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Representations of American Indians in Contemporary Narrative Fiction Film

Denise K. Cummings, Guest Editor

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Introduction

Denise K. Cummings

It is with great pleasure that I contribute to this special issue of *SAIL* devoted to scholarly work about representations of American Indians in contemporary narrative fiction film. With a thematic issue, one's insight into an idea is deepened and broadened with every essay. Divergent essays also have a beauty, in part because they stand in stark contrast to their surroundings. This issue offers a little of both, I think, because the essays and interview here address two interrelated, but distinct, histories: films about American Indians and films by American Indians.

In "White Romance and American Indian Action in Hollywood's *The Last of the Mohicans*," Craig Rinne confronts a 1992 film about, but not by, American Indians. While acknowledging the popular reading of the film's central narrative as white heterosexual romance, he suggests an alternative reading that focuses on the Native American stories within the film. In doing so, he re-examines the film's narrative periphery and argues that the film's romance narrative can be viewed as a displacement of the racial conflict that underlies the text, thus problematizing the prevailing interpretive history.

Jhon Warren Gilroy and I, in part, offer descriptions of films in which American Indians control the key creative aspects of production. In "Another Fine Example of the Oral Tradition (?): Identification and Subversion in Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals*," Gilroy engages the heavily touted first independent narrative fiction feature film written, produced, directed, and acted by American Indians. In his reading of Sherman Alexie's use of the road/buddy genre, Gilroy exposes *Smoke Signals*' exploration of particular cultural experiences of a group of

American Indians and the film's clever subversion of a classical Hollywood genre toward its own ends. In a companion piece to his essay, an interview with Evan Adams (*Smoke Signals*' Thomas Builds-the-Fire), Gilroy offers an insightful conversation with a talented, affecting individual who has a real-life gift for expressive storytelling.

In the final essay, "‘Accessible Poetry’? Cultural Intersection and Exchange in Contemporary American Indian and American Independent Film," I discuss *Smoke Signals* and two films by independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, *Dead Man* (1995) and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), and tease out the implications of "accessible poetry," for whom, and why it matters.

In 2001, we are just beginning to see what types of films American Indians create when they retain control over their representations. Present and future film histories must emphasize the innovations of American Indian filmmakers, screenwriters, and actors as well as discern the difference between white-written, -directed, and -produced Hollywood films about American Indians and those American Indian independently made films. We hope this collection is a step toward a film criticism that employs critical tools that speak to these differences.

The idea for a special film issue of *SAIL* was initiated by John Purdy and communicated to me just after the first Native American Symposium in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico in November 1999. Therefore, it seems fitting that this issue—John's last as Editor—should be dedicated to him. Our readers join me in heartily thanking you, John, for your ideas, your energy, your support, and your contributions to *SAIL*.

White Romance and American Indian Action in Hollywood's The Last of the Mohicans (1992)

Craig Rinne

Hollywood films have rarely portrayed complex, fully developed American Indian characters. Countless Westerns have propagated the stereotypes of the “noble savage” and the “bloodthirsty savage,” and Hollywood producers have viewed hiring American Indian actors and accurately depicting American Indian culture as unimportant and unprofitable. Not until the revisionist Westerns of the 1970s did Hollywood begin to offer slightly more complex and accurate American Indian characters, but Hollywood representations of American Indians still remain problematic at best.

The 1992 film *The Last of the Mohicans* (directed by Michael Mann)¹ appears to continue the Hollywood tradition of underdeveloped American Indian characters. Although *Mohicans* was a financial success and often praised in the mainstream press, scholarly critics have censured the film for its stereotypical representation of American Indians. Nevertheless, some American Indian voices have praised the film and its portrayal of American Indians. These paradoxical stances towards the film are the basis for this essay. I will begin by surveying the critical and popular reception of the film in order to compare various readings of the film. Then I will attempt to reconcile competing interpretations of the film through a form of structuralist analysis borrowed from Charles Eckert. Finally, I will put forth an alternate interpretation of the film that considers Chingachgook, played by Russell Means, as an important force relegated to the narrative periphery. I intend to examine what space, if any, Hollywood films provide for the advancement of American Indian stories and characters.

Much of the scholarly criticism of *Mohicans* derives from the

differences between the film version and James Fenimore Cooper's original 1826 novel. The film retains the basic plot and setting of the novel. Set during the French and Indian War in 1757 colonial New York, Hawkeye (played by Daniel Day-Lewis) and his Mohican comrades, Chingachgook (Russell Means) and his son Uncas (Eric Schweig), rescue and protect Cora Munro (Madeleine Stowe), Alice Munro (Jodhi May), and English officer Duncan Heyward (Steven Waddington) from the Huron led by Magua (Wes Studi). Magua is an ally of the French, and he desires revenge upon the Munro sisters for wrongs inflicted upon him by their father, the English Colonel Munro. *Mohicans*, however, significantly changes Cooper's novel.² Based on the screenplay for the 1936 film version, the 1992 film emphasizes the romantic involvement between Hawkeye and Cora; Duncan also romances Cora. The film only implies a possible romantic link between Uncas and Alice. In Cooper's novel, Duncan and Alice eventually marry, both Magua and Uncas pursue Cora, and Hawkeye's romance is with the frontier. In the novel, Hawkeye kills Magua after Magua kills Uncas; in the film, Chingachgook kills Magua in retaliation for Uncas' death. Additionally, the film focuses on Hawkeye's character as the primary protagonist who performs many of the actions attributed to others in the novel, and the film lacks any reference to the novel's strong suggestion of Cora's partial African ancestry.

One effect of these plot changes is to slight the American Indian characters in favor of the white characters. Critics argue that because the film emphasizes the individual hero Hawkeye and the white romantic triangle of Hawkeye, Cora, and Duncan, the film fails to fully develop the American Indian characters or their relationships, romantic or otherwise. As Jeffrey Walker states in his examination of Hollywood's infidelity to Cooper's novel: "Of all the many revisions of Cooper's novel that appear in the 1992 version, Mann's decision to turn *The Last of the Mohicans* primarily into a love story and to ignore the essence of the Native American theme is the strangest and most damaging plot twist of all" (173). Similarly, Henry Sheehan addresses the transfer of sexuality from the novel's Uncas and Cora to the film's Hawkeye and Cora (who lacks African ancestry): "Aside from rendering the film's title meaningless, the switch perpetuates a racist interpretation of acceptable sexuality. . . . When Mann kills off Uncas and Alice, it's just a way of avoiding racial complications" (46). Both Walker and Sheehan further argue that the film's reworking of Cooper's characters and plot serves to elide American Indian presences and sidestep issues of race, racial conflict, and miscegenation.

Discussing another modification from the novel to the film, Martin

Barker says of Hawkeye's new status as the adopted son of Chingachgook:

This shift in perspective is linked in Mann's version with an overall tendency to make Hawkeye the most Indian character of all. . . . Hawkeye/Day-Lewis is interracial, therefore all political issues about race are "resolved" in and through him. Thus does multiculturalism find a myth to bear it. . . . Mann has made a clever, beautiful, but in the end hollow film, celebrating cultural pluralism but depoliticising racial politics. (29)

In Barker's view, the film treats race as a non-issue through the white Hawkeye's appropriation of American Indian characteristics. As Deborah Root explains, "We see in this film an old device—the white man as a mediator, presented as the one who best understands what it means to be Native" (46).

With the emphasis on the white protagonist Hawkeye, the film pushes the American Indian characters into the background. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick asserts that:

This film is about the English, French, and white Americans, with the Indians as colorful backdrops and sidekicks for the hero, and in the end, as the white Bumpo and his adoptive Indian father stand on a mountain and look over the wilderness, we hear only that he is the "last of the Mohicans." It would be a poignant scene, except that it seems a fitting ending for some other film. (142-143)

Kilpatrick concludes that Uncas and Chingachgook are relegated to supporting roles despite the film's attempts at including American Indians. Root also criticizes the film's token inclusion of American Indians:

The film marks its supposed "sensitivity" to the Native community by hiring Native actors and acknowledging the American Indian Movement in the credits at the end of the movie (it would be very interesting to hear how that went down) and having some of the characters speak Mohawk. But the narrative shamelessly reproduces old stereotypes, which clearly demonstrates that hiring Native actors is not enough. (46)

Root and other critics recognize that the film depends on traditional Indian stereotypes of the "noble savage" and the "bloodthirsty savage."

The film lacks fully developed American Indian characters. Gary Edgerton perhaps best summarizes this established critique of the film's reliance on stereotypes:

In terms of plot structure, Chingachgook and Uncas remain second-class citizens, which further supports the evidence throughout this film that Michael Mann's formal stylistic decisions actually undercut his stated intentions to revise the negative stereotyping of American Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans* from Cooper through Hollywood's many versions. (13)

And in pointing out the film's adoption of a colonial point of view, Edgerton concludes that, "In the process, American Indian images continue to be used in this newest version, intentionally or unintentionally, to present the viewpoint of the historically privileged rather than the oppressed" (16).

I agree with these critics' interpretations; *Mohicans* only minimally attends to the American Indian characters and instead accentuates the white lead characters of Hawkeye and Cora. This film is a mainstream, big-budget, Hollywood star vehicle, and unfortunately, such a film usually has white lead stars and a heterosexual romance-driven narrative. In his historical examination of classical Hollywood cinematic style, David Bordwell identifies the most commonly recurring motifs and elements of Hollywood narrative structure. Regarding the inevitable inclusion of a love story, he points out that:

The classical film has at least two lines of action, both causally linking the same group of characters. Almost invariably, one of these lines of action involves heterosexual romantic love. This is, of course, not startling news. . . . The tight binding of the second line of action to the love interest is one of the most unusual qualities of the classical cinema . . . (16-17)

Writing for a more popular audience, Janet Maslin similarly notes the seeming necessity for a romantic story with popular stars:

It took a lot more than tomahawks to make a box-office success of "The Last of the Mohicans," that's for sure. What it took was the inclusion of heartthrob elements, plus a strain of modern-day silliness, in a story not previously known for its sex appeal. . . . Now Mr. Day-Lewis, teamed smolderingly with the beautiful Madeleine Stowe, brings

serious chemistry to a role that seemingly had no romantic potential at all. (Maslin 13)

Both Bordwell and Maslin indicate Hollywood's dependence on romantic storylines for box-office appeal. What remains unsaid, however, is that most big-budget Hollywood films also feature white lead stars. At some fundamental level, the assumptions of big-budget, profit-driven Hollywood filmmaking are racist; such films must reach the largest possible audience in order to maximize profit, and Hollywood tacitly assumes that a romance plot with a white star and a white love interest best appeals to the largest possible audience. Hence, any non-white characters are relegated to supporting roles and rarely are involved in the romantic line of action. Occasional exceptions occur, of course, but the majority of Hollywood films follow this pattern.

I am not attempting to somehow excuse the filmmakers of *Mohicans* for the problematic depictions of American Indians within the film; rather, I am suggesting that emphasis on white stars and subordination of American Indian supporting characters is more of a problem with the institutions of Hollywood film production than of the individual film or its creators. Big-budget Hollywood films will not radically change and present truly progressive, American Indian-centered stories any time soon; the question is, then, whether or not a specific Hollywood film like *Mohicans* improves, in any way, Hollywood's traditional portrayal of American Indians.

Some American Indians think it does. Given the stereotypical depictions of American Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and in Hollywood films in general, I was surprised to find a few American Indian sources that endorsed the film. Two of these American Indian voices belong to actors Russell Means (Oglala Lakota) and Wes Studi (Cherokee), who play Chingachgook and Magua, respectively, in the film. Both actors view Magua as a complex, fully developed American Indian character. Studi says that the film will "allow more people than just Indians to identify with Magua. . . . They'll see that he has reasons, that it makes him feel better to act ruthless" (qtd. in Arnold D1). Also referring to Magua, Means says, "For the first time in cinematic history, the so-called 'bad' Indian has character development and is portrayed as intellectually superior to his non-Indian counterpart, a French general. It's fantastic, and it's revolutionary" (qtd. in Arnold D1). Both actors regard Magua as more than just a "bloodthirsty savage" stereotype; instead, Magua is intelligent and motivated. Magua often acts savagely, but he acts in response to the savagery of the English: Colonel Munro's actions caused the death of Magua's children, the remarriage of Magua's wife

when she thought he was dead, and Magua's slavery to the Mohawks. As John Christian Hopkins, who identifies himself as "an Eastern Woodlands Indian," says, "Only deep down, you understand why—the English commander led an attack that killed his family. Magua is driven by a lust for power but the loss in his heart warped his mind" (Hopkins).

Further praising the film, Russell Means comments on the characterization of Chingachgook and the progressive depiction of American Indians in the film (Larry Hackett's article quotes Means):

The aging Indian patriarch "is what I aspire to be," Means says, drawing a parallel between his own life and that of the movie's Chingachgook. "He has a presence of dignity, of courage and integrity; integrity for his way of life and integrity for his family." . . . "This movie is the movie that, from now on, pictures about American Indians are going to be measured against," Means adds. "It sets a standard for Indian actors and the role of Indians as human beings. Hollywood is starting to reach its potential for eradicating racism." (Hackett 1G)

Means argues that *Mohicans* contains well-developed American Indian characters that work to counter Indian stereotypes. Other American Indians seem to agree with Means; an article by Bob Curtright presents reactions from "a number of Wichitans with Indian roots from students to Indian center officials who previewed the stunning new film" (Curtright, *The Wichita Eagle*, 1C). Two of the respondents are concerned with stereotypes in the film, but on the whole the comments are positive. Because Curtright quotes and paraphrases the respondents' comments, I have assembled the following excerpts from his article:

"I didn't see any negatives," said Betty Nixon, chairman of the board of the Mid-America All-Indian Center in downtown Wichita. "I thought it was well-put. It's different than the cowboys and Indians most people think about." . . .

"I liked how it showed what the Indians were like back then. It showed how everybody survived. The scenery looked right for the movie. So did the costumes. There was nothing out of normal," said Tahlo Moore, a sophomore at North High School. . . .

"Many of the Indian characters are portrayed as intelligent, quick-witted and practical whether as hero or villain. They are well-rounded characters," said Indian Center director [Jerry] Aday. . . .

"They really went out of their way and spent the money to get the details accurate. I respect them for that. There are so many details that you can easily miss the subtleties," [Jim] Mendenhall said. (Curtright 1C)

As these reactions attest, some American Indians applaud the portrayal of Indian characters in *Mohicans*. Hopkins similarly approves of the film:

The characters were Indian, but more importantly they were real. They were humans, displaying emotions that any person—regardless of race—would feel in similar circumstances. . . .

This movie gives New England tribes their rightful due. And they offer something for all Indians. . . .

It is good to see Hollywood letting real Indians play themselves. I, for one, was tired of always seeing olive-skinned Italians running around with feathers in their hair in those old John Wayne flicks.

Hooray for Hollywood. (Hopkins)

Despite Hopkins' cheer for Hollywood, *Mohicans* certainly doesn't overturn decades of stereotypical Indians in Hollywood films. But the fact that some American Indians do sanction the film suggests that it contains some redeeming depictions of American Indians. How, then, to account for these disparate readings of *The Last of the Mohicans*? How to reconcile the scholarly condemnations and the assertions of value by some American Indians? Perhaps a reading of the film exists that simultaneously critiques the film for its conventional plot and stereotypical characters while acknowledging a potential view of the film as accurately and progressively depicting American Indians. After years of reader-response criticism and postmodern assertions of the multiplicity of the open text, it should be possible to reconcile opposing interpretations of the film. The remainder of this essay is my attempt at such a reading, and I will begin with a methodology borrowed from a seminal work of film studies by Charles Eckert.

In "The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's *Marked Woman*," Eckert uses Marxist, Freudian, and structuralist methods to analyze the title film. Eckert first notes a striking contrast in emotional levels between the scenes that develop the standard melodramatic plot and other scenes interspersed throughout *Marked Woman*. Then, beginning with Lévi-Strauss' assertion that a dilemma lies at the heart of every myth and is expressed through layered pairs of oppositions that transform a primary opposition, Eckert argues that the oppositions of the film's melodramatic

plot are transformations and displacements of real class conflict that underlies the film. In other words, the latent class tension is resolved through displacement into the manifest content of the reassuringly myth-like melodrama. Eckert discovers this displacement by examining microstructures within the film. He first outlines the essential pairs of oppositions from one of the thematic-laden songs in the film and discovers that the pairs are variations on the common “city life versus small town life” opposition that runs throughout the film. He then uses metonymic substitution of a seemingly incongruous pair (“witty people versus people who lead the right life”) and similar analysis of another song in the film to deduce that “city life versus small town life” substitutes for the “wealth versus poverty” opposition of class conflict; the class conflict is defused through its displacement into the melodramatic conflicts that structure the film’s plot. Ultimately, the gangster figure that serves as the prime mover of the plot in *Marked Woman* is an overdetermined condensation of class conflict because he represents both the wealth of the upper class and the street-wise sensibility of the urban lower class.

My description of Eckert’s article is condensed, but it sufficiently illustrates his methodology for my analysis of *Mohicans*. I begin with the white romance story, which stands out because it so forcefully overlays the rest of the plot. The romance reaches an emotional crescendo after the surrender of Fort William Henry and the subsequent Huron massacre, led by Magua, of the departing English. Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook rescue Cora and Alice and flee from Magua, who has just killed Colonel Munro, and his warriors. The Mohicans and the Munros join with Duncan and conceal themselves behind a waterfall, but Magua’s band soon discovers them. They realize that their only chance is for Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook to leap down the waterfall, leave Cora, Alice, and Duncan behind, and avoid a hopeless battle. As they prepare to part, Hawkeye and Cora’s passion for one another surfaces, and Hawkeye exhorts Cora as follows:

You stay alive. If they don’t kill you they’ll take you north up to Huron land. Submit, do you hear. Be strong. You survive. You stay alive no matter what occurs. I will find you. No matter how long it takes. No matter how far, I will find you.³

Following Eckert’s model of outlining oppositions in *Marked Woman*, I will now extract the essential oppositional pairs from this dialogue, based on Hawkeye’s directives to Cora on the left and their implied opposites on the right:

stay alive	:	become dead
submit	:	struggle
be strong	:	be weak
survive	:	perish

These pairs are transformations of a primary opposition, “survival : extinction,” that immediately suggests the myth of “savage war” as defined by Richard Slotkin:

The premise of “savage war” is that ineluctable political and social differences—rooted in some combination of “blood” and culture—make coexistence between primitive natives and civilized Europeans impossible on any basis other than that of subjugation. Native resistance to European settlement therefore takes the form of a fight for survival; and because of the “savage” and bloodthirsty propensity of the natives, such struggles inevitably become “wars of extermination” in which one side or the other attempts to destroy its enemy root and branch. (12)

Slotkin further argues that the myth of “savage war” lies at the heart of many American frontier narratives from the colonial era to the present day, including Cooper’s novel and most film Westerns. The film situates the waterfall romance dialogue in the context of racial survival or extinction: Hawkeye has just informed Cora that Magua killed her father when the Huron attacked the English, and Magua now pursues Cora and Alice in order to eliminate all of the Munros. The “savage war” dilemma of racial survival or extinction also reverberates throughout the rest of the film: the Mohicans are the last survivors of their race, and they perish with Uncas’ death; Hawkeye was orphaned but survived through Chingachgook’s adoption; in retaliation for the death of Magua’s children caused by Colonel Munro, Magua desires the death of “the grayhair” and his daughters so his bloodline is eliminated; Duncan urges a fight to the death with the French rather than surrender the fort; the English General Webb considers the French an inferior race; the Huron led by Magua massacre the defeated English; Magua became Mohawk in order to escape slavery; a marauding war party kills all of the Cameron family in their frontier cabin; and the colonial militia at Fort William Henry passionately argue for leave from the battle to defend their frontier homes and families.

As in Eckert’s analysis, however, one pair of oppositions seems incompatible with the others: “submit : struggle.” “Struggle” seems to better match “stay alive,” “be strong,” and “survive,” while “submit” seems to belong with “become dead,” “be weak,” and “perish.” Stereotyp-

ical gender roles partially explain the linking of submission and survival. Hawkeye directs Cora to assume the passive, enduring feminine role of the frontier captivity narrative that heavily influenced Cooper's novel, while the male characters often actively "struggle" in bloody combat. Nevertheless, even the hyper-masculine Hawkeye must "submit" at key points in the film. He allows the English to arrest him at Fort William Henry for encouraging sedition among the colonial militia. And most strikingly, Hawkeye passively endures being pushed, cut, and clubbed on the head as he enters the Huron village in order to negotiate for Cora and Alice's lives.

