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The Heart of Lightness: Hollywood's Wild West Show Revisited

DELANO JOSÉ LOPEZ

After seeing Disney's Pocahontas, every kid wants to be John Smith.

—Television commercial for Burger King's *Pocahontas* Kids Meal

The last three decades of the twentieth century have seen a resurgence of films with Native American themes. In addition to a growth in the number of such films, there has been a qualitative difference: the new generation of films has attempted to counteract previous stereotypes, to accurately portray the history and culture of Native groups, and to be sympathetic to the political claims of Native Americans. There has been a concomitant effort to include Native Americans on every level of production, not only as actors, but also as screenwriters, directors, and historical consultants.

Films that favor Native Americans to some degree have existed from *The True Heart of an Indian* (1909) to *Broken Arrow* (1950). By the late 1980s, however, almost any film about Native Americans had to pay at least lip service to these concerns. This trend has been recognized and referred to as “sympathetic”¹ or “progressive” Indian films.

Be this as it may, even many of these “progressive” films depict Indian culture primarily through the experience of a white (and usually male) protagonist. The white mediator fills a range of functions, which progress chronologically as the concerns of the larger white American society shift. This progression involves a debate on the white conquest of Native America, first affirming and celebrating it, and then critiquing it. The subjects and concerns of these films then shift from the actions of society as a whole, to the role of an individual white in either accepting or rejecting his place in this conquest. The concern with collective responsibility will be abandoned, as the repercussions of this responsibility would indict American society as a whole. Instead, the actions of a single white protagonist, often an outcast from society, provide the audience with a vicarious reprieve.

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Although in some of these films the white is simply an observer, in most the protagonist participates in the Native culture to some degree, taking a Native wife, learning a Native language, or even “going Indian” and fully assimilating. Films that follow this pattern include the aforementioned *Broken Arrow* (1950), *Little Big Man* (1970), *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Ulzana’s Raid* (1972), *Thunderheart* (1992),² *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993), *The Broken Chain* (1993), *On Deadly Ground* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Buffalo Soldiers* (1997), *Grey Owl* (1999), *Windtalkers* (2002), and perhaps the best known of the genre, *Dances With Wolves* (1990). Some television portrayals show a similar pattern. On *Northern Exposure*, which has been praised for the generally positive handling of its Native Alaskan characters,³ the protagonist Joel Fleischmann’s story arc is not resolved until he finally spends some time abandoning his medical practice and living in the bush salmon fishing with a group of Native Americans.

The need to “privilege” the white observer by making him the main character through whom the audience experiences Native American culture has an economic explanation: the belief that American audiences won’t see a film unless they have a white character with whom to identify. For this reason, studios won’t risk producing a film without a white protagonist, not out of racism, but for fear of low financial return. This argument parallels a similar theory in McCloud’s study of the iconic character in comic books, that the fewer specific markers of identity, such as age, ethnicity, extreme physical attributes, and so on, the more readily the audience will substitute their own persona onto the tabula rasa of the protagonist.⁴ This rests on the assumption that “white” is considered neutral or non-ethnic among Americans, particularly among the white moviegoers who still form the largest demographic in the nation’s film market.⁵

Another economic motivation is that although a handful of Native American actors, such as Wes Studi or Graham Greene, are becoming better known, none of them have the name recognition of a Kevin Costner or Pierce Brosnan. Because films are major investments that often don’t turn a profit, producers seek a known box office draw to hedge their bets. In many cases, securing the commitment of a big-name star is essential to finance a film. Even when Wes Studi had the title role in Sony’s *Geronimo: An American Legend* his name did not appear in the large titles on promotional posters. That space was reserved for his white co-stars, Gene Hackman, Jason Patric, and Matt Damon.

However, economic considerations alone don’t fully explain the phenomenon of the white protagonist. In *Playing Indian*, Philip J. Deloria has documented the long history of whites dressing as Indians, from the predecessors of the Boston Tea Party to Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls.⁶ As much of contemporary popular culture is experienced through the media of television and film, the white becoming an Indian trope in film provides the modern audience with a vicarious fantasy equivalent to that of the Tammany Societies of the pre-Revolutionary era or the white Indian hobbyists of the 1950s. Thus, in addition to fulfilling a desire for an Indian experience that can only be presented through a white mediator for racist or economic reasons, the experience of watching a white becoming an Indian fulfills a unique and separate desire as well.

Deloria argues that “dressing in feathers” has been done at different times to address varying cultural concerns. He maintains that such films focus on white concerns: “In a sense, Indian movies have never been about Indians at all. They have been about white concerns: white guilt, white fear, white insecurity.”⁷ The current vicarious dressing in feathers on film must fulfill a need for contemporary American audiences. To examine this need in context, let’s first review how films in previous eras about Native Americans have expressed white concerns.

Jack Nachbar, in his study of the film *Ulzana’s Raid*, divides Westerns, especially those dealing with the conquest of Native America, into “pro-progress” and “anti-progress” films.⁸ The pro-progress films, which celebrate the heroism of pioneers in settling the West, portray Native Americans as merely another force of nature that must be endured and ultimately vanquished to make room for civilization. Such films usually use the “savage” stereotype of Native Americans examined by Hilger and Berkhofer, among others, more as a plot device than as characters.⁹

In contrast, anti-progress films decry the atrocities of American imperialism and colonialism. In these films, the Native characters serve primarily as victims of the imperialist aggressors. Thus, although they often receive far better treatment with more fully developed personalities, they’re often stereotyped, but this time as “noble” characters.¹⁰

Both types of films have existed side by side since the earliest penny arcade films. Some directors made both types—such as D. W. Griffith’s “noble” *The Redman and The Child* (1908), and his “savage” *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913). However it’s not coincidental that the “pro-progress” film came to dominate during the 1940s and 1950s. The portrayal of the heroism of the U.S. military in defeating the forces of barbarism, as symbolized by the Indians, probably resonated among American audiences with the fight against the Nazi war machine. The post-World War II economic prosperity enjoyed by many middle-class Americans found a reaffirmation in the myth of hardworking homesteaders forcing the wilderness to give forth its bounty. Much like stubborn tree stumps and boulders, the inconvenient Native inhabitants needed to be cleared from the land before it could prosper.

