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# *The Exiles*: Native Survivance and Urban Space in Downtown Los Angeles

Liza Black

As Yvonne walks the city streets of downtown Los Angeles in her lush white coat and matching hair ribbon in *The Exiles* (1961), we witness an urban American Indian woman onscreen for the first time in film history.<sup>1</sup> Taking solace in the streets and storefronts, she opens up her very soul to the camera and discloses her most heartfelt secrets. At the same time as her monologues give clues to her identity, they challenge the viewer's expectations. As an Apache and one of the American Indian women repressed by the settler-colonial project on multiple levels, Yvonne's voice speaks back to those who would silence her. Contemporary Los Angeles urban Indians represent themselves in *The Exiles*, creating a profound connection to Native artists and activists who are reclaiming and reimagining downtown as an Indian space. Also connecting the present with the past, this film acknowledges the presence and struggle of young American Indians who left reservations for Los Angeles and their children who continue to call LA home. As they build on the history of LA's urban Indians, these Native artists call attention to the reality that all lands in the United States are Indian lands in ways that exemplify Vizenor's concept of "survivance." In moving beyond reactions to colonization, survivance articulates Native self-representation that is separate and distinct both spatially and conceptually. These qualities are clearly seen in Native artworks that physically claim urban spaces and reappropriate historical representations of American Indians, especially in pop culture.<sup>2</sup>

Long ignored, Native people have often functioned as an absence in America's political life, scholarship, and popular culture. When Native people do make an appearance, artists and filmmakers negotiate the public's lack of basic knowledge both by introducing new knowledge and by reconfiguring preexisting "knowledge"

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steeped in stereotype. Likewise, Native American studies continues to be marginalized: although scholars in the field read widely across disciplines and pull from a wide range of sources, the impact of their scholarship continues to be confined mostly to Native American studies. Scholarship in early American history, for instance, now incorporates Native American people, but most nineteenth- and twentieth-century American historians feel little pressure to familiarize themselves with Native history, incorporate it into their courses, or bring it to bear on their research agendas. Native American studies, Native political issues, and Native cultural interventions remain marginalized, perhaps even greatly; despite the efforts of generations of activists, artists, and scholars of all backgrounds, they are simply not taken as seriously as they should or given as much space as they deserve. One remedy, even as Native American studies scholars continue to situate their research in the context of outside research agendas, is to seek even more dialogue between Native American studies and other fields.

Although it has most been studied by film and urban scholars, a film such as *The Exiles* presents a unique opportunity for broad academic discourse because it foregrounds Native voices in ways that involve other disciplines. Just as American historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially, continue to ignore Native history, so too have scholars failed to see what *The Exiles* says about urban American Indians. With virtually no studio shots, this film explores the inner and social world of Indians in the physical space of downtown Los Angeles and in the precise moment of 1958, presenting a window into the world of young Natives in Los Angeles in the late 1950s. This barely noticed film deserves ample scholarly attention because never before have Indians told their own stories before a camera and placed themselves alongside their contemporaries in a cityscape to communicate the reality of living in a city as an American Indian. Filmic representations of American Indians are plentiful, but only rarely have the actors been American Indian, and before *The Exiles* they were never both American Indian and non-actors.

The film was shot exclusively on the streets of downtown Los Angeles and at nearby Chavez Ravine. The two locations used in *The Exiles* have both been plowed under and replaced with expensive high-rises and Dodger Stadium. The neighborhoods where working-class Chicanos and American Indians lived and thrived but no longer exist can literally be seen, documented, and understood through *The Exiles*. Remarkably, as the film documented what later disappeared, the film places Native people at the center of Los Angeles, leaving the viewer to assume their presence in the city will continue. Native viewers perhaps see their parents or who they imagine their parents to have been, and non-Natives see the LA their parents knew. *The Exiles*, then, is primarily a story of Indian survivance and secondarily of inner-city gentrification, although the scholarly literature reverses this focus.<sup>3</sup>

As the only film in the mid-twentieth century featuring Indians representing themselves, *The Exiles* stands out for Native control over the material, yet disciplinary boundaries have firmly situated this film in film studies and urban studies, with concerns that are quite separate from issues in the film that are central to Native American studies and history. For instance, when American Indians migrated to cities under the relocation program of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, they encountered a



**FIGURE 1.** Image from *The Exiles*: Yvonne walking home after her husband failed to pick her up after her movie with 3rd Street tunnel in background. All images courtesy of Milestone Films.

fundamentally different Los Angeles than the one we know today. The tone of existing scholarship and journalism on *The Exiles* tends to be mournful, with critics longing for a Los Angeles that no longer exists because of freeways and gentrification. When *Time* magazine called the film “a precious document of a vanished culture,” it meant the culture of Los Angeles, not that of urban American Indians.<sup>4</sup> The limitations and mournful tone of film and urban studies scholarship on this film stem from a lack of Native voices; the archival materials are not Native-based, but largely from director Kent Mackenzie, his family, and the owner of the film.<sup>5</sup>

Other film scholars seek to categorize the film, contrasting its neorealist, independent format with cinema vérité, ethnography, or even documentary. In contrast, studies placing the analytical emphasis on Native people produce quite different results. The film’s placement of Native people in the present stands out profoundly from the hordes of films that place Native people in a fictionalized past. Not only is *The Exiles* unique in how it defies film genre conventions, by keeping the focus on the American Indians, rather than the Los Angeles setting or director Kent Mackenzie, it also demonstrates and documents Native presence and survivance in powerful ways. For Vizenor and the scholars who invoke his theoretical construct, survivance is more than a reaction against genocide. It is a positive and distinct landscape created by Native people for Native people, even while survivance challenges the fundamentals of erasure and genocide embedded in settler colonialism. Critics continue to reflect on and argue about Vizenor’s meanings and intentions in regard to survivance,<sup>6</sup> but of central concern in this critical discourse is how Native people have used art to create space for a dynamic

utterance that is more than a response to colonialism, but indeed, a life separate and distinct from colonial tragic representations. In the case of *The Exiles*, the director neither recreates nor even draws upon the trope of the “vanishing Indian” even as his film eerily and beautifully records the doomed spaces of 1950s Los Angeles now existing only in memory.

In the sense that *The Exiles* film demonstrates survivance, rather than claiming it or explaining it, Mackenzie self-consciously worked against the norms of American society which erase Native presence. Further, representational norms are reversed when the Natives in the film create a world in which Indians have always been and always will be. Instead of Indians being fragile, tragic, and romanticized, Los Angeles embodies these characteristics of a dying culture. LA becomes all that American Indians normally represent; something fragile and romanticized. Instead of Indians vanishing, Mackenzie shows how urban landscapes are always up for grabs and this includes downtown Los Angeles as well. He showed incredible foresight. Since the late 1950s, Los Angeles has only become more segregated. Downtown has been fitfully remodeled over and over by city managers. Their desperate and manic efforts at gentrification have only partially succeeded. Although pushed to the physical margins of downtown, the unassimilated have continued to uphold their claim to the physical space of Los Angeles, especially downtown.<sup>7</sup>

If survivance is the best lens through which to view *The Exiles*, a variety of theoretical frameworks may also guide our analysis as well. For instance, a postcolonial feminism applied to film analysis would not only consider whether women in *The Exiles* truly speak, but more importantly, how gender itself speaks in the film through viewpoint and the male gaze. Black feminist postcolonial theorists would perhaps investigate how the movie is received by audiences. In tandem with postcolonial theorists, they might define the extent to which Native characters are cast as “Other” in *The Exiles* and the configurations of white guilt and narcissism present in the film. Although these theorists present an invaluable service in challenging the inherently Western values and viewpoints of both feminism and literary criticism, they are less directly relevant to Native American studies as they emerge from questions quite distinct from its focus of Native American studies, which often is recovering and articulating a Native viewpoint.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, theories of narrative and how narrative ultimately shapes content remain the bedrock for analyzing the storytelling structures of film. Narrative theory retains a close alliance with structuralism in its search for terms and signs that can be used to analyze all narratives, borrowing heavily from linguistics. Distinct from narrative theory, yet overlapping with it, film theory emerged from linguistics and literary theory; both are fundamentally interdisciplinary in that they ask questions influenced by psychology, linguistics, feminist and gender studies, and literary criticism. From the film and narrative theory perspective, any number of questions could be asked of *The Exiles* or any film about framing, viewpoint, symbolism, and methods of representations of reality.