This important scene involves Magua and Hawkeye debating before an elder Sachem of the Huron who will decide the fate of Magua's prisoners—Cora, Alice, and Duncan. Magua declares that the Huron will become traders as powerful as the whites, and Hawkeye responds as follows:

Would the Huron make his Algonquin brothers foolish with brandy and steal his lands to sell them for gold to the white man? Would Huron have greed for more land than a man can use? Would Huron fool Senecans to take in all the furs of all the animals in the forest for beads and strong whiskey? Would the Huron kill every man, woman, and child of their enemy? Those are the ways of the Yangees and the Français traders and their masters in Europe infected with the sickness of greed. Magua's heart is twisted. He would make himself into what twisted him.

Edgerton observes that "this speech is obviously an indictment of the Euro-colonial tradition," but for the American Indian characters, "any degree of assimilation or accommodation is now defined by the film's hero as being tantamount to total corruption" (11). I agree with the indictment of colonialism, but I believe the notions of assimilation are slightly more complicated; after all, the heroic Mohicans trap for pelts to trade with the Dutch for silver. Using Eckert's method to analyze the oppositions in this dialogue, based on the potential actions in Magua's plan and their implied opposites, will best illustrate the complexity of assimilation:

make foolish :	make wise
steal/take :	give
have greed :	have generosity
fool :	inform/educate
kill all :	spare all

The items in the first column (“steal/take,” “have greed,” “kill all”) obviously relate to colonialism and the accompanying racial conflict of “savage war,” and the items in the second column relate to some anti-colonial ideal of interchange and convergence between cultures. The implied basic opposition, then, is “conflict : convergence,” or, including the implied racial context, “racial conflict : racial convergence.”

The key pairs are the very similar “make foolish : make wise” and “fool : inform/educate”; Hawkeye twice emphasizes a variation of “fool” in his indictment of Magua. The opposite “make wise” or “inform/educate” suggests an alternative to the physical conflict between Europeans and American Indians. Themes of education, dialogue, and discovery surface occasionally in the film: Chingachgook sent Uncas and Hawkeye to a white school as children so they could learn English and the culture of the Europeans; the three Mohicans often hunker down together to discuss their options; Cora speaks of her thrilling discovery of America and the wilderness; the colonials debate among themselves whether to join the English against the French; Hawkeye and the colonial militia hold council concerning whether to desert the fort or not; and Magua learned the ways of the Mohawk in order to survive and wants to learn and master the ways of the Europeans. The most important dialogic scene in the film is the debate between Magua and Hawkeye conducted before the Huron Sachem—I will closely examine this scene later in the essay.

To return to Eckert’s model, comparing the primary oppositions and key pairs from the waterfall romance scene and the Hawkeye and Magua debate scene yields:

submit	:	struggle
(racial) survival	:	(racial) extinction
(racial) convergence	:	(racial) conflict
inform/educate	:	fool

The seeming incongruity of “submit” with “survival” and “struggle” with extinction is now explained: *Mohicans* abandons “savage war” in favor of a more harmonious myth. In “savage war,” a racist myth from the white European perspective, racial “convergence” with Indians leads to “extinction” of whites. Only all-out war or “conflict” with Indians ensures the “survival” of whites and the “extinction” of the Indians. In the “savage war” model, “struggle” and “conflict” are inherent to both “survival” and “extinction”; the winners of the struggle or conflict survive, and the losers perish. *Mohicans*, in contrast with the outdated “savage war” model, denies the necessity of “conflict” and “struggle” in race relations. The film is fundamentally concerned with a modern mythic

version of race relations, one that places “convergence equals survival” against “conflict equals extinction.” To “struggle” with and to “fool” another race leads to “conflict” and mutual “extinction.” Conversely, to “submit” to and to “inform and educate” another race—to recognize the other race’s right to exist and to promote peaceful interaction and interchange between races—leads to “convergence” and mutual “survival.”

The film’s opposition of “convergence equals survival” against “conflict equals extinction” is a reflection of the current dominant ideology regarding race relations in the United States. Mainstream America views any violent conflict between races, whether it be white hate crimes or the Rodney King-inspired Los Angeles riots, as threatening and destructive to all involved. The alternative is a harmonious vision of a “cultural stew” where all races work together to overcome racist ignorance with tolerance, understanding, and education. While the ideal of a society without racism is a real goal that real people believe in and work towards in modern America, violent racial conflict is equally real. This real, immediate opposition surfaces in *Mohicans* as the “convergence equals survival” versus “conflict equals extinction.” The film, viewed as a popular myth, has a certain cultural sensitivity for current American ideological dilemmas regarding race, but the immediacy of these issues is weakened through displacement into the romantic and action plot lines of the film.

The romantic plot line functions as a displacement for “racial convergence.” Hawkeye, the adopted son of Chingachgook, is a displaced Mohican, in part, and Cora represents the English. Thus, the union between Hawkeye and Cora stands for the convergence of the Mohican and the English, or, metaphorically, American Indian culture and white Euro-American culture. Hawkeye’s “blood” is Caucasian, but he is clearly more aligned with the Mohicans than the Europeans—he acts as Uncas and Chingachgook do, speaks Munsee Delaware⁴ with them, and is similar to them in physical appearance and dress. Hawkeye also has strong links with the American colonials and interacts with them; Hawkeye himself is a condensed symbol of cultural convergence between American Indians and Euro-Americans due to his adoption by Chingachgook and education in a white school. The Hawkeye character suggests that the truly “American” race mixes Indians and whites, and “purely white” Europeans become the savage “Other” that causes racial conflict. The English and French in this film treat the American colonials and the American Indians equally badly.

While Hawkeye and Cora represent Indian and white convergence,

Magua represents divergence—the racial conflict. Munro’s colonizing actions have forced Magua, Huron by blood, into first becoming Mohawk and then desiring to adopt the colonizing methods of the Europeans. Having become as greedy and ruthless as the white European colonizers (“what twisted him”), Magua is a condensed symbol of cultural conflict between Indian Americans and white Europeans. Magua learns from the whites in order to better fight and remain separate from them; as Magua says to Duncan early in the film, “I understand the English very well.”

Hawkeye and Magua engage in a multicultural, multilingual debate before the Huron Sachem with the lives of Alice, Cora, and Duncan literally at stake—Magua wants to burn them as trophies of war. Mohican, Huron, Mohawk, French, English, and Euro-American cultures intersect in this debate: set in the Huron village, spoken in French and English, with Magua representing the Mohawk, Huron, and French, Hawkeye representing the Mohican and Euro-Americans, and Duncan, Alice, and Cora representing the English. As the Sachem and the Huron listen, Magua boasts how the Huron will become as powerful as the whites, and Hawkeye rebuts him by pointing out that Magua wishes to adopt the colonial methods of the Europeans. Referring to Magua’s plans, Hawkeye says, “Those are the ways of the Yangees and the Français traders and their masters in Europe infected with the sickness of greed.” The Sachem orders a compromise: Magua will wed Alice to heal his heart and preserve the Munro lineage, Duncan will be returned to the English as a goodwill gesture, and Cora will burn as compensation for Colonel Munro causing the death of Magua’s children. Vexed by the decision, Magua leaves angrily with Alice. Duncan saves Cora by trading his life for hers, and Hawkeye leaves with Cora.

The importance of this scene lies in its adherence to convergence instead of conflict. Multiple cultures interact without physical conflict, and settle their differences through dialogue. The Sachem carefully considers both arguments and mediates a compromise that does not award complete victory to one side or the other. Also, the compromise does its best to promote racial survival by proposing union between Magua and Alice so that both Magua’s and the Munro bloodlines are preserved. So although Hawkeye does not receive exactly what he requests, the “racial convergence” he represents triumphs over the “racial conflict” Magua espouses as Hawkeye escorts Cora safely away.

The displacement of “racial convergence” into Hawkeye and his love story with Cora accounts for scholarly censuring of the film. The film explicitly channels the “racial conflict” through Magua; his hatred for Colonel Munro and desire for revenge most obviously displays ungovern-

able racial conflict. Except for a short scene early in the film where Uncas, Chingachgook, and Hawkeye visit and peacefully interact with the Cameron family, any further indications of racial convergence are subsumed under Hawkeye's character and his romance with Cora. Since Hawkeye and Cora clearly denote white characters, and Hawkeye only indirectly connotes "American Indians," viewers may easily decide that the film lacks any indications of racial convergence. The Hawkeye/Cora relationship appears to be a typical white romance, and Magua's embodiment of racial conflict and the Mohicans' secondary status suggest that the film portrays American Indian characters as savage, secondary stereotypes.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, however, *The Last of the Mohicans* does contain a complex, though transformed and displaced, treatment of relations between American Indians and whites. How, then, do some audiences, like the American Indians who support the film, relate to and appreciate the progressive elements of the film's depiction of Native Americans? I have already provided some possibilities: the film explains and justifies, to an extent, Magua's actions; the historical detail for the props, settings, and costumes seems authentic; Magua, Uncas, and Chingachgook, though supporting characters, are intelligent, multilingual, and very capable.

Additionally, American Indian activist Russell Means plays Chingachgook. Means became nationally famous as a leader of the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. He is probably even more well known among audiences with a knowledge of American Indian history and issues; possibly, he functions as a "star" for such audiences—an immediately recognizable celebrity figure. Moreover, his casting in the film probably lends it a certain credibility for authentic portrayals of Indian characters (again, for audiences aware of American Indian history and issues). As one viewer of the film states in the Curtright article:

"Russell Means is such an activist that he can be a real problem if there's something he doesn't like. If he went along with this movie, then they did it right," said Jim Mendenhall, who is on the board of the Kansas Association for Native American Education. (Curtright 1C)

Because Means plays Chingachgook, his role in the film assumes much more importance for a viewer like Mendenhall than it does for most filmgoers. The "star power" of Means, his celebrity status among American Indian-oriented audiences, works to overcome the limitations of his supporting role, and such audiences will likely attach more

narrative and thematic weight to Chingachgook's actions than will mainstream audiences. Indeed, reactions to Chingachgook's role will vary widely among individuals regardless of what their social groups are, but I will cautiously assume that, in general, American Indian-oriented audiences have increased interest in and empathy for Chingachgook's character due to Means' presence.

Considering Russell Means as a major star for certain audiences suggests another interpretation of *Mohicans* as an American Indian-centered film. In this interpretation, Chingachgook dominates the beginning and end of the film, and his actions and dialogue produce a lasting impression on the viewer. In the first scene of the film, Chingachgook, Uncas, and Hawkeye work together to hunt and kill an elk. Hawkeye shoots the animal, but only Chingachgook speaks in the scene as they stand over the slain creature. In two close-up shots that are intercut with close-ups of Hawkeye and Uncas, Chingachgook speaks in Munsee Delaware that is translated in subtitles as, "We're sorry to kill you, Brother. We do honor to your courage and speed, your strength." This opening scene establishes Chingachgook as the elder and leader of Uncas and Hawkeye. Throughout the film, as Hawkeye becomes the central protagonist, these three characters still consult one another and fight together, and both Chingachgook and Uncas are narratively indispensable.

Chingachgook again becomes the prime agent of action in the climactic sequence of the film, after Hawkeye debates Magua in the Huron village. This approximately eight minute long sequence is intensely affecting. The sequence is silent except for one word of dialogue (Hawkeye's cry of "Uncas!") and various non-verbal sound effects (shrieks, thuds, etc.), but the crisp editing, painterly visual compositions, and emotionally stirring score enhance the impact of the life-or-death actions and emotions presented. Set upon a high mountain path amidst breathtaking scenery, the sequence resolves the conflict between Magua and the Mohicans and Munros in a burst of action. Magua and a group of Huron leave with Alice; Uncas, Chingachgook, Hawkeye, and Cora pursue. Uncas first reaches Magua, but Magua defeats him in hand-to-hand combat and shoves his body off a cliff. Alice then leaps off the cliff rather than remain with Magua.

Right before Magua kills Uncas, the viewer sees a close-up of Magua holding his knife to Uncas' throat. This sets up what I consider the most important shot of the film, a slow-motion shot that tracks forward into a close-up of Chingachgook as he moves towards the camera: the viewer sees Chingachgook scream as he helplessly recognizes his son is about to be killed—but his scream is silent, the only audio the viewer hears being

the relentlessly droning background music. Nathaniel soon follows up with an audible cry of “Uncas!” and Cora sobs aloud at her sister’s death, but Chingachgook remains unheard. With the death of his blood son, the Mohican tribe is dead, and Chingachgook’s voice as a Mohican literally disappears.

Chingachgook furiously chases Magua, killing Huron along the way with Hawkeye’s help. Finally he confronts Magua like Uncas did, but Chingachgook quickly disables Magua. As Chingachgook stares at the stunned and injured Magua, Chingachgook shakes his head with a conflicted look on his face, seemingly hating and pitying at the same time. He seems to realize that he, Uncas, and Magua are all trapped within the deathly structures of racial conflict, and he has no other option but to continue the extermination. He deals Magua the death blow, and the sequence concludes.

Chingachgook is the action hero of this climactic sequence, the Westerner who displays remarkable fighting ability in the service of blood vengeance. As the epilogue of the film reveals, however, this hero’s day is done. Surveying the landscape and looking into the sunset (like riding into the sunset in many Westerns), he says a funeral prayer for Uncas, much as he did over the elk at the start of the film. This time, however, he speaks in English, not Munsee Delaware:

Great Spirit and the maker of all life, a warrior goes to you swift and straight as an arrow shot into the sun. Welcome him and let him take his place at the council fire of my people. He is Uncas, my son, tell him to be patient and ask death for speed ... for they are all there but one, I, Chingachgook, the last of the Mohicans.

Conflict results in extinction. Magua’s insistence on “savage war” racial conflict results in his own death and the extinction of the Mohicans. Remembering that white colonialism and its influence on both whites and Indians are displaced onto Magua, the racial conflict of colonialism has eradicated American Indians, represented by the Mohicans, and destroyed itself as well.

The film’s finale certainly resonates with the damaging stereotype of the noble, and thus disappearing, savage—the American Indian only exists in history and has no place in a culture dominated by whites. But closely studying Chingachgook again implies an alternate reading: the stereotype of the noble, disappearing savage has become extinct. “Mohicans” seems to stand for “Indians before the white invasion,” or “noble savages,” and that image constructed by white culture will soon be

extinct. Chingachgook, however, survives, and he now speaks his prayer in English; he has made contact with white culture while retaining his Mohican. Also, Hawkeye stands beside him with Cora; as previously stated, Hawkeye represents American Indians and racial convergence with whites through his relationship with Cora. Chingachgook, though no longer purely “Mohican,” and Hawkeye exist as part of an interchange between Indians and whites. Magua and racial conflict have perished, but Hawkeye, Cora, Chingachgook, and racial convergence survive.

Additionally, reading Means’s closing speech meta-textually, in terms of “Russell Means” as much as “Chingachgook,” further indicates a movement towards convergence rather than extinction. The speech suggests Means’ real life roles as activist and entertainer. The move from conflict with Magua to wistfully speaking in English mirrors Means’ move from militant activist to cultural mediator, from fighting against white American culture to trying to educate white American culture about American Indian culture. In other words, Means himself has moved from “racial conflict” to “racial convergence,” as his own statements indicate. In an article by Jim Parsons, Means replies to Laura Wittstock’s comments that criticize Means for acting in Hollywood films:

Wittstock’s comments suggest an even deeper criticism of Means—that he has turned his back on the struggle to secure equality for Indians. “I haven’t abandoned the movement,” he said, “I’ve just taken it to Hollywood. The Great Mystery [or Great Spirit] has opened another door. The movies and television are a powerful way to reach a huge audience, and I intend to take advantage of that.” (Parsons 1E)

In his autobiography, Means further discusses his move to acting:

The movies offered me something else, too—a better way to get messages about my people to the world. Ours is a celebrity-driven society. . . . After my decades of devotion to my people, the Great Mystery had led me to a place where what I had to say would have more credibility than ever before. Just as important, the motion-picture industry has been instrumental in creating and reinforcing institutional racism about Indians. Working from within that tremendous venue of expression, I could become an agent for change. (517)

Instead of martial conflict with white culture, Means has decided to use his celebrity status to teach other races about American Indians through

the vastly influential media of film and television. The ideological work of *Mohicans* is done; attempts at racial convergence have finally superseded the traps of racial conflict. Gerald Vizenor calls Means “the postindian warrior of cinematic simulations” (21); while this is probably a back-handed compliment, it does describe Means’ role in *Mohicans* as he fights to change the portrayal of American Indians in film through the gradual modification of “cinematic simulations”—Hollywood stereotypes. Such modification necessitates American Indian convergence with the white culture that created the stereotypes; the danger in such a move is that white culture may “fool” Indian cultures by appropriating the many unique aspects of American Indians’ identities.

The only sure way to completely eliminate stereotypical portrayals of Indians in Hollywood films is for American Indians to have creative and economic control of Hollywood films that portray Indians. But until that moment arrives, the question remains whether or not working within the Hollywood system in order to gradually improve the depiction of American Indians is a worthwhile enterprise. Can a “postindian warrior” like Means successfully forge a convergence with the images of Indians constructed by whites, or do American Indians attempting such a convergence immediately enter into a savage conflict they cannot win, a conflict wherein any real “Indian” identity is lost through appropriation by white culture? I hope my analysis of *The Last of the Mohicans* begins to explain the dilemmas resulting from the manipulation and modification of Hollywood representations of Indians. Perhaps at some point in the future Hollywood will produce a truly progressive version of the story that emphasizes well-developed American Indian characters: maybe a frontier romance featuring Uncas and Cora, Hawkeye playing Tonto to Chingachgook’s Lone Ranger, and an even more sympathetic portrayal of Magua.

NOTES

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¹Because my essay examines the reception of *The Last of the Mohicans* after its 1992 release into theatres, I am using that version of the film, not the 1999 “Expanded Director’s Version” released on DVD.

²For an extensive list of the differences between the novel and the film, see Jeffrey Walker’s article.

³All film dialogue is transcribed directly from the film.

⁴Gary Edgerton's excellent analysis of the formal elements of the film identifies the Mohicans' spoken language as Munsee Delaware.

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Another Fine Example of the Oral Tradition? Identification and Subversion in Sherman Alexie's Smoke Signals

Jhon Warren Gilroy

"My heroes have always killed cowboys." –Slogan on T-shirt worn by Neil Young.

"Say, didn't I kill you twelve movies ago?" –John Wayne to an Indian actor.

"Sometimes, it's a good day to die. Sometimes, it's a good day to have breakfast." –Thomas Builds-the-Fire



59 ■ INT. BUS (PRESENT DAY)—DAY...

Thomas: Hey, what do you remember about your dad?

Victor ignores Thomas.

Thomas: I remember one time we had a fry bread eating contest and he ate fifteen pieces of fry bread. It was cool.

Victor sits up in his seat and looks at Thomas.

Victor: You know, Thomas? I don't know what you're talking about half the time. Why is that?

Thomas: I don't know.

Victor: I mean, you just go on and on talking about nothing. Why can't you have a normal conversation? You're always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I

mean, how many times have you seen *Dances With Wolves*? A hundred, two hundred times?

Embarrassed, Thomas ducks his head.

Victor: (con't)
Oh, jeez, you have seen it that many times, haven't you? Man. Do you think that shit is real? God. Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?

Thomas: (whispering)
I guess not.

Victor is disgusted.

Victor: Well, shit, no wonder. Jeez, I guess I'll have to teach you then, enit?

Thomas nods eagerly.

Victor: First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic.

Thomas tries to look serious. He fails.

Victor: No, like this.

Victor gets a very cool look on his face, serious, determined, warriorlike.

Victor: You got to look mean or people won't respect you. White people will run all over you if you don't look mean. You got to look like you just got back from killing a buffalo.

Thomas: But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen.

Victor: What? You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? It ain't *Dances With Salmon*, you know? Man, you think a fisherman is tough? Thomas, you got to look like a warrior.

Thomas gets stoic. He's better this time...

On the Road: Re-Paving the Powwow Highway

The above scene from *Smoke Signals* exemplifies the major thematic concerns and formal approaches that the film explores. In this scene, Sherman Alexie's personal favorite, we see evidenced the humor, social commentary, and the powerful relationship between filmic representation

and American Indian identity. Heavily promoted as the first feature film conceived, written, directed and co-produced by American Indians, the film subverts mainstream viewers' generic expectations through the use of classical film narrative techniques and humor. By creating a film steeped in classical Hollywood norms, yet rooted in an American Indian epistemology, the filmmakers have created a space that invites Euramerican viewers in and then uses humor as tool for incisive political commentary. The palliative effect of humor works to dissolve racist stereotypes even as it softens the blow of social commentary.