The anti-progress films similarly reflected their time of greatest prominence, the 1960s and 1970s. Both the Native American civil rights movement and the Vietnam War had brought an awareness of American imperialism and its concomitant atrocities into mainstream consciousness, making it easy to draw parallels between the Native Americans and Vietnamese as victims of American colonialism.

To depict the injustice of the American genocidal attacks on Native Americans further, these films often portrayed the Indians as peaceful, natural ecologists. This understandable reaction to the previous stereotype of the bloodthirsty savage avoids any victim blame (i.e., that the Indians somehow deserved their treatment for being warlike). Yet it has resulted in another equally inaccurate, although more sympathetic, stereotype.

Many more recent films, starting with *Ulzana’s Raid* (1972) and becoming far more common in the 1980s and 1990s, avoid both stereotypes by

portraying the violence of both Indians and whites, although generally remaining more sympathetic to the Native Americans.¹¹ These films don't need to portray Indians as the innocent victims that they were in some previous anti-progress films, because they're not the heroes of these films. The white characters are ultimately the protagonists, because only they can truly address the concerns of the audience.

Such concerns don't question the moral validity of the attempted extermination and relocation or the inevitability of the European American conquest of North America. Instead, these films address the individual moral responsibility of modern-day whites for the actions of their ancestors. The anti-progress films of the 1960s and 1970s that the current generation was exposed to have created an awareness of the "plight" of Native Americans. The political battles fought by many Native Americans during the 1980s and 1990s over their cultural representation (such as the critiques of sport team mascots) and the quincentenary of the Columbian discovery have also contributed to an awareness of contemporary Indian issues. This awareness evokes what social psychology calls *cognitive dissonance*: "a state of tension that occurs whenever an individual simultaneously holds two cognitions that are psychologically inconsistent."¹²

The first dissonant cognition is an awareness that the United States is an occupying country, whose existence is based on bloodshed and genocide. The second is that individual white audience members, who think of themselves as good people, have benefited from this conquest. The solution these films offer is that even though white America committed terrible acts against the Native population for greedy, racist, and imperialistic reasons, the audience member can identify with the protagonist, who chooses not to participate in this genocide. Thus the audience member can vicariously escape the moral dilemma, without actually having to interact with the modern situation of Native Americans.

The strikingly consistent form that this absolution takes in a number of these films inverts the plot employed by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*.¹³ Conrad employs a voyage down the Congo as a mythic device for the moral education of Marlow, his protagonist. As Marlow, employed by Dutch colonialists in Africa, is exposed to the absurdist cruelties of his fellow colonialists, he comes to realize that the entire world, not just Africa, is "the heart of darkness." His realization reaches its zenith when his inspiration, the uber-agent Kurtz, confides to him his dying words "the horror." Ironically, the barbarism that most horrifies Marlow is not that of the supposedly barbaric Africans, but of the "civilized" Europeans. Although the pagan practices of the Africans might arguably have corrupted Kurtz, it's clearly the pressures of imperialism that contribute to his downfall. In fact, Marlow observes that the most restrained characters are the cannibalistic Africans who refrain from killing their employers, even when faced with starvation.

As Marlow travels upriver, further from the civilizing influence of Europe, the Europeans he encounters become progressively less sane or competent. The same holds true of *Dances With Wolves*' protagonist Lieutenant Dunbar (Kevin Costner). He begins the film amid the absurdity of the Civil War, where

he is so wounded, physically and psychologically, that he tries to commit suicide by charging enemy lines. After his attempt inadvertently results in a victory, he's promoted and allowed to choose his posting. Just as Marlow employs his family's influence to be posted as a steamboat captain on the Congo, Dunbar uses his status as newly minted war hero to ask for the most remote post in the army, stating that he wishes to see the frontier, "while it's still left." On his journey west he encounters a commanding officer who is clearly delusional and suicidal, much as the company agents of Conrad's central station in the Congo are incompetent and petty. The crude and filthy mule driver who transports Dunbar to his final post parallels the needlessly violent yet cowardly agents who accompany Marlow to the inner station. When he finally arrives at his post, Dunbar finds it abandoned, and needs to spend time cleaning it, much as Marlow must repair the scuttled steamboat before he can continue his journey to meet Kurtz.

Here the two stories part company drastically; although it's clear that both men are searching for some meaning in their lives, the meaning they discover is significantly different. Marlow will learn from Kurtz that the world is absurd and horrible, and will resolve to survive with that knowledge. Dunbar will also receive his insight from another man, a father figure in the form of the Lakota Sioux shaman Kicking Bird (Graham Greene). Dunbar will be gradually adopted into the tribe, learning the language, receiving the name Dances With Wolves, and marrying a woman of the tribe, Stands With a Fist, although she's also an adopted white.¹⁴ Through becoming a Lakota, Dunbar will also become a man, fully actualized and civilized. His ultimate heroic deed occurs when, after being recaptured by the U.S. Cavalry, he refuses to answer their questions, and screams at them in Lakota "I am Dances With Wolves."¹⁵