Analyses of *The Exiles* that primarily pertain to issues in film and narrative theory are far less valid and useful for the purpose of understanding American Indians in the

postwar era, however. Essentially, films of the 1950s and 1960s with Indian characters systematically stereotyped them as members of a vanishing race and relics of the past, always situated in historic conflicts between tribes, white settlers, and their military forces. When studios hired Indian actors or extras, they covered them in cheap costumes mimicking Plains Indian cultures. In the postwar period, less than a handful of Native people held positions as technical advisers and none were screenwriters or producers. Indian characters were also used to indirectly critique the Vietnam War or assuage white guilt over Indian genocide. These films disempowered Native people at the time and continue to represent Native people in inaccurate and powerful ways.<sup>9</sup> In the context of *The Exiles*—a filmic attempt to capture reality—pursuing modes of analysis aligned with film and narrative theory would be likely to undermine the value and significance of American Indians of this period playing themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, some see *The Exiles* as continuing the tradition of negative representations of Indians and support their claims of Indian victimization in the film by relying heavily on archival materials about director Kent Mackenzie in particular.<sup>11</sup> While these scholarly claims are both sincere and valid, *The Exiles* is nonetheless exceptional because in addition to the contributions of its director, the Native participants also influenced the film's content. Mackenzie's reach and influence were held in check by the Natives themselves: their personalities, their values, their goals, and their lack of financial investment in the film industry. It is also because the 1950s and 1960s witnessed an absolute dearth of representations of Native Americans created and controlled by themselves that *The Exiles* stands unparalleled in the era as a cultural production that uniquely seeks to understand how Natives saw themselves, how they negotiated visual representations of themselves, and the results of that perspective and negotiation. As this article demonstrates, this film should be a site of dialogue between the interdisciplinary field of Native American studies and other fields such as film studies, which will not only illuminate Native people and their survivance, but also interrogate and challenge dominant film and narrative theories.

## BUNKER HILL: THE HISTORIC LOCATION OF *THE EXILES*

In Southern California, settler-colonial encroachment on Indian land began in the eighteenth century. What we now call Los Angeles was the home of the Tongvas and other Indigenous groups, stolen first by Spain, then by Mexico, and finally by the United States. California's gold rush meant a radical assault on the lives of all California Indians: their genocide ushered in the modern era of Los Angeles as a metropolis with very few Natives compared to the millions of non-Natives.<sup>12</sup>

From my perspective, the importance of *The Exiles* is closely linked to the film's locations. Writers such as John Fante, Charles Bukowski, and Raymond Chandler used the downtown neighborhood as a tool for creating a beautiful, yet melancholic literary landscape, both before and after the destruction of the original Bunker Hill neighborhood. The downtown portion of the city of Los Angeles functions like a supporting character in *The Exiles* as well. As Mackenzie began filming, downtown LA and the neighborhood of Bunker Hill in particular were on the brink of massive



FIGURE 2. *Yvonne's reflection in the window while shopping.*

gentrification. At the time the film was shot, city planning had created a downtown that symbolized greater Los Angeles, holding a power that was centralizing yet polarizing as well. The city of Los Angeles wanted to bring downtown back to what it had been in the 1920s: a thriving, expensive neighborhood with wealthy white residents, high-priced commercial real estate, and high-end stores filled with customers ready to spend. They envisioned a skyline filled with skyscrapers and expensive storefronts, hotels, and theaters.

Using venues such as the *Los Angeles Times*, city boosters first accomplished this vision by mythologizing an image of the neighborhood in the minds of the public as decaying, demoralized, and full of criminals. That mythology may have been true of Skid Row, which was then full of residence hotels housing dozens of poor, single men, sometimes with many sharing a single room. But Bunker Hill was altogether different: in the 1950s its landscape was still dotted with large Victorian mansions, some of

which had been divided and transformed into apartment buildings filled with elderly, but self-sufficient pensioners. Unlike Skid Row to the south and east, these mansions housed Angelenos who were working class, not destitute.<sup>13</sup> Regardless, in 1955 Los Angeles launched the Bunker Hill Redevelopment Project with the object of tearing down Bunker Hill rental and local businesses buildings and selling the land to developers. Honing in specifically on Bunker Hill, the project left Skid Row and southern downtown untouched.

When the mansions of Bunker Hill were demolished, many residents found themselves unable to replace the affordable housing they had lost: to the west were expensive homes, and to the south and east, the unsafe single beds of Skid Row. None of these options being ideal, in the end they had to move to Skid Row, the outskirts of Los Angeles, or become homeless. Instead of creating new and better housing for the stable community of mostly pensioners, the city tore down both rentals and stores, replacing them with parking structures and high rises. Once this functioning working-class enclave was razed by the city, it became the financial epicenter of Los Angeles. City boosters purchased lots on Bunker Hill, erected massive skyscrapers, and transformed the unique neighborhood into a wealthy, thriving financial district regardless of the unintended social consequences of only increasing the numbers of homeless in Los Angeles.<sup>14</sup> The transformation was so thorough that the working class neighborhood of Bunker Hill bears no similarity to the throng of restaurants, highrises, and museums now in its place. A handful of historic buildings south of Bunker Hill remain, such as the main branch of the Los Angeles Public Library and the Biltmore Hotel, but the historic buildings of Bunker Hill are gone.<sup>15</sup>

Both the scrappy residents of Bunker Hill and the steep climbs of the hill itself captivated the imagination of *The Exiles'* director: this angled landscape, the glowing lights along Third Street, and the tunnels connecting downtown and Bunker Hill became a silent frame for a small group of urban Indians and their interpersonal dramas, rendering the inner lives of Indians in visual terms. Yet most of the attention paid to *The Exiles* to date focuses not on American Indians, but on the film's physical spaces, as does literature on the history of Los Angeles that addressees the transformation and erasure of neighborhoods as LA grew into a metropolis. This analysis of changing neighborhoods should be placed alongside new studies of the American Indians and other minorities who are the main residents and characters.

In addition to the destruction of Bunker Hill, the city of Los Angeles destroyed the thriving neighborhood of Chavez Ravine. Through all manner of subterfuge, the city forced the thriving, working-class Chicano residents of Chavez Ravine out of their homes. Eventually, the building of Dodger Stadium destroyed and displaced the community. Developers buried the entire neighborhood and Palo Verde Elementary School. Chicanos and Latinos only began attending games and overcoming their hatred of the stadium when the Dodgers strategically brought Fernando Valenzuela to the team in 1980. Their love for Fernando brought them to the stadium and eventually turned them into devoted Dodgers fans and attendees.<sup>16</sup> Although Angelenos have come to love the Dodgers, many older Chicanos and Latinos continue to remember the bitter history of Dodger Stadium, even as the new generation remains oblivious



to the roots of the team's move to Los Angeles. In *The Exiles*, Los Angeles is the Los Angeles their parents remember from their childhoods. Former residents mourn the devastation of the neighborhood and their children emotionally connect with the loss even as they engage in Dodger fandom.

When I show film clips during talks on *The Exiles*, I find that Angelenos become nostalgic and also have bittersweet feelings upon seeing Chavez Ravine and the view from the hill above Chavez Ravine that has since disappeared. The young Indian men and women in the film see a downtown cityscape from that hill that lacks the skyscrapers that downtown is known for today. This is no accident. Knowing full well these spaces would be gentrified, Mackenzie filmed Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine fully intending to document them. Those carefully chosen spaces haunt Angelenos and to see them in the film creates a powerful bond with viewers, even if their nostalgic reactions also include criticism of the shortsightedness of Los Angeles. Film critics join the chorus of praise for Mackenzie's insight and devotion to the neighborhoods and people of 1950s Los Angeles and condemn developers both past and present. It is likely that Mackenzie intended to provide a critique of Los Angeles through his art. Indeed, Los Angeles, and especially Hollywood, is perhaps the urban area most loved and hated in the world. Like the commercial films churned out by Los Angeles, in some ways Los Angeles often seems to represent a city more strongly than its actual existence as one. Los Angeles continues to bask in renewal projects which result in a constant newness that many find banal. Even at the time of filming, Mackenzie's critique of LA fit with the critique of others who were struggling to understand LA and its most likely problematic future. Scholarship continues to thrive on the topic of LA's superficiality and the unintended social consequences of gentrification.<sup>17</sup>

How did a bicultural English-American come to create an unknown masterpiece that documents both a little-known Los Angeles and the even lesser-known urban Indians living there? He achieved something majestic in cinema and unparalleled in representations of Indians on a shoestring budget, starting with only \$539 on the first day of shooting.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps because of his financial limitations, Mackenzie was unwilling to waste film. He carefully planned each sequence, even though he also captured unplanned moments. In his attempt to be economical, he made each shoot match their plans exactly. On set, the young Natives were always introduced to each crew member, and they were promised a party and a good time on set. The feeling they created on set comes through in the film, as it appears to be a group of friends having a great time together, somewhat naturally in spite of the cameras.