At its heart *Smoke Signals* is a typical road/buddy movie. Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph, the film's main characters, set out to recover the cremated remains of Victor's estranged, alcoholic father who had abandoned Victor and his mother ten years previously. Their trip from the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation to Phoenix, Arizona serves as the vehicle for a large number of inset narratives that are presented as both "recounted" and "enacted" flashbacks and stories (Bordwell 78).¹ The film plays off a viewer's familiarity with a form in which the ostensible goal of the journey drives the action of the plot; here, the retrieval of the father's remains, metaphorically the reclaiming of the estranged Father, is not necessarily read as the most important story. It is at the subtextual or philosophical narrative level there exists the potential for subversion of stereotypes, and mainstream viewers' implication in the fabula-making based upon them, becomes more noticeable. Here, the viewer finds herself not in the comfortable, well mapped-out confines of territory, but rather in a frontier space informed by the culture of an Other.

The simultaneous push/pull of a mainstream Euramerican audience's identification with the film's genre, juxtaposed against the alienation of a story and characters that arise from distinctly "Other" cultural backgrounds, creates what American Indian author/critic Louis Owens refers to in *Mixedblood Messages* as a "frontier" space. The creation of this frontier space is necessary if the film is to subvert successfully pejorative stereotypes of contemporary American Indians. Owens re-conceives "frontier" as a space that "is always unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, characterized by heteroglossia, and indeterminate" (26-7). This space where different cultures meet and collide stands in direct opposition to the "static and containable" territory: a space which merely waits to be emptied of its indigenous character and replaced with that which will be called "American." By replacing the film's underlying philosophical message with an American Indian cosmology, *Smoke Signals* creates a frontier environment—particularly for a mainstream Euramerican viewer—to build a bridge from which viewers can examine stereotypical

assumptions about American Indians.

The postcolonial implications of Alexie's screenplay's appropriation of the discourse of the privileged center lie in the film's re-possession of a format which Euramerican viewers read easily: that of the road/ buddy movie. Our familiarity with the perceptual schemata—the “organized clusters of knowledge [that] guide our hypothesis making”—that we bring to films rooted in classical Hollywood narrative modes, allows mainstream viewers access into the narrative (Bordwell 31). The film's indigenous epistemological origins then re-configure the meanings of classical Hollywood tropes, altering the outcomes of a viewer's attempts at fabula construction.² In her explication of the codes and conventions of mainstream American cinema, Susan Hayward proposes that, by its very nature, the “road movie implies discovery, obtaining some self-knowledge,” and that “the roadster is male and it is his point of view that we see” (49). By inviting the viewer into a narrative that on a surface level adheres to these classical norms, the film is then able to subvert a mainstream viewer's expectations in three ways: (1) by having that “roadster” male be American Indian; (2) by creating levels of narration that do not adhere to “his point of view”; and (3) by having the mainstream viewer “obtain some self-knowledge” through a character that is decidedly Other.

Cigar Store Indians: Subverting the Stereotypes

Perhaps the most easily recognized subversive effect of *Smoke Signals* is the film's success at countering racist, stereotypical images of American Indians—many of which have been engendered and perpetuated by the very medium in which this narrative appears. Instead of the “usual” tragic, two-dimensional, drunk and vanishing Indian, the narrative depicts fully developed characters living out a unique aspect of contemporary American existence: life on the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation. It is here that Alexie's efforts to subvert what he sees as the two most pernicious stereotypes—those of the warrior and the shaman—come most clearly into focus.³ At key moments, the film's narrative plays off these stereotypes by misdirecting the mainstream viewers' attempts to construct fabula that are based on their pre-conceptions of “Indians.” Through this misdirection, mainstream viewers, along with the protagonists, can “obtain some self-knowledge” regarding the stereotypical assumptions that guide their construction of the fabula.

The narrative creates this possibility by generating a recognizable gap between the viewer's prediction of what will occur and what actually happens in the syuzhet. As these predictions are based on cultural

misinformation (read: racist stereotypes), the pejorative nature of the schemata upon which viewers create their fabulas is highlighted along with the very act of fabula construction. The most poignant examples of this action occur at points in the narrative where the characters themselves fall victim to this same process: manifested here as internalized racism. Through this simultaneous action, both viewer and character implicated in erroneous fabula construction, the film creates identification and subversion for both an Indian and Euro-American audience.

This identification and subversion are most effectively demonstrated during a crucial scene that occurs near the end of the film. Having been accused of drunkenly assaulting a white man after an automobile accident that they happened upon, Victor and Thomas are questioned by an Arizona Police Chief. The scene is charged with animosity as Victor—in stoic “warrior” mode—responds in a hostile manner to the officer’s questions. Both the viewer and the characters no doubt expect the worst. Upon being accused of the drunken assault, Victor informs the Chief that he has never had a drink in his life. The officer is shocked by the response and asks them, “Just what kind of Indians are you exactly?”⁴ Victor replies that he is a Coeur d’Alene Indian and that Thomas is as well. Thomas chimes in “exactly.” The officer’s surprise at an Indian who doesn’t drink reflects the stereotypical trope of the drunken Indian. In this scene not only is this stereotype subverted, but the word play on “exactly” takes a colloquial form of speech—the “Chief” slurs Indian just enough to sound like “Injun”—and turns it into an opportunity for Victor and Thomas to define themselves through tribal affiliation. In addition to drawing attention to the communication gap between the two cultures, the tribal specificity further undercuts the two-dimensional conception of American Indians as one homogenous mass rather than a multitude of distinct cultures.

Tellingly, this is the only scene in the film where the loquacious Thomas appears speechless. When the Chief asks him if he has “anything to say about all these charges?” Thomas meekly mutters, “We was framed” (130). Despite the comic relief provided by his response—humor that draws upon the hackneyed cliché response of filmic hoods—Thomas’ inability to speak portrays the depth of fear he feels in a situation that he knows must end badly. After all, in the movies, strangers—especially minorities—never fair well in dealings with small-town law enforcement officials. One need not look much farther than the archetypal road movie, *Easy Rider* (Dir. Dennis Hopper, 1969), to see the tragic results of the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The scene, however, does not end as the characters and viewers

would expect. Instead of being unjustly incarcerated, or worse, Thomas and Victor are freed by the written testimony of the wife of the man who accused Victor of assault.⁵ Walking through the police impound yard to retrieve Victor's father's truck, Victor expresses his disbelief that they "got out of that hospital alive." Thomas ironically replies, "Yeah, I guess your warrior look does work sometimes" (130). Thomas' good-natured ribbing of Victor provides both social commentary on the stoic warrior stereotype and comic relief from the previous scene's heavy tone. The meta-narrative nature of Thomas and Victor's incredulous reaction to their release from custody poignantly demonstrates the internalized racist assumptions of the two indigenous protagonists. Ultimately, Thomas and Victor seem to be unaware of the source of their preconceived notions of interactions between minorities and authorities, despite the fact that in an earlier scene Thomas informs Victor and Suzy, "the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV." Victor evidences this internalized racist self-image most fully in his adoption of the antagonistic warrior role. Goaded on by the assumption that all must end poorly for him as the doomed, tragic figure, he is prepared to fight, even in a situation where resistance is futile.

By mirroring and commenting on the fabula construction process, and its dependence on stereotypical tropes and assumptions, this scene demonstrates the simultaneous push/pull relationship that is created by mainstream Euro-American viewers' identification with the narrative. The viewers, along with the characters, are not only implicated by predicting an outcome based on pre-conceptions, but their subject position is also mirrored in the experience of the Other, who is the victim of the same schemata. The empathetic relationship created by the realization that the characters have fallen victim to the same misguided conceptions—albeit in a much more insidious fashion—is essential to viewers' recognition of the power of stereotypes. From the position of the viewers, this leads to the possibility of an awareness of their own preconceptions, ideas based largely on previous filmic representations of Indians; for the characters, it displays the depth of the medium's potential for enculturation and the internalization of racist self-images.

Stealthy Structures: Classical Territories and the Filmic Frontier

The success of the identification and subversion in the previous scene lies in its accessibility to an audience steeped in the norms of classical Hollywood film. These norms in turn rely on a narrative style that attempts to be as transparent as possible. Through the palliative effect of humor, and by cloaking the subtextual political commentary of the scene

in a familiar filmic situation (such as the aforementioned scene of the outsider meets the small-town cop), the film presents an approachable and deceptively simple surface narrative. Alas, the apparent surface simplicity of *Smoke Signals* belies its complexity and depth. The collision of this simple surface with the complicated subtextual information drives the divergent mainstream reviewers' commentaries on the film. Running from flat-out racist to shallow, yet culturally sensitive, both the range and volume of mainstream reviewers' reactions are no doubt a testament to the film's groundbreaking accessibility as an American Indian cinematic endeavor.

As mentioned above, the film's appeal to a mainstream Euramerican audience rests largely on the use of easily recognized narrative techniques that include Bordwell's classical narration norms such as the use of psychologically defined characters as causal agencies, clear-cut problems or goals, continuity editing, and arguably a structurally decisive ending. The choice to make a buddy/road movie was no doubt a shrewd move on behalf of Alexie and Eyre, particularly for the level of accessibility this type of film offers to both mainstream Euramerican and Indian audiences. It could be argued that the estrangement created by the use of a more radically divergent narrative technique, coupled with cultural Otherness of an American Indian epistemology, would most likely defeat any substantial potential for large-scale appeal.⁶

Developing large-scale appeal has pragmatic as well as political import. First, as a freshman effort for both the screenwriter and director, the financial and critical success of the film is crucial to insure hope for future projects. The importance of "success" for two individual careers is magnified by the fact that they are ultimately bound up in the role of spokesperson for their cultures whether they accept the mantle or not; simply promoting the film as a "first" for American Indians would seem to validate this assumption. Alexie is very open about his self-conception as a "populist" artist. Speaking about the success of the film, he has publicly adopted some of the responsibility of an American Indian role model, albeit begrudgingly. Aware of the much wider audience appeal—particularly in the American Indian community—of film over books, Alexie has commented on the film as a text that gives permission to young American Indian artists to take these ideas even further. This film represents a radical departure for indigenous actors, screenwriters, and filmmakers through its appropriation and manipulation of the very medium that has done so much to create our false impressions of American Indian cultures. We can begin to imagine the further import of Alexie's desire to subvert stereotypes by approaching the film with

sensitivity to the pervasive nature of these false impressions. Accessibility to both the Euro-American and American Indian audiences is essential if these stereotypes are to be undermined. A viewer need look no further than Victor in order to see the effects of internalized racism. For a Euramerican viewer this is consciousness-raising; to a young Indian viewer, it is fundamental commentary on the process of identity building in a hostile culture. In this light, the author sees the film as truly groundbreaking and feels a sense of responsibility to use his clout as a writer to advance the cause of self-representation.⁷

Secondly, touted as the “first feature film conceived, written, directed and co-produced by American Indians,” the film shoulders the burden of demonstrating the economic feasibility of American-Indian produced mainstream cinema.⁸ While some of Hollywood’s portrayals of American Indians have become more empathetic, there is indeed a dearth of films actually made by Indians about Indians.⁹ In a recent conversation, Alexie bemoaned the difficulty of having “white men tell [him] how to write about Indians.” One need look no further than the nearly dozen rejected re-writes of the screenplay for his novel *Reservation Blues* to see this in action.¹⁰ While previous films such as *Powwow Highway*—a wildly successful picture on the rez according to Alexie—have gone some ways towards creating less stereotypical Indian characters, their limited success in Hollywood’s terms has kept them relegated to the status of novelties. Other more subversive “underground” productions such as Victor Masayesva Jr.’s *Imagining Indians* (1992) and Gerald Vizenor’s *Harold of Orange* (1984) simply do not have the marketability necessary to perform much cultural work outside an academic setting.¹¹

Although the issues of the means of production may seem secondary to an analysis of the film, the influence of these economic/practical concerns of accessibility, given the film’s position within the discourse of mainstream Hollywood cinema, should not be ignored. Suffice it to say that for the terms of this essay, the success of *Smoke Signals* has indeed cracked open a door. It remains to be fully examined as to how well the film negotiates the difficult spaces between entertaining and educating, and breaking ground and selling out. In addition, time alone will tell if the film is another curiosity or the beginning of a new era of self-representation for American Indians in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

While the choice of the buddy/road film arose partly out of practical concerns, there are other aspects of the genre that lend themselves particularly well to the subversive nature of *Smoke Signals*. Perhaps the most important of these is the dialogue-driven nature of the buddy/road movie. The focus on dialogue underscores the fact that this genre does not

rely on the usual suspense regarding the ostensible goal of the narrative. Put simply, much like a “talking heads” film, the buddy/road movie is not plot driven by the viewer’s need to solve a mystery or project the outcome of the film. Instead, since we know the most probable outcome of the film—an outcome that is not subverted as the “goal” is achieved, the father’s ashes are reclaimed—the viewers’ and characters’ attention is focused on the way in which the story is told. This refocusing of attention highlights the subtle underlying messages that are being conveyed.¹² In this way, for a mainstream Euramerican viewer, the traditional tension as the narrative unfolds is replaced by awareness of the Otherness of the philosophical underpinnings of the film. In a very clever appropriation of the dominant discourse, the film creates a system of schemata that alerts the viewer to look beyond the surface level of the narrative for deeper philosophical meanings. It is at this subtextual level—a level the viewer is expected to recognize as a feature of the genre itself—that the film functions most subversively.

By simultaneously creating identification for both a Native and Euramerican audience through the common ground of classical film narration, *Smoke Signals* creates a frontier space wherein lies the potential to further interrogate stereotypical depictions of American Indians. To understand more fully just how this space is created, it is necessary to detail how the film departs from the classical Hollywood buddy/road movie tropes in its efforts to subvert these stereotypes.

The first, and most obvious, departure is the use of American Indians as subjects and stars. Simply replacing the white male protagonist is a subversive act. Late in the film, when Thomas is told by one of the accident victims that he and Victor are heroes like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, he replies, “No we’re more like Tonto and Tonto.” The subversive undercurrent of this scene’s humorous content is further punctuated by the fact that this anecdote was used to conclude the film’s theatrical trailer. The use of non-traditional characters in stereotypically white male roles has the effect of holding a mirror up to the form itself; the viewer is made aware of the film as an act of representation through the incongruous nature of another subject occupying the space traditionally filled by white males.¹³ The traditional subject position of the buddy movie protagonist is further undermined by the lack of attention to a strong heterosexual theme. It is typical of the genre to include a female love interest—which is absent here—which leaves no question as to the relationship between the “buddies.” While it can, and should, be argued that women play minor roles in this film—a criticism to which Alexie both bows and contests—they do not serve the usual role of alleviating any ambiguity as to the

heterosexual status of the male leads.¹⁴ While the female characters in *Smoke Signals* no doubt contribute important aspects to the narrative, their role is ultimately subordinated to the simultaneously overarching and underlying theme of the relationships between fathers and sons.

Beyond simply replacing white characters with American Indians, the film gives us a wide array of fully developed, non-stereotypical characters. As Alexie states repeatedly in the scene notes at the end of the screenplay: "NOTE TO ALL OTHER FILMMAKERS: Cast Indians as Indians, because you'll get better performances" (158). The characters portrayed defy the stereotypical roles we have come to expect through our inculcation by traditional Hollywood portrayals of American Indians. Instead of pounding on drums and wailing, they listen to contemporary rock and roll music. Drinking the "real thing," Coca-Cola, replaces the firewater-swilling drunken Indian. And lest we forget this is a work by Sherman Alexie, they play basketball. The apparent quirkiness of the residents of the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation—e.g. Lester's traffic reports, or Velma and Lucy's backwards driving car—lies in the Otherness of reservation life to a Euramerican viewer. In fact, in my conversation with him, Alexie described the scenes with Velma and Lucy as the "rez-iest" performance ever captured on film. The characters' portrayal as unique individuals, as opposed to static stereotypes, challenges mainstream notions of "Indianness." Life on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation is depicted as dynamic and life affirming: an impression that is further supported by the cinematography's sweeping depiction of the beautiful landscape that the characters inhabit. The narrative simultaneously insists not only the differences inherent in the cultures, but also the radical differences between the actuality of contemporary American Indian life and the stereotypical pictures a non-Native viewer might hold in their minds.¹⁵

This insistence on difference leads to the final subversion of classical buddy movie narrational norms. In both form and content, the mainstream viewer enters the narrative in a confused place. We are in an Indian space, Owens' frontier. The mainstream viewer's status as outsider is quickly affirmed by the opening voiceover narration that uncovers the central event of the story: the death of Thomas' parents. The viewer's confusion at the beginning of the film is further highlighted by an awareness that while Thomas is providing the voiceover narration, the visual imagery is not necessarily from his point of view. The film subtly switches from a "recounted" narrative level that we may perceive as a psychologically motivated imaginative flashback, to a narrative level that "enacts" this imagined flashback (Bordwell 78). The blurry boundary of the scene's

origin of focalization contributes to the viewer's curiosity regarding the nature of Thomas and his knowledge of the stories of the fire.¹⁶ Thomas' voiceover narration serves not only an expository function—giving crucial background information surrounding the death of his parents—but also articulates the cultural necessity of “knowing the stories.” As we see throughout the film, it is Thomas' knowledge of the stories—even in the absence of his parents—that keeps him centered. This opening confusion and disorientation sets the pattern for flashback narratives throughout the film that will become increasingly sophisticated, and they are the necessary keys to understanding the deeper narrative subtexts of the film.

Dances With Salmon: Comic Relief and Social Commentary

Throughout the narrative, Thomas' well-grounded nature—based on his knowledge of and relationship to “the stories” that he discusses at the very beginning of the film—aligns him closely with the frontier space represented by the film's culturally informed subtexts. Though not immune to the dominant culture's influence on his self-image as an American Indian, Thomas exists much more easily in the “unstable, multidirectional, hybridized . . . and indeterminate” than Victor. The complexity of Thomas' character shows through in his simultaneously naïve yet wise personality. In my interview with actor Evan Adams, he refers to Thomas as “an old Indian woman trapped in a young man's body.” Thomas is represented throughout the film as a peaceful, centered individual who, though lacking a father and mother, fulfills his role in the community rather than being spiteful and jaded like Victor. This is most strongly demonstrated by the caretaker role he plays for his grandmother. His self-awareness of his value to the community is made clear in a scene where he finally stands up to Victor for the first time:

Thomas: ... You've been moping around the reservation for ten years. Ten years, Victor! Doing what? Playing basketball all day. Telling jokes. You ain't got no job. You ain't got no money. You ain't got nothing.

Victor: And what do you got, you goddamn geek? You ain't got no friends. You ain't got nothing either. What do you do all day long? Huh, Thomas huh?

Thomas: I take care of my grandma.

Victor: And I take care of my mom.

Thomas: You make your mom cry.

Victor: Shut up, Thomas!

Thomas: You make your mom cry. You make her cry her eyes out, Victor. I mean, your dad left her, sure. Yeah, he ran away. But you left her, too. And you're worse because you've lived in the same house with her for ten years, but you ain't really lived there. When your dad left, he took part of you with him. And you let him, too. You let him. (109-10)

By finally standing up to Victor, Thomas is able to clearly articulate his understanding of the difference between himself and his antagonistic friend. Unlike Victor, Thomas finds solace in the stories that he tells and is not overly concerned with the "Truth" as it relates to the facts. Rather, he seeks to preserve and create a meaningful existence through his stories as a way to deal with the hardships of reservation life in general and his tragic past in particular. While Thomas does very much appear to be in touch with a mystical, quasi-mythic understanding of his life and the lives of those around him, he stops far short of being the stereotypical "shaman" figure. He does not have visions or burn sage or recite any Indian wisdom based on knowledge of the old ways or ancient ones. Instead, he is a storyteller: a young man with a unique and creative perspective on the difficult world in which he lives.

Throughout the narrative, the viewers listen to Thomas' stories and for the most part find they occupy a similar position to that of Victor. Victor has "heard the stories a thousand times" and still doesn't know "what the hell Thomas is saying most of the time," repeatedly telling Thomas that "he is so full of shit." From a modernist perspective Victor might easily be seen as the alienated, questing protagonist separated from his self, family, and culture. However, this generalized characterization is complicated by the cultural specificity of his internalized racist assumptions of what it means to be a "real Indian." In one of the film's most humorous and poignantly revealing scenes—the scene with which this essay opens—Victor instructs Thomas on just what it means to be a "real Indian." Chastising Thomas for his dorky three-piece suit and glasses, and belittling him for watching *Dances with Wolves* too many times, Victor tells Thomas that he must "get stoic" because "White people will run all over you if you don't look mean" (62). Victor is blind to his own hypocrisy as he condemns Thomas for participating in the process of self-identification through film, despite the fact that Thomas clearly displays his understanding of his own cultural heritage as a tribe of fisherpeople rather than the stoic buffalo-hunting warriors Victor seeks

to emulate. Victor fails to recognize his own conception of the “real Indian” as the stoic warrior: a stereotype heavily informed by the movies and literature that Victor has no doubt been exposed to growing up in eighties America. Ironically, Victor clings to a stereotype that seems to be a mirror image of the John Wayne school of machismo: the emotionless, strong-willed outsider, the perfect protagonist of the buddy/road movie genre.