This illustrates the common theme shared by the "Heart of Lightness" films. The protagonist, like the audience itself, has a problem with the larger American culture of which he is a part, although he's often not fully aware of this at the beginning of the film.¹⁶ This leaves him with a void, such as the need to prove himself, or the search for a meaningful occupation. He's often an outsider or outcast of sorts. In the process of this quest, his discomfort with being an American grows, often accompanied by a growing awareness of American imperialism against Native Americans. Eventually he will encounter the Native culture, and begin to admire or respect his adversaries as human beings. Through his adoption of this culture and/or refusal to partake in genocide, he will encounter his own humanity and become a fully realized human being.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the "horror" of the Congo (and by extension, of European colonialism and the world in general) is only fully realized by Marlow when it has corrupted a supposedly civilized European. In the Heart of Lightness films, the beauty of Native American culture, and the heroism of its struggle for survival, is realized only when it redeems an alienated or evil white.¹⁷

An example of this appropriation that is noteworthy in its self-awareness is found in *Grey Owl* (1999). The film is based on the true story of Archie Belaney, who left England at seventeen for Canada, where he was adopted by

the Ojibwe tribe and given the name Grey Owl. Belaney learned the Ojibwe language and woodcraft, became a trapper and guide in the 1930s, and presented himself in his articles for magazines as a full-blooded Indian. His transformation closely follows the daydreams of many white Americans and Canadians, as documented in *Dressing in Feathers*, with its Indian hobbyist clubs and pseudo-Native names. The film demonstrates the origin of Archie's interest in Native Americans from this commodification when it shows his boyhood room in England filled with dime novels, posters for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and homemade models of teepees and canoes. Further, Archie will become an agent of commodification himself when his literary agent refers to his work as the "authentic voice of the wilderness" and tells Archie that there is a market for his writing among the whites' "hunger for his world." Ironically, of course, Archie was himself both a product of this hunger and a perpetuator of it.

Archie's presentation of himself as genetically Indian provides the source of dramatic tension in the film. He seems to feel no guilt in presenting himself to whites as an Indian; only when this deception involves other Native Americans does he feel remorse. Ironically, Pony, an urban-bred Mohawk, will approach him for knowledge of the ways of her people. (This alone makes the film noteworthy in that it's one of the few to mention the experience of the urban Indian.) Archie tells her that he is in fact a half-breed, half Scottish and half Apache. As his celebrity grows with the writing of a book and lecture tours, he finally comes clean to his now wife Pony on the eve of meeting a group of chiefs at a large powwow. Although he didn't balk at perpetrating his deception before the British royal family, the fear of being face to face with "real" Indians causes him to reveal his true identity. (Indeed, the words *real* and *authentic* are peppered heavily throughout the film.)

However, at the climax of the film, as Archie is to be called onto the carpet by the real Indians for his deception and appropriation, he is instead absolved, forgiven, and further "adopted" by them. His wife tells him that she loves him for the life that he led; because he chose it, rather than being born into it, she loves him all the more, and she says that he "speaks for all of us." One of the chiefs tells him, "Men become what they dream and you have dreamed well." Although his acceptance by the Indian community might be historically accurate and justified, in the film it fulfills the function for the audience of an absolution not only for the occupation of North America, but for the guilt of vicariously "playing Indian." As a counterpoint to Annie Oakley's assertion that "I'm an Indian, too," here the Indians bestow this honor on Archie and, by extension, on the sympathetic audience.

A more complex version of this forgiveness occurs in *Shanghai Noon* (2000). The protagonist Chon Wang (Jackie Chan) is "adopted" into an Indian tribe and "married" to an Indian. Through a complicated series of plot twists she will leave him for his white compatriot, Roy O'Bannon (Owen Wilson), freeing him to become involved with a Chinese woman, Princess Pei Pei (Lucy Liu). This both affirms and denies concerns about miscegenation: Chinese are allowed to marry each other, but the white and Indian may intermarry. Wang's adoption is in part done jokingly, as he is mocked by the

Indians when drunk for thinking that speaking louder and slower will enable them to overcome the language barrier. Moreover, the Indians are also presented as martial equals, if not superiors, to Wang. Nevertheless, they exhibit a seemingly irrational (but typical for this genre) loyalty to the newcomer when they show up at the end to save him and his companions.

Another noteworthy example of the theme (the white man adopted into the tribe) occurs in *Dance Me Outside* (1995). This film, set on a modern-day reservation in Canada, deals with the concerns of an extended group of Indians, including racism, poverty, assimilation, activism, and government neglect and oppression. In one scene, Silas Crow and Frank Fencepost improvise an adoption ceremony in order to distract Robert McVey, the sterile white husband of Silas' sister, so that her former Indian lover can impregnate her. What's exceptional in this scene is that the Indians are clearly aware of the white man's desire to be made an "authentic Indian," and are using his desire and naïveté for their own ends. Moreover, they are aware of this tactic being used before: "Remember when they made that developer an honorary chief?" The young men give Robert a secret Indian name, Bob Firechief, taken from the label of an oilcan they are drinking from. Soon, Bob is drunk, naked, and howling at the moon, and he leads the boys on a torch-lit run through the woods, ending by leaping into the river. Despite the obvious fool that Bob has made of himself and the cuckold the boys have made of him, he has earned a certain respect, as the boys declare that "he was pretty cool" when they return him to his wife. While having earned some acceptance from the Indians, it's questionable whether they now consider him to be one of them. They're willing to let him think otherwise, however, when it serves their interest.