While his characters were American Indians, Mackenzie was deeply situated in cinema studies and attempted to create an altogether new cinema without form.<sup>19</sup> For a filmmaker this goal is not unique, yet at each turn the choices Mackenzie make are surprising. The film criticism regarding *The Exiles* can indeed be fascinating, but to look closely at the Natives in the film will show us the complicated nature of living as a Native person in a multiracial metropolis. For the American Indians in the film, their director's fascination meant little to them; they participated for the opportunity to represent themselves. There is virtually no dialogue about the landscape they inhabit, which suggests that the concerns of Mackenzie and scholars of his work such as Eric



FIGURE 3. Yvonne laughing at her friend's ex.

Avila lie outside their interests. They may have been aware of the intellectual concerns around freeways, gentrification, and white flight, but these are not their motivating concerns. While focusing on how such issues are represented in this work is both valid and illuminating, this is a film in which Native people actually speak in their own words, wear their own clothes, and present incredibly complex lives that revel in challenging stereotypes and assumptions while they create altogether new identities. Reading *The Exiles* as an ethnography or even autobiography tells us something about Indians and Los Angeles, not merely "LA."

#### THE FILM AS TEXT: FEDERAL POLICY, MID-CENTURY URBAN NATIVES, AND BILCULTURAL IDENTITY

*The Exiles* documents the outcome of urbanization programs by following a small group of young friends. In the mid-twentieth century, what historians call the relocation and termination era began officially with the Indian Relocation Act of 1956. Aiming at the so-called tribal dependency on the federal government that was said to be holding Native people back from their economic and personal potential, the law encouraged American Indians to leave their reservation communities for densely populated urban areas far from their homes and extended families. Seeing urbanization as a solution to tribal problems, the government targeted tribal communities, structures, ways of life, and social organization as part of their effort.<sup>20</sup> After World

War II the federal government began sending thousands of young American Indians on one-way tickets to urban areas throughout the United States. Notably, the young Natives who moved to cities were the children and grandchildren of those who had undergone the more violent effects of assimilation legislated through boarding schools and allotment. Beyond what forced assimilation had already done, the result of this federal legislation was undoubtedly a further erosion of Native identity, language, culture, religion, and dress.

In recalling the forced assimilation era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most historians portray mid-century federal relocation policy as bearing disastrous implications and consequences for Native people. While settler colonialism created the context for Native migrations, making it the most effective framework for understanding urbanization, it is concepts of survivance that can best account for the Native continuity, adaptation, and the recreation of communities seen in the urban setting of *The Exiles*. Although urbanization resulted in young American Indians embracing a homogenous urban American identity complete with current slang, dress, and music, many historians have begun to document this transition as less of a change and more of a continuity. These young people also struggled and succeeded at retaining their tribal heritages. They created entirely new familial, tribal, and personal identities that blended their reservation backgrounds with their lives in cities.

Like its title, *The Exiles* suggests a story of rupture and the suddenness of Indian migration to Los Angeles. But America was undergoing intense urbanization overall from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century and American Indians were part of this process. The urban Indian population went from just 8 percent in 1940 to 66 percent in 2008. Today more than 150,000 self-identified American Indians live in Los Angeles County. In 1952–1960, the years pertinent to the film, about 31,000 American Indians moved to cities. But in the longer period between 1950 and 1980, approximately 750,000 American Indians moved to cities, a percentage rise from 16 percent to 53 percent. And yet Los Angeles has always been a Native space. Settler colonialism began a long and steady process of non-Native migration to the region, but Natives were always here. Everywhere economic opportunity presented itself, American Indian men, whether alone or with their families, moved to where business owners would hire American Indians to find work at higher paying jobs. Indians were doing what they had always done in response to the federal government's relocation program: pursuing the highest paying work they could find and bringing their culture and families with them.<sup>21</sup>

Even if many representations overstate the difficult transition for reservation residents into cities, at least initially city living was, in fact, somewhat unfamiliar and unexpected. In addition, the social consequences of urban relocation meant at least some isolation from extended families who continued to live on reservations. Native people confronted racism from urban whites and fell into racial segregation. Racism also held them back from higher paying jobs with room for advancement. City living also meant a much higher cost of living. When they found the cheapest housing, it would often be targeted for urban renewal shortly after they moved in and they would be quickly asked to move once more. This further heightened the insecurity

and instability of their new lives in American cities. Regardless of the outcome, the exodus of young Native Americans from reservations to American cities changed both spaces.<sup>22</sup> This was the reality of the Los Angeles that American Indians like the Native men and women in *The Exiles* entered in the termination era of the 1950s and 1960s.

Mackenzie was fascinated with the idea of bicultural identities, especially as a result of migrations, perhaps because he himself was an Anglo-American who moved between homes in England and the United States. After reading an article in a 1956 *Harper's Magazine* about the forced relocation of Native people from reservations, Mackenzie made a visit to the San Carlos Apache reservation in Arizona. As a result of his visit, he scrapped his original plan for the film and decided to represent American Indians already living in Los Angeles.<sup>23</sup> He intended his film not only to shed light on urban Indians, but to explicitly address misrepresentations of Indians in movies as well. He believed Americans had no idea of the reality of Native peoples' lives, or that often, Native people had migrated to cities because of the movie industry:

But the point is that the American public does not have the dreamiest notion of what the American Indian is doing today; they think they are running wild on the reservation, are all taking scalps still, but retrained by the federal government, are all drunken and lazy and irresponsible, are all on pensions, are not citizens, cannot vote, are not allowed to drink, are all descended from tribes which lived in tepees and hunted buffalo on the great plains in war bonnets. Hollywood-Hollywood-Hollywood.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps for these reasons, Mackenzie turned to the documentary form he had encountered as a night student in the film department at the University of Southern California. Documentary form began in the 1920s, only a handful of decades prior to Mackenzie's experiment, and can be distinguished as attempting to show reality in terms of unseen social forces and the effects of those forces, especially as a counterpoint to Hollywood's fantasies and façades, which allows filmmakers to focus on social issues rather than aesthetics. Mackenzie's attention to aesthetics within the documentary framework is what makes his films pathbreaking for film historians, but his motivation in choosing this genre for *The Exiles* was undoubtedly to create a realistic portrayal of urban American Indian lives.<sup>25</sup> At film school he learned to avoid exaggerating squalor in approaching social justice issues and to present his subjects as real and multifaceted rather than tragic. *Bunker Hill* (1956) was his graduate project. His camera focuses heavily on the people, their relationships, and the landscape they inhabit. He seems to have been aware of James Agee's film criticism so in seeking out people to film he used conversation and friendship rather than a casting director.<sup>26</sup> In preparing for *The Exiles*, he continued to approach the human subjects of his films in this same manner, through personal relationships and introductions.

During the shooting of *Bunker Hill*, he came to know several local Native Americans and began spending time with them in Main Street bars. He recorded the stories they told in conversation and this became a very loose film script. He filmed on a borrowed 35mm camera but it was unable to record sound. Mackenzie called the film "anti-theatrical" and "anti-social documentary." His goal was to create a new format,

one that would capture the complexity of urban Indians. He believed this could be done through the voices of Native people and resisting the urge to create resolution, to leave the viewer with the responsibility for creating a solution: “we sought to photograph the infinite details surrounding these people, to let them speak for themselves, and to let the fragments mount up. Then, instead of supplying a resolution, we hoped that somewhere in the showing, the picture would become, to the viewer, a revelation of a condition about which he will either do something, or not—whichever his own reaction dictates.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite the necessity of adding sound after shooting, the film’s realist texture continues to amaze viewers and film critics alike. Both then and now, most non-Native audience members seeing the film have had no exposure to modern, mid-twentieth-century hipster Indians who use current slang, listen to surf music, and tease each other mercilessly. Native control over content and the lack of financial incentive created the atmosphere of *The Exiles* and resulted in an unparalleled film. The majority of the film takes place downtown, alternating between Yvonne at the movies and the rest of the characters drinking in bars, but it was the Native participants in *The Exiles* who made the decision to include a powerful scene of attempted heterosexual rape at the Ravine. This is perhaps the only depiction of Indian-Indian rape in film history and only occurred because Mackenzie was willing to relinquish directorial control over content. The scene in no way endorses rape, but rather exposes the sexism of urban Indian men. Numerous scenes take place in downtown LA bars, including the Ritz Café at 312½ South Main Street, then one of the most popular urban American Indian bars, now a parking lot. The bar scenes portray constant sexual harassment of Native women, who only partially challenge these behaviors.