The lighthearted mood of Victor’s sermon on being a “real Indian”—punctuated by the use of humor—is quickly followed by the film’s most blatantly racist scene. Having lost their seats on the bus to a couple of stereotypical rednecks, Victor is compelled to take a stand. When he insists that the cowboys are sitting in their seats the “huge” man replies:

Cowboy #1: (*quietly and threatening*)

These are our seats now. And there’s not a damn thing you can do about it. So why don’t you and Super Indian there find yourself someplace else to have a powwow, okay? (65)

After losing a stare-down with the cowboy, Victor grabs Thomas and they find a place in the very back row of the bus, on the bench seat near the bathroom. A perceptive viewer cannot overlook the historical significance of the “back of the bus.” In a heavily ironic line Thomas remarks “Jeez, Victor, I guess your warrior look doesn’t work every time” (65). Thomas utters this line in a surprised manner; there is no sense that he is taunting Victor. He appears genuinely surprised by the result of the altercation and the lack of effect of Victor’s warrior look. But his innocence is complicated when he turns the conversation to point out that the Indians never win in these situations. At this point in the scene the heavy tone is once again broken with humor:

Thomas: Man, the cowboys always win, enit?

Victor: The cowboys don’t always win.

Thomas: The cowboys *always* win. Look at Tom Mix. Look at Roy Rogers. Look at Clint Eastwood. And what about John Wayne? Man, he was about the toughest cowboy of them all, enit?

Victor: You know, in all those movies, you never saw John Wayne’s teeth. Not once. I think there’s something wrong when you don’t see a guy’s teeth.

(*breaks into song while pounding a powwow rhythm on the*

seat)

Oh, John Wayne's teeth, John Wayne's teeth, hey,
hey, hey, hey, ye! Oh, John Wayne's teeth, John
Wayne's teeth, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, ye! Are
they false, are they real? Are they plastic, are they
steel? Hey, hey, hey, hey, yeeeeee!

(*Thomas joins in the song*) (66)

While the song obviously provides some comic relief to lighten the tone at the end of such a powerful scene, it is equally apparent that all of the white people on the bus are unnerved by Victor and Thomas's culture-blurring behavior. Victor and Thomas do, in a sense, get the last word. They may have lost their seats, but not their dignity. This scene is an excellent example of the interplay and balance created by Alexie's use of humor to provide comic relief at the same time it bears the burden of social and historical comment. One need only scratch the surface of these jokes lightly to reveal the heavy political commentary that lies beneath.

The Whole Truth: And Nothing But the Truth

When we dig beneath the surface narratives of the buddy/road movie and the philosophical subtext of a young man attempting to recover the memory of his estranged father, we begin to see *Smoke Signals* as a meditation on the nature of "truth" and "lies." While this topic is by no means unique to American Indian literatures, it takes on a particular significance when placed in this specific cultural context. Understanding Thomas' conception of the truth of stories is essential if we are to recognize his ability to find peace in his life despite being tragically orphaned as an infant. Throughout the film characters constantly interrogate the truth of Thomas' stories. After relating the Vietnam protest story where Victor's father supposedly pummels a National Guard Soldier, Velma and Lucy are duly impressed and ask Victor if his father really did that. Victor's response is that Thomas is "full of shit." Suzy Song, as well, repeatedly asks, "Is that true?" when Thomas relates stories about Victor's mother and her incredible fry bread. It is after relating the story of Arlene Joseph's "Jesus fry bread" that Thomas tellingly demands that Suzy now owes him a story. When she asks him do "You want me to tell the truth? Or do you want lies?" Thomas responds that he wants both (77).

This scene is the most self-conscious point in the narrative regarding the question of "truth" and "lies." Perhaps, if the mainstream viewer is

able to recognize the radical, from a Western view, perception of the relationship between truth and lies that Thomas' epistemology represents, this might be seen as the most subversive element of the entire film. By challenging the traditional Western binary of truth and fiction, this may well be the closest approximation of the Other view—to borrow again from Owens—that the viewer receives from the narrative. Arguably, this is the point at which the viewer moves beyond Victor's limited perception of events and his father, and begins to understand the larger philosophical messages of the film that are yet to be revealed to our "alienated protagonist."

In stark contrast to Thomas, Victor never tells anyone his stories, even though Thomas constantly assails him to tell him about his dad. He is reluctant to speak of his past, yet is trapped by his memories of the tumultuous years he spent with his father. The viewer, unlike any of the intra-diegetic narratees, is privileged to Victor's stories as they are all related through psychologically-motivated interior flashbacks. This inside knowledge has a double-edged effect on the viewer. While it enhances our identification with Victor as a main character and gives us crucial backstory information on his relationship with his father, it further distances the viewer from the subtext of the movie, or Thomas's version of the Truth, until the crucial scene described above. Although the lion's share of the narrative is not related from Victor's subjectivity, viewers most closely occupy a parallel position to him with respect to their understanding of the stories as they unfold through Thomas. For example, when mainstream viewers first witness the scene on the bus in which Victor instructs Thomas on how to be a "real Indian," they laugh along with Victor at Thomas' expense. Victor models the internalized version of the stereotypes that mainstream American culture tells itself about what a "real Indian" is. A "real Indian" is certainly not like Thomas Builds-the-Fire, but is instead much more like Victor's conception of himself as the stoic warrior—ultimately just as erroneous of a stereotype as the "damn medicine man" that Victor thinks Thomas is trying to be. It is not until later, when Suzy Song reveals Victor's father's guilt over causing the fire that killed Thomas' parents, that viewers realize the full extent to which Victor is a victim at the hands of the stories he has chosen to believe about himself. Victor's inability to see beyond his own internalized stereotypical perceptions of Thomas, himself, and his father keeps him from seeing the greater truths in Thomas' stories. Through the viewers' identification with Victor, the movie holds a mirror up to a mainstream audience that might harbor similarly jaundiced views of American Indian cultures.

It is not until the climatic scene of the movie—in which Victor experiences a “vision” of sorts—that he is able to recognize the importance of Thomas’ stories. In an effort to get help for the victims of an automobile accident, Victor sets off running in the rural Arizona desert night. As he runs, we are assailed with a montage of images and voice-overs that would appear to be psychologically motivated yet include information to which Victor could never have actually been privy. The voices of Suzy Song and Victor’s father are juxtaposed with images of the house fire that killed Thomas’ parents. Exhausted from running, and spiritually tormented, Victor finally collapses. He literally “sees” his father through Thomas’ eyes when he awakes on the side of the road. A point of view shot as Victor reaches for the hand that offers him assistance reveals the smiling face of his father. This is *exactly* the same shot from a previous flashback focalized by Thomas in which he recalls the day he went to Spokane “waiting for a sign” and ran into Victor’s father. While this particular scene is lighthearted and quite humorous when it first appears in the narrative, in hindsight it takes on greater significance. When Thomas relates this story, Victor tells him “I’ve heard this story a thousand times” (52), but he obviously never truly listened. His obsession with the “Truth” as he conceived of it always blinded him to the other possible truths contained within Thomas’ stories.

The moment at which Victor has the vision of his father on the side of the road is very brief, but it signals his movement into Thomas’ level of understanding of the stories. The fact that the image/vision Victor sees is literally the same image that Thomas “sees” earlier cements the connection between Victor and Thomas. Victor has now internalized Thomas’ stories and has made them his own. He literally sees his father through Thomas’ eyes: the eyes of a character who venerates Arnold Joseph throughout the film. Victor’s crucial moment of identification with Thomas’ stories echoes metonymically the film’s place in the larger culture. The current focus on issues of self-representation within the scholarly debates surrounding American Indian literatures situates *Smoke Signals* at and as a historically crucial moment. This moment perhaps defines the kernel of an American Indian canon of film, perhaps the next logical step to proceed from the arguably “established” American Indian literary canon. This type of self-representation is essential if audiences—both Indian and Euro-American—are to be exposed to depictions of contemporary American Indian life that do not re-inscribe pejorative stereotypical images. In this way *Smoke Signals* indeed signals the paradigm shift that Alexie sees as necessary for opening a new era of filmic self-representation.

150 ■ EXT. BUILDS-THE-FIRES' HOUSE — MORNING

Grandma Builds-the-Fire sitting on the porch of the house.

She is happy to see her grandson.

She stands from her chair, walks up to him, and takes him in her arms.

She holds him at arm's length.

Grandma: Tell me what happened, Thomas. Tell me what's going to happen...

NOTES

¹The film is based on Alexie's collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. While the bulk of the story line comes directly from a piece entitled "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," the film incorporates elements from a number of stories in the collection, contributing to its pastiche origin.

²Bordwell discusses at length a constructivist approach "for a Psychology of Filmic Perception and Cognition" (30-33). Bordwell's discussion of the viewer's use of perceptual schemata echoes the work of Umberto Eco. Eco explicates how the viewer constantly re-evaluates the fabula that s/he constructs in light of the new information we are given by the syuzhet. My argument is that the subversive effects of this film rest on balancing a mainstream viewer's identification with the film through classical cinematic form, with humorous political commentary and an Other worldview.

³The author has been quoted in numerous interviews regarding his intentions with this film (see: Clark, Peary, Webster, West, Winton). While typically discussions about authorial intention are sticky at best, for the purposes of this discussion Alexie's very public persona serves as a viable benchmark for an analysis of the film and its effects on an audience.

⁴All citations from the movie that vary from the screenplay will be cited without page numbers, thus identifying this variance. Where the dialogue from the film matches the written screenplay page numbers will be given.

⁵This scene can be read as a response to the more conspiracy-laden theme of *Powwow Highway*. In that film the predictable always happens, but we have a conspiracy of B.I.A. and local law enforcement officials to blame. This justifies

the outlaw behavior of the protagonist. In fact, it would be quite interesting to do a side-by-side analysis of the two films to examine how *Smoke Signals* responds to the issues raised by *Powwow Highway*.

⁶It is interesting to note that Alexie intends to film *Reservation Blues* as a very jumbled, postmodern film. One could speculate that this might have something to do with his difficulty getting the movie produced. (Personal conversation with Alexie 30 May 2000).

⁷In May of 2000, Alexie discussed his deeply-felt responsibilities to younger American Indians in a talk given on his *The Toughest Indian in the World* book tour stop in Bellingham, Washington.

⁸In a 1997 interview for *SAIL* with John Purdy, Alexie discusses what he then saw as a three-year window for Indian filmmakers to make a statement. In my recent discussion with the author, he said it has, unfortunately, come and gone.

⁹For a close examination of the danger of the feel-good, empathetic Hollywood film—quintessentially represented by *Dances With Wolves*—see Louis Owens' *Mixedblood Messages*, particularly the chapter entitled "Apocalypse at the Two Socks Hop."

¹⁰In my conversations with both Alexie and Adams the difficulty of getting the "green light" for future projects was a sore subject indeed.

¹¹I would certainly not argue that either of these films was made with mass marketability in mind, but merely mention them to demonstrate the limited exposure that films by American Indian filmmakers have received. For an in-depth discussion of American Indian representation in film, as well as a more exhaustive look at American Indian-produced films, see Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*.

¹²It would be interesting to compare this notion of "knowing the story" to Louis Owens' treatment of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. In his book *Other Destinies*, Owens discusses how the novel is formally couched in the terms of an oral discourse. One of the fundamental features of that oral discourse is that we know the whole story before we begin. Just as in all mythic or parabolic stories we know the eventual end of the tale, so we become more attentive to the way in which the story is being told.

¹³Part of Alexie's controversial defense of the lack of strong female roles in the film is evidenced by his statements that the American Indian women have not had their roles displaced in the same manner in which the men have. Both *Thelma and Louise* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 1991) and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Dir. Stephan Elliott, 1994) are excellent examples of other subversions of these particular generic expectations.

¹⁴Alexie's statement, that the American Indian women have not had their roles displaced in the same manner in which the men have, reveals his controversial defense of the lack of strong female roles in the film. This is a fruitful area for exploration, but not for this essay. In terms of the film these notions are complicated by Alexie's desire to have Suzy Song be a "magical" character,

although her magical nature does not come through in the film due to the large share of her scenes that ended up on the cutting room floor. While Alexie admits that Suzy's tribal affiliation is elided, in the screenplay he makes it clear that this was a result of editing. This elision is further downplayed in the scene where she says she misses home, and that home is New York. This is another strong example of our mistaken fabula-creation based on stereotypical notions. The pregnant pause that comes before she reveals that home is New York leads the viewer to think she will mention some reservation.

¹⁵Again, it is interesting to compare the depiction of the reservation in *Smoke Signals* to the abject poverty depicted in *Powwow Highway*.

¹⁶See Rimmon-Kenan for a full discussion of the concept of focalization and narration.

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A Conversation with Evan Adams 6/1/00

Jhon Warren Gilroy

*The following interview stems from a conversation with actor/writer Evan Adams (Coast Salish, Sliammon Band) over breakfast (not at Denny's) the morning after he spoke at Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, Washington. Though Adams is currently immersed in his fourth year of medical school at the University of Calgary, he came to town to discuss both his portrayal of Thomas Builds-the-Fire in the film *Smoke Signals* and his connection to Whatcom's book of the year, Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. During both his speech and this interview, Adams chatted animatedly about his experience with *Smoke Signals* and Alexie; about stereotypes, fantasies, and film as a mode of self-representation.*

We join a conversation already in progress over breakfast at the hotel. We began our discussion with me mentioning an article I was writing about Alexie's use of humor.

JG: In the talk you gave yesterday at Whatcom Community College I got the sense you see humor as both a way to bear witness and as a survival tool. You talked about humor as a way of creating empathy and that the humor of *Smoke Signals* serves as a way to create common ground. In a sense it is a place where more people can understand, or the dominant culture can understand, what is going on because they understand the vehicle, yet at the same time it's turning a mirror on the dominant culture.

EA: Yes, for sure, and that's the nice thing for a Native audience is that they get reflected back. Because he [Alexie] makes a conscious effort to say, "Hey, what do white people think of us? And here's what we think of you." I don't think as many people would go to see it if it didn't do that, if it was a little too self-reflective. But with humor, because Indians are so funny, I really do think it's a survival tactic. I think the drinking, the pursuit of pleasure, is all about survival tactics. Because life is so hard, you go for what could possibly be fun. And I think, of course, what people discover is that, "Hey great alcohol is really fun" for a while, but then it turns into something else really quickly and they get stuck there. It also becomes a kind of medication, a way of stopping the pain as opposed to a way of making fun, of having fun.

So with Sherman, Sherman has some kind of wider vision. He's got the eagle's vision, and I have the little mouse's vision. But I know my little cubby hole really well, and I like to write down the way that the common Indian is really funny. Like when I'm sitting with my family and the way they turn things and laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh. I know that that is what the old-time Indians would do, cooped up in their homes in the middle of winter. They could turn humor off and on. Another word to describe it is teasing; it is a sign of affection. It's a way of saying to somebody "get over yourself." That's a basic tenement amongst Indian people is "get over yourself"; there's more important things. You know the world is out here [*makes sweeping gesture*] and it's very demanding so get out of *here* [*points to his head*] you know and put it out there and open this [*points to his chest*] so we can see inside. That's a very human thing to do. I think the isolation we feel today, when there are so many of us in Western society, is abnormal and one of the ways in is to tease and to say "get over yourself" and open your heart, and open your eyes, so we can see in and we can all share because we all have a commonality of experience. We have all raised children. We've all been really lousy at something or other. We've all been disappointed. We've all been hurt and maimed. We're all good at something and bad at something, so we tease each other.

It's a lovely, lovely thing to be around Indians and you go, "they all know who I am." I am at my like most naked here. They don't avert their eyes even though we're very communal, and I mean communal and not communist. We're all equal. We all participate. We all share, so there's a warmth there. I always describe our society as being warm and complex. It's very warm; it tries not to be detached. It tries not to be cynical—in the face of everything, in the face of especially the last hundred years of great deprivation and weirdness. So anyway, Sherman's humor has an edge,

and it's familiar to non-native readers. It feels dry; it feels smart. For me, Indian humor is that, but it is also something else. It is something that is not political, that is purely emotional: support.

JG: I don't even think that it's a fine line [*laughter*] that he treads, but he walks a tightrope, to start mixing metaphors, really well. It's really obvious when you hear him talk. It was interesting talking with him and hearing how much his writing and his sense of humor and the timing of that is informed by these live talks he gives. I wonder how that plays into what you are doing.

EA: Yeah, it's funny isn't it? The fact that he is a writer who kind of acts on the side, and I'm an actor who writes on the side. I'm certainly not known for writing, and he's certainly not known for his performance, though he is a little bit and I am a little bit. I think that's why we love each other so much and why we like each other's work and we want to work together all the time. I understood the importance of his writing as an actor; whereas, most actors just, just see "Oh, he's powerful; he has money. He can produce work and I want to be part of it." Instead, I read his work and I *know* what he's doing; I *know* where he's coming from. I'd like to do this. And ditto. He likes the fact that I'm a smart writer; he knows how to inform my performance with what he's doing. And I think when Indians watch him, watch his work, they go "he's so smart." You know he cuts through, and he lays it bare. I think with people when they watch me, and I don't have very much of perspective on it, I think they feel...they *feel*. They just feel. I try and be very caring with my work. I'm trying not to instruct; I'm trying to touch. I guess that's it.

JG: I was really struck by the distinction that you made yesterday between writing to teach a lesson, and then you corrected yourself and said that you write to remind. I think that that is a really critical distinction to make. That the lessons have been there and there is something to be learned from that. In Western culture, we don't typically respect our elders, and we don't really pay attention to the past. We are so youth-obsessed and goal-orientated, which has been part of the problem since white people hit the shore: this whole "Go Westward" notion, and believing that you can re-invent yourself as if you are brand new . . . but at what cost?

EA: It's so true. I see my friends doing it, but they also have an instinct not just to be hip and with it and cool and all that. They want to have a

past. They have an instinct for an invented tradition. "I like tradition," that's what they say to me; "my family has this tradition, it's been around like, forty years," and of course to me, forty years is like [*laugh*] big deal, right? Then change it, like the Confederate flag, a hundred and forty years it's nothing. Throw the damn thing out; pretty soon it will be a hundred and forty years and you'll have a better flag. So when people say, "you know my family's been here for twelve generations." For me, that's so what? But they want to have their traditions. Even things like, "I've been doing this every year for five years" is a big deal to them, and they love that. I think we do have a need for our past, so some people reach for it. So for me with a culture that's twenty thousand years old, I have a bit of perspective and I can say, "you can take something that old and you can leave it behind," like our sexism. In my culture there is some sexism. No culture is perfect; it's always evolving.

[*Sound of sipping and the TV in the background.*]

JG: I asked Sherman about how it felt, because he's been quoted as saying and it seems somewhat obvious, that you took Thomas away from him. [*Dirty laugh from Evan.*] I thought that must have been a unique situation to be in. To have this character that's so important and admittedly has a lot of autobiographical flavor to it, and all of a sudden someone else has walked into it. Now he says, "I can't even write that character now without thinking of...I see Evan!" [*Evan laughing and crunching on toast.*] He talked about how it was a gift of sorts because now he doesn't have that crutch to fall back on that character. What he says we want in fiction, what he thinks readers want, is to meet strangers; they want to meet someone new. To hear you talk about how you can't do Thomas apart from Alexie's lines, it seems that perhaps your training as an actor runs counter to the way he sees things as a writer. What it came down to is that he says that actors become, are given, the role of storytellers. So there's something about ownership in there, or the lack of ownership.

EA: Just on that small note. Actors can't work alone. It's funny actually, you know, for an actor to find out just how powerless they are. They cannot work independently; they cannot apply for grants to just act. They need text, they need a play form, a screenplay or theatre play, to work within. They need an outside eye: a director. They can't see themselves. They need input. It's a terrible position; it means we have to wait for others to help us all the time. So with Sherman, yeah, I could've tried to

fake my way through all the shows; people have said “would you come and do Thomas for us please? Maybe you could be in the character, in the Thomas character and host our show; host our...” whatever. And to me it’s a ludicrous idea, but I know some other actors might’ve tried it. They might’ve said, “just send me the text, and you know I’ll work on it.” [Long pause.] Nooo, for me that was ridiculous. It would be like improvising iambic pentameter. I couldn’t do it. I don’t know the character well enough to write his lines. It’s part of Sherman, and I’m like a mask, I guess, for Sherman.

