the past, and character development scenes in the present continue to reveal Seymour's character for the audience. In one scene, Seymour is in bed working on his poetry again, as before with Steven, but in this scene, it is Aristotle who Seymour conjures out of memory to help him find the rhythm. The scene is shot in such a way that it clouds the sexuality and intimacy of the moment. Aristotle comes into the picture shirtless, as is Seymour, suggesting the two had recently been with each other sexually. The familiarity between the two characters is tangible as Aristotle plays a tribal drum song with a hand drum, phallic symbolism intended. This helps Seymour recover his connection to his heritage that he has mined throughout his career. Aristotle then kisses Seymour and tells him "nice poem" before exiting the scene. The exchange is a fantasy that metaphorically represents the process of Seymour's writing about his complicated love for his past combined with his intimate connection to Aristotle.

Later, Mouse plays the violin for Aristotle, with Mouse dressed in his funeral suit and Aristotle in his traditional dress. This scene, like most scenes in the film, are difficult to place in the timeline of the narrative or even the reality of the narrative, but it is suggestive of Seymour's longing to be with his people, here illustrated through Mouse's music calling him back. This is further demonstrated by the next scene where Aristotle and Seymour have a fight while still in Seattle. Aristotle is done with the city life and college and wants to go back home, but Seymour does not want to go with him. While this is written as a scene between two friends, the tension

between the two characters suggests something much deeper. This tension is much more personal than the simple destruction of a friendship. Indeed, Alexie plays with the value of intimacy between friends as opposed to lovers throughout the film. Seymour/Agnes have the deepest and perhaps most sympathetic relationship in the film, but they are not lovers. Seymour/Aristotle share a volatile and tumultuous connection that far supersedes any passion exhibited by Seymour/Steven, but again the eroticism is only suggested never confirmed.

Perhaps the most striking indication of the limits of sexual intimacy as a defining characteristic in the film occurs during the bathtub scene. Here, Seymour is in the bathtub when Steven enters with a camcorder much like Mouse's. When Seymour asks him to leave him in peace, Steven playfully refuses unless Seymour tells him a poem. Seymour says, "I'll share my poems with the world but not my penis." To which Steven replies, "Is that my choice? A poem or a penis?". Is this the choice for Native men, their spirits or their bodies? Can we understand the former without having to consume the latter? Steven asks for a love poem just for him, and he demands that Seymour not reuse an old poem. Steven is using the connection of the poetry to bridge that intimacy gap between him and Seymour. Contrary to Seymour's claim, Steven has had Seymour's penis and his body, but he has not yet been given his soul. We, by extension, have already consumed the Native male body time and again, but we have not yet managed to reflect and represent the Native man as a fully realized person. Seymour's vulnerability remains guarded except through the poetry that he shares with everyone that will buy it. Here Steven wants a part of Seymour that he can claim as his own. As Seymour closes his eyes to recite the poem, the camera moves to capture Seymour as he goes to his place of creative recovery.

Seymour is lit by the warm golden glow of candlelight, his body is wet from the bathwater, but it is the gaze of Steven that elevates the scene beyond fetishism of the Native

body. The filmic camera moves to Steven, who is holding the small camcorder and captures the intensity with which Steven is gazing into the camcorder's display and drinking in the image of his lover. Steven personifies the white male gaze that has dominated Native American representation in film to this point. We gaze not at Seymour, the sexual object in the scene, but at Steven's eroticized filming of that object. "There's nothing as white as the white boy an Indian boy loves." The film cuts to the captured image on the camcorder, and we are fully inside Steven's gaze as he pans down Seymour's glistening body and lingers briefly on the ring that is chained around his neck. This singular moment beautifully encapsulates the trajectory of our work in this project. Seymour is seen in this scene through a filmic lens by Steven who loves him and yet objectifies him. The Seymour here that we see in the small screen of the camcorder is the closest we can come to fully representing Native American masculinity and personhood onscreen, but when we add to this scene the emotional weight that both men possess, we can truly see Seymour as a fully realized human being. We cannot know him or know everything about him, but we can know that he is real for Steven and that makes him real for us. In the spaces of true representation, such as this one, Native men and boys can see that they can be seen. These filmic moments are not clean, and they are not perfect, but they are honest, and that is enough.

We learn later, as the film nears its conclusion that the ring belongs to Seymour's sister, when he tells the story to the interviewer. His sister was accidentally killed by another Indian boy on the reservation and that all he has left of her is her ring. At this point, the ring, which figured prominently throughout the film starts to pay off as a physical symbol of Seymour's Native identity that he refuses to let go. His poetry reflects the stories and the period of his life on the reservation, but that is only an artist harvesting memories for his art. The defining

moment of Seymour's life on the reservation, his crises moment, is the death of his sister and the spiral of despair it put on his family. As we have learned in the film, and in this work, death is an inescapable reality for modern Indians. Mouse's corpse figures heavily throughout the film and works to bring Seymour back to the reservation, but the death that we do not see is the death that eventually drove Seymour away from his tribal life. The drinking, the drugs, and rage that we see through Aristotle and Mouse to this point is now given a personal context as we now understand that their lives are not just lives of loneliness and boredom but filled with a lifetime of loss that leads to a scarred and fractured existence.

Gerald Vizenor argues that survivance requires not just a survival of the past, or an endurance into the future; rather, it is an existence in a constant state of renewed survival. Vizenor writes, "The postindian ousts the inventions [mythologies of Native experiences by non-Natives for non-Natives] with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance". The Native American producers of cultural artifacts, such as film, resist and fight back against the dominant mythologies with their own stories wherever they can. Vizenor adds, that "the postindian arises from the earlier inventions of the tribes only to contravene the absence of the real with theatrical performances; the theater of tribal consciousness is the recreation of the real, not the absence of the real in the simulations of dominance" (*Manifest* 5). While Vizenor might not agree with the ultimate potentiality of film to offer a space of resistance that was presented here, there can be no doubt that filmic resistance must be an active process that addresses and moves to correct the mythologies about Natives with stories by Natives and for Natives. *The Business of Fancydancing* reveals that inevitably, this struggle is continuous. For some, like Mouse, the struggle consumes them and claims them. For others like Aristotle, it drives them crazy with rage or despair. The same source of disenfranchisement, emasculation, and

oppression that drove Magua to target the Monroe sister and Scar to attack the Edwards and capture Debbie fuels Aristotle's rage and Mouse's despair. Seymour's sister, as remember through the ring, pushes him away from his people and away from the horrors of his past. They situate his pain and his anger inside a personal narrative of division and exploitation. He wears the ring because he cannot let her, or the deepest parts of his past, go. While Steven fixes the camcorder on this ring, he does not seem to understand these details. It is an object. It is a part of Seymour's aesthetic. We, as contrapuntal viewers capable of decoding oppositionally what Steven has captured in his camcorder, can unpack its meaning and hang it around Seymour's neck as a talisman of his histories that we both understand but do not fully comprehend.

The film concludes with Seymour's cathartic moment at the wake where he vents his rage, anger, and despair while the film cuts between the funeral and fancydancing scenes. When Seymour has spent his rage and walks out of the room, he also falls from the dancing and strips himself of his traditional clothing. When he arrives back home in Seattle and crawls into bed with Steven, the ring is now off and laying on the nightstand. The tragedy of the film is not that Seymour chooses to live in Seattle, that he is an urban Indian, or that he cannot reconcile his love for a white man with his Native heritage. The tragedy of the film is that his identity, his sense of self, is so interconnected to each of these facets he cannot be all at once. The Seymour that we come to know at the film's opening, the Indian in the window, was created at each of these points of personal tension between past/present, gay/straight, friend/lover, drunk/sober, and traditional/urban. He is not a liminal character that can transition through these worlds or move between them. He is a conflicted character that believes that he must choose. He erroneously believes that he exists only in the places of tension. Seymour then, in many ways, becomes the most complex Native male we have seen in this work.

The intimate portrait we have of Seymour is only made possible by exploring the various sexual and pseudo-sexual relationships and moments in Seymour's life. Alexie shows us a Native man that is fully realized on screen through those that know him intimately. That Seymour is unsympathetic and complex, is part of the necessary revelation that film must have for Native men. We are not always romantic. We are not always beautiful. We are certainly not always easy to define sexually. Just as our masculinity is linked to our tribal and racial experience, so too is our identity understood not through fixity but through fluctuation. Even though Seymour destroys the erotic triangle and subverts the Noble Savage and Ignoble Savage, his character is still necessarily revealed through his intimate connections. He has moved off the binary of Noble/Ignoble Savage that has plague Native men in Hollywood for decades, but he has not left behind his overt sexual appetites or his aggressions.

Furthermore, film must continue to address intergenerational trauma as a critical component to understanding the emotional complexity in Native men today. Films need not dwell on the trauma, but by exploring the intimate spaces between close friends, such as the scenes between Johnny and his friends following the suicide death of one of their friends, we can come to see facets of the Native American male identity we might not otherwise comprehend.<sup>33</sup> As each of the 21st century films have illustrated, the lives of Native men are also filled with humor and compassion that is further revealed in our intimate spaces. Cufe's relationship with his father and their shared dismissal of social propriety is best illustrated when he and his cousin Jim are preparing the empty coffin for the fake funeral, and they agree to weigh it down with watermelons because Frankie believed that "funerals ain't nothing but a big circus." Some of Mogie's funniest lines in *Skins* are between himself and his friend Verdell, but the tension

---

<sup>33</sup> *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015)



between his humor and Rudy's serious nature is the most revealing component between the two men's reconciliation with their traumatic past. However, Rudy's laughter at the film's close after he executes Mogie's final joke, leaves the audience with a note of hope as Mogie's humor quells Rudy's anger. In each of these films and the films of the future, the life, humor, social position, and intimacy of the Native male characters must coalesce into a filmic representation of a viable and desirable Native American male in reality that is situated in experiential truth.

Each of the 21<sup>st</sup> century films explored in this work complicate the notion of abjection by reframing the relationships of the surviving characters with those that have passed. They have deconstructed the mythemes of both Nativeness and the non-Native world advanced by the mythologies of the past and reframed the archetypal images of heroes, lovers, warriors, and leaders with culturally specific mythemes that transcend the hegemonic gates held by the Hollywood system. The Natives in these films are usually situated in a series of triangulations and complex kinship dynamics that allow more their intimate qualities to resonate for their audiences. In so doing, these films show Natives that they can be seen and that they can take pleasure in that act of seeing themselves. This generative trajectory pushes back against the lingering anxiety of personal and cultural annihilation by providing that space for shared subjectivity in the act of signification. Yet, the power of these films to generate substantial social change in the non-Native world is still limited by the power of the Hollywood film industry to control the dominant narrative and reproduce hyperreal simulations of Nativeness that replaces authentic knowledge of the lived experiences of Native people. However, since I began the research for this project, I have found renewed hope in the influx of film, television, and other creative works of recent years and those on the horizon. By leaning into the wind, the Native American in film is finding the strength to stand straight.