Another example of an Indian allowing a white to believe that he's now an Indian when it serves the Indian's purpose and not the white's occurs on the animated television show, *King of the Hill*. Unlike similar adult animated shows such as *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*, in which Native Americans appear only in episodes when their respective families visit Indian casinos, *King of the Hill* has two regular Native American characters, John Redcorn and his son, Joseph Gribble.¹⁸ Redcorn, who looks as if he stepped off the cover of a romance novel, is aware of the eroticization of the male Indian and uses this to his advantage in his work as a "licensed new-age healer" and part-time gigolo serving the bored housewives of Arlen, Texas. Although clearly flawed, he's one of the most well-rounded characters on the show and fights hard to maintain his dignity in the face of the ignorant rednecks that comprise the rest of the cast.¹⁹

Redcorn's son is the result of an adulterous affair with Nancy Gribble, and her husband, Dale, remains unaware that Redcorn is the father, despite the obvious physical resemblance between the two. In the episode "Vision Quest,"²⁰ when Dale dreams of an Indian making love to his wife and goes to Redcorn for advice, to prevent Dale from discovering the affair, Redcorn suggests that Dale is the Indian in the dream and reluctantly encourages Dale to "become" an Indian.²¹ Thus, he plays Dale's white desire to be an Indian for his own advantage, but not without a price: the ongoing tension in his frustration at not being able to raise his own son or impart to Joseph knowledge of his heritage and culture.

Although space doesn't permit a detailed examination of the Heart of Lightness theme in all the movies in which it occurs, three more recent films warrant further analysis. *Buffalo Soldiers*, made for Turner Network Television (TNT), contains this theme, even though the protagonists are black. The movie purports to tell a story of a black unit of the U.S. Cavalry participating in the Indian Wars during the campaign against the Chihenne Chiricahua Apache leader Victorio in 1880. The protagonists are black soldiers, who at the beginning of the film are established as morally superior to the white society when they stop a group of Texas Rangers from lynching some Apache children in retaliation for a raid. They're also depicted as outsiders in white society as they are treated with contempt by the white citizens they protect and many of the white soldiers they work for. The blacks are forbidden by army regulations to ride mounted through a town and are summarily ejected from their barracks when a new white officer takes command.

Interestingly, although modern Native American-themed films with white protagonists have accepted the condemnation of the American invasion and no longer focus on validating this invasion, but on exculpating an individual protagonist, *Buffalo Soldiers* concerns itself with validating the behavior not of individual blacks, but of the black soldiers collectively. This might be an effect of the still widely held, if subconscious, racist belief that the good deeds or misbehavior of individual blacks can be generalized to reflect well or poorly upon the black community as a whole.

The film follows a similar theme to the films *Glory* and *The Tuskegee Airmen*, both of which showed black army units outperforming their white counterparts, thus demonstrating both the patriotism of black Americans and their military competence and heroism. (Military service has often provided a means for the disenfranchised to assert their rights to citizenship in democracies.) In *Buffalo Soldiers*, the blacks demonstrate this competence by catching the chief Victorio and his band, even after the death of their white officers. Moreover, once the soldiers have Victorio and his band surrounded, they demonstrate their moral superiority by choosing to let the Apache escape.

The film is mostly a fabrication that does not tell the true story of the Buffalo Soldiers, but is constructed to address modern black concerns, much as other "sympathetic" Westerns address white concerns.²² The most important event of the film, the capture and subsequent release of the Apache, is wholly fictitious. First, the black cavalry units were no more competent at locating the Apache than were the white units.²³ The U.S. Army only located Chiricahua during the Apache wars when other Apache scouts led them to them. A common inaccuracy in most films of the Apache wars is the portrayal of the cavalry relying on a handful of scouts to locate the Apache, with the Americans doing the bulk of the fighting. In fact, the U.S. Army fielded large units of scouts, sometimes numbering more than a hundred, who took the brunt of much of the combat. In the film, the Buffalo Soldiers are accompanied by only one scout, a half Seminole/half black named John Horse. This depiction relies on and reinforces one of the more prevalent and heinous Indian stereotypes: that all Indians are equivalent. In reality, a Seminole raised

in the Everglades would have no greater chance of locating Apaches in their homeland than would any European or African American.²⁴

The manner in which the Apache are caught is not in keeping with the known tactics of the Apache, particularly under the military genius of Victorio, who was always diligent in posting sentries and erecting breastworks around any encampment, no matter how temporary. The Apache were masters of guerrilla warfare, and an ambush at a water hole was one of their common tactics. To believe that Victorio would just walk into such a trap without sending scouts ahead stretches credulity. Moreover, once the trap was sprung, the Apache would not surrender tamely, but fight and flee.

Even more grotesque is the scene in which the Buffalo Soldiers free the captive Apache. The screenwriters would like the audience to believe that the Buffalo Soldiers, perhaps because of their experience or knowledge of slavery, would be more compassionate to the Apache. Unfortunately, history is full of countless examples that suffering oppression does not immunize an individual or group of people from oppressing others.²⁵ Empowerment is not inherently ennobling and, just as many an abused child grows to be an abusive parent, the oppressed can become oppressors. The uncomfortable truth about the Buffalo Soldiers is that, for the most part, they were willing participants in attempted genocide.

When asked if he felt uncomfortable being involved in such a movie, Chelsey Goseyun Wilson, a Chiricahua Apache who played the chief Nana and served as language consultant on the film, responded, "Well, we knew from the beginning that it would be their [the producers'] film."²⁶ Indeed, it was not "our" (the Apaches') film. Even the phrase *Buffalo Soldiers* is not of Apache origin, but is attributed to various Plains Indian groups. There is no evidence that the Apache ever made such a distinction between black and white troops. From the Apache perspective, they were nearly identical, as both were trying to exterminate the Apache. (The Apache word used for Americans, *Indah* was not color based, and did not mean "white," so it could apply equally to white and black soldiers.) Any sympathy that the Apache might have had for the Buffalo Soldiers as fellow victims of racism was unlikely, because they were so isolated from American society that they probably had little knowledge of black-white race relations.²⁷ Thus a scene in which Victorio confronts the soldiers' allegiance to white America, while providing an opportunity for the wise scout Horse to comment that "you have more in common with them then you know or want to admit," not only didn't happen but was highly unlikely. It's far more likely that any soldier that close to Victorio during open warfare would be killed, not given a lecture on politics and morality.