I have no illusions about my importance. I do the accent, and I am the face of Thomas. I also know that if people were to watch me as a theatrical Thomas, i.e., not through the eye of the lens, they would be disappointed because he doesn’t look the same. Part of Thomas’ allure is how he was photographed. It was the locations he was in: always sunny, warm lighting. The camera’s close, close, close all the time. Very loving shots. You know the microphone is right here [*gestures just under his chin*], picking up all the cadence and subtleties. Till he felt like he was just like a lover, really close. I mean that’s the way he was shot. When people see me and I do Thomas, it’s like “say what?” [*laughter*]. It’s not the same! So if I’m up there, hawking tee shirts and doing Thomas and people are watching me without a lens, I’m greatly diminished. It’s not really Thomas. So Thomas very much only lives on film. He doesn’t live in me; I’m very clear on that. And of course, like I said, his mind lives in Sherman.

JG: I don’t think a lot of people pay that close attention; they don’t have the heightened awareness. You mentioned [at the Whatcom lecture] not liking watching the film. Is that an actor’s response? I’m curious because you had mentioned working on the film as feeling “holy.”

EA: I guess I make myself sick. I’m pretty objective when it comes to acting. I’ve been watching myself for almost twenty years now; I can do it pretty well. But watching me play Thomas was distinctly different. That was because I really committed to Thomas, more so than I ever had to be. I tried to be really pure with him, because the feeling of Thomas—because he was the feeling of my grandmothers, and of my people. And so I said, “I know this feeling.” I’m not putting on tricks. It’s not casual behavior. I have to really immerse myself in a memory in wanting to do it. So I wasn’t posing, that’s it; it was a very deep feeling. So I went with that, and tried to capture that feeling so people would, people later as I said yesterday; I really did it for the Indians who came after me, so that

they would know what it felt like to be an old-time Indian. Because I know that even my nephews and nieces, they didn't know my grandmother. They didn't know how beautiful she was in her Indianness. They never saw it; they know *me*, and I'm so modern. Oh, I hate that.

So I really wanted to capture it; those kinds of Indians are leaving us way too quickly. There used to be a lot of them when I was young, and now I go around to powwows and say these are *young* old people; they are not the old-timers. Anyway, I tried to capture that feeling and I would pray that I could capture it. It was holy because I was copying people who were dead. I was paying homage to them. It was my tribute to their lives, to how they had become. How they had stayed so loving in the face of [pause] horrible tragedies—most of them had terrible lives—so many people they lost so young, poverty . . . you know the whole shtick. To me they were heroes, and I was playing a hero. I was playing an icon.

Then I watched the movie and I think *well, how does it look?* It doesn't look anything like how it felt; it doesn't look holy to me. I'm not seeing my grandmother up there; I see me. I see me. For instance, for me telling those stories it's this wonderful thing in my mind. I'm just saying the words and closing my eyes. Often I'm closing my eyes, I'm speaking, telling this story, and I'm getting this warm feeling of I'm my grandmother; I'm grandmother passing on knowledge, telling, being funny, being light at the same time. And then I watch it, and I see this young man who doesn't look like me because I'm all done up. He doesn't sound like me, because my voice is higher, which always surprises me. My voice is higher on tape than it feels in my body. I see blue sky around my head, which is not what I'm seeing when I'm actually doing the monologue. That's weird: To see a distortion of my face, because it's in this kind of drag with these weird locales behind it. That's not what I saw; I wasn't seeing blue sky behind my head when I was working. People like Thomas; I get the sense. I guess I didn't have that much of a sense of him. I guess I wasn't self-conscious when I was working; that's it, I wasn't self-aware. So then to become aware was shocking. As an audience member I don't follow the story. I don't follow the narrative of the movie. I follow Thomas' line. I follow where Thomas is going, because I can't help it. That's my perspective.

JG: I think the scene that captures that feeling is the one where you meet Velma and Lucy in the car. It is the one story that is not visualized for the audience, and I think that lack of visualization, being stuck in the moment with the characters—even though I heard from Sherman that the scene wasn't filmed for financial reasons—and the way it informs the narrative

is really powerful, because it is just you four characters and your reactions.

EA: That was the closest to what I had imagined.

JG: There's this thread that I feel runs through the whole movie that Thomas is in tune with another level of the stories that no one else quite comprehends. In this way the movie mirrors Victor's position in relation to the truth and lies with the audience's subject position. The audience is trying to sort out this whole thing, whereas Thomas knows the answers the whole time because he sits in a different relation to truth and lies.

EA: But I did play that he missed one truth. He missed the truth that Victor's dad killed his family. He misses it. I was told to play it neutral, because I was asked, "Does Thomas know the truth? Or does he not? Does he know this man's secret and why he left and ran away? Or does he not? Or does he know that his family was sacrificed so this man could learn a lesson? Or does he not? Does he choose to perceive this other man as his adopted father in spite of his past against his family, or not?" I was asked this by the director. We decided that I would play it neutral; I would not play it either way. But, I made a decision to play it naïvely; that he missed the crucial truth. He knew everything else, except the dead-center truth, because he's human too. He needed a dad. He needed to believe in something.

JG: So in the scene at the end that is so neutral, when Thomas says, "I know." Just what does he know?

EA: I had to play it naïvely, because even if Thomas knew, he couldn't show that he knew. I didn't want him being smug, like "I knew this all along, and look at me, I'm so wise and good. And I give you this gift of something I've always known that your dad hurt me and I'm bigger than that." I couldn't play it that way. I had to play it as innocently as possible. For the actor to believe the opposite, I could play the opposite. So I'm only telling you my intention; I'm not telling you necessarily the "truth" about Thomas. We struggled with that scene, and in the end the director was very happy and said that I got it perfectly. It was so funny because we tried so hard just for that moment when we stopped talking and we look each other in the eye and I go [*raises eyebrow*], and I leave. That's it! We look at each other; he's withholding the truth from me, and you're wondering: Does Thomas know? Or does he not know? Is he complicit

or not? And all I do is go [*raises eyebrow again*] and I leave. It was so hard to capture that moment. We did it over and over and over again. My way through it was to play it naïve.

JG: One of the key moments in the film has to be when Victor is running for help after they are involved in the accident, and he has the “vision” when he sees the father. That particular view is the one that Thomas has of Arnold earlier on the bridge. That’s the key to the whole movie for me, when Victor literally clues in through the other character’s imagination and sees his father through Thomas’ eyes.

EA: Of course, Thomas is trying to remind Victor of the magic that his father was. I guess in a way you could say that Victor and Thomas are two halves of the same character. Or that Victor is the modern Indian, and Thomas is an old-time Indian. That Victor is male and Thomas is female. That Victor is action, and Thomas is memory. That Thomas is the kind of Indian that Victor should have been. Like in a way that the modern world dictates that we have to be Indians like Victor and not Indians like Thomas. That Thomas gives his memories to Victor. He says, “Remember this. Remember this. Don’t you remember? That’s what my stories are for. Remember where you are from. Remember who your father, your culture, is. You’ve got to remember.” And so in the end, Victor does remember. He has the flash of this kindly, gentle father reaching down, smiling. And the shot looks old. It looks like a shot that you would see in your photo album; it looks dated. He looks so benign. He’s shot from way below, reaching down with his hand. It’s such a loving moment, and it is very clearly my memory. It’s very clearly Thomas’ memory, but we are his son. When he can finally take my memory from me and incorporate it into his own psyche, then that completes the film. It’s amazing that you saw that, because it’s a very big clue if you’re looking for it, and it’s a reminder of how important Thomas’ sense of being this man’s son is to his actual son. A lot of people don’t even notice that Thomas regards this man as his father. Hardly even anyone notices that. To many Indians, to thoughtful Indians, they would say, “of course, that’s what we do. We don’t think of family as being purely biological, we have extended family, and we have responsibility.” And they would say, “of course that’s his dad; he thinks of him as his dad. That’s just such a given.”

JG: I think people tend to get lost on that surface-level where there’s this goofy storyteller who simply holds the narrative together for us. I think that’s where the film is that mirror for the audience, where Victor says,

“Thomas, I’ve heard that story a hundred times, and I don’t know what you’re saying half the time.” As audience members, we’re like “oh, yeah.”

EA: It’s such a movie about fatherhood, and people forget that crucial moment. And sometimes they think I’m like comic relief or something [*laughter*].

JG: But it’s fascinating how that comedy works. Even with him, it’s not just Sherman’s normal voice. Your character inhabits that humor in a way that it is funny—and there is some comic relief—but there’s still social criticism being leveled. For instance, the “Jesus” fry bread scene, being a recovered Catholic myself [*much laughter*], is absolutely hilarious.

EA: And who’d of thunk it would work? If people would have told me your character is going to stop and do eight monologues, everything is just going to stop, I would’ve said, “no way, it’ll never work.” Or if someone had said, “the camera’s just going to sit and watch you while you tell Indian stories.” I would say, “no way. It will never go, you’ve to show something more interesting.” And they did to a small degree, but he actually did preserve the “oral tradition” as they call it. I get teased so much for that: preserving the oral tradition. [*Laughter*.]

JG: Sherman spoke a lot about being tired of hearing about the “oral tradition,” saying that what he does is not the “oral tradition.” When he’s out on the road or on a book tour that’s one thing, but when he’s writing that it’s different. He said that the next novel is going to be completely devoid of any trace of autobiographical reference. He says he’s sick of that. We’ll see how that works.

I was struck by your discussion of substituting the term fantasies for stereotypes. When we say stereotype there is often a reaction such as “No, no, no. Things are better than they used to be.” Do you think that it’s easy for people to absorb a little PC speak and be a little more “multicultural” and avoid what’s going on, thus shifting from stereotypes to fantasies?

EA: It comes from the fact that nobody wants to go and see a painful movie. I’ve been attached to many, many, many scripts over the last fifteen years; the ones that are just painful. For instance, one about a young man who’s betrothed to a woman and he’s wrongly incarcerated, sent to residential school. His girlfriend dies of TB and his family is wiped out by some skinheads. He’s beaten up. He’s raped. He has a drinking problem, and he accidentally kills his children. Then he meets a

woman and they start living together, and it's really a very tumultuous relationship, and the movie resolves by—how does it end?—he goes to AA, or something like that. It was like really, really truthful. I mean lots of Indians go through this residential school stuff. In Canada we make a lot of very dark films, and there have been a couple about residential school experiences, or about being a woman living on the street. And the producers always say, “this doesn't have a happy ending; this is way too real. The audience is working way too hard, and they're bummed out at the end of it. And they say I feel worse than when I came in here.”

So that's when I realized—look at the majority of blockbusters. The majority of films are these “feelgood” blockbusters; they're escapist. People don't want to look at actors like me; they want to project themselves into actors like Adam Beach. That's why Adam Beach . . . who's really badly trained—I love the guy, but you know, he's a small talent—I'm afraid to say that because he's my friend and it sounds petty, but it's true. He's not an actor. He's so clearly not an actor. Even Irene Bedard is wonderfully trained and she's never been given a role where she's been allowed to go really, really far with it: to test herself. But Adam's been tested, and he's failed every time. So people want to project themselves into this beautiful person, and not into me. And I realized, “OK, they don't want the truth,” because I can play the truth. I have a real breadth of experience that I bring as a young actor. And I go, “OK, well that's the way movies are.” Most people want movies not to be instructional, or allegorical, or metaphorical; they want them to be escape. They want an out from their lives.

I tried to be snobby about it, 'cause I thought, *I'm an academic. I'm a bright boy. I wanna go and see all these foreign films about a little girl who wants a bike and doesn't get it, and I couldn't do it* [laughter]. I love escapism as well. I like to think that I'm the hero of a John Woo movie: that I'm the smart, slick, sexy, skinny sex symbol up there.

I've asked around for people and said, “how come you're not going to see movies where people are less than perfect up there?” They say, “Well, I don't know.” Then I ask, “well, would you go out with a man who was shorter than you?” And they say, “uh, no.” And I say, “OK, well then that's why the men you want to see on screen have to be really tall and handsome right?” And I ask men, “would you go out with a heavy woman?” “No!” And I go, “Oh, well that's why you want the women in these movies to be really thin,” like absurdly thin. For instance, there was research done on actresses and models that we commonly see. Their body mass index was nineteen, which puts them in the .5 percentile, like one in a thousand women is that skinny and shaped like that. That's extraordi-

nary—an extraordinarily small number of women. You would hardly ever run into a woman who is that skinny, and I mean *skinny*. So, those are the women that they put up there. They are these images that we keep in our mind that are strictly fantasy; they're not about real people. People want to see, a lot of the time, an abnormality and not the everyday.

I know it's the same with Indians; people are incredibly fond of Tonto, and they are incredibly fond of the Indians in cartoons. They love them. They grew up with them. They just think they are the coolest things. They don't know they're insidious. They really don't. And I remember seeing old people, how they loved Al Jolson in the blackface stuff. They loved that. They used to love when movies were all white and they didn't have to deal with issues of race in film. They miss that; they were nostalgic for it. People hold their fantasies really close.

JG: I see that when I look at my own students and the lack of self-awareness that shows when they deal with media and pop culture. They say, "We all know that they are just trying to sell us stuff," and "well it doesn't have any effect on me." Yet how many people suffer from bulimia, and how much money did you spend on that Abercrombie and Fitch baseball hat because *everyone* is wearing one, yet you're the only one in the class with the hat on. It's interesting to hear that, because it's the re-projection of fantasies without understanding that these fantasies are creating, sustaining, and perpetuating those very same things.

EA: That's right, and so many of us agree to try and be objects of fantasy. A lot of us are trying to lose weight and so on with these eating disorders. But a lot of us think *that's how I'm supposed to look*. So they kind of make themselves over. There is tremendous power, and they see Julia Roberts doing this incredible flirtation and making huge amounts of money. She has phenomenal power worldwide. She's incredibly famous, and all she's doing is flirting. I mean the whole thing like "do the sex thing." And there are millions of women around the world, tens of millions of women, who are doing all kinds of sexual gymnastics for rupees. But she's doing it as an object of fantasy. So I think people see an enormous payoff in being as close to that standard as possible.

I especially see it, of course, being in L.A. where you see extraordinary actresses, and some really shitty actresses, and outright prostitutes—like really—come right out of the sex industry and they say, "I can be a star, because I know how to do *that*: That's required." They are all trying and you say, "OK, if I want a career like Julia's, 200 million dollars or 40 million dollars a year, making movies, everybody loves me. How far

would I go? Five thousand dollar boob job? I'll do it, sure. Starve myself? Sure, I'll do it. It's the only thing that stands in my way. That's the easy part, right?" It's incredible. So, I see them doing it professionally, and then I see the common person saying, "I want to be like that. I can make myself look like that. I can try." It's actually quite awful to watch, and I'm so glad that my family is devoid of that. They won't even try, and they're rare. I think most people are caught up in the fantasy of Western society that we can reinvent ourselves, like you said, I can make myself into anything I want to be. The images now, it's not about trying to be a person like, for instance my sister, her name is Kulkwasukt; she was given that name after my great-grandmother who was a very wise woman. And so my sister says, "I want to be like Kulkwasukt; she was a good, strong woman. She outlived many husbands, buried many of her daughters. She stayed strong. She was principled, and she was good to everybody." No, women today are not trying to be like Kulkwasukt; they're trying to be like Julia. And if it's not Julia, in five years it will be someone else. Ten years ago it was Cheryl Tieggs, or Farrah, and just before that it was Twiggy.

JG: And even with Julia Roberts, the hooker with the heart of gold was her first big role (*Pretty Woman*). So she's straight out of that.

EA: Poor actresses now, they have to be abnormally perfect. They are no longer genetic anomalies. They are absolute constructions. Science can give them that now, and they know it. They have to be twenty-five, and they have to really know how to work it. They have to be like . . . they have to put on behaviors that strippers use. They have to be masterful, and they all agree and say, "OK, I can do that." So we play it, and I never wanted to play that. I don't ever want to milk a fantasy. Oh, yeah, that's what it is: I have a line in my writing; it's something like—I wish I could remember it properly: "The world is hard enough without you telling stories that couldn't possibly be true and giving them false hope." That's wrong for a storyteller to do. So for me to play out a fantasy like, "I'm this wise man coming down from somewhere and I'm going to transform your white life," that will never happen, anywhere in the world, right? So I'm going to play that in a movie, and they're going to say, "one day I'll meet an Indian who'll change me, or one day a man will come with great spiritual wisdom because that's what great spiritual healers do." Or they think *Ah, one day a handsome young man—of any color—a handsome young man is going to impart some wisdom, or share some wisdom with me*. That's all malarkey; it will never happen. Just like you will never

meet Julia Roberts, and she agrees to sleep with you for a week for a thousand dollars. Nuh-uh. And you have a great time and fall in love. It's never gonna happen [*high, sarcastic voice*]! It's hard enough to walk a straight road without telling people stories that can't possibly be true, and giving them false hope. That's what fantasies are. To rely on the fantasy, and there is such a strong incentive to believe it, is terrible. So I see people all the time that meet me and they go, "Oh, an Indian," and they get that look in their eyes. You can see the fantasy in there, and if you play it out they love you for it. They love you when you are whomever they project onto you.

JG: That reminds me of the "Frog Girl" story that you told yesterday. There's a fundamental difference between the stories we are told as children. My partner and I were wondering if any of the other stories you alluded to had been transcribed. In addition to that, she remarked on the difference between your stories, which have characters with agency, as opposed to the passive, someday-my-prince-will-come, thing. In "Frog Girl," the element of chance is played out completely differently than it is in say *Cinderella*, where someone goes "poof" with the magic wand and everything is OK. Instead, you can try really hard, be a good person, and still get hit by the log.

EA: Or you may be a wonderful person, but the timing is wrong—you're leaving the country, or they gave up already.

JG: So, future projects?

EA: Probably with Sherman. I've read several scripts, but I haven't been offered anything at all interesting except for one project called *Oliver's Silver Dollar*. Dreamworks has it now. They requested a copy because it won the Sundance Screenwriter's Lab. Joe Marshall III is a Lakota Sioux, and it's a really nice story set in the forties. But it's too beautiful. I thought I don't know how to make this. I don't think anyone would know how to. It's about an Indian man who's in a mental institution over thirty years as he tries to get out. It would be very easy to be heavy-handed with it. So, I hope they do it though, because I know there's a way for it to be subtle. It doesn't have to be a downer. We all know what happens in institutions, right? You don't want to play it broadly like *Girl, Interrupted*. That one was so contrived. They just made it look like a high school dorm [*laughter*].

JG: Well, the book was fantastic. It's such a powerful meditation on control of bodies and who defines sanity and insanity.

EA: So hopefully that will go. Other than that I'm just attached to Sherman's projects, and I don't know, hopefully those will go. There are many irons in the fire, and I'm trying to finish medical school and that's four years. When I get out I want to produce, and I want to start working again, but I don't need to act for film. I'd be happy in theatre; I really would. It's kind of a rarefied air, but it's good, honest work for an actor to do. There's nothing like it. So I just kind of have these dreams where I think I just want to go back into the theatre for years and years and years, and try out all these different roles, and stretch my muscles.

JG: So you can be a doctor, and play one on TV. [Being from Canada, Evan did not recognize the commercial. I had to explain it.]

EA: Oh my god. That is so disgusting. I've never heard that. That's ridiculous; that is so ridiculous. Because some people say to me, "imagine at the end of this, you can actually play a doctor." For me to play a doctor would have taken a day of study. [*Errrggggh voice.*] For me to actually be a doctor it's taken me ten years. There is no comparison; you are not going to compare these, at all, ever. Get out of here. [*Cutesy voice.*] "Now you can play a doctor." [*Choke, laughter.*]

JG: That's a perverse extreme of method acting.

“Accessible Poetry”? Cultural Intersection and Exchange in Contemporary American Indian and American Independent Film

Denise K. Cummings

Representations of American Indians and cultures have long occupied positions in mainstream American literary and filmic identities. Yet in many ways, ever since M. Scott Momaday's seminal *House Made of Dawn*, published in 1968, American Indian and mixed-blood authors in the United States have undertaken to imagine themselves and have emphasized in their fiction and poetry a highly personal discourse of physical and mental landscapes, symbolic and symbiotic links to nature, and resistance to colonial incursions. Just as American Indians have undertaken to envision themselves in their literary endeavors, so, too, since the politically turbulent 1960s has there been an ongoing movement by American Indian film actors to combat ethnic stereotyping proffered by Hollywood. In their wake have come American Indian film producers, directors, actors, and writers. Today, it is now possible to see advances to this continuum embodied and explored in contemporary American independent film. Indeed, the ethnic group that has been featured more than any other in the history of American films is finally beginning to speak its own voice with complexity and diversity, not unlike M. Scott Momaday did three decades ago.