## Chapter 7 – Coming Home is not Easy

Neil Diamond's documentary *Reel Injun*, explores a simple focus, "to understand how Hollywood's fantasy about Native Americans has effected the world, even Natives like me." I began my research with much the same purpose, yet with a slightly more refined focus. I wish to understand how Hollywood's fantasy about Native American *men* has affected the world, even a Native man like myself, so that we can begin the work of reversal and recovery. Throughout this work I have explored the manner in which Hollywood has used the Native American male body, his social space, and his interpersonal relationships to reduce and erase him from the consciousness of white America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While it is true that his presence on screen has endured for over a century and that Hollywood still returns to his image whenever it needs a walking, talking, and fighting foil for the heroic American cowboy figure, this work and its predecessors have fully established Hollywood's clear motion towards cultural genocide. Where this work has differed most ardently from its predecessors is its desire to enunciate a productive pathway forward where the Native American man is revived, socialized, and accepted as multifaceted and human.

We began with an exploration of the Native American male body as a point of erasure. We considered how films like *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* used the Native American man as little more than a prop for the white characters to act against. Films like *The Vanishing American* attempted to add to this dynamic by giving the Native American man a voice and a purpose, but he is not only ineffectual at restoring the culture to his people or protecting them from white encroachment, but he is also unable to avoid the same fate as nearly all other Natives in film, as he dies at the film's climax and is carried off into the distance while the credits begin to roll. In *Little Big Man*, the titular character Little Big Man is a white man playing Native and

Old Lodge Skins, venerable though he may be, is nearing the end of his power with his people. Old Lodge Skins and all his descendants are absent at the film's closing. Indeed, Little Big Man is the one to tell his story as though Old Lodge Skins and his people have in fact vanished. Yet, when we finally reach the 21<sup>st</sup> century and begin to put the camera in the hands of Native filmmakers, we get characters like Frankie Smallhill and his family, especially his son Cufe. In *Four Sheets to the Wind*, the Smallhill's prove that the death of the Native American may be a harsh reality and all too common in Native communities, but such an occurrence is hardly the end of the narrative nor an indication of any vanishing. Director Sterlin Harjo not only disrupts this concept and revives the corpse by letting him be the first and last voice we hear, but he also lets us come to understand him through his family and friends who have survived him, and we come to understand the family through their relationship with him.

This emphasis on the family and friends, the kinship ties that bind and define a Native American man, has only inconsistently appeared in Hollywood films before the 21<sup>st</sup> century and even more rarely have the kinship bonds been allowed to fully develop the Native American man into the hero he could be for his family and community. With films like *Daughter of Dawn*, the Native American man is given prominence in his community, and his community both defines and is defined by the characters of White Eagle and Black Wolf. By the end of the film, we see the value and promise of exploring Native cultural realities, even in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet *Daughter of Dawn* is more an aberration than a shining example. It misses as much as it hits, and it clearly reflects the Director's attempts to westernize the Native culture. This mistake is further exacerbated in a host of captivity narratives, otherwise known as assimilation tales of Native Americans in Boarding Schools at the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Exemplary of such tales is *Redskin*, which allows the primary heroic figure to be a Native American man and

emphasizes his desire to protect and preserve his culture and kinship. Yet, typical of Boarding School narratives, it is clear in *Redskin* that the violence and trauma of captivity and forced assimilation is a necessary price to pay for the savior the Native American man from his baser instincts. His Nativeness must die so that his manhood can thrive. *Thunderheart* explores the long-term ramifications of this trend as Levoi is not only fully assimilated but has been taught to reject and dismiss his own Native heritage. At the beginning of the film, he has abandoned his kinship ties and embraced his oppressors. While the film tries to reflect a “coming home” for Levoi, it does so at the expense of the culture and kinship ties that it seeks to save. Levoi is the hero who has extracted all that was good in his Native heritage and will now return to the white world. His heroic journey does not truly benefit his people. Jimmy and Walter are the true heroes of the narrative, and they will stay behind and try to hold the culture together, as they always have. They never vanished, even if Hollywood chooses not to tell their story. Chris Eyre takes the camera back and returns to Pine Ridge in *Skins*. He gives us the true narrative of the Sioux struggling to survive in the contemporary world. Gone is the tired trope of mineral exploitation and the great white hope as the savior. Instead, the deeper wounds of despair and alienation have infected the community in such a way that only a true insider can help them heal. “Showboating is not a Lakota virtue” Mogie explains, and hero worship is no exception. Rudy tries to become that hero, through violent vigilantism, but Mogie reminds him that the community needs him to think about what the people need, not what Rudy needs to satisfy his frustration. A good laugh is a necessary component to any healing process. This is the elixir that Rudy must recover. This is the true medicine.

Each of these Native American men have expressed their sexuality to some degree. Often, the Native American man is depicted as a savage who must take his sexual gratification

through force. Furthermore, the sexual appetites of Native American men are almost exclusively directed towards the pure white women in Hollywood cinema. In the few instances where the Native man's passions towards a white woman are reciprocated, the union is still abhorrent. *The Last of the Mohicans* is the prototype for both the Noble savage and the Ignoble savage sexual predator. Magua must take Alice by force, while Uncus' affections are built on reciprocated love. Yet, miscegenation is even more abject than the corpse for many Americans and at the end of *The Last of the Mohicans* Magua, Uncus, and even Alice are all dead. Only Hawkeye and Cora, the white tourists who have fully appropriated the Native culture, are allowed to survive. Their love is tolerable because their race is still pure. *The Searchers* fully embraces its fear of miscegenation and the assumption that the Native American man is only a savage and never noble. It attempts to rectify this stance by its negative take on the white savior Ethan, and showing Debbie as a wife of Scar, while also allowing its most sympathetic character to be a mixed blood Cherokee. Yet, at the end of the film Scar is dead, the white people have all voiced their racist views of miscegenation, and Martin will complete his assimilation by marrying a white woman.

*Tell them Willie Boy is Here* gives us a Native American man whose love is both reciprocated and sympathetic. His sexuality is part of his characterization, and his anti-hero persona adds weight to his sacrifice. His tale is a glimpse into the passion and conviction of the Native American man fully realized and seldom explored by non-Native filmmakers. Yet, Willie Boy and Lola both die and reassert the Vanishing American trope and the much less sympathetic white "hero" Cooper survives. If a Native man loves a Native woman, they both must die. If a Native man loves a white woman, he must die. If she loves him back, then she must die as well. There is no viable filmic space for the Native man to love or be loved. This continual denial of

intimacy for the Native American man onscreen has denied him masculinity, agency, and humanity, even when he and his culture have not “vanished”. Sherman Alexie not only subverts all these tragedies, but he weaponizes them as an indictment of all assumptions of normative sexuality in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. While Seymore is an unlikeable protagonist, he is clearly a sexual being. While he does desire a white lover, that lover is a white man. He is a small man and non-violent, but his words incite rage, and he profits from the commodification of his poetry by non-Natives. He lives through the narrative and returns to the white world as exploiter, even though his people are still being exploited. Yet, through him we see the relationship between culture and identity play out in real time. His choices are valid, even if we disagree with them.

Frankie, Cufe, Mogie, Rudy, Aristotle, and Seymore are all complicated characters. Their films explore their lives in depth and with purpose. While the trajectory of Native American men in American history is not identical to that of African American men, many have seen the parallels. James Baldwin once noted that for black men it must have come “as a great shock to discover that when Gary Cooper was killing off the Indian, and you were rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians were you.” However, Baldwin, like our work here has also revealed, understands that there is value in casting off mythologies of essentialism. “One of the things that the white world does not know, but I think I know, is that Black people are just like everybody else... We are also mercenaries, dictators, murderers, liars, we are human too” (“Debate”). What the white world does not seem to fully understand is that Native American men have not vanished, their communities are not destroyed, their kinships are not irrelevant, and their sexuality is as nuanced and integral their identity as the white man’s own is to his. We do struggle, but we pull together. We are dying at an alarming rate, but we endure. Our communities and our kinship ties have suffered under the weight of oppression, assimilation, and

removal, but we survive. Though Hollywood has continually denigrated our sexuality and emasculated us at every turn, our desires for love and laughter remain. Each of these characters has reflected parts of these truths to audiences keen enough to comprehend. We are human too. Yet, what remains elusive is that film that can combine all these elements into one with the polish and presentation of the Hollywood style of filmmaking to appeal to Native and non-Native audiences alike.

*Winter in the Blood* is the first film analyzed in this work that seeks to fully explore the complex layers of Native American masculinity on screen without sacrificing style for substance. While it failed to reach a wide audience, as it was given a small release, it none-the-less proves that Native actors can deliver. Native American writers translate to the big screen. Native American tales can be contemporary and complex. We leave *Winter in the Blood* no more sympathetic towards Virgil than we were towards Seymore, but we have hope in his ability to heal his wounds and endure. We leave *Winter in the Blood* with no more faith in Virgil than we had in Rudy to save his people from the harsh reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, but we see his spirit as something worth recovering. We leave *Winter in the Blood* with no more assurance for the future of Virgil than we did for Cufe, yet we know that his life is his to reclaim. Virgil does not give us answers that we can share, but seeing his journey shows us that we too can be seen. His inertia towards identity mirrors our own, even if the details of his journey do not.

### **Knowledge of the Past Informs our Reading of the Present**

To understand the odyssey of discovery that Virgil First Raise undertakes in *Winter in the Blood*, we must first come to know how he begins the story. “Coming home was not easy anymore. Never was a synch, but it had become a torture”, he tells us as he wakes up in a ditch drunk and beaten from the night before. For many Native men, the concept of “coming home”,

has complex layers of joy and sadness, discovery, and loss. Sean Teuton explains this journey the motion to return “personally, culturally, and geographically” through a necessary and transformative “process of recovery, a conscious act of reclaiming knowledge of a tribal self, knowledge that often has been distorted by centuries of European and American oppression” (Chapter 2). For those of us who have left our Native communities or where our families left Native communities long ago, “going home” is a spiritual as well as a physical journey of our return to our homelands and our people and a reconnection with our past to help situate our present and reclaim the direction of our futures. For Virgil, he is literally returning to the home in which he was born and raised. It is a familiar place in his lived memory, but his absence is also one of choice. There is a geographical as well as spiritual boundary between what he calls the “shadow world of the white people”, and his family home where he was born.