After drinking, the group of drunk friends leave downtown and drive to Chavez Ravine. They stop for gas, and because of her high-paying job, Marilyn (Pima and Maricopa) is expected to pay. Once their tank is full, they knock on the bathroom door repeatedly, telling Marilyn they are done and ready to go. Marilyn does not respond, and the group drives off, leaving her behind. She eventually comes out and discovers they are gone. This is her last appearance in the film. After leaving the gas station, they drive up a steep, narrow, winding dirt road to Chavez Ravine. As they park, many other cars pull up next to theirs. A large intertribal group of Indian men gathers at the top and begin to get out drums and plan the songs for the night. As the men begin their songs, Tommy, played by Tommy Reynolds (Chicano and/or American Indian) grabs Claudine (Irish and Pueblo), the woman he’s been pursuing sexually all night and forces her into the group of men. She squeals, squirms and smiles either to avoid Tommy or to avoid being the only woman in the dancing. She eventually joins the dancing men and other women join as well. In a scene which is remarkable for its intimacy and complete exclusion of non-Natives, the group of young Native men and women dance in the dark for hours, laughing, joking, and drinking, relating to each other as Native people without any non-Native gaze present within the scene itself.

As the drinking and dancing continues, Tommy grabs Claudine’s arm and pulls her away from the group dance and into the dark, along parked cars. He suddenly stops and pushes her up against the front end of a car, kissing her forcefully, then grabs

her shoulders and forces her back against the front. She fights him off and he loses his grip. She slaps him hard and he stomps off, pouting and angry. She fixes her hair, buttons her shirt and walks past the film's Native male protagonist, Yvonne's husband Homer (Hualapai Nation). He has watched the whole scene and as she goes by, he hands her a thick blanket. She neither leaves nor rejoins the party, but accepts the blanket and sleeps in a backseat until everyone decides to leave at sunrise.<sup>28</sup>

These people are friends and occupy the hill at Chavez Ravine. As viewers, we sense they have done this many times before. The Ravine feels like a space they have claimed as their own for late night and private partying. Without a doubt, what Mackenzie captured on screen was a "49," a recent phenomenon that is truly intertribal. Originating in Oklahoma as songs and dances in preparation for war, in the mid-twentieth century young people embraced the 49 as a way to relax, socialize, and often drink with other American Indians of the same age. This scene lacks trendy surf music; the songs are sung in Native languages and they dance according to tribal traditions. Homer narrates his past memories of medicine men singing all night over sick patients, literally bringing them back to life by morning. There is a clear sense, then, that this intertribal gathering performs the same function, giving life back to these city dwellers.

For some, this scene simply displays the fun of young people enjoying their weekend. Still other viewers see the dancing at the Ravine, or what they call Hill X, as a noble attempt to reclaim tribal ceremonies and friendship. Most of my students and colleagues attending conference presentations find this scene to be deeply disturbing. Generally, viewers cannot stomach the physical fights and attempted sexual assault.<sup>29</sup> By the time we see Claudine's attempted rape at Chavez Ravine, we've witnessed all manner of alcoholism, sexual harassment, homophobia, abandonment of wives and children, and male physical violence. Because *The Exiles* fails to condemn misogyny, it may appear to condone it, and contemporary film reviews and scholarly analyses since reject the film altogether, except for its cinematography. Watching the film with students, friends, and colleagues, many express that they cannot tolerate the film by the time the attempted rape takes place because it seems to both represent and approve of the very worst aspects of modern American Indian society.

Yet viewers often fail to similarly criticize the film's depictions of homophobia and homophobic violence. For instance, Homer becomes more and more angry during a scene at the Columbine Bar (263 South Main; now the Five Star Bar) in which an interracial gay couple flirts, dances, and argues. Whether his anger is provoked by watching these gay men publicly expressing their sexuality and interest in each other is unclear, but well before this scene, Homer narrates his utter lack of interest in listening to his friends and has also revealed that his boredom leads him to start fights. It is then unsurprising when Homer does start a fight with an Indian man standing at the bar that erupts into a major fight involving several other Native men. These scenes all take place in the streets and bars of downtown Los Angeles, all of which have been replaced with high rises and hipster bars. Homer's palpable anger and despair parallels the viewer's dismay at the gentrification of downtown Los Angeles.



FIGURE 4. Yvonne watching her husband come home drunk with friends early in the morning.

Shot in 1958 and completed in 1962, *The Exiles* portrays a Los Angeles that no longer exists, even if the Los Angeles in *The Exiles* remains the “real LA” for some. Mackenzie made no attempt to eliminate cars from *The Exiles* in an attempt to create a utopian Los Angeles; the city had already been overtaken with freeways and public transportation had been dismantled. Instead, the young Natives travel in cars to downtown and Chavez Ravine, and he also shot cars from the vantage point of Native pedestrians walking the city streets. In addition, the skyscraper as both emblem and physical feature is completely absent from the landscape of *The Exiles*. The film is all storefronts, tunnels, bars, and movie theaters. This framing strategy shifts the role of the cityscape away from mere filmic backdrop toward content and meaning suggested by the characters.

The lighting of the film and the melancholy it evokes feels like film noir, yet the vulnerability of those on screen and their personal narratives tells us this is straightforward ethnography. What is truly magical about *The Exiles* is how it deftly mirrors the physical and emotional presence of downtown with the physical presence of American Indians, such as in the film’s episodes of the protagonists’ intentional walking. Yvonne and Homer speak lengthy, pensive monologues during parallel walks that apparently occur at the same time. We see Yvonne standing on the street watching her husband

drive off with his friends. After seeing her movie, she walks plaintively, but with determination. She moves through the city slowly and carefully, stopping to view certain consumer objects. She smiles as she pauses to look at men's shoes. She stands back and admires a beautiful dress on a mannequin. Her husband Homer too walks the streets of downtown Los Angeles, first in a passive mood, then angrily after his fight. After he leaves the Ritz Café with his friend Rico (Jicarilla Apache), they head for Royal Liquor on Hill and Third (now the site of a parking structure). While Rico goes inside to buy a large bottle of liquor, Homer opens and reads a letter from his parents. We see his emotions change from quiet frustration to melancholy and homesickness, all experienced on the streets of Los Angeles. Once he begins walking and drinking from a bottle encased in a paper bag with his friend, his mood changes yet again. They walk simply to enjoy being in the city. As they make their way through the Third Street tunnel, they playfully try to walk a straight line despite their drinking. Joking, laughing, and slapping each other on the back, we hear them narrating the differences between Natives and everyone else. Mackenzie makes young Native people in Los Angeles the foreground of his film. Los Angeles exists as the backdrop.

#### URBAN INDIANS AS THEMSELVES

These are Natives whom non-Natives would most likely not realize are Native. The men wear chinos, and the women go to movies. A young white man has to serve them and take their orders while they are drunk. A Native woman has enough money to fill a car's gas tank. There are no beads or buckskin to notify others of their identity. Yet they know who they are, and in this film that is all that seems to matter. They drive fast cars and essentially horse around in bars downtown and dance and sing at Chavez Ravine. Although their lives are difficult, they inhabit and enjoy the music and bars which are plentiful in urban areas like LA. This is a cinematic view of Native people unparalleled.<sup>30</sup>

Because the Natives in this film represented themselves with Mackenzie's involvement and cooperation rather than direction and narration, a sense of the present comes through in a way that other films about Indians do not. Documenting a single night in the lives of these urban Indians in downtown Los Angeles, the film's extremely narrow focus situates them firmly in the present, a very narrow present at that. These Indians are absolutely part of the city and the 1950s. However, the narration also makes it clear that they are from reservations and we see their continuing connection to family there through letters and photographs. Homer especially misses family and home while continuing to claim the world of Los Angeles and make it his home; Mackenzie evokes reservation life when Homer reads the letter from his parents, and, by means of a flashback, also visually includes the reservation. This single flashback to the reservation and family provides a window to the past, but the action returns immediately to downtown LA, now connected to the reservation through memory.