In actuality, the U.S. Army led by Apache scouts followed Victorio's band into Mexico, where his band encountered a large force of the Mexican army at Tres Castillos, led by Tarahumara Indian scouts, traditional enemies of the Apache. Many of Victorio's followers died in this battle and Victorio himself was reportedly killed by Maurico Correador, a Tarahumara scout.²⁸

The distributors of this film were aware of these problems, as they addressed some of the historical inaccuracies on their website. They freely admit that the capture of Victorio and his confrontation with the soldiers, as

well as their choosing not to partake in the genocide, were fictitious. However, the fact that the one redeeming act of the Buffalo Soldiers did not actually occur seems immaterial to them. Demonstrating a noteworthy lack of awareness of irony, the film's website states, "While fighting to subdue the Apache on the frontier, the soldiers have to combat an even greater menace at home, racism." A more accurate description would be, "While perpetrating racism, imperialism, and genocide against the Apache, they experience racism themselves."

Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron (2002), an animated children's film, presents an audacious variation on the white mediator theme, as a Native American film told from the *horse's* point of view. It's the story of the friendship that develops between a young Sioux warrior, Little Creek (Daniel Studi), and a wild stallion as they both resist capture by U.S. Cavalry forces in the late 1800s. The filmmakers attempt to demonstrate a similarity between the situations of wild horses and "wild Indians" and in the process conflate both. They also perpetuate the myths of both wild horses and Indians.

The film begins with the horse, Spirit, (Matt Damon in voiceover), explaining that his "people," the wild horses, had always been there. This is patently false. The herds of wild horses that now roam the American West did not exist in the nineteenth century. Horses were so valuable, economically and militarily, that horse stealing was a capital offense. (Imagine a herd of wild tractors, pickup trucks, and jeeps being allowed to roam free.) It was only during the crisis of overproduction in the Great Depression that owning a horse became, for perhaps the first time in history, a liability rather than an asset. Modern wild horses descend from horses freed by Dust Bowl farmers of the 1930s.

More problematically, the film asserts a natural kinship between horses and Indians, in that the untamable Spirit will only allow the Sioux to ride him, and stubbornly resists the efforts of whites to break him. The cause of the natural affinity between the two is unclear. A cultural explanation makes sense only if one accepts the movie's false premise that horses are native to North America. Otherwise, the Europeans should have a stronger cultural connection with horses, as they have lived with them for thousands of years longer than the Sioux have. Perhaps the horse and Indian merely empathize with each other's oppression at the hands of the whites. This suggests a problematic equating of Indians and animals, as indicated by Spirit referring to his herd as "people," that elevates the horse and demeans the Indian.

Windtalkers (2002) squanders its historic material. It also follows the pattern of attempting to tell the story of its Indian subjects, in this case the Navajo Code Talkers of World War II, through the eyes of a white protagonist, Sgt. Joe Enders (Nicholas Cage). The film is primarily a conventional war movie with a clichéd and predictable plot. It was made in the context of heightened interest in the Code Talkers, spawned by a few books and numerous articles that were published in the 1990s as part of a larger resurgence of interest in World War II during that decade (with *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Greatest Generation* being prime examples). The Code Talkers were Navajo who used their language during World War II as a military code which was unbreakable by the Japanese in the Pacific theater.

Enders is a bitter and cynical Marine sergeant who is haunted by an incident in his past when he lost his platoon because of his strict adherence to orders. He's given the job of guarding a Navajo Code Talker and secret orders to kill the Navajo if they are ever in danger of falling into Japanese hands. (The historical veracity of such orders is questionable.) The Navajo assigned to him is Ben Yahzee (Adam Beach), a fresh-faced, innocent farm boy who's a staple of many a war film. He even carries a picture of his wife and child taped inside his helmet.

The two are accompanied by another Code Talker, Charles Whitehorse (Roger Wiley), and his protector, Ryan "Ox" Anderson (Christian Slater). Anderson is skeptical of the orders to kill the Code Talkers rather than let them be captured. When faced with this situation, Anderson disobeys orders and tries to fight their way out. He's killed, and to "protect the code" Enders kills Whitehorse.

Enders resists a friendship with Yahzee to avoid guilt or hesitation should he need to carry out his secret orders. Yet he eventually becomes friends with Yahzee, who uses a Navajo ritual to cure Enders of his survivor's guilt. The same ritual, performed earlier by Whitehorse, also cured Yahzee of his cultural fear of the dead, allowing him to become a skillful fighter.

At the climax of the film, when the two are about to be captured, the wounded Yahzee, now aware of the secret orders, urges Enders to kill him. He refuses and carries Yahzee out on his back. However, Enders is shot during this escape, so that although he saves the Code Talker and the code, he does so only by sacrificing his life.

Despite the inclusion of elements of Navajo culture such as the ritual and Whitehorse playing a Native flute, the film remains primarily about Cage's character development. The little that's shown of the Navajos' lives outside the Marines is revealed when the other Marines describe their homes and families. A hint of what could have been done is provided when Yahzee laments after Whitehorse's death that Yahzee had persuaded Whitehorse to join the Marines. This conversation would have been an interesting facet of the Code Talkers' story. Were any reluctant to fight, and if so why? Unfortunately, such issues are peripheral to the story of the film's white protagonist.

In one scene, the Marines are discussing the war and the Navajos' presence in it. One soldier mentions that his grandfather used to get paid a bounty to kill Indians, and now he's fighting beside one. He further comments that perhaps in fifty years they'll be fighting alongside the Japanese against someone else. Although this comment appears to humanize the Navajo, it also implies that war is inevitable, thus exculpating the participants of any war: the implication is that the grandfather who participated in attempted genocide is no more culpable than the Marines fighting the Japanese.