In town he is just another drunk Indian, used for the money he can bring to the local bars, but distrusted for the baggage that comes with welcoming alcoholics. Among the Natives who visit town he is also an outcast, a half-breed, and a nobody. Yet, at home he is unwelcomed and treated with even less respect. He craves something that neither location can deliver, a fulfillment of his lack. “My throat ached at the terrible thirst”. Throughout the film we will see him drinking to quench this thirst, but it is a thirst of the spirit that no alcohol or water can quench. It is this thirst that keeps him moving back and forth between town and home. He cannot satisfy it until he stops trying.

As he wakes up in the ditch and tries to correct himself, he sees images of his father’s corpse dead in the snow. This is the first and only corpse we see in the film, and it is a continual image that haunts both the viewer and Virgil. First Raise has died in a blizzard, laying in a similar ditch to the one in which Virgil just woke. At each of these moments of flashback, Virgil is caught by



some inner turmoil or outward pain. The corpse of First Raise is ever present in his mind. He is the future that Virgil is heading towards and the unfortunate past that he is trying to escape. At this point, we see the corpse as abject for Virgil because he cannot yet reconcile with what it signifies for him.

As a result of this ever-present corpse in the back of his mind he is unable come to terms with the demons of his past. "I am as distant from myself as the hawk from the moon." He thinks to himself as he walks back home. He is aware of his own fracturing, and we as the audience are aware of at least part of the cause for this separation. No son should ever have to bury their own father, and while we do not yet know why his father died, we know that the image haunts him. We see Virgil's decay. He, not his father, is abject for Native audiences. Each flash of the corpse is accompanied by a tragically beautiful image of a bottle of red wine pouring into the snow. This blending of the wine into the winter snow, and the allusion of blood into the earth, and the mingling of the white with the red is emblematic of the various intersections in the lives of Native men. The poison and purity of life for the men struggling with alcoholism is a near constant presence in Native lives. The interconnectivity between the life of the Native man and the land of his people is integral to his personal and communal identity to the point that often the one bleeds into the other becoming something new. Finally, miscegenation and land encroachment have led to generations of genetic and cultural blending of the two worlds, much of which has been at great cost to the Natives and of little concern to the white world.

In this state of separation and fracture Virgil is open to the despair that has claimed the lives of far too many Native American men over the last few decades. "I was caught in the in-between space. My body was vulnerable to the spirits." Virgil seems aware that his current path

opens him to the same destructive fate that claimed his father and so many other Native men, but he seems unable to close the fracture or heal the internal wounds. Seeking this closure only leads to anxiety and the need for self-medication. This is the journey that he continually leaves home for, and one from which he continually returns defeated. Yet, he does not find solace at home. There he is further emasculated and denigrated by his emotionally distant mother, Theresa, and his encroaching neighbor, Lame Bull. Only his aging grandmother offers him any comfort, but she no longer speaks and cannot give the same kind of guidance and help that she once did. She can only be a physical presence that helps ground his spiritual journey. The lack that is within him is present in all the external objects of desire and can never fulfill him.

His narration combined with the cinematography helps create a world of confusion and uncertainty in the first two minutes of the film. When Virgil first awakens in the dry ditch and hungover from the night before, he stands and vomits out the poison and as he is looking down at his boots the swirling dirt merges into swirling snow. This takes the viewer with him as he flashes back to see the first image of First Raise dead in the snow. Later when he is telling us about his vulnerability to the spirits and in the in-between spaces he is walking out of a darkened barn into the sunlight, vaguely reminiscent of the iconic John Ford *doorway shot* at the end of the *Searchers*. This famous shot is frequently employed by other films to visually represent the crossing of boundaries between societal spaces. While in *The Searchers*, the door is closed behind Ethan suggesting his inability to cross back over into that civilized world, in *Winter in the Blood* the boundary between worlds is more permeable and Virgil has not yet made an irrecoverable choice.

The source novel of the same title written by James Welch is told largely from inside the narrator's mind and has a much more stream of consciousness permeability to it than a typical

film narrative. Alex and Andrew Smith, along with screenwriter Ken White have attempted to emulate this characteristic with constant fades into and out of Virgil's mind as he flashes back into the past. Yet, as with the novel, Virgil is unreliable even in his own mind, and it is not always clear if what we are seeing in these flashbacks are true memories, composites, or imaginings. As the film progresses, we can put a greater level of trust in the visions of his father and his brother. However, all associations with Agnes, the bar maid Malvena, and the Airplane Man are more questionable. There are no clear warnings before or resolutions after such flashes to give the viewer any reliable map to navigate the events in the film.

During one of his flashes to a memory of he and his brother Mose playing cowboys, the narrator is in a brief state of peace as he fishes, chest deep in the water. "My big brother Mose and I always wanted to be cowboys, cause in the movies, the cowboys always won. At least that is what our father, First Raise told us." Through this commentary and later interactions between himself and his brother we come to learn that the ideal male figure is indeed that of the cowboy figure. Their father had bought into this narrative, and they too have absorbed this into their psychology. They do not see themselves as Native boys resisting the white settlers. They do not see the stories of their past of the great warriors and chiefs as markers of manhood. Those Native heroes cannot serve as mirrors for Virgil's ideal self. First Raise not only confirms their adoration for cowboys, but he also seems to aspire to the life of a cattle rancher. This is both emblematic of the effects of white assimilation practices in media and a moment of intertextuality where the filmmakers are calling back to the effects of previous films that have created this heroic association. Other young natives, like Long Knife seem to dismiss the notion of cowboy worship and opt for a more angry and violent Native savage persona. Yet the clothing, work, and attitude of the Native men in this film still carry that cowboy ethos.

Young Virgil and Mose both look up to their father, as a heroic model for their own manhood they seek to claim as cowboys. Yet, it is Virgil who seems to idolize First Raise the most. In another flashback when First Raise has woken the boys to bring the cattle in before a blizzard, they have a brief exchange where Virgil notices that First Raise puts whiskey in his coffee instead of honey.

FIRST RAISE. Use the honey instead, it will stay warm inside you longer.

YOUNG VIRGIL. Why don't you put any in yours?

FIRST RAISE. I had my share of sweetness, now all I do is drink coffee.

YOUNG VIRGIL. Well, I'll just drink coffee too then.

While the exchange is brief, young Virgil is already learning the ways of an alcoholic from First Raise. It is unclear if Mose is also taken in by this false narrative or the appeal of alcoholism, and he will not live long enough to have to make that choice. Yet, in Virgil's present life he finds himself walking much the same path of substance abuse and despair as First Raise did before his death. The parallels are obvious, but the addiction is already so much a part of Virgil that he cannot escape it. It is as though his fate was already decided those many years prior. Substance abuse, when linked to models of behavior and as self-medication for trauma become doubly problematic. When combined with intergenerational abuse and broader communal infestation, substance abuse becomes an almost inescapable trap.

By contrast, his mother, Theresa has little to offer as a model for masculinity, be it positive or negative. Instead, her first words to him in the film emasculate him and humiliate him. "Your wife is gone. She left three days ago. She took your rifle, and your electric razor...At least you could go get that rifle. You know she'd sell it for a drink." As Virgil is sucking the water directly from the tap to quench his "terrible thirst", Theresa is aggressively chopping potatoes and harassing him about his wife walking out on him. She has taken his gun, his phallic power source, and his razor, one of his few possessions of value. While Theresa is

emasculating him with these words, her aggressive chopping of the potatoes adds a physical allusion to her psychological castration of his manhood. This will prove to be a recurring theme between their interactions. Theresa is either distant and unloving, or worse, destructive of what little sense of pride and self-worth he might yet contain. As the first Other that Virgil experiences during his psychological development, her unwillingness to see him creates one of many primal breaks for his subjectivity. If he cannot be seen by his mother, he will not be able to see himself as seen, and thus his conception of objective self, always-already vulnerable to misrecognition, is increasingly threatened.

Soon after this Lame Bull makes his first appearance. As a family friend and neighbor, Lame Bull is trying to marry Theresa to gain access to her cattle and their land. In effect, Lame Bull is there to claim what was once First Raise's but will never be Virgil's. Theresa seems to have no intention of leaving the land to Virgil, and she certainly seems to have no desire to replace First Raise with Virgil as the head of the household. Even though Lame Bull and Theresa's romance seems to be largely transactional, Virgil plays no real part in the transaction. Indeed, Theresa makes a point of reminding Virgil that he should look for other work once the hay is brought in as there will not be enough work there to sustain him. Later, she also suggests that maybe he will be happier in town, away from the home. There is no solace in Theresa's world for Virgil. Furthermore, she seeks to cast him back to the white world where she knows that he, and his father before him, found no acceptance, no community, and therefore no true sense of self. While desire is always left unfulfilled in the recognition of another, Theresa rejects any such recognition of Virgil as a son or as a man, thereby accelerating Virgil's annihilation.

Lame Bull offers Virgil very little. The two rarely communicate. Virgil frequently makes disparaging comments about the memory of First Raise and Virgil's grandmother, and

Theresa does nothing to discourage this behavior. Yet, Gary Farmer plays Lame Bull to such great subtle comedic effect that it is clear that we are meant to view his character negatively. Yet he is one of five men in the film that help us orient Virgil's masculine models. Lame Bull must establish himself as the rightful head of the household and he uses two basic tactics for this establishment. First, he must denigrate Virgil as incapable of keeping a wife home and happy, something he does on several occasions. "Ho, you going hunting? You got your gun back. Where's your wife?" Lame Bull declares after Virgil recovers his gun. This is just after Lame Bull and Theresa return from town, now married. Virgil has reclaimed in phallic masculinity, but Lame Bull still knows that the woman who castrated him eludes him. However, Lame Bull has secured his wife. "Catch em, hold em, shrink em. You gotta treat these women rough once in a while or else they forget." Lame Bull later declares as Virgil is flirting with Malvena from town. Again, Lame Bull humorously jabs at Virgil's inability to keep a woman satisfied. Lame Bull also takes jabs at First Raise's memory. "To renegade wives and dead husbands. To hell with them. May we all ride with our back to the wind and die in warm weather." Lame Bull knows that First Raise died in the winter, since he helped Virgil bury him. He also inverts First Raise's call to lean into the wind, which will fortunately be revisited later by his Virgil's true male kinship model Yellow Calf. Since First Raise is not here to defend himself against these slights, Virgil tips Lame Bull back in his chair and Lame Bull falls to the floor. Virgil adds to his victory by quickly drinking several glasses of Lame Bull's wine, both to get back at him and to help mitigate the pain his remarks have caused.