Significantly, the flashback scene offers no explanations, translations, or subtitles, which works to normalize Native peoples, cultures, and languages. Techniques used in *The Exiles* thus manage to present the reservation and Homer's family as different and



distinct from himself and Los Angeles, but like Homer himself, viewers can also see them and the reservation as still connected to him and his identity as an urban Indian. Homer accepts no shame for their lives. He never uses the word “poverty” or even implies it. He shows himself making decisions about his future as his parents did. He never acknowledges that the intention of the settler-colonial goal of assimilation is that he will reject them or their cultural values; in fact, Homer feels badly for whites, saying they are always worrying, with so much on their minds. Astoundingly, this film has very little to do with whites or even other ethnic minorities: the Los Angeles created by Mackenzie and the Natives who worked in the film is a Los Angeles in which Natives are at the foreground and non-Indians are almost nonexistent.

Mackenzie did not set out to make a film about Native people that documented American Indian history and culture, but rather situated himself as an artist or filmmaker engaged in an artistic enterprise. In that sense, he saw himself in conversation with other filmmakers and artists. In a letter he wrote during the editing process, he explicitly told his friend that he was watching at least one movie a day. He admitted directly to its influence: “don’t be surprised when you see our film to see different styles in all sequences, depending on what I saw the night before I did the final trim.” He was both mimicking and challenging other representations of Los Angeles in terms of framing, lighting, and storytelling. He was grounded in his art form, and urban Indians and LA happened to be his subjects. But he was creating art. The result is that, with Los Angeles itself as both backdrop and supporting character, the Natives in the film interact primarily with other American Indians. In what filmmaker, teacher, and critic Thom Anderson calls the film’s “parallel social worlds,” *The Exiles* thus takes us straight into their world, their perspectives, their viewpoints.<sup>31</sup> Non-Natives simply fall back.

Because the young Natives narrate the film, it represents their existence in Los Angeles straightforwardly; there is nothing unexpected or ironic about their presence. It is ironic that they center their community in downtown Los Angeles, a place constantly transforming, constantly up for grabs, claimed by everyone. Indeed, in some ways, as Sherman Alexie suggested at the time he supported restoring *The Exiles*, the film parallels the immigrant experience to Los Angeles so well documented by countless monographs and films.<sup>32</sup> Rather than contrasting the American Indian urban experience with that of immigrants, these urban Indians parallel those stories with their own. In this Native Los Angeles we see Native youth struggling with religion, love, and despair. Their exile in Los Angeles is perhaps a story of loss, but their gains are far more apparent, oddly enough, especially when finding their redemption in this sprawling city. They make choices for themselves and their future children.

I maintain that not only does *The Exiles* portray this small group of urban Indians “staking a claim” of their own to Bunker Hill, but that their voices and images, accompanied only with sparingly used surf band music by The Revels, powerfully communicate their emotions and states of being in ways that prove that claim to be profound and complete. Although dramatic, their voices and stories avoid the common pitfalls of extreme, dehumanizing representations of American Indians. The men and women in this film do not “act.” They just are. They reveal so much of themselves, perhaps all

of themselves, baring their souls. For example, in one instance of Yvonne's series of movingly vulnerable monologues, she reveals her relationship with the Catholic God:

I used to pray every night before I went to bed. And asked for something that I wanted and never got it. Or it seemed like my prayers were never answered. So I just gave up. And now I don't hardly go to church and don't say my prayers sometimes. But I haven't started drinking or hanging around Main Street yet.<sup>33</sup>

Yvonne's sadness is palpable. Homer's inner conflict almost leaps off the screen. Tommy's misogyny cannot be ignored, denied, or minimized. In *The Exiles*, their pain is real as is their joy.

These raw emotions came as a shock to non-Native audiences. After the film had opened, the director then added a new beginning, shots of nineteenth-century Edward Curtis romantic ethnographic portraits of Native Americans accompanied by a voiceover. What follows, however, is the absolute opposite: the substance of the film is bar scene after bar scene with men relentlessly pursuing Native American women and demeaning and abandoning their pregnant Native wives. At a film festival in Puerto Rico, this was seen as a film about drunk Indians and was deemed far too negative.<sup>34</sup> The protagonist played by Yvonne Williams would absolutely agree. Even the man behind the relaunch of the film deems it "a movie about drunk Indians and the women they mistreat or neglect."<sup>35</sup> Yet their inner lives are just as strong as the sense of place. These are fundamentally urban Indians, and they share their stories with no irony whatsoever. This lack of irony is what *makes The Exiles* so categorically shocking and fundamentally new as a piece of art. Not until *Skins* (2002) did a film similarly place Indian-Indian relationships and dynamics at the center.<sup>36</sup>

In *The Exiles*, the viewer sees Native Americans' commitment, confidence, and comfort with Los Angeles even in the way they move. Los Angeles is their home and they bring a different perspective with their adventures. For them, being Indian was not a binary proposition and they assert this fluid identity on screen. In their own words, they sidestep the traditional/modern divide. They speak in their Native languages at times in the film without warning or translations. Never do they dismiss or deny the idea that Indians belong on reservations or are expected to adhere to traditional ways. Neither do they admit to guilt for leaving the reservation or to a duty to return. They speak of the future, of their hopes and dreams. Even as they speak to the disappointments found in Los Angeles, they situate themselves and their futures there with no hesitation.

Unlike so many representations of Native people, even those generated by Natives themselves, there is no mourning in this film over the past. If Mackenzie's intention is to mourn the city and its gentrification and to document the disappearing neighborhood of Bunker Hill, the concerns of the Native individuals in *The Exiles* are their own personal pasts, their families, and their intentions for their futures. They don't mention the term "Bunker Hill," how the neighborhood is being transformed, or even where they will move once it is razed and replaced with skyscrapers. Their mourning, if we can call it that, is quite specific to Los Angeles and the transition from reservations to cities. They wonder how they are going to have enough money to raise their children.

They marvel at the differences between their worldview passed on from their ancestors and that of the non-Natives surrounding them in Los Angeles. For seventy-two minutes, these young people—urban Indians, not actors—serve as the transparent mirror for all young American Indians seeking new, modern identities of their own creation in urban spaces. Seeing Natives with other Natives all over downtown LA seems normal by the end of the film. They clearly belong there and make up their own subculture. In fact, Mackenzie intended that this would be the result of his film: “Ideally this would be a film in which you understood or felt from the point of view of these people, not from our point of view.”<sup>37</sup> Through their eyes, theirs is a hopeful mourning.

## PAST AND PRESENT: LOS ANGELES IS INDIAN LAND

Sherman Alexie sees the film as realistic and full of real strife. Others see stereotypes of drunken and violent Indian men. Very few critics have anything to say about the women of *The Exiles*. Instead their debate centers on the men of *The Exiles*, whether their alcoholism is representative, and what damage might be done by representing Indian alcoholism.<sup>38</sup> But what about Yvonne and Claudine? Why is so little ink spilled on the Native women? *The Exiles* explodes with insights about gender, yet scholarship around the film focuses on the cinematography of Mackenzie and the Native men to the exclusion of the women and the exposure of misogyny. Most viewers see Yvonne, the female protagonist, as broken, abused, and abandoned: a Native woman who, throughout the film, does appear to be mourning.

Although Yvonne’s pain is inescapable and undeniable, “despair stamped on her prettiness,” I read her role in the film as ultimately transcending mourning and exile.<sup>39</sup> As she constantly moves through the city, she does not simply take up space, but claims the streets and sidewalks as hers. Even the steep uphill climb home is hers, not only in these filmed moments, but for the future as well. *The Exiles* begins with Yvonne musing on the future of her unborn baby as she purchases groceries in the Grand Central Market on Broadway. She moves through the consumerist spectacle of the downtown market, quietly narrating her shopping experience, which thriftily features more looking than buying. She may be enjoying looking at displays she does not have the money to pay for, but when we hear that she wants her baby to speak English and have a better life than hers, clearly Yvonne is referring to her child’s future earning and purchasing power. Even if her own limited ability to purchase things in the market is painful to her, when she encounters a toy monkey blowing bubbles, we also see joy in simply viewing and inhabiting the market space. She steps up closely to the monkey, almost putting her face in the bubbles, and quietly giggles to herself.