This film, like *Saving Private Ryan*, falls into the genre of celebratory war films, no less heroic for the carnage they show. It fails to question the war and Navajo participation in it,²⁹ with the only tension being whether or not Enders will follow his orders. Symbolically, as with the heroes of other films studied in this article, he redeems himself, and whites in general, by refusing to kill an Indian.

Possibly in order to avoid the problems inherent to the Heart of Lightness films, a number of films have been made with Native American protagonists, some featuring an entirely or mostly Native American cast. *Windwalker*³⁰ (1980) went one step further and was filmed entirely in Crow and Cheyenne with English subtitles.³¹ *Indian Paint* (1963) is described on its videotape packaging as “a Western with a twist. There are no white people, no love triangles, none of the cornball trappings of traditional horse operas. *It is a tale told strictly from the Indian’s point of view*” (italics mine). Although a few such films were made before the 1990s, that decade saw a surge in attempts to “tell tales from the Indian’s point of view.” Most notably, Turner Network Television has produced a number of such films, including *Son of the Morning Star* (1991), *The Broken Chain*, (1993), *Geronimo* (1993), *Lakota Woman* (1994), and *Crazy Horse* (1996).

As TNT’s *Geronimo* was released in the same year as Sony’s *Geronimo: An American Legend*, a comparison of the two should be illuminating.³² As mentioned earlier, in Sony’s *Geronimo* movie Geronimo himself did not receive top billing. This was appropriate in the context of the film, because the protagonists were white cavalry officers. (A more appropriate title for the film would have been *White Guys Searching for Geronimo*.) Most of the film was shot from the perspective of these officers, with Geronimo serving primarily as a sounding board for the various white characters to pontificate on the proper course of action for the Apache. Ironically, the heroism of the film does not focus on the epic struggle of a desperate band of warriors to protect their people from extermination but on the refusal of white characters to participate in the genocide. The climax comes when Lt. Charles Gatewood (Jason Patric) and Lt. Britton Davis (Matt Damon) decide to resign from the army.

This film contains an ironic juxtaposition of a scene from *Ulzana’s Raid*. In that film of 1972, the young Lieutenant DeBuin (Bruce Davison) confesses his hatred of the Apache to the experienced army scout McIntosh (Burt Lancaster) after seeing the results of an Apache torture death. McIntosh responds that to hate the Apache is futile, as they are a force of nature, implying in a form of cultural relativism that they are not morally responsible. The audience is meant to learn from the scout, as the lieutenant does, that the Apache are immutably savage, thus morally blameless and to be pitied, yet simultaneously incapable of reform and thus doomed to extinction. This ultimately exonerates those who participate in the extinction from blame as well.

In *Geronimo*, the scene is reversed, with the experienced Chief of Scouts Al Sieber (Robert Duval) telling Lieutenant Gatewood, “You don’t love what you are fighting for, and you don’t hate the people you are fighting against.” Gatewood’s sarcastic response, “Perhaps I can learn the proper level of hatred from you,” is lost on Sieber. His hatred for the Apache is all the more nonsensical as his extensive knowledge of Apache culture and wilderness skills could only have been gained through close contact with them. However, the character is redeemed when he sacrifices his life protecting one of his Apache scouts from bounty hunters.

The film was marketed as being historically accurate, with posters proclaiming “Now the true story can be told.” This contains an implicit

acknowledgment of the inaccuracies in the previous screen incarnations of Geronimo (two films of that title, in 1939 and 1962, plus dozens of films featuring him as a supporting character.) It follows the established Heart of Lightness plot, with the sympathetic army officers Lt. Britton Davis, Lt. Charles Gatewood, and General Crook refusing to participate in the genocide, while Chief of Scouts Sieber sacrifices his life for one of his Apache scouts. Each of these officers was an actual person, as was General Miles, the only officer portrayed as less than compassionate to the Apache, and much is known about their role in the conflict. Both Davis and Gatewood would write books about their experiences, *The Truth About Geronimo* (1929) by Davis, and *An Account of the Surrender of Geronimo* (1895) by Gatewood.

The filmmaker also relies heavily on the photographs of C. S. Fly, who took a number of famous photos of Geronimo and his band during surrender negotiations. The film argues for its authenticity by showing the staging of Fly's photographs and superimposing the actual photographs, relying on the assumption of the audience that "the camera (both still and motion picture) doesn't lie." The irony of bolstering one's claims of authority by recreating a staged photo session escapes comment by the filmmakers. The "treachery of images" is unacknowledged, yet *Ceci, ce n'est pas un Apache*.

One of the disappointing aspects of this film is that it uses historically based characters, but alters them severely to fit them into the formula of white men experiencing Native culture, becoming ennobled by the experience, and then choosing to absent themselves from the imperialist aggression. To this end, the motivations ascribed to these characters often lack historic basis. For example, the film presents Gatewood as sympathetic to the Apache and as a friend of Geronimo. Early in the film Gatewood, while escorting a surrendering Geronimo back from Mexico to the reservation, defends him from a vengeful posse, and the two exchange gifts. (Hollywood thus turns the subjugation of a Native people into a buddy movie.) Because of this bit of multicultural male bonding, at the end of the film Gatewood is sent to negotiate the final surrender of Geronimo. Even though Gatewood believes that General Miles and the federal government are acting in bad faith, he secures Geronimo's surrender and is then assigned to a remote outpost to prevent his intervening on behalf of the Apache. Historically, Gatewood did deliver Miles' terms to Geronimo for his final surrender, but the previous trip from Mexico is fictitious, and Geronimo and Gatewood were not friends. While Gatewood did learn to speak a little Apache, and was respected by them when he was an administrator at Fort Apache, "Gatewood did not share . . . Davis' liking for the Apaches."³³ In fact, when Gatewood approached Geronimo for his surrender, his life was initially spared not because of his friendship with Geronimo, but because his two scouts were related to members of Geronimo's party.