After Lame Bull, Theresa, and their friends have humiliated Virgil, he resolves to return to town to get his gun back and find Agnes. Each time Virgil leaves home and enters town, the story becomes more difficult to track. The flash backs and dream sequences merge with

unreliable memories. After entering the bar, “the shadow world of the white people” Virgil helps Agnes’s brother rob Long Knife, which triggers a memory of he and Mose fighting Long Knife and other bullies when they were children.

YOUNG LONG KNIFE. What are you farm girls doing in town?

YOUNG VIRGIL. Where not farmers, we are cowboys.

YOUNG LONG KNIFE. You ain’t cowboys, you ain’t even Indian from what I heard.

YOUNG MOSE. Take that back Long Knife.

YOUNG LONG KNIFE. We all know that your grandma would spread her legs for any white man that comes along.

Even from this early stage in their lives, both Virgil and Mose were forced to fight for their identity as Native boys. They were not even allowed the uncontested fantasy of being cowboys. This is the first of several insults Long Knife will throw at Virgil in the film about his mixed blood heritage and his masculinity. “I got a good time woman that needs taking care of. She’s got needs man. She needs some full blood Indian in her. You catch my drift half-breed?” Long Knife says later, taunting Virgil with the knowledge that he is also sleeping with Agnes.

By this point we can begin to put together the social relationships that have helped shaped the image of masculine identity under conflict within Virgil. R.W. Connell articulates the manifestation of masculinity as a development between the various gender interactions. “Masculinity is defined as a configuration of practice organized in relation to the structure of gender relations. Human social practice creates gender relations in history.” (“Hegemonic” 843). Eve Sedgwick adds that a woman can often act as a focal point between two men from which they can play out their homosocial tensions without the risk of revealing or indulging in homosexual expressions. While considering several models in the literary world, Sedgwick finds that “In these male homosocial bonds are concentrated the fantasy energies of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence; all are fully structured by the logic of paranoia” which she

then goes on to connect to related class struggles (Chapter 9). Each iteration of these exchanges, whether brought on by desire or fear, become micro utterances of power and identity given voice through dynamic tensions. Whether it is the social practice creating the gender relations or the romance triangle serving as the battle ground the manifestation of masculinity is certainly a social production. However, this social production is in constant dialogue with the internal self.

For Virgil, the film gives us several homosocial relations to parse out his masculine framework. Mose, as his brother and closest companion is a relationship of kindred masculine experiences. Mose stands as solid and accepted representation of his near future masculine self. Virgil tests his own identity against Mose's, but his aim is emulation rather than separation. First Raise serves as a secondary and more distant example of this same form of emulation. First Raise is Mose fully formed and serves as Virgil's ultimate marker of masculinity. Yet, both of these models prove insufficient to carry him into adulthood due to their early deaths. This leaves unsatisfactory surrogates like Lame Bull, who is more buffoon than man who has stolen rather than earned his father's place in Virgil's family. Long Knife on the other hand is both a full blood and hypermasculine. He is strong, where Virgil is lame with his constant limp, to which Long Knife references when he calls him "limpy." Virgil is unable to capture and keep Agnes happy due to his own internal misery and unhealed wounds, but Long Knife is perfectly capable of satisfying her, at least sexually. More abstract archetypes of masculinity exist in the form of the cowboy figure. Virgil and Mose have already absorbed all the mythemes of this symbol and bought into the mythology of its superiority to their own tribal heroes.

The cowboy can never serve as an appropriate heroic model for Native men, no matter how much we as young boys might want to cheer for the victors. At a certain point, we must all come to terms with our true status as losers to the constant victories of the cowboys. In truth, we



were more victims than losers in a war that could only ever have one outcome. Old Lodge Skins reminded us of this sad truth. “The white man, they believe everything is dead: stone, earth, animals, and people, even their own people. If things keep trying to live, white man will rub them out.” (*Little Big Man*). Here in *Winter in the Blood*, Virgil has long since given up his notion of being a cowboy, though he still wrestles with his supposed white ancestry and what it might mean for who he really is.

For Virgil, abandoning the cowboy heroic model and losing Mose and First Raise as true masculine models has left him fractured, unfinished, and “caught in the in-between spaces.” Though he still tries to return to the white man’s world for answers, or at least escape, he is left with more questions than answers. Though the lack cannot ever be filled, the repetition of desire forms the basis for identity in practice. Yet, for Virgil, each point of access to this cycle of desire/repetition is denied to him before he can successfully process the implications. The object-cause of his desires are dead, which leaves him teetering on annihilation as he struggles to find signification to buffer him from his trauma. Andrew and Alex Smith use the uncertainty of time, place, and reality to disorient the audience along with Virgil on his quest. The cowboy poster that young Mose and Virgil were admiring flashes across the screen after the fight scene and then fades into a shot of whiskey being dropped into a glass of beer. The childhood image of the cowboy figure gives way to the Airplane Man. This character is a composite of all the images of white masculinity and escape that Virgil has developed over the years and stands as part of the dreamlike memory/imaginings that happen in the white man’s world when he is not pursuing Agnes. This character is tall and powerful with some measure of wealth and prestige, yet mysterious and strange. He calls for Virgil to go on an adventure with him and drive him into Canada in exchange for 500 dollars and a car. However, these scenes act more like

remnants of his childhood imaginings and offer him little in the way of identity resolution. They are yet more necessary fictions.

Ultimately, Virgil can find no lasting answers with Mose, First Raise, Lame Bull, or Long Knife, and his shattered image of the white man's masculinity through Airplane Man will leave him empty of answers, but full of questions. Of the women in his life, he finds little more. "She took my gun! She took my razor too. I don't really give two shits about my razor, but I do care about my gun." Virgil declares while getting drunk at the bar, which may or may not have been the same bar where he may or may not have met the Airplane Man. Agnes has taken his rifle, his phallus. This rifle was once First Raise's, and Virgil stole it one day as a young boy and killed a hawk on a bet. The act, and his grandmother forcing him to eat hawk stew as penance for the pointless killing sickens him, and he intentionally breaks the rifle. He had tried to claim First Raise's phallus before it was his time, before he had the wisdom to know how to control it, and it repulses him. It becomes abject, and in his anger and revulsion he breaks it. That he breaks the rifle with this knife he earned from his brother is crucial as we shall see later. Now, Agnes has stolen it from him, broken as it is, and he must retrieve it if he is to repair his masculinity and his identity with his family.

For much of the film Agnes is a character from Virgil's unreliable memory who drifts in and out of scenes as a beautiful yet elusive ghost. She is given permanence through his family's constant reference to her, but she is given form through his imaginings. She is an object that helps us to understand Virgil better. She is something that he desires yet knows little about. She is something that has wounded him and exposed his primal wound, his lack, so he seeks her out to close that wound. He does find his rifle in a pawn shop, where she has discarded it for something that she desires more. He buys it back, and immediately feels its power return to him

as the white people in town cower before the Native man walking through the streets holding his rifle on full display. Unfortunately, he is uncomfortable with this power, so he tries to assuage their fears by telling them, “don’t worry, it’s broken” but they still fear his regained power. However, when he returns home with the rifle, Lame Bull still acknowledges the lack of Agnes; thereby, reminding Virgil that she had still unmanned him.

With Virgil’s rifle back in his possession he needed to get it fixed to restore its power. He decides to visit an old man who lives in the mountains that his father had taken Virgil and Mose to visit when they were boys. Along the way, he recalls the morning of the day when Mose died, as First Raise was getting them prepared to bring the cattle in. This is the story within the story that will unfold in parts as Virgil’s present narrative continues. Here, First Raise tells the boys that when he was young, they would have brought all the cattle in one day as a way of setting a challenge for them. Mose takes up the challenge and impresses First Raise, so he tells them he will take them hunting if they can get the cattle in one day. “I mean it this time. Take you all the way up into Canada, into our sacred land. We’ll bag us an elk or three. That’s our hunting grounds. That belongs to us. I know the perfect spots up in there.” Land is an important part of First Raise’s sense of self. He has imagined going on this great hunt into his people’s ancestral lands for as long as Virgil could remember. We will later see First Raise drunkenly reminding the white people in the bar that “it’s our damn land.” First Raise’s disconnection from his geographical and spiritual homeland is intertwined with his unreconcilable sense of self. It foregrounds the emptiness of his identity and precludes him from seeing himself as a viable whole for his sons to emulate.

Unfortunately, the events of that day would not prove joyous, and First Raise would never take them on that hunt. “After that day, First Raise would stay away from home a week or

two at a time. Then he'd show up, looking ruined and fearful." Virgil recalls as he nears the old blind man's house. That day was a turning point in all their lives, and it is central to Virgil's recovery, but he is not yet ready to relive all of it. Back in the present time, Virgil arrives to find the old man, Yellow Calf, who tells him, "being dead isn't so bad, once you get used to it." Yellow Calf seems to sense Virgil's anxiety and seeks to alleviate his fears of the Real. Yellow Calf's existence is difficult to verify as he is only seen through our unreliable narrator, but Virgil tells him that he was once brought here by First Raise when he was a boy. "He never taught you any of his tricks?" Yellow Calf asks, "Just how to talk to white men." Virgil responds. "And their women?" Yellow Calf answers knowingly. In this exchange, Virgil comes to understand that Yellow Calf knows a great deal about him and his family that he is not aware of, yet Virgil is unwilling to press him on this knowledge at this time. When Yellow Calf tells him that the deer and the magpies keep him company and that he can talk to him, Virgil asks if they can help him find something that he has lost. Yellow Calf replies "Or someone. Sometimes you have to lean into the wind to stand straight." Virgil is unsettled by this, but he is not yet done chasing after what he thinks he is missing. He is not yet ready to listen, so he leaves the gun with Yellow Calf who tells him it will take three days to fix. Virgil does not yet know it, but by bringing the rifle, the broken symbol of his masculinity to Yellow Calf, he has inadvertently asked his last remaining living male family member to help him close his wounds and revitalize his sense of self. In this sense, *Winter in the Blood* is reminding its audiences that the point of origination for all of our modes of identity rest in our people, in our family.