This is Yvonne’s only smile until the end of the film, two brief moments set apart from her visible pain in the rest of *The Exiles*. After her grocery shopping trip, she walks through downtown and into Bunker Hill with a paper sack full of food. When she enters her home, it is filled with her husband Homer and his friends. They fail to acknowledge her entrance into the apartment, not even so much as glancing in her direction. As she prepares pork chops, we hear her voice wondering why she gives him everything when she receives nothing in return. She serves the men and eats nothing

herself. The men eat hungrily and selfishly, never thanking her nor clearing the table. As the men claim the physical and social space, cajoling and lounging around her home, she moves silently and almost tragically through the apartment, disappearing into the background almost like an inanimate object.

Once the men finish eating and dressing, they deposit Yvonne at the Roxie Theatre on their way to the Ritz Cafe. Yvonne watches her husband and friends drive off wildly. We can see from her quiet and sad gait as she moves toward the movie ticket window that she seems to accept their alcoholism and feels resigned to the hopelessness of the situation. After following her husband and friends in their alcoholic, misogynistic debacle at the bar, bellies full of Yvonne's pork chops, the story returns to the downtown movie theater, where Yvonne finishes watching her film looking satisfied and content. Waiting in vain at the drop-off spot where her husband had promised to pick her up, she eventually gives up and begins her walk home.

In the accompanying monologue, Yvonne deftly weaves together her past, present, and future. She locates the source of her grief and pain in both her past on the reservation and her alcoholic husband. Yvonne's loving words of the Catholic educators on the reservation correct any misperception that perhaps missionaries created her internal conflict. Yvonne sees herself as a Catholic Apache with no irony; for her, Catholic education and religious schooling offered hope. Yvonne had wanted a Catholic wedding in a Catholic church and articulates a muted hope that perhaps she can still have one. Her pain never gives way to the stereotype of the suffering noble savage, however. She doesn't need or want the viewer to pity her or rescue her. In spite of her unhappy marriage to Homer, Yvonne believes she will have a Catholic wedding with a good man. Her monologue and walk end with a visit to her friend's home.

Once in her friend's apartment in a nearby building also on Bunker Hill, Yvonne settles into the bed they will share for the night. She narrates for the audience so we come to understand that her friend is also regularly abandoned by her husband at night, who returns early morning after drinking. Yvonne stays with her often. The women talk about home and family. When her friend shows Yvonne a picture of her former boyfriend, we see a more lighthearted Yvonne as she smiles and laughs, calling him "skinny." Her friend laughs with her and takes a long drag from her cigarette. Yvonne absolutely revels in teasing her friend about this ex-boyfriend, perhaps especially because of the distance of time and space. Her mood changes as her friend presents a picture of her uncle. This time Yvonne says seriously, "handsome." Together these two women on Bunker Hill personify what it means to be American Indians who are female, urban, pregnant, abandoned, and yet hopeful, still connected to home and to each other.

Currently, the archive surrounding *The Exiles* largely concerns Mackenzie, cinematography, and the history of Los Angeles and contains very little information about the Native men and women in the film other than what can be surmised from the movie itself. The press kit provided in the archival material on the 2009 reissue on DVD offers some information, but the backgrounds on Yvonne, Homer, and Tommy are written very much from Mackenzie's viewpoint and the only lengthy pieces concern the cinematographers: "We know very little of what happened to the cast of *The Exiles*.

Milestone has been searching for them but have found little through tribal records. Homer Nish of the Hualapai tribe died on July 5, 1980.<sup>40</sup> However, Mackenzie kept in touch with his cast scrupulously during his short life. In a letter to one of the camera operators, he gave ample detail on each, even the elusive Tommy Reynolds:

Going down to see Tommy for a few minutes tonight . . . Yvonne has temporarily disappeared; her husband was released from prison in November, and when someone gave her a three-foot-high police dog for Christmas, the landlady threw them out so I haven't seen her since. Homer was busted for robbery in December, but is out on bail (\$1,575—no help from us—some Indian friend), and figures he can get his trial put off until they forget about him. I don't quite follow his reasoning, but he's still out. He wasn't really guilty—he was there and watched his three friends (one boy, two girls) beat up a guy and rob him, and then he ran with them, but never actually took part—I don't quite follow the reasoning on this completely either, and I'm afraid the judge won't. Homer's sister was very disappointed to find this out.<sup>41</sup>

The pages that follow dissect the importance of Yvonne's role in the film and discuss the stories it may tell about Native American women in American cities. Although scholarly analysis of Homer and Tommy has eclipsed that of Yvonne, the ways in which her role exposes misogyny grounds the entire film. The nature of that role has also caused the neglect of Yvonne's perspective and focus on the male protagonist in the literature. Even after presenting a conference paper on *The Exiles* during which I state that it focuses on Yvonne partly because of this predominant focus on Homer, the first question asked was, "What about Homer?"<sup>42</sup>

A closer analysis of her life, as well as her own view of the film, reveals how centrally Yvonne represents *The Exiles*. Yvonne was born on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in 1938. When her mother died when she was five, her father refused to take her in because she was a girl. Yvonne's aunt brought her home to the San Carlos Reservation and raised her, although Yvonne lived mostly lived at a Catholic boarding school. Yvonne "loved" her boarding school and happily returned each year after a summer spent at home. Her aunt paid Yvonne's tuition and her experience was entirely different from that of students forced to assimilate in Indian boarding schools. Beginning at age fourteen, Yvonne began working in Los Angeles each summer to make money, where she "cleaned houses for rich people."<sup>43</sup>

Her permanent "exile" in Los Angeles began at sixteen, when her aunt's death left her with no one to pay her tuition or offer her housing. She obtained full-time work as a housekeeper before her move to Los Angeles through Catholic Church staff at her boarding school. When she turned eighteen, she spent time at the Indian bars at Third and Main, where she met her first husband at the Ritz Café. Mackenzie found her when he befriended several Native American men while filming *Bunker Hill*, one of whom was Yvonne's first husband, Clifford Ray Sam. Clifford had wanted to play the role of the husband, but he worked nights and his employer would not give him time off. Yvonne's participation in the film was not entirely enthusiastic, but she agreed to undertake the role after Mackenzie nearly begged.

Today, she is the only member of the cast still living, yet sees herself as having accomplished very little and steadfastly avoids being involved in any publicity related to *The Exiles*.<sup>44</sup> When Sherman Alexie funded a project to restore the 1961 film and bring it to the big screen, the media sought out all of the Native participants but could locate only Yvonne, who stands in tremendous contrast to the ethos of the movie culture of Los Angeles.<sup>45</sup> Where the culture of Los Angeles is steeped in the desire for fame and even notoriety, Yvonne wanted almost nothing to do with the publicity surrounding *The Exiles* in the early 2000s. In spite of the movie being heralded as tremendously important for both American Indians and the history of Los Angeles, Yvonne seems nonplussed by the excitement. About seeing the movie, Yvonne stated simply, "I really didn't care."

Sadly, Yvonne also sees herself as not worthy of being on screen. She states simply, "I didn't accomplish anything." In interviews, Yvonne reluctantly answers questions that she seems to find irrelevant and repeatedly implies she does not approve of the film or her former friends in the film. She also doesn't want her children or grandchildren to see the film as it would probably make them "feel bad." She especially doesn't want them to know about her feelings back then and her "story." Overall Yvonne states plainly that she is not glad she appeared in the film. "I just feel so . . . self-conscious about it . . . and I feel like . . . I'm nobody." The movie meant to tell audiences about "how all the Indians are when they come out to California . . . and some of it is not true, some is."<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps more than anything else, Yvonne hates that she appears to be "like one of them" in the film. For instance, in saying that Homer was chosen simply because he was unemployed and thus able to work anytime, she emphasizes his instability, unlike her gainfully employed husband Clifford. When prompted to think about the drinking in the film, she quickly admits to her dislike of drinking in general and the drinking in the film in particular. When asked about the baby she was carrying during filming, she abruptly mentions the baby's early and tragic death.<sup>47</sup> She tells the story of leaving Clifford shortly after finishing the film because of his excessive drinking and returning to the reservation, where her baby drank contaminated water. He died shortly thereafter of diarrhea and dehydration. She left her second husband George as well because he drank and lost work as a result.<sup>48</sup>

For Yvonne, the reservation mostly brought suffering, and LA brought redemption and security. When she returned to LA once more, she found steady work in the aerospace industry and remarried her first husband. Contrasting the reality of her first son's death with her hopes and dreams for that same son perhaps adds to Yvonne's sense of disdain, in hindsight, for the entire film project. After the aerospace industry job, she worked at the Los Angeles County Registrar/Recorder and retired somewhat comfortably in the city of Bellflower. In hindsight, Yvonne is glad that she moved to LA. She visits her family's reservation but enjoys her life in LA and occasional powwows. Her main reason for staying in the area is her children.<sup>49</sup> When she talks about her second son's death from diabetes, she also mentions the death of Clifford from the same disease. Yet when she was asked about how her character in the film represents the sadness of Native American women, Yvonne adamantly speaks of

herself as neither happy nor sad, but as a woman who simply enjoys being alone and is naturally distrustful of people.