Herein I would like to advance the idea that there is further reason to explore the relationship between certain current independent filmic practices and those of the sixties. In his study of American film in the sixties, David James outlines the major transitions in the fields of film and

cultural history that created a set of new questions about new alternative film practices. Defining “industrial cinema,” or film as a commodity dependent on an advanced industry (*Allegories of Cinema* 7), James argues that alternative filmmaking, by contrast, involved the use of film in ideological and social self-creation and allowed for and demanded new social relations around the apparatus, novel relations among the people who made the films, and ground-breaking relationships between filmmakers and their audiences (10). In fact, maintains James, the innovations of one alternative practice of film, one that was so anomalous within the normative terms of cinema, could be figured only by recourse to the analogy of an entirely different medium. He claims that in the ’50s it was the *poet* who provided a model for new film practice, not merely because poetry summarized desired formal qualities, but also because the psychic and social functions of contemporary poetry allowed the process of filmmaking to be reinvented for new purposes (11).

I begin, then, with a subtle suggestion of a relationship between the poetic American independent cinema in mid-century and specific late-century independent film practices. In this essay I wish to particularize these generalizations by discussing several American independent films: one by American Indians, *Smoke Signals* (1998), written by Sherman Alexie (Spokane) and directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne), and two by independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, *Dead Man* (1995) and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999). The three films differ sufficiently that they suggest ways for us to examine divergent contemporary representations of American Indians. Yet, more importantly for my purposes here, one might say that each film I have selected presents somewhat similar means of deploying cinematic approaches and tropological operations that bear out cultural intersection and exchange, mediate between indigenous traditional cultures and dominant cultural values, and subvert stereotypes with various images, stories, and music. As important as the social and political stances represented in these films are, they are of equal interest for their formal innovations. The films employ and reinvent a multiplicity of industrial filmic codes. Moreover, I suggest that certain compelling contemporary representations of American Indians, particularly those offered in *Smoke Signals* and *Dead Man*, are fundamentally tied to the notion of “accessible poetry,” a conception I borrow from Sherman Alexie. I further ask how might we read in multiple ways and perhaps even polemicize the word “accessible.”

Accessible Poetry

Nondiegetic guitar riffs punctuate a dark screen. The music preempts an establishing shot of gray sky, and the camera tilts down to include in the frame what at first appears as a dusty mobile home park, the letters “KREZ” painted in red on a trailer in the foreground. A voice-over states, “Good morning, this is Randy Peone on KREZ Radio, the voice of Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation, and it’s time for the morning traffic report on this rainy Bicentennial 4th of July.”¹ A mid-screen subtitle verifies the location. “Let’s go out to Lester Falls Apart at the KREZ traffic van broken down at the crossroads,” continues Peone after a cut to Benewah Road, and the camera pans right to left, capturing an advancing tractor trailer truck as it moves left to right and finally off-screen. The camera then cuts to a flash of the truck as it exits off-screen right. This aerial perspective long shot also reveals a parked van in the right foreground of a rural crossroads and low-lying mountains in the distance. We see a seated figure and an umbrella atop the white van. We then hear a voice: “Big truck just went by.” There’s a two-second pause. Lester (we presume) concludes, “Now it’s gone.” As we hear nondiegetic “oooh, ay-ay-ay” song lyrics in increasing volume, Peone’s voice, also nondiegetic, responds with, “Well, there you go, folks. Looks like another busy morning.” The camera cuts to the sequence’s concluding shot of the hills foregrounded by several houses. Peone announces, “And I just got a news bulletin that says Matty and John Builds-the-Fire are hosting a Fourth of July Par-tee at their house. And remember, it’s B.Y.O.F.—bring your own fireworks.” The shot fades into black, orange flames and flying embers rising. Thus begins *Smoke Signals*.

On the surface, the dominant impression left by this opening sequence of *Smoke Signals* seems to suggest nothing extraordinary for an American narrative fiction film. We could analyze the sequence in this way: the radio DJ of KREZ, reminiscent of Mister Señor Love Daddy in Spike Lee’s 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, provides a running motif that, similar to Love Daddy, binds *Smoke Signals*’ early events together. The DJ’s self-conscious and playful contradiction heard in voice-over hints at how future events will be articulated in the film: humorous contradictions and nondiegetic sounds will often support the ideas and emotions the director tries to convey to the audience through the images. Sounds complete perceptual experience. Peone’s voice-overs also provide important information about the setting, chronology of events on the reservation, and the overall structure of the film. The formal features of the opening scenes function to construct a narrative and to advance the action. An audience may, however, quickly notice one remarkable quality:

the action takes place on a contemporary reservation with twentieth-century Indians. The romanticized “Hollywood” portrayal of Indians is nowhere to be found: no squaw, “Indian princess,” primitive, savage, hunter, or warrior, indeed no buckskin and no teepees. Neither is there a mystical medicine man, political activist, or “Natural Ecologist,” those depictions of recent stereotyping.² Therefore, in the very first minutes of the film, *Smoke Signals* confronts and dislocates its first expected ethnic response.

I draw attention to formal aspects of the opening sequence and highlight this dislodging of the anticipated Indian portrayal for two principal reasons. First, I wish to suggest that the dislocation coincides with the film’s use of setting and the reservation radio station to center on community. One important means of unifying the film and accentuating community is the setting. Nearly the entire narrative, except for the “road trip” and Arnold Joseph’s (Gary Farmer) trailer camp in Phoenix, Arizona, is played out on the Coeur d’Alene reservation in Idaho—the primacy of the first sequence. The aerial perspective shots give a sense of location. Encounters among several members of this reservation provide the causality for the narrative. The trip off the reservation necessary for Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams) reaffirms the centrality of reservation life. Implicit in reservation life is the conception of home. Director Chris Eyre explains that what resonated most for him in the story of *Smoke Signals* is the question of home and the characters’ different definitions of home (Robson). The film further emphasizes home and community by the succeeding creative storytelling voice, a voice originating from within the American Indian community. Specifically, the film’s layers of storytelling are most clear in that the story of the movie is told by Thomas, often in voice-over, so at certain points he’s telling the story about himself telling the story about someone else telling a story. At one moment in the movie, Suzy Song (Irene Bedard) asks Thomas, “Do you want lies or do you want the truth?” and he says, “I want both.” For Alexie, “that line is what reveals most about Thomas’ character and the nature of his storytelling and the nature, in my opinion, of storytelling in general, which is that fiction blurs and nobody knows what the truth is . . . ” (West and West). Storytelling is a point to which I will soon return.

The setting and the film’s weight on community serve to limn my second reason for emphasizing the opening sequence: to draw attention to the film’s conditional affinity with a familiar Hollywood narrative form.³ Despite the surprising contemporary setting where no romanticization of Indians occurs, the opening sequence immediately

welcomes a diverse audience into the narrative through their association with the conventions of a particular kind of fictional world. As a result, subsequent opposing tendencies made possible within the film are made accessible. The various narrative sequences that later unfold serve to both utilize and interrogate the recognizable film form. As Jhon Gilroy has demonstrated, *Smoke Signals*, provisionally, fits into a familiar genre of American cinema: the “odyssey” film, or what screenwriter Alexie calls “road trip/buddy movie” (West and West). Generally, within this genre, there is often clear action and forward impetus to the plot that we associate with American national filmmaking. I would argue, however, that the film uses this genre, the road trip/buddy movie, as more deconstruction than construction; it becomes an arena of cultural-critical discursivity.

In her recent essay “Rethinking Genre,” Christine Gledhill offers, “Genre is first and foremost a boundary phenomenon” (221). Seeking a more flexible conception of genre as switching point between industry and social history, aesthetic and critical practice, Gledhill places the genre system within a historical understanding of melodrama as a heterogeneous and adoptive mode rather than a timeless and formally conceived narrative classicism:

[G]enre boundaries, once seemingly secure in place if sometimes disputed, are repeatedly crossed by filmmaker, critic, historian, and socio-cultural analyst. Herein, I want to suggest, lies the productivity of genre as boundaries are defined, eroded, defended, and redrawn. Genre analysis tells us not just about kinds of films, but about the cultural work of producing them and knowing them. (222)

Gledhill attempts to rethink genre in its triple existence as industrial mechanism, aesthetic practice, and arena of cross-cultural discursivity (223). The full productivity of genre involves boundary encounters and category mixing, “for boundary disputes involve contested identities” (226).

Gledhill’s exploration is extremely useful if we are to augment my partial analysis of the film’s opening sequence. I return, briefly, to that opening sequence. This time, consider Gledhill’s use of the phrase “aesthetic practice,” first on the part of Alexie and Eyre. For a diverse audience, the romantic expectation of a film entitled *Smoke Signals* is *Dances With Wolves* (dir. Kevin Costner, 1990). The opening scene disrupts that culturally constructed myth—the myth that erases American guilt in genocide—with a series of images and no commentary other than

the white man's technology—radio. Setting and community allow the filmmakers to dismantle a romantic expectation and assemble a contemporary alternative. The omission of stereotypical Indians also helps elucidate a structuring absence in Hollywood's long history of representations of Native America: the absence of portrayals of the contemporary "colonized" American Indian. The roots of Euro-American perceptions led to the images developed and/or used historically by Hollywood (Kilpatrick 1). These perceptions are to be found within colonialist discourse where metaphors, tropes, and allegorical motifs played a constitutive role in figuring European superiority (Shohat and Stam 137). For example, in their provocative text *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam maintain that the trope of light/darkness, implicit in the Enlightenment ideal of rational clarity, envisions non-European worlds as less luminous. Sight and vision, the authors argue, are attributed to Europe, while the "other" is seen as living in "obscurity," blind to moral knowledge (140). When we apply the tropes of empire to *Smoke Signals*, for instance the tropes of light/darkness and sight/vision, interesting readings emerge. These may or may not be intentional on the filmmakers' part; in fact, the constructed meaning may occur on the level of reception. In what follows, I will somewhat exaggerate the reading to emphasize how a consideration of Gledhill's insights invite multiple readings of *Smoke Signals*.

As the narrative unfolds, the nature of storytelling rests on the power of story in the telling; *Smoke Signals* is, in some way, the story of a telling. Though he is clearly not a stereotypical shaman, Thomas most often closes his eyes when he relates the stories. His action then leads to the aesthetic practice of flashback sequences in the film. The closing of his eyes thus serves to reinforce the events we see recounted, which may or may not be from Thomas' point of view. To be sure, Alexie himself claims he is not sure why Thomas closes his eyes. For the screenwriter, "it just felt right" (West and West).⁴ Upon closer examination, however, we can discover a possibility. As Christine Gledhill points out, desire is generated at the boundaries, stimulating border crossings as well as provoking cultural anxieties. If a filmmaker or an audience member is attuned to the frisson of the boundary, I believe the possibility for reading the film in new ways emerges. Thomas' action, therefore, may perform another important function—one related to colonialist discourse.

While Victor and the audience may not immediately understand the content of Thomas' stories or the corresponding onscreen images, Thomas' penchant for telling stories and the visuals that accompany his tales are far from pointless. Through the action of closing his eyes, in a

post-colonial context his storytelling allows him, or the viewers' imagination, to playfully disband the colonialist tropes of light/darkness and sight/vision while at the same time reclaiming and shifting the tropes. In this way the narrative sequences bear a mark of difference from dominant discourse and familiar genre form. To borrow David James' terms concerning alternative cinema, the film not only speaks of what it is, it speaks of what it is not (12).

Consider another example. Early on in the film, a burning house fills the entire screen and the film then cuts to full-screen orange-red fire and its glow surrounding a vertical chimney crossed by dark horizontal tree branches in the foreground. The pillars of flame rise up along the sides of the chimney, heightening Thomas' words heard in voice-over: "You know, there are some children who aren't really children at all. They're just pillars of flame that burn everything they touch." Larger flames followed by scattered, burning embers dissolve, finally, into the gray ash of the next morning. Thomas concludes, "And there are children who are just pillars of ash that fall apart if you touch them." The scene ends. In this filmic instance, the images do not readily match the content of Thomas' words. On a narrative level, Thomas may be talking about himself and Victor as babies, their lives brought together by tragedy, and possibly their differences as they mature. On a metaphorical level, Thomas might refer to Victor's father. The house fire changes Arnold Joseph; he descends into alcoholism and abandons his family. Thomas perhaps foreshadows the remains of Arnold, the ashes he and Victor must pick up in Arizona. On a tropological level, for American Indians the trope of infantilization took statutory form; their presumed childlike nature made them "wards of the state." The infantilization trope also posits the political immaturity of colonized or formerly colonized peoples (Shohat and Stam 140). With this in mind, and though perhaps forcing the reading only just a little, my attention to the subtextual colonialist implications in the aforementioned filmic sequence demonstrates that there occurs this doubling, tripling in the film on the visual and discursive levels. Crucially, Thomas' words, coupled with the visual imagery, dramatize the agency of the filmmakers.

This juxtaposition of images and words represents cultural self-assertion. The differences come together in mutual association and interconnection, rather than warring with one another or canceling each other out. The spatial premises of this style open the possibility of incorporating into the meaning of the discourse significant organizations of the visual composition. In this style the classical chain of logic linking image to narrative is thus opposed and questioned. This emphasis on the

verbal-visual, as in the aforementioned sequence, is, I argue, the mark of the poetic in *Smoke Signals*, or what we might call a slight productive tension between the lyrical and the narrative. While David James suggests that the specificity of film poetry is the elaboration of discrete incidents rather than the continuously unfolding linear action of the feature film (29-30), *Smoke Signals* seems to combine these approaches.

Tellingly, what I wish to call poem as poem also marks *Smoke Signals*. The film features an original contemporary poem as its post-script. The first line of the poem sounds one of the film's themes: "How do we forgive our fathers?" The film closes with Thomas' voice-over recitation of the poem.⁵ The poem's author, Dick Lourie, is not an American Indian, appropriate for a film that offers accessibility to a diverse audience as well as a pattern of breaking with the expected ethnic response. In fact, breaking with predictable reactions is the unabashed aim of this film. I would argue that breaking with predictable responses and subverting stereotypes and colonialist discourse through visual and verbal metaphor are directly linked to Alexie's own interest in poetry. In an interview he explains, "My beginnings are as a poet. My first form of writing was poetry. While there's certainly a strong narrative drive in my poetry, it was always about the image, and about the connection, often, of very disparate, contradictory images" (West and West).

As an adaptation of his short stories from his book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *Smoke Signals* reveals adaptability to the exigencies of the film medium. When he began working on the screenplay, Alexie suggested that he was most interested "in going outside the narrative and traditional formats." He explains, "In my books, I've always been fascinated with dreams and stories and flashing forward and flashing back and playing with conventions of time, so in adapting the screenplay, I always knew I would use those elements" (West and West). Alexie always knew that while a character speaks, the film would show images from the story he or she is telling.

A paradigmatic example of this occurs when Suzy Song tells the adult Victor about Arnold's stories of he and the child Victor on the reservation basketball court. We witness a layered flashback sequence structured as interplay of present, past, and still further past. The action of the two flashbacks, both Suzy Song's and Arnold's, occurs on a basketball court at the Phoenix mobile home park. Minutes after this sequence, Suzy dares Victor to take a shot on that trailer park court, only to ironically implore, "Look, Victor, I'm not playing some game." In these flashback sequences, the *mise-en-scène* functions to connect with earlier moments in the film, such as when Victor plays hoops with his buddies

on the reservation court. A demolition of unitary notions, however, emerges. Image and story certainly connect to earlier film moments, but they also yield multiple confrontations: between past and present; between Suzy, a stranger to Victor yet friend to Arnold, and Victor, the bereaved son; between father and son; between truth and fiction. Boldly, the historical confrontation of two cultures metaphorically “staged” on the court between the Jesuit priests and Arnold and his son divulges the film’s pointed cultural intersection.

With such style and structure, sound and music become essential to this film. For Alexie, music is paramount; the soundtrack helps characterize the community. “John Wayne’s Teeth,” for instance, is what Alexie calls a blending of English lyrics and Western musical rhythms along with Indian vocables and Indian traditional drums. Alexie wrote the lyrics to this song and four others in the film. He claims,

I didn’t want the music to be an afterthought, but an inherent and organic part of the film. Writing songs is another way of expressing ourselves. Just as I think screenplays are accessible poetry, I think songs are accessible poetry. . . . Using those songs in the film, however, is also a way of telling the story, of adding more layers to the story, as you see things on screen. (West and West)

Like the songs, the on-screen images are fusion: Alexie sees American pop influences as cultural currency and he uses U.S. popular culture “as a way to bridge the cultural distance between the characters in [his] movie and the non-Indian audience” (West and West). Notwithstanding, or perhaps because of these bridges, the filmmakers never forget their Indian audience.⁶

Indeed, as *Smoke Signals* exemplifies, it is now possible to find on the American independent cinema circuit films with carefully researched, multifaceted approaches to American Indians and their cultures.⁷ Such projects raise the following question: can a non-American Indian filmmaker be true to an American Indian audience? This question subtends the recent call for the guarantee of effective participation of the “other” in all phases of film and media production, including theoretical production (Stam and Shohat 393), and its answer may determine whether *Smoke Signals* provides more than just an occasional interruption of the one-way cultural imperialism of Hollywood. The thematic link between representation and social and political realities needs to be addressed within a different analytical frame—one that includes a consideration of the total field of continuously changing practices in film.

Nobody knows what the truth is

On first examination, films by contemporary independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch could not seem more unlike *Smoke Signals*. The stylistic differences are many. Jarmusch often presents abstract, de-centered narratives. As a result, spatial and temporal structures come forward and create their own interest. Jarmusch, I would argue, makes style an equal partner to narrative. The filmmaker, who studied poetry at Columbia, became known as a figurehead for the contemporary American independent cinema scene in the mid-eighties (Rosenbaum 22, 20). His work typifies the arthouse influence David James describes of the sixties practitioners. His 1995 film *Dead Man* bears the signature of his earlier praxis: the theme of the immigrant and the aboriginal, the theme of restless travel and cyclical return, the sumptuous black and white cinematography.⁸ His most recent efforts, *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), are outwardly about people who have been saved from death but are facing their imminent death.

The plot of *Dead Man* hinges on the plight of Cleveland, Ohio's William Blake (Johnny Depp)—an accountant traveling westward with the promise of a job at a steelworks company run by a capitalist named Dickinson (Robert Mitchum) in a town called Machine. He arrives to find someone else has taken his job. Soon afterwards, Blake visits the local saloon, the tune "Billy Boy" tinkling on the bar's piano.⁹ He buys a bottle, proceeds to leave, and meets a woman, Thel Russell (Mili Avital). Later, while in bed with Thel, Blake finds himself killing her former lover who is also, ironically, Dickinson's son (Gabriel Byrne). Blake shoots him in self-defense just after Byrne's character has shot Thel. In the encounter, Blake takes a bullet in his chest—a serious wound that ultimately leads to his death. The remainder of the film centers on Blake's wilderness travels northward with an eccentric British-educated man named Nobody (Gary Farmer), a renegade Blood and Blackfoot Plains Indian (Rosenbaum 21) who tries to help Blake stave off Dickinson's bounty hunters and assist Blake on his passage to the afterworld. The camaraderie between the two travelers is often fraught with humor and emotion.

According to Jarmusch, the story in *Dead Man* is fairly simple: that of a relationship between two men from different cultures who are both loners and lost and for whatever reasons are dissociated from their cultures (Rosenbaum 22). The story also invited the filmmaker to attend to other themes that exist peripherally: violence, guns, American history, a sense of place, spirituality, William Blake and poetry, fame, and outlaw status. For Jarmusch, these peripheral themes constitute the subtle fabric

of the film (Rosenbaum 22). For the purposes of this discussion, I wish to focus on particularities I find working in this film that are the most unlike—yet surprisingly similar in effect—those found in *Smoke Signals*.

While *Smoke Signals* deliberately elides the romanticization of the late nineteenth century so characteristically deployed in Hollywood films,¹⁰ *Dead Man* courageously delves into that period setting, the mid-to late-1800s, with a variation of the Hollywood western genre in a film episodic in structure and allegorical in theme. The period setting functions in at least one vital way: it allows Jarmusch to restage the “history” of a quintessential nineteenth-century “space,” the western frontier. In fact, the film becomes vehicle for a double restaging. Jarmusch dramatically and forcefully confronts two modes of historical representation: he interrogates presumed American history of the nineteenth century and the ensuing film history of the twentieth. The chilling portrait he presents is not of Native America, but “of white America—as a primitive, anarchic world of spiteful bounty hunters and bloody grudge matches, a portrait that can be read without much difficulty as contemporary” (Rosenbaum 20). Although *Dead Man* contains no portrayals of the victimization of American Indians, the mise-en-scene is littered with evidence of genocide—ruined teepees, abandoned villages, and charred corpses—and Nobody speaks matter-of-factly of the distribution of small-pox infected blankets by smiling white traders (Levich 40).