As Virgil returns to the farm, one half of two worlds that pull at him, he helps Lame Bull and Long Knife work the hay fields. During the hay bucking, Virgil sees the corpse of a rabbit that was caught in the bailing. This pulls him back to the time when his grandmother forced

Virgil and Mose to eat the dead hawk. She tells them of the time when she was young, and they had to survive a harsh winter that almost killed her people from starvation. "I would have welcomed the hawk. It would have given us strength." She tells the boys. As they consume their senseless kill, Virgil becomes sick and goes to the barn to vomit. He then takes his brother's pocketknife that he won for shooting the hawk and breaks it into the firing mechanisms of the rifle. He symbolically conflates the masculine symbols of his brother and father, and in so doing he has rendered both of them useless to him. Throughout the film, his grandmother is the only one heard speaking in her native language, and she is the only one who is seen telling him stories of his people's history. She is his only surviving link to his tribal past, but she can no longer speak, and her secrets will die with her. She too is a void that cannot close his wounds.

It is also on this hay bucking trip that Long Knife tells Virgil that he wants to go back to town so that he can have sex with Agnes. "She needs some full blood Indian in her." The juxtaposition of the two experiences, the memory of his time with his grandma hearing about his tribal past and Long Knife denigrated his mixed blood heritage are more than Virgil can stand, so he knocks Long Knife out with one sucker punch. The ability of this one act to reclaim a piece of his manhood is undercut when Theresa berates him for his behavior afterwards. "First you lose your wife, then you cold cock our best hand, what kind of nonsense you gonna pull next?" She scolds him as he stares at his busted knuckles and has visions of his father's frozen hands when they found his corpse. Theresa's emasculation of Virgil is situated in his inability to dominate a woman or to sacrifice his own integrity for capital gain. To become the man that Theresa might value in him would only take him further from his ideal self. Each of these instances of remembrance and pain is internalized for Virgil. When he tries to communicate his

pain, no one seems to hear him. The extended exchange between Virgil and Theresa here warrants a closer examination.

VIRGIL. I saw him you know, First Raise. He was lying in the creek bed facing east towards home.

THERESA. Your father was a foolish man, so drunk on a night that cold.

VIRGIL. He wasn't satisfied.

THERESA. He was restless. I never really stayed, and he never really left either. Just like all these damn Indians. Just like you.

VIRGIL. He wasn't happy.

THERESA. Do you suppose he was happy, lying in that ditch, 30 below, eyes frozen shut, stinking of wine?

VIRGIL. You know he didn't say. Seemed peaceful. I almost envy him.

When Virgil tries to broach the subject of First Raise's death, an event that happened over ten years ago, Theresa seems unmoved by his questions. It is clear here that they have never really had this conversation and she has no desire to have it now. She cannot recognize Virgil's need to understand First Raise's decision, or she simply does not know how to help him. She tries to equate First Raise's restlessness to Virgil's, and she seems just as unable to help Virgil overcome his as she was First Raise's. Virgil presses on, giving her opportunities to discuss his state of mind, and Virgil's by proxy, but Theresa has little to offer him. When he states that First Raise wasn't happy, a clear call out to his own depression, Theresa challenges his choice of death as a viable alternative. Even when Virgil says he envy's First Raise's decision, Theresa is unmoved.

VIRGIL. Why'd you let First Raise send us out alone that morning?

THERESA. Your wife, she wasn't happy here. She belongs in town. Maybe you do too.

VIRGIL. You know Theresa, I never expected much from you, and I never got it.

THERESA. You got what little I had left

Virgil abandons his pursuit of answers and shifts the conversation to Mose's death, but Theresa has no response. There is a brief flash of Mose's face as he was riding off that morning that could be either of them recalling that moment. She leaves the question hanging in the air and instead shifts the conversation to Agnes as if to remind Virgil of what his true concern should be,

unaware of how interconnected all these issues are for Virgil. She still does not see him. When Virgil tells her that she never gave him enough growing up, she responds that she gave him what little she had. Here the film articulates what is unsaid in so many films about Native American men. The unfulfilled spaces of our anger, sadness, loneliness, and guilt that needs healing, but all too often those around us are suffering so much on their own that they have nothing to offer. The specter of displacement and oppression always lurks in the corners. Here is where our heroes are needed most.

This is the point of healing that is most crucial in media and in Native country today. Men and women alike need to renew their commitment to community and family in order to heal these traumatic intergenerational injuries together. They must reconsider how they measure each other and redefine what it means to be a viable and successful man or woman in the community. Lame Bull is walking the white man's path. He acquires wealth and prestige through transactional exchange. He is Black Wolf all over again (*Daughter of Dawn*). He believes that he has earned his place as head of the household simply because he has married Theresa. Long Knife seems to express no interest in healing of any sort and is a one-dimensional force of toxic masculinity and alcoholism. By providing Virgil with no answers to the questions of his past, no comfort in his grief, and no future role in the family house, Theresa has denied Virgil his masculinity, so he must seek answers elsewhere. She encourages him to go back to the shadow world of the white people for answers.

Instead, Virgil goes back inside to visit his grandma. She has fallen from her chair, and he has to help her back into bed. As she sings him a song and comforts him, he thinks back to when Agnes was there. "She's just a girl I brought home. Fish for dinner. That's all." He wants to dismiss her importance, but his memory of her, standing in the kitchen bathing proves his

words at least partially untrue. Then he admits, “I miss her now more than I ever did when she was here. Sometimes the memory is more real than the experience.” This is the key part of his imaginings of Agnes. All of his memories of her in the home are tender with soft music and warm lighting. She is mesmerizing. Yet, his family only refers to her as “that wife of yours”, and Long Knife only sees her as an object. For Virgil, keeping her as a ghost-like imagining in the house is more real to him than the actual experience of having her there. This is why she cannot be a true link to his quest for his identity. Her reality is unsatisfying, while her memory is incomplete. Still, Virgil knows that he must find her eventually as she still signifies his emasculation, so he heads back to town after all.

Rather than find any answers in town, Virgil awakens to find himself in a strange house with only vague memories of the night before. Here we see the Airplane Man’s story play out in greater detail as Virgil moves through town following the odd white man and becoming slowly pulled into his strange plans to carry some mysterious package across the Canadian border. The Airplane Man comes to represent the adventure and rewards that Virgil still wants to believe can be extracted from the white man’s world. That he can simply complete some small task and be rewarded with unearned wealth is in keeping with his view of providence and luck that seem to permeate the white man’s experience. “Again, I had crossed over into the shadow world of white people. I had given up something of myself, but I didn’t know what.” Virgil thinks to himself when he awakens in Malvena’s home. He tries to talk to her son, but the boy rejects his attempts. Then, when he tries to crawl into bed with Malvena, she kicks him out. He finds no sanctuary or answers there, only more questions. He was the unsatisfying object of her desire.

The interludes with the Airplane Man serve as a window into Virgil’s view of himself by the white man’s world. The Airplane Man sees him as an exotic distraction; a tool to help him



achieve his own personal goals, while Malvena and the rest of the white people in town prey on what little money he has left, and what little soul remains.

AIRPLANE MAN. What kind of Indian are you anyways?

VIRGIL. Normal kind, same as always.

AIRPLANE MAN. Would you call your garb traditional... Tell me, lone brave, do you make horse thieves cry. Do you run down the antelope? Where's your long braids? Where's your war pony, your squaw to clean the black horns that you kill?

VIRGIL. I don't have any idea what you're saying.

AIRPLANE MAN. Well, isn't it obvious? I need you to be more bonafide, more Indian Indian.

The Airplane Man needs him to be full blood. This moment of inadequacy cuts to Virgil's feelings of fracture and displacement. He wants this adventure as much as any young man who dreams of something more, something grand. Yet, when he is on the cusp of receiving the rewards, of starting off on that journey, his own mixed blood heritage betrays him. When they return to town, his self-worth all but crushed, he is pulled back into the world of the Natives walking among the whites when he catches up with Agnes.

She is his last remaining link to his masculinity, to his sense of self. The Airplane Man proved to be little more than a diversion, a mental escape that had no hope of delivery. Agnes could return with him, and they could be married. If he can conquer her, he can reestablish his place as a man in his community. In her, he can be seen. He would win one over Long Knife and reclaim the pieces of himself that Lame Bull and Theresa have claimed since Agnes left the home. First, Agnes tries to warn him not to hang around as Long Knife is looking to get revenge for the sucker punch.

AGNES. I tried to talk him out of it. I hate that macho shit.

VIRGIL. Well, you think I'm a big fan of it?

AGNES. Hey, have you missed me?

VIRGIL. I see you got a new dress.

AGNES. You like it?

VIRGIL. There's not much to it.

AGNES. Do you blame me? It's hot.

VIRGIL. Well, maybe if you would just settle down a bit you wouldn't be so hot.

AGNES. I tried that.

VIRGIL. I know, I'm just saying, you'd be a lot happier.

AGNES. You bore me.

VIRGIL. I don't blame you. I don't blame you for leaving me okay. I'm not happy.

AGNES. That's a good one. Who is?

She claims to dislike the hypermasculinity displayed by Long Knife, but her actions betray otherwise. She is unreceptive to his honesty and dismissive of his pleas for understanding. He bores her. Fortunately, we are still able to see Virgil in this interpersonal exchange, even if what we see is broken and unhappy. After Long Knife enters the bar and breaks Virgil's nose, the two drive off with the car that the Airplane Man was going to give him. Long Knife and Agnes have once again stolen the possibilities of his success. "They had appeared out of nowhere and now they were all gone. Maybe I had imagined the whole thing." Virgil thinks as the Airplane Man and Malvena disappear from the story. With Agnes and Long Knife gone and the Airplane Man's story at its conclusion, real or imagined, Virgil meets Marlene who agrees to get them some beer. After she tends to his wounds in a dingy hotel room, they have sex. After he wakes up and finds her asleep, he sees something missing in her that causes him to react. Their shared lack angers and frustrates him.

To this point, Virgil has sought out people that need him, but have something of their own in return. Some validation or some reward that will help satisfy that terrible thirst within him. Marlene is empty of this life, this possibility. Her lack is too visible, and he finds her emptiness abject. Even though she has empathy for him, she is caught in a sadness of her own. There is no challenge to her, no spirit that drives him. He unexpectedly slaps her across the face when she asks him for a sexual favor. It is as if he is angry at her for not seeing the futility of the pursuit of pleasure. She struggles against him, but he has her pinned underneath him. She

screams “if only I could get loose.” Her helplessness pulls him out of his moment of violence. He has broken her down with little effort. She was even more vulnerable than he. He saw in her that he was tired of town, of what it was doing to him and what he might become if he stayed.