Yvonne also rejects Alexie's comparison of the Indian characters in *The Exiles* to immigrants to America and their children. Significantly, Yvonne instead emphasizes the back and forth nature of her relationship with the reservation and her family there.<sup>50</sup> What Mackenzie strove voraciously to achieve—a film with Native people representing themselves—exists within the larger reality of the erasure of Natives. Although the landscape of downtown Los Angeles has continued to change since the 1950s, to some extent the groups of people who claim it as their own have not changed. While there is no monument marking the presence of urban Indians on Bunker Hill, in spite of skyrocketing rents, they continue to make it their home—even if unnoticed by Angelenos mistaking them for Latinos and Chicanos.

Indians had come to Los Angeles in floods. When the Native American population of Los Angeles doubled in the 1960s, a disproportionate number of Indians lived, gathered, and often drank in Werdin Place alley in central downtown. Nicknamed “Indian Alley,” Werdin Place was once firmly part of Skid Row: a gathering place for alcoholics, seasonal immigrant day laborers, and sex workers that featured crowded hotels and brothels in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Beginning as a space for sex workers to live, work, and sell sex, 118 Winston Street stood at the entrance of the Alley and underwent many transformations, from brothel to a mission house run by nuns. From the 1960s through the 1990s, Natives used one particular door in the Alley to inscribe the names of their tribal nations. In June 1974, Baba Cooper, who identified as Lakota, set up the United American Indian Involvement at the notorious address. With federal funding, she began reaching out to American Indians to encourage sobriety and provide living space for those struggling to maintain their sobriety.<sup>51</sup>

Today 118 Winston is an extremely expensive loft with a security entrance. Nonetheless, the current owners of the businesses lining Werdin Place agreed to contribute the walls of their buildings to document the former presence of struggling Native Americans downtown, with Indian and non-Indian artists thus claiming Indian Alley as a Native art space in the middle of downtown LA.<sup>52</sup> Jaque Fragua of Jemez Pueblo and Kiowa-Comanche artist Steven Paul Judd put content on the walls of Indian Alley that challenges American hegemony and settler colonialism. Both rely on methods of simplicity and repetition: Fragua created a massive mural with a play on the logo of the overdone British World War II “Keep Calm” meme, and Judd played on the idea of spray paint, depicting larger-than-life spray paint cans adorned with images of famous Indians. A brand of spray paint commonly used for street graffiti, for example, has suggestively been renamed “War Paint.” However, they refrained from such Warholian techniques for the highly personal and unplanned claim of urban space originally made by Skid Row American Indians themselves. Instead they recreated the tribal door by simply writing tribal names over it in many shapes, sizes, and fonts.<sup>53</sup> This kind of art proves that urban spaces can be claimed for Indians, thus unsettling settler colonialism in physical spaces without the usual ironies of “the vanishing race.” Taken together, these images create a powerful experience for downtown pedestrians.

In *Legacy of Exiled NDNZ* (2014), her remake of *The Exiles*, Diné filmmaker and photographer Pamela Peters reads the contemporary presence of urban Los Angeles Indians, not merely for the purpose of educating Angelenos, but to promote the well-being of urban Indians as well.<sup>54</sup> Peters set out to recreate those who appeared in *The Exiles* by dressing local young Native people and placing them in popular downtown locations. Eventually this photography project became a film project as she added interviews with the young people about how they came to Los Angeles, their parents' histories, and their goals in relation to their urban American Indian identity. Peters too aims to reveal survivance in order to displace the figure of the tragic Indian and thus documents presence, resilience, and connection in her representations. Where others see debauchery and alcoholism in *The Exiles*, Peters sees playful fun amongst young people. In the sexual violence scene, she sees an empowered Native woman who ably defends herself. While acknowledging alcoholism among urban Indians, she sees Indian Alley as a space where Native people connected with people from other tribes.<sup>55</sup>

While many viewers of *The Exiles* see the worst stereotypes of American Indians on screen, others see something powerful, complicated, and empowering. What makes this such a complete vision of modern Native America is Mackenzie's refusal to fall into certain tropes. Other artists, then and now, tend to expose social injustice solely by seeking out and depicting squalor. *The Exiles* avoids this altogether and the Indians in the film come across as multidimensional young people navigating city life. Many depictions of Indians fail to recognize the presence of Indian people in the twentieth century and those that do engage in images steeped in tragedy and hopelessness. What scholars such as David Treuer call trauma, poverty, or rez "porn" is noticeably absent in *The Exiles*.<sup>56</sup>

Mackenzie's vision and direction shaped the final product, but his accomplishment is in direct proportion to how much control the young Natives in the film took over the movie, their participation in the script, and their willingness to literally play themselves. American society is dominated by images of whites and only rarely do images of Indians penetrate the American consciousness. And even more rarely are those images created or controlled by Indians. Scholars continue to seek Native-generated representations of Natives not just to reverse the historical trends, but also to understand Native viewpoints and perspectives. Mackenzie's willingness to allow a space for their voices is unusual for a film director, leaving *The Exiles* bobbing alone in an ocean of filmic representations of Indians. In writing on works such as this film, so much more than a film about the lost LA or the beauty of nighttime filming, scholars ultimately must engage more seriously with the content presented and the questions raised by Native American studies scholarship and research. Looking at *The Exiles* as a historical document from the viewpoint of the American Indians in the film reveals the possibilities of such approaches and the continuing need to understand the past from an American Indian viewpoint.



## NOTES

1. *The Exiles* (feature film, 1961), dir. Kent Mackenzie. A restored version of the original film was reissued as a two-disc DVD set (November 17, 2009, Oscilloscope Laboratories/Milestone Cinematheque) with a supplement that includes archival material (hereafter cited as “DVD supplement”).

2. See Dina Gilio-Whitaker, “Native Americans in L.A. Almost Saw Their Culture Erased—Now They’re Getting It Back,” *LA Weekly*, November 21, 2016. Survivance stands as the explanatory framework for Native American studies. The word itself goes back to the eighteenth century and was later articulated by theorist Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, the term denoted a space between life and death. Transforming the term into an Indigenous meaning, theorist Gerald Vizenor loaded the term with the history of Native America and the creative response of Native America to genocide. See Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

3. Thom Andersen, “This Property Is Condemned,” *Film Comment* 44, no. 4 (2008): 38–39; Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999); *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

4. Richard Corliss, “Exiles on Indie Street,” *Time*, July 18, 2008.

5. Ho’esta Mo’e’hahne, “Animating the Indigenous, Colonial Affects, and ‘Going Native’ in the City: Kent Mackenzie’s *The Exiles*,” *Western American Literature* 52 (2017): 75–94; Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 87, 133.

6. Alan Velie, “N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn and Myths of the Victim,” in *The Native American Renaissance: Literary Imagination and Achievement*, ed. A. Robert Lee and Alan Velie (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 2014), 58–73; Jace Weaver, *Other Words: American Indian Literature, Law, and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Diane Glancy, “The Naked Spot: A Journey Toward Survivance,” in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, 271–284; Karl Kroeber, “Why It’s a Good Thing Gerald Vizenor Is Not an Indian,” in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, 25–38; Joe Lockard, “Facing the Wiindigoo: Gerald Vizenor and Primo Levi,” in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, 209–220; Sonya Atalay, “No Sense of the Struggle: Creating a Context for Survivance at the NMAI,” *American Indian Quarterly* 30, nos. 3 & 4 (2006): 597–618.

7. Corina Knoll, “Confrontation Between Downtown Los Angeles Bar Owner and Homeless Man Prompts Debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 29, 2017; Dakota Smith, “Temporary Trailers for Homeless People Planned on Downtown City Lot,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 2018.