Where *Smoke Signals* seems to self-consciously avoid the use of Hollywood stereotypes of American Indians, *Dead Man* exploits and inverts. In the figure of Nobody, “He Who Talks Loud Saying Nothing,” Jarmusch wanted to make an Indian character who was neither the savage that must be eliminated nor the noble innocent who knows all (Rosenbaum 23). Instead he creates a complicated human being, an American Indian who has crossed geographical borders. Significantly, Nobody has traveled West to East and back again, a complete inversion of the frontier trajectory. He is an unlikely figure to know, verbatim, the romantic poetry of English-born William Blake 1757-1827). In a startling inversion, in this redrawn “western,” it’s Nobody who holds the cultural capital.¹¹ Nobody is convinced that Cleveland-born William Blake, who knows nothing about the English William Blake, is the ghost of said poet. Throughout his travels with Depp’s Blake, Nobody recites lines from William Blake’s oeuvre. Oftentimes these aphorisms, such as “The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn from the crow,”¹² sound indigenous. Jarmusch intentionally shifts the cultural import of Euro-America by giving Nobody William Blake’s lines. Simultaneously, in other key moments in the film, Nobody also has Native American

dialogue. Deliberately, Jarmusch offers no translation subtitles of the Blackfoot, Cree, and Makah languages (Rosenbaum 21)—a rare filmic instance of the privileging of an American Indian audience. When Nobody first speaks to Blake after noticing his injury, he shouts, “Stupid fucking white man.” No translation is required. Depp’s Blake, by contrast to the intellectual and multidimensional Nobody, picks up bits and pieces of his identity from others: perhaps from Dickinson, and certainly from the bounty hunters and from Nobody. In this sense I believe Depp’s character is fundamentally the more accurate mirror of the stereotypical representation, no matter how problematic, of a colonized individual.

On the level of genre analysis, Jarmusch’s film approximates the cultural work performed by *Smoke Signals* in that it invites an audience in and then deconstructs its very recognizable form, in this case the Hollywood western. When Blake arrives in Machine, he rather tentatively disembarks the train. Neil Young’s improvised musical score, comprised of minimalist guitar riffs, accentuates Blake’s actions and reactions to what he sees in Machine. In an extended horizontal tracking shot, the camera follows Blake as he walks through a ramshackle “western” town complete with “Hollywood” props: distressed wooden buildings, dirt road, occasional livestock, and several preoccupied townspeople. The film then enacts a series of alternating shots—medium shots of Blake to point-of-view shots as Blake surveys his environment. Emblems of death surround him: he passes men handling crudely fabricated caskets, another peddling or collecting animal and human skulls. In one point-of-view shot, a woman and an infant are captured and the camera then tracks right to left, revealing a nearby baby carriage filled with skeletal remains. Blake’s facial expressions indicate incredulity, disgust, shock—each look registering that much of what he sees is either new to him or disquieting.

On a stylistic level, this narrative sequence interpenetrates and interrogates another. The jarring juxtapositions in this sequence reverberate in a very similar shot sequence near the film’s final moments. In yet another series of alternating shots—medium shots of Blake to point-of-view shots as Blake considers his surroundings—a delirious and near-death Blake walks through the Indian village, the totems and machine-like structure of the canoe manufacturers loom in the distance like an indigenous Dickinson Steel Works. Through the sequence in Machine, Jarmusch establishes affinity with the *mise-en-scène* of the western film then distorts the very details of the genre. Moments such as those near the film’s end—when the *mise-en-scène* resonates with an earlier sequence—signify the complexity of Jarmusch’s filmmaking. Evocatively, each sequence reinforces the evidence of American Indian genocide and death.

The sequences allegorize the industrialized culture's elimination of aboriginal cultures.

Jarmusch's calculated mutations of the industrial codes of the Hollywood western are significant. In the classical western genre, emphasis rests on violence and death. Jane Tompkins makes this point when she observes that in practically every western narrative we encounter a "ritualization of the moment of death" (24). It is a way, she claims, in which the genre sets about "controlling its violence" (25), even cloaking its nature, by rendering it meaningful. The effect is, in fact, one of the keys to the genre's popularity. Jarmusch's narrative trajectory seems determined by a similar underlying attitude, but with a few twists. In *Dead Man*, death and violence are most often awkward, unheroic, and almost pathetic. The western hero, or frontier hero, typically caught between savagery and civilization, is reconfigured in Nobody. Another name for the frontier hero is "the [white] man (or woman) who knows Indians" (Slotkin 14, 16). Nobody is the Indian who knows "the white man" or "white men," thus throwing into sharp relief the classical genre's internalized racist assumptions. A mixed-blood Plains Indian, Nobody is also an interesting variant of the Hollywood buddy-movie "side-kick": he steals the show.

The overall result of Jarmusch's effort is a highly stylized presentation of subversion. "[S]cenes . . . resolve in and of themselves without being determined by the next incoming image" (Rosenbaum 21). Blank screens, Jarmuschean ellipses, often interrupt sequences. There also occur occasional passages of silence that remind one of the profound and suggestive powers of silent film. And however damning its revision of the settling of the western frontier, the film also often celebrates the beauty of the land. Like Alexie and Eyre's road-trip sequences with Victor and Thomas, Jarmusch let the landscape tell much of the story during Nobody and Blake's travels. For a film whose allegorical theme is an incisive critique of history and indictment of capitalism, a film that attenuates the whole sense of society, the overall outcome—no small feat—is a beautiful picture. Indeed, the film also honors the visceral gratification of storytelling. The use of Blake's spiritually radical and reinventing verse is an inspired element of Jarmusch's *Dead Man*. Julian Wolfreys characterizes Blake as one of the privileged dissenting voices from South London; I would characterize Nobody as one of the privileged dissenting voices from film.¹³

Dead Man's union of images, stories, and the carefully selected music of Neil Young stands out, I believe, as a possibility of what Gerald Vizenor calls an overturning of the very content of popular ideas about

Native Americans (107). Crucially, *Dead Man* also suggests that a non-American Indian filmmaker can be true to an American Indian audience. It should come as no great revelation, then, that Jarmusch and Alexie seem to share certain similarities. As contemporary film poets, they each discern an underlying rhythm beneath the surface movement of events. They each redraw familiar genres and judiciously select musical scores. Akin with Alexie, Jarmusch admits to an interest in the synthesis of cultures. "I think it's because that's an inevitable part of the whole world, that cultures sort of cross-fertilize each other," he related in a recent interview (Klein). Jarmusch is careful to distinguish the notion of cultural synthesis with "homogenization." For Jarmusch, they are opposites: it is devolution to have everything the same. He says, "America [is a] culture made up of people from other cultures that have mixed together" (Klein). We might therefore call his not the melting pot theory, but instead the salad bowl effect. For Jarmusch, there are a lot of beautiful gifts in that mixing (Klein).

His most recent feature length film, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, is an innovative mixture indeed. The story is about a modern day urban hit man, Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker)—a northern New Jersey loner who lives by the ancient rules of Samurai code. Vis-à-vis another familiar Hollywood genre, the mob/gangster film, Jarmusch erodes and redraws the form to include philosophy from Eastern Zen culture. He begins the film with Whitaker's voice-over reading a portion of the code; its universal but abstract truths find an immediate application in his character's actions throughout the narrative. In keeping with the imbalances, ambiguities, and ambivalences abounding in American gangster films (Mitchell 210), in *Ghost Dog* Jarmusch creates a portrait of a character that is a contradiction. Moreover, just as *Dead Man* constructs juxtapositions between indigenous and western literary traditions, *Ghost Dog* also constructs discursive juxtapositions on several levels. Like *Dead Man*, *Ghost Dog* features the import of literary texts either to provide running motifs, such as the filmmaker's employment of the *Hagakure* and *Rashomon*, or as narrative props, like *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Night Nurse*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, to name a few.¹⁴ The various ethnic identities in the film—black, Italian, French—understand one another even when they do not speak the same language. Within this allegory of communication and commentary on the hybridity of national culture, Jarmusch binds the film together with a most striking American signifier, rap music. The RZA, one of the founders of the hip-hop group Wu-Tang Clan, composed the music sound track for the film. The use of rap music counterpoints the

action sequences and *Ghost Dog*'s contemplations and, significantly, also provides what Jarmusch recognizes as an accessible feature of his otherwise "arty" film (Klein).

In his characters, Jarmusch employs cultural and social stereotypes. Chinese Americans are relegated to the background—they're seen but not heard. Italian Americans in the film are figured as exaggerated typecasts: many of the mob men are one-dimensional and ignorant; the mobster daughter is indifferent if seemingly intelligent. She shares her *Rashomon* text with *Ghost Dog*. Curiously, both the Italian men and the mobster daughter all watch television reruns of violent American cartoons often depicting gun-wielding characters. The Italian hit men, in fact, often simulate their cartoon counterparts. More fully developed characters can be found, however, in the black Americans *Ghost Dog* and the child Pearlman; like *Dead Man*'s Nobody, *Ghost Dog* and Pearlman each hold a certain degree of cultural capital—they read and exchange ideas about books. And one of the most significant features in *Ghost Dog* is Jarmusch's "resurrection" of a familiar figure, at least to Jarmusch fans: "Nobody" returns—this time as a contemporary man (again played by Gary Farmer). On *Ghost Dog*'s rooftop aerie, Nobody confronts a pair of hit men who, in their attempts to ethnically identify Nobody, conflate Puerto Ricans, Indians, and "Niggers" as the "same thing." In response to their ignorance, and in yet another rare filmic moment, Nobody takes the opportunity to offer the men, and the audience, a corrective to their description of "sameness" and their identification of human beings as "thing." He proceeds to identify himself through tribal affinity—yet he offers a different affiliation than his identity in *Dead Man*. After one of the mobsters senselessly kills a pigeon, the Cayuga¹⁵ Nobody repeats his line from *Dead Man* by calling the mobster a "stupid fucking white man."

At this point in the film, apparent to an attuned audience is an immediate link between Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and his most recent film; with *Ghost Dog* we see emerging the possibility that intertextuality may be a terrain on which these contemporary independent films take place. Nobody returns in *Ghost Dog*, though he is identified as "Nobody" only in the film's credits. Dean Rader observes that in *Smoke Signals*, Victor's favorite Indian is, remarkably, "Nobody." Nobody—the American Indian—seems to be an absence but becomes a presence.¹⁶ Gerald Vizenor recognizes that "America embraces romantically not the *absence* of real people, but the simulated spiritual *presence* of the Indian. . . . And the simulations have become more important and more significant in America, in the world, than have 'real' people and their experiences" (Isernhagen 83, 102, Vizenor's emphasis). Through film, Jarmusch is

working to give Nobody, an American Indian, the presence of identity.

The tale of cultural intersection and exchange in *Ghost Dog*, with its subtextual theme of the propensity for violence, was well researched by Jarmusch. In an April, 2000 interview on radio program *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross, the filmmaker explains that he read books on samurai code and culture. His readings translate into his aesthetic practice. Symbols that separate text in one such book influenced the form of his film. "I used quotes from the *Hagakure* as little separations in the film itself, like breathing spaces, like—almost like a little running commentary on what informs *Ghost Dog* as a samurai" (Gross). These contrasting spaces support the film's ultimate aim as a study of contrasts: comedy and tragedy, a reflection on the meaning of life and death, and a study in contrast between cultures in America and between the code of the Mafia and the code of the Samurai.

Seeing is believing

Like his characters *Ghost Dog*, *Nobody*, and *Blake*, Jarmusch is an outsider. Though he may be one of the few American directors who have made the cinema as personal as poetry or fiction, some consider him a dead man in Hollywood (Cook). One wonders what significance his style of work bears on an American culture conditioned by the Hollywood instantiation and monopolization of perception and aesthetic articulation. When thinking about today's independent filmmakers like Jarmusch, Alexie, and Eyre, it is worth considering what has happened to the American independent cinema over the past decade.

Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that one model for thinking about American independent narrative feature filmmakers is to judge their main distinction from their Hollywood counterparts: independent practitioners maintain creative control. Another model, he believes, tends to gravitate around the Sundance Film Festival, where success in the independent sector is typically defined as landing a big commercial deal—with distributor and/or Hollywood studio contract. Such a deal yields the exposure, in short, that comes with dependence on large institutional backing (20). Although it would be wrong to assume that Jarmusch is not himself dependent on such forces to get his films in theaters (Miramax distributed *Dead Man*; Artisan, *Ghost Dog*), the salient difference between Jarmusch and other independents, contends Rosenbaum, is that he is strong enough to afford the luxury of brooking no creative interference when it comes to making production and postproduction decisions. Notwithstanding, in the present, reconfigured independent scene constructed around the Sundance myth, Rosenbaum sees Jarmusch as a

tough act for audiences to follow (22). Important to mention is that Rosenbaum's comments were written after *Dead Man* was released. One critic has since noted that *Dead Man*'s popularity seems to be increasing with age (Klein). Criticism following *Ghost Dog*'s release, however, seems to verify Rosenbaum's predictions. In her interview with Jarmusch in April, 2000, Gross talks about *Ghost Dog* and Jarmusch's continued marginalized status. Jarmusch confesses that his expertise is not marketing—it is making films—so he has to concede the marketing to the distributor (Klein).¹⁷

Jarmusch also admits to loving the form of cinema and commits to trying to learn how to do it and how to use it (Gross). In a similar vein, Alexie continues to work on film projects. He understands his filmmaking as ancillary to his activity as a poet; his work can thus be read as part and parcel of a conception of the self and its negotiation in cultural practice. *Smoke Signals*, however, more closely resembles Rosenbaum's second model of independent filmmaking. The Sundance Film Institute and Shadowcatcher Entertainment financed *Smoke Signals*, a postproduction purchase by Miramax. Alexie and Eyre, therefore, maintained creative control over the production process. The film debuted in January 1998 at the Sundance Film Festival and was subsequently released in theaters nationwide. This film's fate is one Alexie welcomed. He said in an interview, "while I'm going to continue to write poetry that nobody reads [laughs], that 2,000 people read, I also want to express myself in poetic ways that will reach a much wider audience" (West and West). For Alexie, accessibility means not only the ease at which diverse audiences enter his narrative, but also wide distribution. He resists, however, "aspiring to universal qualities"—which is, in his opinion, the industry's narrow conception of accessibility. He therefore seems to recognize that the universal would diminish what is implicit in experience. In Jhon Gilroy's forthcoming interview with Alexie,¹⁸ the filmmaker argues that his is a balancing act of trying to write mainstream entertainment while also trying to be as subversive as possible within that framework. Jarmusch, however, seems more ambivalent in allegiance to mainstream audiences. He concedes that he thinks he would make "very bad commercial films" (Gross). In fact, for Jarmusch, this is a world where almost everything is valued—or its value is assessed in the marketplace, which doesn't interest him (Gross).

The films I have discussed are themselves types of balancing acts: between lyrical and narrative forms, between defined and redrawn forms of genre. The films, like poetry, are incredibly self-aware and offer a kind of contradictory play of binary exposure. It seems important to now recall

Christine Gledhill's attention to genre in its triple existence as industrial mechanism, aesthetic practice, and arena of cross-cultural discursivity. Also important to keep in mind, however, is that poetry, lacking any ready commercial viability, has proven progressively more resistant to integration into mercantile processes of capitalism or its attendant social rituals (James 31). Accordingly, *Smoke Signals* erodes the familiar genre form and redraws the form to its own poetic ends. Yet Alexie's screenplay and Eyre's camera create something of an aberration: an accessible *and* poetic independent film with the wide audience appeal of a Hollywood vehicle. Jarmusch's filmic form, by contrast, seems more squarely situated as poetic independent film. David James argues that filmic form may be understood as the product of social necessities and aspirations, as they engage in the cinematic possibilities of their historical moment (23). I think we can then assess the three films I have discussed according to their historical moment and judge them as successful films. If we suspend the complexities of marketing and distribution for just a moment, we can say the three films are "good" films. A film worth consideration gives you a little piece of insight to apply to your own life; for some of us, that is what a "good" film does—whether it is an industry blockbuster or an independent art film.

Smoke Signals, for instance, is a film that made my stepfather reevaluate his relationship with his own dad, and also his role as a father of three children from his first marriage. While he appreciated the representation of contemporary American Indians as well as the diversity of personalities presented in the film, on another level he received the story of the film in a highly personal way. Similarly, *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* reflect back to an attuned audience its own limitations of history and internalized racial and ethnic stigmatizing and stereotyping. These insights on the level of reception are clearly linked to the film creators. The filmmakers reread history for their own purposes. Therefore, Alexie, Eyre, and Jarmusch, though each with distinct subjectivities, seem to both appreciate the depths beneath the surfaces of language and share a vision of poetry as visional truth, immensely powerful, subversive, and potentially life-changing. All three films I have discussed here are dynamic precisely because of their astute blending of elements; each film thrives on the articulation of its internal and external differences.

A key perception currently emerging in film studies is the significance of the "image" and the "imaginary" as sites of cultural construction and contest.¹⁹ In particular, the rethinking and use of genre suggest its renewed value for exploring the location of cinema at the heart of a social imaginary. Where genre, mode, and cultural formation were once viewed

as in the service of an overarching dominant narrative, we can now relocate them in a more complete matrix of cultural forms, practices, and effects that do not necessarily add up to master narratives but which have political purchase. Since notions of racial and cultural superiority have historically depended on configurations of power, the films I have discussed here are thus politically charged catalysts for fostering resistance. Chris Eyre says of *Smoke Signals*, "It's not a political movie at all, but it *is* a political movie because I was preserving the fact that these characters didn't have to be stereotyped" (Robson, Eyre's emphasis). For Jarmusch, *Dead Man's* politics were not a conscious kind of proselytizing (Rosenbaum 22). Stuart Hall once pointed out that cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being," belonging to the future as well as the past.²⁰ How, then, might we consider contemporary independent films and other media activism as perhaps serving to protect threatened identities or even create new identities?

All models of filmic distinctions and their cultural work, according to David James, must return to the social practice (23). He argues, "any alternative [film] practice, whether it be Black film, underground film, or women's film may be understood as a response to . . . three other spheres of activity: the alternative social group, the dominant society, and the hegemonic cinema"(23). James takes the example of the sixties' underground film as the most comprehensive illustration of this complex of determinations:

...the films of the beat generation were shaped simultaneously by the beats' own aesthetic principles and social uses for film, by their situation in respect to the commercial cinema, and by their situation as a dissident subculture in respect to the surrounding social formation. Underground cinema thus represents the modification of previous uses of the medium to produce a film practice formally consonant with its functions in beat society and capable of negotiating, symbolically and practically, the relations between the subculture and the whole. Though a major procedure in underground film is the documentation of beat life, its function is not just the representation of beat life, but also the production of beat society. (23-24)

Following James' model for social determinants, we can take the example of American Indian representation in contemporary film and unearth larger implications of current filmic practice and cinematic possibilities. The "relocation" in a more complete matrix of cultural forms, practices,

and effects appears to share the sixties' installation of the filmmaker as *poet*. Before the 1940s no tradition of filmmaking in the United States existed to provide an independent filmmaker who understood his or her work as Art—as an end sufficient to itself rather than as a means of entry into the studio industry—with a model of production methods and a theory of his or her social role (32). The role of film as the dominant medium of the twentieth century, inflecting and directing others, reached a curious apogee in the sixties. For James, the poetic film allegorizes its own means of production. We can now ask, what moment are we currently experiencing? Rather than mere adaptation of western visual culture, *Smoke Signals*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog* emerge as new forms of collective self-production. Though not the only films that perform this vital work, the three I have discussed here offer an interesting comparative study. *Smoke Signals* succeeds because of its ability to appeal to the responses of more than one audience or social grouping, its awareness of variable positions for the subject, the audience, or the medium, and the relationship between the reading subject and the film is one of negotiation and interpretation. Similarly, in his films Jarmusch builds alternative meanings out of his images and non-conformist discourse while attempting to “unbuild” the mainstream manifestations of Hollywood’s political power. In sum, through productive tension between the lyrical and narrative, *Smoke Signals* and Jarmusch’s latest films break with the notion of a static conception of form. Indeed, it seems chimerical to expect that a few independent films might initiate contemporary audiences to jettison their deeply ingrained cultural baggage. Will a few more accomplish change? Maybe. What matters is the possibility. Realistically, the films are a call to rehabilitate the social and aesthetic spheres, a move to relocate film in the experience of the audience, and re-find the rich experience of film.

NOTES

I sincerely thank John Purdy for the opportunity to present these ideas. I also warmly thank Jeff Rice and Craig Rinne for their counsel and comments.