As he makes his way back home, he climbs to the top of a cliff and looks down into the water. He contemplates jumping. He considers what might happen if he just ends it all. He cannot find himself anywhere. He is not welcomed at home. He is lost in two worlds in town, beaten up and unwanted by both the whites and the Indians. A breeze picks up, and he remembers Yellow Calf’s words: “sometimes you have to lean into the wind to stand straight.” This pulls him from his melancholy, and he finds a new sense of resolve.

He stops to pick some chokecherry tobacco for his grandmother on the way home. When he gets there to reform that connection to her, he finds that she has passed away in his absence. The one person who seemed to appreciate him for who he was and tried to strengthen his connection to his homeland and his people had passed. He had looked for so long to find the answers to what he sought and just when he felt he might have hope; he had lost his potential guide. He goes to visit Yellow Calf again, to tell him about his grandmother dying, and it is then that he learns the truth of his heritage. Yellow Calf was the hunter that had saved his grandmother from dying so long ago in that harsh winter. He was his grandfather. Virgil was not only full blood, but he had a link to his past again, and this gave him renewed hope. However, Yellow Calf tells him “We all have the blood of our enemies in our veins, we all have the same amount of blood.” While this might be a way of dissuading him from putting too much stock in the reality of his ancestry, Virgil is unmoved. Virgil cannot yet understand that the intergenerational trauma that fills him and torments him, also runs through the veins of all those in his world. None of them are able to fill his lack because they too have their own gaps.

Instead, Virgil is still repeating the desire of fantasy fulfillment by moving towards a perceived state of completeness that exists in the spectral reality of full-blood identity and family acceptance. He has found an answer that he thinks can start the healing process for him. He has found at truth that matters only to him that can help him process at least some of the disdain he feels at home and in town. In the worlds he must walk, he has at least that much armor. Yellow Calf gives him the rifle, now repaired, and tells him that it was never really broken. He hands him the shard from the pocketknife, telling him that the gun just had something stuck inside it.

Yellow Calf has tried to show him that the pieces of Virgil that were fractured with the death of Mose and First Raise could not be conflated. Each is a separate piece of him and must be incorporated into his subjectivity differently. The guilt and trauma he feels at the death of Mose is one of inadequacy to save him and the trauma of seeing his death happen. The guilt and trauma he feels at the death of First Raise is inadequacy to fulfill his father's pride and heal his sorrow, and the trauma of having found him dead in the snow. While they are similar in their inertia towards the Real, they are unique wounds that must be healed independently. While the repaired rifle is a form of closure to his wounds, for Virgil the parts stuck deep inside of him are much harder to remove.

When he returns home, he finds the cow stuck in the mud bog and tries to pull her out. He and Bird, his old cow horse, are incapable of freeing the cow from the bog, so he retrieves the gun that Yellow Calf has repaired and takes aim at the cow. With his renewed sense of masculinity restored he seeks an aggressive action but is unable to complete the task. This is the cowboy way, the way of the gun, the way of domination and death. It is not his way. He is impotent to the moment and collapses in the mud, a broken man. It is not the blade in the rifle, or the winter in his blood that has broken him. It is Mose. It was always Mose. In this instance,

the final piece of the story is revealed to the audience, and we see that Mose died trying to help bring the cattle in when Virgil failed to do his part. The terrible sadness and guilt play across Virgil's broken face as he turns the gun on himself. Yet, even in this he is unmanned. He cannot do it. He cries out to the one person on his life that had never let him down. He begs Mose to help him. In that moment, the memory of he and Mose laying in the grass with the rain pouring down on their faces returns to him. Mose tells him to get up. Virgil has finally worked his way through the entirety of his guilt and sadness and circled back around to one of the earlier memories in the film. He was able to lean on the times before everything turned dark. He was able find his way back to the beginning and begin the healing process on his true wounds.

The film concludes with a possibility of hope, but it fails to give us any true closure. This is one of the film's greater strengths. The struggle for identity, the confusion of masculinity, and the terrible pain and confusion that can accompany manhood is never a clean narrative. The ongoing struggle for young Native men, both on and off the reservation, to find their way in a world that has still not open its arms to them is real. The statistics suggest that Native American's are in just as much danger now than they ever have been. The intergenerational traumas that are faced by almost every Native American man cannot be easily conveyed by the typical Hollywood narrative. Our stories are complicated, and so too must the men in our films be complex.

*Winter in the Blood* does not shy away from death. From the beginning, with Virgil waking in the ditch, he begins to see the recurring vision of his father, dead in the snow from exposure and alcoholism. This image will permeate throughout the film and marks one of the central struggles Virgil faces in order to close the distances within himself. Unlike films of the past, Andrew and Alex Smith let the camera linger on the body and situate each remembrance

with a direct connection to Virgil's present struggles. They have linked the corpse, the abject other, to the present experiences; thereby, giving the corpse a vibrancy often lacking.

Sterlin Harjo's *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007) takes a similar approach with Frankie Smallhill, who is the patriarch of his family and first corpse we see in that film. His voice is the first voice we hear, and his narration permeates through his surviving family's journey. These narrative choices that bring the corpse to the front of the narrative and give voice and purpose subvert the Vanishing American trope by reminding audiences that the corpse is part of the living memory of all tribal members, but especially the surviving family members. The abject qualities of Frankie Smallhill's and First Raise's corpses are replaced with reverence and contemplation. Both Cufe, Frankie's son, and Virgil fear becoming like their fathers, the unalive corpse, the abject other that has cast off life. But neither seem to be repulsed by this image. The film and the sons linger on these images and let the fathers come alive in their memory. They have no power as bodies except to show each survivor the inevitable. Yet, where Julia Kristeva saw abjection in the corpse through its finality and corporeality, the Native community tends to see the corpse as the least significant component of the deceased.

All our relations before us and after us are given life through their place in our communities. In *Winter in the Blood*, Grandmother's corpse is never seen, but her absence in the house, in her chair, and in her bed is felt just as viscerally for Virgil. However, when he finds the missing pieces to her history with Yellow Calf, it becomes part of his history. Yellow Calf becomes part of his history and his present. Her death, First Raise's death, and ultimately Mose's death are part of the pieces of Virgil that brings him the most pain and guilt, but they are also part of the necessary journey "to face [his] demons, to speak to [his] ancestors, to get [his] name." As his grandmother told him, the journey "was not an easy road. To be a human being

was not easy.” No film should attempt to dismiss the importance of our ancestors on our present lived experiences. They are a part of our intergenerational trauma, but as both *Four Sheets to the Wind* and *Winter in the Blood* remind us, they are also the necessary part of our healing and at the core of what it means to be alive.

By seeing Cufe and Virgil proceed through life with the intergenerational trauma of death, audiences, both Native and non-Native, are able to see into the lives of contemporary Natives today and come to understand that we did not vanish, and we are still here. Our struggles are real, but to the outside world they might be too subtle to understand without coming to understand the entirety of the struggles of oppressed peoples. To the Native world, these struggles are unique to each individual, but the collective battles for survivance are integral to the overall health of each Native community. Community revitalization efforts are underway in many Native communities today that seek to recover and preserve the language, stories, and histories of our people and situate them into our contemporary experiences. Any such efforts must also include the sorrowful and joyous reconciliation with those that we have already lost and those that we will lose. These efforts must bring all aspects of our history back into the circle of our lives today.

*Winter in the Blood* does not give us a complete and idyllic native community, nor a hero to save it. Virgil moves between two worlds throughout the film. In the shadow world of the white people, he is an exotic other. He is an object to be desired for what he represents, but not for who he is. However, when he is pressed on his lineage, he comes to learn that he is not Indian enough to satisfy the appetites of the white world through his commodification.

The women seem to desire his body for its exoticism. They do not seek to understand his pain or enter into his world. They seek only the pleasures of what he has to offer. Just as with

the Airplane Man, Malvena treats him like a thing. When he comes to her bed the morning after their sexual encounter, she casts him out. She has extracted all she needs from him. Her son does not see him as a man. He is a point of humor and disdain. The people in town see him as a commodity that they can exploit in exchange for drinks, cheap hotel rooms, and bad food. He is invisible in that world as a man. Until he reclaims his phallic power, his rifle, they all but ignore him. Even then, they see only the power that they respect, the danger that it represents. They do not see Virgil. They see an Indian with a gun. They see a threat.

In the world of the Indians, he is just as lost and objectified. At home, Theresa and Lame Bull emasculate him and denigrate him at every turn. They do not see him as a man in the house, but a burden that needs to be cast out. Theresa does not even see him as her son. He has no place in his family, in what should be his closest community. His Grandmother is the only one that seems to view him with any compassion, but she has long since lost her power of speech. She can offer him only songs and a gentle touch. When she passes, he is again alone. His father is gone. His brother is gone.

Virgil tries to seek out a new community in town with Agnes, and later Marlene, but both of these experiences leave him beaten, broken and alone. They too emasculate him, but in different ways. Agnes claims to reject “that macho bullshit”, but she leaves with Long Knife after Virgil is beaten. Marlene seems to have the capacity for compassion for Virgil, but her own emptiness is not enough to satisfy Virgil. Her passivity and empathy forces Virgil to see into himself, which disgusts him. Long Knife and Dougie, Agnes’s brother, offer him only disdain. They beat him up, they harass him, and they denigrate him for his mixed blood ancestry.

The community he seeks is ultimately found in the memory of Mose and First Raise and the times they had together, joined with the knowledge that he is a full blood Blackfeet through



his Grandfather Yellow Calf. While the film makes no guarantees that Virgil will find true family and acceptance now that he has recovered some sense of himself, it is clear that his internal journey to earn his name and discover who he is now has a chance at success. There are no heroes in this film that a modern Hollywood audience would recognize. Virgil is the protagonist, but he is a largely unsympathetic character. He is bitter, pathetic, lazy, and even violent towards women on at least one occasion. However, Virgil is complex. His flaws come from an arrested development and a lifetime of trauma. The demons that he must slay are within him. The very aspects of his character that make it difficult to sympathize with are the very aspects that he seeks to overcome. That his heroic journey is internalized makes it no less heroic. That the climax of his journey comes when he nearly kills himself does not diminish the triumph of his will to live. With Mose, First Raise, and his grandmother before him, he seems poised to follow the same fate, but he endures. He looks past the death of Mose and into the more joyous memory of Mose's life to give him strength.