The villain of the piece is General Miles, which is more accurate than much of the film. Miles is also made to represent the deceit of the U.S. government, not only to the Apaches, but to Gatewood and Davis, the real heroes of the film. General Crook, Miles' predecessor, is also presented as a "good guy." A veteran Indian fighter who fought Cochise, he is shown as far more sympathetic to the Apaches than was the case. Ultimately frustrated by his

inability to convince Geronimo to remain on the reservation, he resigned. In his autobiography, Geronimo had this to say about Crook: "I have suffered much from such unjust orders as those of General Crook. Such acts have caused much distress to my people. I think that General Crook's death was sent by the almighty as a punishment for the many evil deeds that he committed."³⁴

It's distressing that the screenwriter, John Milius, when looking for some whites to lionize, overlooked General Howard, an abolitionist who led black troops in the Civil war and namesake of Howard University, and George Wratten. Of the former, Geronimo said:

He always kept his word with us and treated us as brothers. We never had so good a friend among the United States officers as General Howard. We could have lived forever at peace with him. If there is any pure honest, white man in the United States army, that man is General Howard. All the Indians respect him, and even to this day frequently talk of the happy times when General Howard was in command of our post."³⁵

However, it appears likely that the primary sources used by Milius were the memoirs of Britton, Davis, Crook, and Miles; it's not clear that he has read Geronimo's autobiography at all.

George Wratten would make an excellent candidate for the sympathetic white character, if one felt such a character was necessary. Wratten grew up near the Mescalero Reservation and spoke Apache fluently. This fluency allowed him to become a chief of scouts at the young age of sixteen, and although he helped subjugate the Apache, he came the closest to "going Apache" of any white. He married an Apache woman and willingly accompanied the Apache when they were sent to a concentration camp in Florida, providing translation and other desperately needed assistance to them.

More importantly, the portrayal of Apaches in the film is simplistic and homogenous. The film only covers a few years of Geronimo's life, and portrays him as much younger than he actually was at this time. To make him appear more sympathetic, he is not shown killing any Americans, and the more brutal elements of Apache culture, such as torture, are not shown. Additionally, there's nearly a total absence of female characters in the film, with only one line ("Geronimo is here") spoken by a woman. The absence is especially galling because Apache women were active participants in the war bands. Geronimo had two notable women in his band, Tahdahste, a scout and messenger who was instrumental to the surrender negotiations, and Lozen, a warrior woman and *di'yen* (shaman) who was an important adviser. Also missing is Naiche, the son of Cochise, who although secondary in actual leadership to Geronimo, was actually accorded higher status in the final band since Geronimo was never actually a chief. In a famous photograph of Geronimo's band beside the railroad car that's taking them back East, Naiche holds a central position in the group, with Geronimo deferentially sitting slightly off to the side.

One notable character in the film is the Apache scout Chatto, who, despite his loyalty to the United States, is deported and imprisoned along with

all the other Chiricahua at the end of the film. His sense of betrayal and confusion as he is ordered to surrender his rifle is the most poignant moment of the film. Chatto attempts to hold on to his rifle, asserting that he is "Sergeant Chatto, U.S. Army." This scene is laudable in that it shows the divisions within the Apache—particularly the fact that some chose to work against their own people—and acknowledges the treachery of the U.S. Army. When confronted by his fellow prisoners, Geronimo asked those who had remained resistant to the final surrender not to hate Chatto, as there were too few remaining Apaches for internal fighting.

However, Hollywood has traditionally been sympathetic to the "good Indian," the loyal Tonto who assists in the decimation of his people, as opposed to the irrational "hostile." Chatto is no exception. Just as the white officers' records are sanitized to make them more compassionate, Chatto's historical motivations are overlooked. In actuality, Chatto had himself been a "hostile," leading a small but successful campaign in 1883 known as Chatto's Raid. Later, he framed Kaytenae, one of his rivals for leadership of the Chiricahua after the death of Victorio. Chatto lied, saying that Kaytenae was plotting the murder of Davis, resulting in Kaytenae being arrested and shipped to Alcatraz. However, because even eliminating his rival did not secure him the respect of most of the Apache, he turned to the U.S. Army to obtain a position of power. Despite the film's attempt at absolving him of guilt, much as it seeks to absolve the whites who participated in genocide, in reality many Apache hated Chatto, reviling him as "the arch traitor."³⁶

The Turner Network Television production avoids many of the critiques of its Sony counterpart, but remains problematic. It is part of TNT's Native American series, advertised with the slogan "Behind the Myths, Beyond the Legends." Unstated but understood is the implicit prefix to the slogan, "The True Story." The production provides a far better portrayal of Apache culture than does the Sony film and is far more comprehensive, covering Geronimo's life from early childhood to old age. It also includes a large number of Apache characters, many historical, such as Cochise and Mangas Coloradas, with a variety of well-developed personalities. Although the production has serious flaws, it remains the best portrayal of Apache culture and history on film to date. Particularly well done is the opening framing sequence, which occurs during Teddy Roosevelt's 1905 Fourth of July parade. Geronimo agrees to appear in the parade and is told that he will march up front with the "wild" Indians, while Carlisle school students, including his nephew Daklugie, will represent the "civilized" Indian. Geronimo arrives dressed in a western suit, panicking the parade organizer who asks, "Where's his costume?" This bodes well for the rest of the film, as it seems to suggest that the filmmakers are aware of the appropriation of Geronimo, even during his life, as an icon by mainstream America.