¹All film dialogue is transcribed directly from the films.

²See Jacqueline Kilpatrick’s *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film*, xvi-xviii.

³Here, I use “familiar Hollywood narrative” rather than the notion of a classical Hollywood cinematic form in the aesthetic sense—a concept of the Classical Hollywood Cinema, and later the Classical Narrative Cinema, of David

Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, 1979, 1985. My aim is to emphasize a break with the notion of the classical Hollywood narrative as a *static* conception of form.

⁴Apparently, it felt right for actor Evan Adams as well. See Jhon Gilroy's interview with Adams in this issue of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 13.1 (Spring 2001).

⁵"How do we forgive our fathers? Maybe in a dream? Do we forgive our fathers for leaving us too often or forever when we were little? Maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage or making us nervous because there never seemed to be any rage there at all? Do we forgive our fathers for marrying or not marrying our mothers; for divorcing or not divorcing our mothers? And shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth or coldness? Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning, for shutting doors, for speaking through walls, or never speaking or never being silent? Do we forgive our fathers in our age or in theirs, or in their deaths, saying it to them or not saying it? If we forgive our fathers, what is left?"

⁶Assuming that there is a common center of value in the various Indian cultures that reach across tribal boundaries. The comment is in no way an attempt to reduce rich complexities and distinctly identifiable experiences.

⁷Another noteworthy and recent film is Valerie Red-Horse's 1998 *Naturally Native*. The film focuses on American Indians and community and is written, produced, directed, acted, and distributed by individuals who have some ancestral link to Native America. *Natural Native* powerfully proffers images of contemporary American Indian women and raises awareness about the gaming industry.

⁸For more on Jarmusch's earlier films, see Shawn Levy's article, "Postcards from Mars." *Sight and Sound* 10.4 (2000): 22-24. For insights regarding Jarmusch's repetitions of thematic preoccupations and narrative configurations of his earlier work, see "Postmodernism and American Cultural Difference: *Dispatches*, *Mystery Train*, and *The Art of Japanese Management*," by Thomas Carmichael in *boundary 2* 21.1 (1994): 220-232.

⁹For the lyrics of this tune, consult <<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/kids/lyrics/billyboy.htm>> or conduct a web search for the title.

¹⁰In an interview, Chris Eyre explains that, "it's been proven that the best investment in making a movie with Indians is period—like *Dances With Wolves*, around 1860-1890, because America will pay to see Indians but not contemporary Indians" (Robson).

¹¹Interestingly, in "Book Nine: New Coasts and Poseidon's Sea" of Homer's *The Odyssey*, Kyklops asks Odysseus, "'Tell me, how are you called?'" Odysseus replies, "... 'My name is Nohbdy: mother, father, and friends, everyone calls me Nohbdy'" (155-156).

¹²From Blake's "Proverbs of Hell."

¹³For more on the figure of William Blake and his non-conformist discourse, see Julian Wolfreys' *Writing London: The Trace of the Urban Text from Blake*

to *Dickens*; for additional reading on the intertextual relationships between *Dead Man* and the works of William Blake (1757-1827), see Jacob Levich's informative essay entitled "Western Auguries: Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*." *Film Comment* 32.3 (May-June 1996): 39-41. Additionally, the idea of the mythic as it relates to aspects of the films I discuss in this essay—in Native American literature, William Blake, Japanese culture, the Beats—is an area of my further research interests.

¹⁴An analysis of these selected texts and their relationship to the film would make an interesting study: *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, by Tsunetomo Yamamoto (1659-1719); the story of *Rashomon*, by Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927); animals and the folkloric in *The Wind in the Willows*, by Kenneth Graham (1859-1932); a study of race relations, W.E.B. DuBois' (1868-1963) *The Souls of Black Folk*; *Night Nurse* (I found two: one, *The Night Nurse*, by James Johnston Abraham (1876-), the other, *Night Nurse*, a more recent [and perhaps more unlikely] "Harlequin romance" by Hilda Pressley); and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's (1797-1851) *Frankenstein*.

¹⁵Cayuga Nation of New York

¹⁶Nobody as an absence/presence and the possibility that Victor's "Nobody" in *Smoke Signals* may resonate with Jarmusch films are observations made by Dean Rader in his unpublished paper entitled "Native Screenings." I extend my gratitude to the author for his permission to cite his ideas.

¹⁷Miramax's distribution of *Dead Man* seems to have disappointed Jarmusch (see Klein's interview in *The Onion*).

¹⁸Gilroy's interview with Sherman Alexie will appear in the *Bellingham Review*.

¹⁹See *Reinventing Film Studies*. Eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. New York: Oxford U P, 2000.

²⁰See Hall's essay "Cultural Identity in Cinematic Representation" in *Framework* 36 (1989).

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FORUM

From the Editor

Dear Subscribers:

When I became editor in 1994, at a hectic time for the journal, I thought I would simply get things in order and pass the editorship along to someone within a year or two. It has been seven, and they have been truly enjoyable years. They would have not been so except for the support of the members of the Association, and I want to thank you all for your kindness and encouragement. I appreciate it. Likewise, I could not have survived even the first months, let alone seven years, without the efforts of Robert Nelson, whose seemingly infinite energy and fine eye for detail have been the actual force behind the journal. The fact that these are administered with an exceptionally good spirit has made it an enjoyable experience. Thanks Bob.

I would like to take a minute to introduce *SAIL*'s new editor, Malea Powell. I look forward to Malea's contributions to the journal, and, with you, wish her the very best in all her endeavors.

John Purdy
Editor, *SAIL*

Salute

I cannot let this issue go to press without offering a special thanks, on behalf of all of us affiliated with *SAIL* as staffpersons, as subscribers, as contributors, and in any case as admirers, to our colleague John Purdy, *editor quondam editorque futurus*. For those who don't already know the story, John's characteristically selfless service to our common cause

predates his editorship of *SAIL*: for years prior to coming aboard the journal he was the editor of our important newsletter *ASAIL Notes*, and in a very crucial and (I think) desperate time for the journal and the development of the field he readily and unconditionally agreed to step in as temporary editor of the journal, thereby keeping *SAIL* afloat. Little did he suspect that "temporary" and "seven years" would be synonyms, but I hope I break no confidence when I say now that John has bent much of his life around us and our needs these past several years. Those of us with children know what it means to put your child first, your own agenda tailored accordingly; *SAIL* has grown up strong and confident thanks to John's guidance and loving attention. To my good friend and colleague: thank you, John, from me as from all of us, for your care and good sense. *Bon voyage*, Cap'n: may it continue to be, as Simon says, a good journey.

Robert M. Nelson

Call

22nd American Indian Workshop: Native American Ritual and Performance.

22-24 March 2002, Trinity College Dublin

Proposals are especially welcome for papers that discuss:

1. The representation of Native Americans in mass media (film, television, internet, video games, advertising) and/or the fine arts (theatre, performance art, music, dance, graphic art)
2. The relationship between Native American performance and ritual (and drama).
3. Literature and/or the arts related to Native American performance and/or ritual.
4. Performance of Native American cultural history (as in Chicano theatre which employs Aztec and Mayan mythology)
5. The use of performance, including the performance of ritual, by Native

Americans to negotiate their cultural identity vis a vis the dominant culture.

This will be an interdisciplinary conference of interest to scholars of anthropology, sociology, theatre, film and performance studies, Native American literature, religious studies and cultural studies. It will focus primarily on North America but it may also include papers on Central and South America.

Presentations should not exceed 25 minutes (including projection of slides, films, or videos).

In addition, there will be a session that is normally held by the workshop with reports (20 minutes) on "Current Research," for which individual papers may also be proposed. These may deal, for example, with unusually research difficulties faced by current scholars or with current trends in scholarship or with problems of defining the terms Native American and America Indian.

Submit proposals (300-500 words) by **15 October 2001** to:

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School of Drama
Trinity College
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REVIEWS

Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film.

Jacquelyn Kilpatrick. *Lincoln: U of Nebraska P*, 1999.

ISBN: 0-8032-7790-3. 261 pages.

Celluloid Indians is an informative and thought-provoking survey of the increasingly rich and complex history of Native American representations in American films (there is also an increasingly rich and complex history of Native Americans in foreign films but that isn't the focus of this text). *Celluloid Indians* primarily includes short discussions of over fifty American films from the twentieth century. Organized chronologically, the text also includes the historical and cultural influences that affected the depictions of Native Americans in Hollywood. Kilpatrick begins her survey with the silent films of the early 1900s and concludes with the 1998 release of *Smoke Signals*. As the author states in her introduction, "[a] complex analysis of each film is not the purpose of [the] book; the films have been chosen because they are examples of stereotype development, or because they show deconstructions of the stereotype, or because they markedly reflect mainstream American society's perception at a specific point in history" (xviii).

The text begins with a chapter on the "Genesis of the Stereotypes" of Native Americans, the European and Euro-American perspectives that laid the groundwork for racist Hollywood images. The chapter includes brief discussions of the influences of James Fenimore Cooper, Nationalism, Dime Novels, and Buffalo Bill and Wild West Shows in the creation of Indian stereotypes. Kilpatrick concludes that Cooper, for example, was "building an American nationalist mythology" (3) and that the authors of dime novels "took the ingredients in Cooper's works . . . and made them into a mix-and-match recipe for western fiction that has survived well over a hundred years of use in novels and provided the basis for the model

Indian in Hollywood's moviemaking" (9). It is because of the Wild West show "that cowboys and Indians became so closely intertwined" (13) and it was the Wild West show and the dime novel that lived on in Hollywood Westerns.

The second chapter is titled "The Silent Scrim." This chapter surveys the representation of Native Americans during the silent film era. Topics include Buffalo Bill, D. W. Griffith, the popular motif of the "Vanishing" Indian, and the melodramatic formula. From her analysis, Kilpatrick concludes that these "early films were based on Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show" (35) which in turn "were based on dime novels, well known authors like Cooper and [Robert Montgomery] Bird" (35), and that each of these historical representations built the myth of the Indian "a piece at a time, constructing reality as it best suited the purpose at hand" (35). The result, argues Kilpatrick, was "an imaginary Indian . . . that could be easily digested by the consumer" (35).

In chapter three, "The Cowboy Talkies of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s," Kilpatrick offers an informative critique of the cinematic language used to create Hollywood Indians. She also investigates the "frontier" motif, changes in federal policies toward Indians, and the relationship between Native Americans and World War II. Chapter Four, "Win Some and Lose Some, The 1960s and 1970s," with its emphasis on the thematic "win some and lose some," references the films of the two decades that either broke new ground by either abandoning previous stereotypes or repeated or reinforced the existing stereotypes. Films discussed in this chapter include John Ford's 1964 *Cheyenne Autumn*, Abraham Polonsky's 1969 *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here*, Ralph Nelson's 1970 *Soldier Blue*, Elliot Silverstein's 1970 *A Man Called Horse*, Arthur Penn's 1970 *Little Big Man* and Milos Forman's 1975 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Chapter five discusses films from the 1980s and 1990s, decades that Kilpatrick dubs as "sympathetic." Films discussed in this chapter include the second remake of John Ford's *Stagecoach*, released in 1986, John Boorman's 1985 *The Emerald Forest*, Franc Roddam's 1988 *War Party*, Jonathan Wacks' 1989 *Powwow Highway*, Kevin Costner's 1990 *Dances With Wolves*, Ridley Scott's 1992 *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, Richard Bugajski's 1993 *Clearcut*, Bruce Beresford's 1992 *Black Robe*, Michael Mann's 1993 *Last of the Mohicans* (the fifth movie adaptation based on James Fenimore Cooper's novel), Walter Hill's 1993 *Geronimo*, Mark Griffith's 1994 *Cheyenne Warrior*, Disney's 1993 animated film *Pocahontas*, Tab Murphy's 1995 *Last of the Dogmen*, Michael Cimino's 1996 *The Sunchaser* and Jim Jarmusch's 1995 *Dead Man*.

Kilpatrick targets some of her harshest and most ironic comments on *Pocahontas* and *Last of the Dogmen*, two films she considers to be “abysmal offerings” (156). She then devotes one of her longest and strongest readings to *The Sunchaser*, a film she finds “partly about deconstructing stereotypes” (164). Moreover, according to Kilpatrick, the film manages “to tell a white man’s story and a native story without the appropriation of identity, and in presenting the Navajo people, beliefs, and ceremonies with respect” (168). The chapter is of particular interest for Kilpatrick’s insights. She notes, “the images of Natives in the eighties were more contemporary, but they were also sometimes grossly modified by new misinterpretations” (103). She concludes with the observation that during the nineties “Hollywood filmmakers were ready to ‘set the record straight’ on the American Indian. But it was not as easy as it seemed” (124).

The final chapter, in my opinion the most interesting in the book, describes “The American Indian Aesthetic.” It includes critiques of four films based on texts written by Native American authors: *House Made of Dawn*, *Harold of Orange*, *Medicine River*, and *Smoke Signals*. Kilpatrick begins with an overview of the authors of the works the movies are based on; she then moves on to discuss the directors and producers of the films. The chapter ends with an examination of the first commercially successful film written, directed and (co)produced by American Indians, *Smoke Signals*.

Celluloid Indians is a very readable and scholarly work and a great source for anyone wanting to chart the general history of Indians in American cinema or simply find a catalogue of films with Indians. Its readings of films, especially *Pocahontas* and *Sunchaser*, are insightful, and its concluding discussion of Native American filmmakers is invaluable to both the experienced and neophyte viewer. This is a very useful text for students and scholars alike. My only criticism of the text is that it is often so provocative in its analysis that oftentimes I found myself wanting a point developed more. Because of its brevity, the text often leaves a topic or makes an observation just when the topic or observation seems most worthy of continued development. This happens not only in the short readings of specific films but also in the occasional political and social comments offered by the author. This criticism aside, I found this book a valuable and enjoyable reading experience.

David Erben

The Sun Unwound: Original Texts From Occupied America. Edward Dorn and Gordon Brotherston, eds. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1999. ISBN 1-55643-292-5. 267 pages.

When you first open a copy of Edward Dorn and Gordon Brotherston's *The Sun Unwound: Original Texts From Occupied America*, you think the scope of the text seems hopelessly large. Poetry and bits of oratory are translated from three ancient languages (Nahuatl, Mayan, and Quechua) and two modern ones (Spanish and Portuguese) and are coming from two very different periods, the sixteenth century and the twentieth. The only assurance of coherence comes from a cover blurb that promises us that these works represent the "disparate voices of oppressed Americans through the centuries." Even for those of us willing to allow some editorial latitude, this seems too much of a stretch. But as you read the poems, common themes do begin to thread their way through the material, images recur again and again, and, eventually, you get a sense of a larger purpose. In the end, you begin to understand that this collection does have something unique to offer beyond its role as the crowning and final achievement of the poet Edward Dorn. What it offers is something like a collective voice limited for what Leslie Silko has called the five-hundred-year "war of resistance" (*Yellow Woman* 149).

The book is divided into three sections. The first, "Images of the New World" (originally published in an earlier Brotherston collection by the same name) contains poems, bits of mythology, and short works of oratory from the late sixteenth century to the early seventeenth in three major languages: Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs from central Mexico; Mayan from southern and southeastern Mexico and Guatemala; and Quechua, the language of the Inca in Peru. The second section is called "Palabra de guerrillero" and contains works by nine "guerrillero poets" of the mid-twentieth century, coming from a range of places—Argentina, Peru, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Cuba—beginning with a tribute to Fidel Castro by none other than the infamous Ché Guevara. In their preface, Dorn and Brotherston explain that these works were first

published in 1968 in a collection called *Our Word/Palabra de guerrillero* and “tell, firsthand and in the first person, of the great guerrillero revolution of the mid 20th century.” The third section is called “Modern Chronicles” and features three early twentieth-century, Latin American poets: César Vallejo from Peru; Patricia Galvão from Brazil; and José Emilio Pacheco from Mexico. Several of the works in this final section are being published in this collection for the first time, or being republished after having gone out of print. Throughout the text, the original language, whatever it may be, appears on the facing page or above Dorn and Brotherston’s translation.

The collection represents a thirty-year collaboration between Dorn and Brotherston and is unquestionably, at least from a linguistic point of view, a substantial achievement. Brotherston, who teaches at Indiana University and helped to found the Latin American program at the University of Essex in 1965, has been a celebrated translator and cultural scholar of both ancient and modern Latin American texts since the 1970’s. He has authored such works as *Latin American Poetry: Origins and Presence* (1975), *The Emergence of the Latin American Novel* (1977), *Image of the New World: the American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts* (1979), and *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas Through Their Literature* (1992). His association with Edward Dorn on this project began in 1967, and the book successfully combines Brotherston’s linguistic expertise and knowledge of the cultures with the poetic sensibilities of Dorn’s best work.

Dorn, who died in late 1999, taught Creative Writing at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He was one of the younger poets associated with Black Mountain College in the 1950s—a student of Charles Olson, a contemporary of Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan. Dorn’s poetry was heavily influenced by Olson, especially in his early career. He was included in Donald Allen’s *New American Poets 1945-1960* as a young avant garde primitivist. But Dorn’s work, while rooted in the land as Olson’s was and steeped in the imagery of indigenous cultures as Olson’s had been, often took as its theme the plight of the working class and the legacy of the great western myths of the U.S. His major work, *Gunslinger* (1975), established for Dorn a unique voice, a voice full of humor and yet resonating with the depth of human experience. It is that resonating voice that he brings to this collection.

In the first section, “Images of the New World,” Dorn and Brotherston—in a decidedly Olsonesque fashion—seek to “gauge the cultural depth of Mesoamerica and the Andes, as well as the disastrous consequences of the European invasions.” They do the former by offering

bits of mythology and cosmology and poems celebrating the traditional life, works that reveal the rich tapestry of these pre-European societies; and they do the latter with exacting and emotional eye-witness accounts and speeches. The "Siege of Tenochtitlan," for instance, is a gruesome account of the last days of the inhabitants of the city as they waited for the Spanish to continue the attack. "The Aztec Priests' Speech," given after the city had been seized, laments the loss of the culture while simultaneously chastising the Spanish for their efforts at deicide. In fact, this emerges as a common theme in these early works—the terrible grief at the physical losses coupled with the outrage over assaults upon the spiritual and sacred. And, as these people get to know the European and their religion more, they begin to realize the extent of the hypocrisy, the extent of the disparity between European words and European actions, and their outrage and bitterness deepens.

In the second section, this curious mixture of celebration and outrage jumps in time to the twentieth century with the works of such revolutionaries as Ché Guevara, Luis de la Puente, Javier Heraud, Otto René Castillo, and Fernando Gordillo Cervantes. These poems are sometimes simple—and here one especially hears the distinctive voice of Edward Dorn—but even still they remain rooted in the land. For instance, poems such as Heraud's "Poema" and "El nuevo viaje" distinctly place the land at the heart of this struggle as well. Too, in these poems you have a strong sense of the historical depth. As Fernando Gordillo says in his poem "Andrés," "one hundred years from where you stood, the enemy is the same." But beyond that, there is sense of something even more profound at work, something that both resonates with the earlier poems and connects directly to them, and that is a sense of the enormous power and place of the dead in this resistance. Poems like "Los muertos" and "Requiem por Luis Augusto" not only illustrate the historical depth of the sentiment "if I die, others will take my place," but also indicate that on a spiritual level the dead ancestors are the reason for continuing the fight in the first place. It's reminiscent of Leslie Silko's message in *Almanac of the Dead*, or in some of her essays in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, that the dead have as much say, if not more say, in the actions and politics of the living.

The third section, "Modern Chronicles," at first seems out of place in relation to the earlier sections. Here the works are Latin American examples of modernist experimentation, poems written with all the typical modernist, existential themes of illness and death, of terrible alienation, of disjointed and fragmented urban life. But even here we see a poetry that offers a more Native response to modernist issues, a poetry that often

begins by celebrating the land. César Vallejo's poem "Telúrica y magnética," here printed for the first time, directly compares the modern sensibility to the bounty and richness—especially the spiritual richness—of the Peruvian landscape. And we find in this section a poetry that again and again praises the fighters, the ones who struggle for the workers, for the common man, for the rights of women (especially true of Patricia Galvão's work).

So, finally, what serves to unite these very different sections is the overall sense of listening to a people long unheard involved in a struggle that spans five hundred years. Silko claims it to be a "war of resistance that the indigenous people of the Americas has never ceased to fight" (*Yellow Woman* 150). She says, "the spirits of the ancestors cry out for justice.... [and] their voices are louder now" (150). This seems to pretty accurately sum up the spirit of this book. And though it isn't comprehensive, or even particularly inclusive, this collection with its remarkable translations stands as a tribute to the poet Edward Dorn and a collection worth serious consideration.

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