Virgil's journey cannot escape the death of his family members or the despair of his shattered and unwelcoming communities. Similarly, *Winter in the Blood* offers Virgil little that validates his sexuality. His sexual experiences seem to move between Malvena, Marlene, and Agnes. Each of the three women encapsulates a different aspect of the typical Native American male sexual experience in film, and each is just as emasculating. Malvena is the blond bar maid who moves in and out of his recollections of his time with the white people in town. She seems to desire him as an object of lust and escape. She stands as the projection of the white world beyond its fears of miscegenation but still rooted in objectification. For Virgil to move past her, he must discover something about himself that subverts her objectification of his body. The Airplane Man is the missing component here. When the narrative between the two men comes

to an end as a result of Virgil's mixed blood ancestry and unsatisfactory objectivity, Virgil sees Malvena leave town with all of her objectifications. Their world is a world of transactions of things, all of which he wants no part.

Virgil's journey does not move him into the arms of another objectifying white woman, instead he meets Marlene who views him as an object of tragedy rather than lust. She does not seem to desire his body in the same way that Malvena does; instead, Marlene wants his company. She wants to talk before they have sex, and she says they can talk if he comes back. However, when Virgil is having an internal crisis after their sexual encounter, she seems unable to offer him any insights. Her talking; therefore, is really an unspecified and unrecognizable desire for affection separate from their physical interactions. Virgil, having just concluded with his interactions with Malvena, and having been ultimately rejected by Agnes, is not yet in a position to see himself as physically viable, much less spiritually.

For her part, Agnes occupies the majority of his thoughts, but offers the audience the least amount of understanding into the inner workings of Virgil's quest for identity. She, like Virgil, is a physical object of theft and recovery. When she leaves his home, she steals his rifle and his electric razor and sells the rifle for a drink. That she can equate his phallic power to its equal shares of booze is further enunciated when she ultimately sides with Long Knife, who is able to bring her that sexual and alcoholic satisfaction she seems to desire. Virgil opens up to her at the bar about his unhappiness, but she is unmoved and bored by his attempts. The only aspects of their interactions that seem to spark any interests for her is when he directs his attentions to her. Virgil cannot find validation and a sexual center in Agnes because Agnes has already commodified him in this way. She has stolen his phallus, sold it for a drink, and has no further desire for Virgil when she realizes how completely she has unmanned him.

Ultimately, Virgil spends much of the film so deep into his depression and despair that he is as a walking corpse. His geographical and social spaces are unwelcoming and uninviting. His sexual relationships are hollow and unfulfilling. It is only when he comes home to the hills with Yellow Calf and returns to the point of his initial fracture and faces his past that he is able to begin a forward motion. While at first, Virgil thinks that his discovery of his full blood identity is the missing piece to his fractured self, Yellow Calf reminds him that “we all have the same amount of blood.” This point is punctuated when he returns to his childhood home with renewed energy and a repaired rifle only to find that he is still impotent. He is unable to rescue the cow from the bog and thus confirms Theresa and Lamé Bulls emasculation. However, he is now closer to a state of completion with this renewed knowledge and is able to push past the fractured memories of his father and his brother. He transcends his brother’s death and faces his own culpability. In doing so, he receives the validation from Mose’s memory to carry on. It is in this moment that Virgil shows the most promise. He rejects his own corpse and the corpses of his father and brother. He rejects his reliance on his identity as full blood or half-breed. He rejects Theresa’s capacity to emasculate him.

By returning to his memories of Mose, he is able to return to the point of his true fracture and extract that pain. He cannot escape it, nor would he want to, but the film concludes with the assumption that he is now at least capable of charting a new path forward that includes the pain and, most importantly, the forgiveness. These are the types of heroic journeys in film that are necessary to explore intergenerational trauma, recovery, and revitalization. Virgil never completes his journey, but he has placed himself back in the cycle of experiences. For many Native men today, this is the first moment of true agency. Virgil chooses life. He rejects despair. In so doing, Virgil opens up the possibility of life with volition.

Non-Native audiences can view Virgil as the complex picture behind the stereotype. He is a drunk Indian throughout much of the film, but *Winter in the Blood* is as much about the lucid moments as it is about the intoxicated ones. It is the interstitial spaces between the drunken states that Virgil makes his discoveries. By facing the reality of substance abuse head on and giving it a history in Virgil's life, non-Native audiences are able to see the intergenerational cycle of abuse and the self-medicating impetus for its employment. By seeing the destruction and denigration of Virgil through his objectification, the film removes the savagery from his sexuality and replaces it with tragic commodification. Films like *Winter in the Blood* give the lived experiences of Native American men context and meaning, even when the answers are not always clear, and the results are not always pleasant.

For Native audiences, particularly for young men, Virgil's journey will be all too familiar. On the surface, the effects of alcohol and emasculation will be apparent. However, Virgil's response to his pain, objectification, and emasculation is not always a violent response. In general, he seems to seek out someone to consult for his problems. He seeks out a community to share his burden. This is the same pathway that Cufe, Rudy, and Seymour discover to varying degrees. Cufe is empowered by the support of his family and community and seems on the verge of using that power to cross over into the non-Native world, at least for a time. Rudy comes full circle to realize that the good that he is trying to do for his community cannot come at a cost of the very community he is trying to save. Seymour ultimately rejects his community in favor of the non-Native world, but first he had to face the complete ramifications of this decision in order to do so. Virgil realizes that the community he thought he had lost with the death of Mose and First Raise is still alive within him. He has the capacity to carry on their memory and their dreams.

For Hollywood to finally get it right with Native Americans in film, they must stop trying to construct the Native American narrative. They must let us tell our own stories and give us the necessary support to develop that voice more completely. By looking deeper into the rich body of independent Native films like *Winter in the Blood*, Hollywood will be better equipped to mobilize the rich, diverse, and vibrant world of the Native American experience in contemporary America. Through such endeavors, and with enough support from the hegemonic Hollywood machine, film can continue its recovery work in earnest.

### Works Cited Page

- Alcoff, Linda. *Identity Politics Reconsidered*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Aldrich, Robert. Dir. *Ulzana's Raid*. 1972. Universal Pictures. 2011. DVD.
- Aleiss, Angela. "'The Vanishing American': Hollywood's Compromise to Indian Reform". *Journal of American Studies*. vol. 25, no. 3, 1991, 467–472.
- . *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies*. e-book ed., Praeger, 2005. Kindle File.
- Alexie, Sherman. Dir. *The Business of Fancydancing*. 2002. FallsApart Productions. 2003. DVD.
- Apted, Michael. Dir. *Incident at Oglala*. 1992. Spanish Fork Motion Pictures. 2015. DVD.
- . Dir. *Thunderheart*. 1992. Tristar Pictures. 2015. DVD.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Hill and Wang, 2013.
- Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Iowa State UP, 1980.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Berkhofer, Robert F. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian, from Columbus to the Present*. e-book ed., Vintage Books, 1979. Kindle File.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. 1994. e-book ed., Routledge. 2004. Kindle File.
- Bordwell, David. *On the History of Film Style*. Harvard University Press, 1999. Print.
- Bordwell, David, and Noël Carroll editors. *Post-theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. e-book ed., U of Wisconsin P, 1996. Kindle File.
- Bordwell, David, et al. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. Columbia University Press, 2006. Print.
- “BRACKEEN V. BERNHARDT – INDIAN CHILD WELFARE ACT”. *Native American Rights Fund*. April 6. 2021. [www.narf.org/cases/brackeen-v-bernhardt/](http://www.narf.org/cases/brackeen-v-bernhardt/).
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. e-book ed., 1993. Routledge, 2011. Kindle File.
- . *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge. 1990.
- Byrd, Jodi A. and Michael Rothberg. “Between Subalternity and Indigeneity.” *Interventions*. pp. 1-12. 2011.

- Chaiken, Michael, and Paul Cronin, editors. *Arthur Penn Interviews*. University of Mississippi Press, 2008.
- Clark, W. P. *The Indian Sign Language*. University of Nebraska Press. 1982.
- Connell, R. W. *The Men and the Boys*. e-book ed., Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. Kindle Edition.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity". *Gender & Society* Vol 19, Issue 6, pp. 829-59, 2016.
- Cooper, James Fenimore. *The Last of the Mohicans*. e-book ed., Amazon Classics. Kindle File.
- Corwin, Hugh D. *The Kiowa Indians: Their History and Life Stories*. Lawton, Oklahoma. 1958.
- Corwin, Jason, and Tami Watt. *Denying Access: NoDAPL to NoNAPL*. YouTube, uploaded by Seneca Media and Communications Center, 2020. [youtu.be/TA-h4UYwPfQ](https://youtu.be/TA-h4UYwPfQ).
- Costner, Kevin. Dir. *Dances with Wolves*. Tig Productions. 2015. DVD.
- Curtiz, Michael. Dir. *Jim Thorpe – All American*. 1951. Warner Bros. 2007. DVD.
- Daves, Delmer. Dir. *Broken Arrow*. 1950. Twentieth Century Fox. 2007. DVD.
- "Debate: Baldwin vs. Buckley." 1965-06-14. American Archive of Public Broadcasting. May 29, 2021. [americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-151-sn00z71m54](https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-151-sn00z71m54).
- Deloria, Vine Jr. *Red Earth, White Lies*. Fulcrum Publishing, 1997.
- Diamond, Neil. Dir. *Reel Injun*. Lorber Films. 2011. DVD.
- Doerfler, Jill. "The Vanishing American" *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*. LeAnne Howe. e-book ed., Michigan State UP, 2013. Kindle File.
- Du Bois W. E. B. *The W.E.B. Du Bois Collection*. e-book ed., Karpathos Collection. 2016. Kindle File.
- Duran, Eduardo and Bonnie Duran. *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*. University of New York Press. 1995.
- Echo-Hawk, Walter R. *In the Light of Justice: The Rise of Human Rights in Native American and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Fulcrum, 2013.
- Eittreim, Elisabeth M. *Teaching Empire: Native Americans, Filipino, and US Imperial Education*. University of Press of Kansas. 2019.
- Eyre, Chris. Audio Commentary. *Skins*. 2002. First Look Media. 2003. DVD.
- . Dir. *Skins*. 2002. First Look Media. 2003. DVD.
- . Dir. *Smoke Signals*. 1998. Miramax Films. 1999. DVD.