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15. After its decline in the 1990s, new investment downtown resulted in ultra-modern buildings: Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Broad Museum, the new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, and the Museum of Contemporary Art. These latest additions, especially, have created the frequent observation that LA is in a process of continual change and lacks interest in preserving historical architecture or even replicating it. See Gale Holland, "Amid More Change, a Bar Fights Eviction," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 2015, A11; Jessica Garrison, "Case of the Vanishing Hotels," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 2008, B10; David Ng, "Remaking LA: The Film Industry Faces Hurdles as Gentrification Makes It Tougher for Old Hollywood to Play Itself," *Los Angeles Times*, December 26, 2016, A1. Filmmakers who want to represent Bunker Hill find it easier to do abroad: a 2006 filming of John Fante's novel *Ask the Dusk* (1939) set in Bunker Hill, had to be filmed in South Africa. See Todd McCarthy, "Ask the Dust," *Variety*, February 2, 2006. The attempts to rid downtown of visible poverty

continues as significant numbers of homeless people live in tents on the sidewalks of downtown. In the evening, the sidewalks become toilets. See Gale Holland, "LA Adds More Public Toilets as Homeless Crisis Grows," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2017; Gale Holland, "LA Plan To Gentrify Skid Row Will Oust Poor Residents, Advocates Say," *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 2018; Gale Holland, "Activists Protest 33-Story Apartment Tower On the Edge of LA's Skid Row," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2017; Gale Holland, "LA's Homelessness Surged 75% in Six Years: Here's Why the Crisis Has Been Decades in the Making," *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2018.

16. Begun in 1938, the Naval Reserve Armory that brought hundreds of sailors to this Mexican American neighborhood resulted in the Zoot Suit Riots during World War II, but it did not displace residents. However, this changed when, as part of the Elysian Parks Height Development, the city of Los Angeles offered residents cash to move. In addition to cash, Los Angeles offered residents a new school, new homes, and a community center. These offers were made through one particular city employee. This white male city employee convinced the residents to accept the city's money. He himself believed the city's promises and genuinely worked with the families of the Ravine. Once the families were removed and the city's goal was accomplished, however, he was accused by the city of Los Angeles of being a communist. He entered into a costly legal battle that lasted years trying to keep his job. He lost this legal battle which ended with massive legal fees, unemployment, and a tarnished reputation as a Communist. The residents received very little funds and extended families had to separate and scatter throughout the city as renters instead of owners because of the forced relocation. Thinking this cash would buy their way into other neighborhoods, many residents agreed to move. However, they discovered the cash was nowhere near enough for the other neighborhoods of Los Angeles. These families became renters and had to separate their extended families into multiple residences. But once the residents gave up their homes and the Ravine was empty, the Development project lost political support as the city fell to the power of the anti-socialist sentiment of the Cold War. The Ravine sat mostly abandoned and only used for fire department training until the mayor of Los Angeles suggested to the owner of the Dodgers in 1956 that they build their new Los Angeles stadium at Chavez Ravine. After a citywide vote and a California Supreme Court ruling which upheld the city's renegeing on their promises in the Elysian Parks Development project. See Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*.

17. Klein, *The History of Forgetting*.

18. Benjamin Jackson, review of *The Exiles* by Kent Mackenzie, *Film Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1962): 60–62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1210630>; Capriccioso, "The Exiles: An Appreciation."

19. Ross Lipman, "Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*: Reinventing the Real of Cinema," in *Alternative Projections: Experimental Film in Los Angeles, 1945–1980*, ed. David James and Adam Hyman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 163–74.

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Harjo and Jack Forbes, *American Indians and the Urban Experience* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Jaako Puisto, "This is My Reservation, I Belong Here:" *The Salish Kootenai Indian Struggle against Termination* (Pablo, MT: Salish Kootenai College Press, 2016); and Peter Iverson, "We Are Still Here:" *American Indians in the Twentieth Century* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 1997).

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29. Andersen, "This Property," 39.

30. Joshua Glick, *Los Angeles Documentary and the Production of Public History, 1958–1977* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), chapter 2, "Downtown Development and the Endeavors of Filmmaker Kent Mackenzie."

31. Anderson, "This Property," 39.

32. Eric Kohn, "The Exiles' Presenters, Charles Burnett and Sherman Alexie," *IndieWire*, July 10, 2008, <https://www.indiewire.com/2008/07/indiewire-interview-the-exiles-presenters-charles-burnett-and-sherman-alexie-72076/>.

33. Ross Lipman makes the argument that Mackenzie's budget meant that sound had to be recorded in the studio. He also points out that being alone in the studio, with hours to talk and even drink by themselves, gave the participants a space to be truly vulnerable without judgment from their friends. See Lipman, "Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles*: Reinventing the Real of Cinema," 170.

34. "Final Cut 2008: Terra Incognita: Unknown Pleasures from Around the World," *Film Comment* 45, no. 1 (2009) 41–45; James Naremore, "Films of the Year 2008," *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2009): 26–27, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2009.62.4.20>.

35. Andersen, "This Property Is Condemned," 38.

36. *Skins* (feature film, 2002), dir. Chris Eyre, is based on the 1995 novel by Adrian C. Louis.

37. DVD supplement, *The Exiles* press kit, April 19, 1960.

38. Mo'e'hahne, "Animating the Indigenous"; Capriccioso, "The Exiles': An Appreciation."

39. Richard Corliss, "Exiles on Main Street," *Time*, July 18, 2008.
40. DVD supplement, Information Sheet #1, Appendix #1.
41. Ibid.
42. Liza Black, "Urban Native Presence in the Exiles: Through the Lens of Native Women," Native American Indigenous Studies Association, May 17, 2018, Los Angeles, CA.
43. Matthew Fleischer, "Exiles on Main Street: Searching for the Ghosts of Bunker Hill's Native American Past," *LA Weekly*, August 13, 2008, <http://www.laweekly.com/film/exiles-on-main-street-searching-for-the-ghosts-of-bunker-hills-native-american-past-2154829>; Dennis Doros, co-owner of Milestone Film & Video in Harrington, NJ, recalls that artist Douglas Miles of the San Carlos Reservation was so influenced by *The Exiles* after Milestone's rerelease that he went door-to-door seeking the performers, finally locating Yvonne. Dennis Doros, email correspondence with author, April 11, 2019.
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46. Ibid.
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48. Fleischer, "Exiles on Main Street."
49. Ibid.
50. Lynn Neary, "The Exiles Portrays Woman's Real Life Struggles."
51. Samantha Schaefer, "LA's Winston Street Has a Colorful History," *Los Angeles Times Online*, June 28, 2014; Penelope McMillan, "The Urban Indian: L.A.'s Factionalized Minority," *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 1980, B1; Jack Slater, "Sacramento on Skid Row," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1976; Chrystal Li, "Downtown Artists Paint to Change Skid Row," *Neon Tommy*, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, <http://www.neontommy.com/news/2014/05/downtown-artists-paint-change-skid-row.html>. Werdin Place is still situated in the legal boundaries of Skid Row, at least according to the legal ruling in *Jones v. City of Los Angeles* (2006), although Werdin Place today is simply an alley with back doors and shipping entrances for expensive art studios and yoga facilities. While it is no longer illegal to be homeless within the boundaries of Skid Row, gentrification has transformed even Skid Row into a place only few can afford.
52. River Garza, "Mapping Out Tongva Territory in Indian Alley," *News from Native California* 31, no. 2 (2017/2018): 9; Ian Frazier, *On the Rez* (New York: Macmillan, 2000).
53. United American Indian Involvement, Inc., <http://www.uaii.org>; Shepard Fairey, "New 'We Are Still Here' Mural in Downtown LA," <https://obeygiant.com/new-we-are-still-here-mural-in-downtown-la/>.
54. *Legacy of Exiled NDNZ* (documentary short film, 2014), dir. Pamela Peters; Pamela J. Peters (website), "Meet the Artist," <https://pamelajpeters.com/meet-the-artist/>.
55. Personal interview with author, December 13, 2016; Pamela J. Peters, KCET Artbound, April 1, 2016, "Native Angelenos: Filmmaker Pamela J. Peters Deconstructs Stereotypes," personal interview with author, December 13, 2016. Materials available in the dvd set sold by Milestone Films <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/indian-alley-skid-row-pamela-j-peters>.
56. Nathan Bergstedt, "The Deeper Story About 'Rez Life,'" *Grand Rapids Herald Review*, September 13, 2014.