- Fehrenbach, T. R. *Comanches: The History of a People*. e-book ed., 1974. Anchor Books, 2003. Kindle File.
- Fiennes, Sophie. Dir. *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*. 2006, Amoeba Films, 2017. Amazon Prime Video app.
- . Dir. *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*. 2012, Blinder Films, 2017. Amazon Prime Video app.
- Fixico, Donald L. *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945-1960*. University of New Mexico Press. 1990.
- ., *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources*. University of Colorado Press. 2012.
- Flisfeder, Matthew. *The Symbolic, The Sublime, and The Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.
- Ford, John. Dir. *Cheyenne Autumn*. 1964. Ford-Smith Productions. 2007. DVD.
- . Dir. *Searchers*. 1956. C.V. Whitney Pictures. 2016, DVD.
- . Dir. *Stagecoach*. 1939. Walter Wrangler Productions. 2016, DVD.
- Foucault, Michel, and Colin Gordon. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. Random House Inc., 1995.
- . *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. e-book ed., Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.
- Franco, Zeno E., et al. "Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism". *Review of General Psychology*. 2011: vol. 15, no. 2, 99–113.
- Friar, Ralph E. and Natasha A. Friar. *The Only Good Indian--: The Hollywood Gospel*. New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. International Publishers, 2014.
- Griffith, D.W. Dir. *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch*. 1913, Biograph Company, YouTube. uploaded by Film&Clips, 2014, [youtu.be/bR3hXYk8eqA](https://youtu.be/bR3hXYk8eqA).
- Gunderson, Dan. "I live with Standing Rock in my heart': Massive pipeline protest resonates 5 years later." Minnesota Public Radio News. April 1, 2021. [www.mprnews.org/story/2021/04/01/i-live-with-standing-rock-in-my-heart-massive-pipeline-protest-resonates-5-years-later](http://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/04/01/i-live-with-standing-rock-in-my-heart-massive-pipeline-protest-resonates-5-years-later).
- Hall, Stuart, et al. *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*. Routledge, 2005.



- Harjo, Sterlin. Dir. *Barking Water*. 2009. Indion Entertainment Group. 2017, *Amazon Prime Video* app.
- . Dir. *Four Sheets to the Wind*. 2007. Indion Entertainment Group. 2017, *Amazon Prime Video* app.
- Harmon, Alexandra. "American Indians and Land Monopolies in the Gilded Age". *The Journal of American History*. June 2003. pp. 106-133. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3659793/](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3659793/).
- Hawks, Howard. Dir. *Red River*. 1948. Monterey Productions. 2006. DVD.
- Hearne, Joanna. *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western*. SUNY Press, 2012.
- Hilger, Michael. *The American Indian in Film*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1986.
- Hooks, bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. e-book ed., Atria Books, 2004. Kindle File.
- Howe, LeAnne. *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*. e-book ed., Michigan State UP, 2013. Kindle File.
- Huhndorf, Shari M. *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination*. Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Iverson, Peter. *The Navajo Nation*. University of New Mexico Press. 1989. Print.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press, 2008.
- Jung, C. G. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Kasden, Margo, and Susan Tavernetti. "Native Americans in a Revisionist Western: *Little Big Man* (1970)" *Hollywood's Indian the Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. 2nd ed. Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. University Press of Kentucky, 2011. pp. 121-136.
- Kelley, Leo. "An Original Silent Film with an Oklahoma Indian Cast". *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, vol. 77, no. 3, 1999, pp. 290-99.
- Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn. *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*. Nebraska UP, 1999. Print
- Kluckhohn, Clyde, and Dorothea Leighton. *The Navaho*. Revised Ed., Harvard University Press. 1974.
- Kristeva, Julia. *The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia UP. 1982.
- Kugel, Rebecca. "Little Big Man" *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*. LeAnne Howe. e-book ed., Michigan State UP, 2013. Kindle File.

- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2001.
- . *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: 1954-1955*. New York: Norton, 2010.
- . *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*. e-book ed., 1973. Routledge, 2018. Kindle File.
- Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. e-book ed., Verso. 2014. Kindle File.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*. University of Toronto Press, 1978.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books, 1978.
- Mann, Michael. Dir. *The Last of the Mohicans*. 1992. Morgan Creek Productions, 2021. *Amazon Prime Video* app.
- Marubbio, M. Elise. *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film*. e-book ed., Kentucky UP. 2006. Kindle File.
- Mosse, George L. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Moya, Paula M. L. et al. *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. University of California Press, 2003.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp 6–18.
- Myles, Norbert. A Dir. *Daughter of Dawn*. 1920. Texas Film Company. *YouTube*, uploaded by The1920sChannel. 2021. [youtu.be/HwZs9IYDp1E](https://youtu.be/HwZs9IYDp1E).
- Nelson, Ralph. Dir. *Soldier Blue*. 1970. Embassy Pictures. 2006. DVD.
- Nieves, Evelyn. "On Pine Ridge, a String of Broken Promises." Oct. 21, 2004, *Washington Post*. 2015. [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/10/21/on-pine-ridge-a-string-of-broken-promises/e64a4060-6969-4d27-a6c3-fdd3bc8a772d/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/10/21/on-pine-ridge-a-string-of-broken-promises/e64a4060-6969-4d27-a6c3-fdd3bc8a772d/).
- Nye, Wilbur Sturtevant. *Bad Medicine & Good: Tales of the Kiowas*. University of Oklahoma Press. 1980.
- Offer, John. "From 'natural selection' to 'survival of the fittest': On the significance of Spencer's refashioning of Darwin in the 1860s." *Journal of Classical Sociology*. 2014, 156-77.
- Penn, Arthur. Dir. *Little Big Man*. 1970. Cinema Center Films. 2014, *Amazon Prime Video* app.

- Raheja, Michelle H. *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and representations of Native Americans in film*. e-book ed., University of Nebraska Press, 2010. Kindle File.
- Reeser, Todd W. *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Reyhner, Jon, Jeanne Eder. *American Indian Education: A History*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. University of Oklahoma Press. 2017.
- Riley, Michael J. "Trapped in the History of Film: Racial Conflict and Allure in *The Vanishing American*." *Hollywood's Indian the Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. 2nd ed. Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. University Press of Kentucky, 2011. pp. 58-72.
- Rollins, Peter. *Hollywood's Indian the Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. 2nd ed. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011.
- Romero, Simon, Graham Lee Brewer. "Oklahoma's Tribes Unite Against a Common Foe: Their Cherokee Governor." *The New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2020. [www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/kevin-stitt-tribal-nations-oklahoma-casinos.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/us/kevin-stitt-tribal-nations-oklahoma-casinos.html).
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage. 1994.
- . *Orientalism*. 1978. New York: Vintage. 2003.
- Sandos, James, and Larry Burgess. "The Hollywood Indian versus Native Americans: *Tell them Willie Boy is Here* (1969)". *Hollywood's Indian the Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. 2nd ed. Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. University Press of Kentucky, 2011. pp. 107-120.
- Scheide, Frank M. *Introductory Film Criticism: A Historical Perspective*. Kendall/Hunt Publishing. 1994.
- Schertzinger, Victor. Dir. *Redskin*. 1929. Paramount Pictures, *YouTube*, uploaded by Raceology. 2012. [youtu.be/\\_ouCeY8zpTI](https://youtu.be/_ouCeY8zpTI).
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. e-book ed., Columbia University Press. 2016. Kindle Edition.
- Seitz, George B. Dir. *The Last of the Mohicans*. 1936 Edward Small Productions, 2021. *Amazon Prime Video* app.
- . Dir. *The Vanishing American*. 1925 Famous Players-Lasky, 2014. *Amazon Prime Video* app.
- "Sherman Alexie Interview". *Winter in the Blood*. 2013. Alive Mind. 2015. DVD.
- Simoneau, Yves. Dir. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. 2007. HBO Films. 2019. *HBO Max* app.
- Singer, Beverly. *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video*. e-book ed., Minnesota UP. 2001. Kindle File.

- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*. University of Oklahoma Press. 2000.
- Smith, Alex, and Andrew Smith. Dir. *Winter in the Blood*. 2013, Alive Mind. 2015. DVD.
- Smith, Paul Chaat. and Robert Allen Warrior. *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*. New York: New, 1996.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris, e-book ed., Columbia University Press. 2010. Kindle Edition.
- Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Behavioral Health Barometer: Missouri, Volume 4: Indicators as measured through the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, the National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services, and the Uniform Reporting System*. HHS Publication, 2017.  
store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma17-barous-16-mo.pdf.
- Teuton, Sean. *Red Land, Red Power*. e-book ed., Duke UP, 2008. Kindle File.
- The Seventh Generation: Youth at the Heart of the Standing Rock Protests*. ABC News. *YouTube*, uploaded by ABC News. 2017. [youtu.be/1Rz\\_TkpysKk](https://youtu.be/1Rz_TkpysKk).
- Tomkins, William. *Indian Sign Language*. Dover Publications. 1969.
- Tourneur, Maurice. Clarence Brown. Dir. *The Last of the Mohicans*. 1920. Maurice Tourneur Productions. *YouTube*, uploaded by PublicDomainMoviesYT. 2016, YouTube.  
[//youtu.be/wwGji2ej3L4](https://youtu.be/wwGji2ej3L4).
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. e-book ed., Digireads.com, 2010. Kindle File.
- Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Aldine Pub., 1969.
- United States. Dept. of Human Services. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. *Suicidal Behavior in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities: A Health Equity Issue*. 2019. [stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/76869](https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/76869).
- Van Patton, Timothy. Dir. *Into the West*. 2005. *YouTube*, uploaded by LionHeart FilmWorks. DreamWorks Television. 2019. [youtu.be/7KSMZ98C7ag](https://youtu.be/7KSMZ98C7ag).
- Vizenor, Gerald Robert. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. U of Nebraska Press. 1999.
- . *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. U of Nebraska, 2008.

- . "Trickster Discourse: Comic and Tragic Themes in Native American Literature." *Buried Roots and Indestructible Seeds: The Survival of American Indian Life in Story, History, and Spirit*, edited by Mark Allan Lindquist, Martin Zanger, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, pp. 67-83.
- Vološinov, V.N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Seminar Press. 1973.
- Wallace, Ernest, and Hoebel, E. Adamson. *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains*. e-book ed., University of Oklahoma Press, 1986.
- Warrior, Robert Allen. *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*. U of Minnesota, 1994.
- Womack, Craig, S. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. e-book ed., Minnesota UP, 1999. Kindle File.
- Yandell, Kay. *Telegraphies: Indigeneity, Identity, and Nation in America's Nineteenth-Century Virtual Realm*. Oxford University Press. 2019.
- Zhao, Chloe. Dir. *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*. 2015. Film Independent. 2019. Netflix.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. e-book ed., Verso, 2012. Kindle File.
- . *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso, 2009.