Unfortunately, the filmmakers fail to avoid this appropriation themselves. The rest of the film consists of the elderly Geronimo telling his life story to Daklugie. However, this account is sanitized to be more sympathetic to an American audience. Although Geronimo's early battles with Mexicans are shown in graphic detail, his battles against the Americans, for which he is most famous,

are glossed over. To be a hero acceptable to American audiences, Geronimo neither kills any American soldiers on screen, nor do any American soldiers attempt to kill him. In a voiceover he will tell Daklugie, “we fought for ten more years” and later “we fought for eight more years,” thus conveniently allowing Geronimo himself to sneak into the “good Indian” category. In this way, the audience can identify with the protagonist without having to identify with someone they see killing American soldiers, nor need they cast the U.S. Army in the role of villain attempting to kill the hero with whom they’ve now identified.

Also, the history of the American-attempted genocide will be softened. In the opening sequence, Wratten states that Geronimo was never captured, but surrendered because his men missed their families. Although Geronimo did surrender for this reason, the film does not state that their families and all of the other noncombatant Chiricahua left on the reservation had already been arrested by the United States and sent east, and were used as hostages to obtain Geronimo’s surrender. It should be noted that for the Apache, to be “sent east” meant death or madness, as those who returned from the east talking of the fantastic things in the white man’s world were believed to be bewitched. Even more tragically, many died from disease and never returned, most notably Cochise’s son and presumed successor Taza, who died during a visit to Washington, D.C. in 1876. Thus Geronimo’s surrender was obtained through the threat to exterminate the Apache people. The threat of death in captivity was real, as out of 545 captive Apache at the time of surrender in 1886, only 261 survived the years of captivity. Many of these died from diseases such as tuberculosis that were known to be aggravated by the climates in which the Apache were held (the swamps of Florida and Alabama) and alleviated by the climate of New Mexico and Arizona, making the charge of intentional genocide difficult to avoid.

Disappointingly, this film, which had avoided both the “Heart of Lightness” and “Vanishing Indian” motifs for most of the film, slips both in during the last scenes. In the penultimate scene, Geronimo advises Daklugie to study white man’s ways to help serve the Apache people, while addressing Daklugie’s fear of assimilation. In the last scene, during which Geronimo confronts Roosevelt about the treatment of the Apache (an actual historical event), Geronimo delivers a variation of the Chief Joseph “I will fight no more forever” speech. However, contrary to this Vanishing Indian motif, he insists that “the Apache will always be,” avoiding the tendencies of such themes to relegate the struggle and lives of Native Americans to the past. He also mentions that the Apache were betrayed: the conditions of their surrender stated that they would be freed in two years, yet they remain prisoners of war in Oklahoma nineteen years later. He admits to killing many Americans, but in self-defense. He charges Roosevelt that “if you were me, you would have done the same.” Roosevelt will look after him, saying, “The irony is that if I were in his position, I would have done the exact same thing.” Thus, Roosevelt, like the unnamed narrator of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, voices for the audience what they have been experiencing throughout the film: an identification with the struggle and suffering of the Indian, and through this empathy, absolving of one’s culpability in that suffering. Like Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun*,

Roosevelt states for the audience, "I'm an Indian, too." Roosevelt is a particularly problematic surrogate in this case as he was an imperialist who would participate in the subjection of indigenous peoples in Asia and Latin America during his career.

As the audience watches Geronimo walk outside into the sunlight, they hear the voice of Daklugie saying, "They say you can hear his name in the wind." Despite the assurances that "the Apache will always be," Geronimo and the Apache are reduced to ghosts, and join the long parade of vanishing Indians stretching back to James Fraser's *End of the Trail*.

One of the greatest problems in both of the 1993 Geronimo films is their choice of subject matter. Geronimo was the subject of these and many previous films due to his fame and prestige in the white community, not because of a similar position in Chiricahua culture. Geronimo became a celebrity after his surrender, selling his autograph, dictating his autobiography, appearing in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, and riding in Roosevelt's inaugural parade. As Hollywood has often sought to portray the "White Man's Indian," Geronimo was well prepared before the advent of film for his role as the "White Man's Apache." To his credit, he did not engage in these activities merely for his own self-aggrandizement. He often sold the bows and arrows crafted by other members of the tribe, but would tell white tourists that he himself had crafted them, thus securing a far better price. He only participated in the inaugural parade in exchange for an audience with Roosevelt, which he used to argue for his people's release.

However, among his own people he was not considered a "great chief." Even his nephew Daklugie insisted that Geronimo was never a chief.³⁷ Instead, he was a war leader and shaman, equivalent to Chatto or Ulzana in stature and prestige. He is not one of the three great chiefs of the Chiricahua: Mangas Coloradas, Cochise, and Victorio. While Geronimo had a great respect for Victorio,³⁸ Victorio blamed Geronimo's behavior for the loss of the Ojo Caliente Reservation for which Victorio had successfully fought. "We should not have been driven from our homes. We are not to blame for what Geronimo did."³⁹ In *Geronimo: An American Legend*, Crook compares Geronimo unfavorably to Victorio and Cochise, stating that he knew both and that they were both great men, thus begging the question as to why the film was not made about either of them. Geronimo would not rise to prominence among the Apache until after the death all of these great chiefs, as well as his brother-in-law Juh, chief of the Nednhi Apache. Even after the final incarceration of the Apache, many blamed Geronimo's mystical power for the premature death of many of their number, in the belief that his long life was due to his power deflecting the death meant for him onto others.

In service of the Geronimo-centered nature of these films, other Apache leaders were diminished in stature or eliminated entirely to solidify the myth of Geronimo as the greatest of Apache "chiefs." In the TNT movie, the relationship of Geronimo with his brother-in-law Juh is presented as if Juh were Geronimo's sidekick. In reality, Juh was the powerful chief of the Nednhi tribe of the Chiricahua. (Geronimo was a member of the, by then, almost extinct Bedonhoke tribe.) Much of Geronimo's stature grew from his position as

spokesman for the brilliant, but stuttering, Juh. Nowhere in the film is Juh depicted as leading his forces to victory, as he did many times, most notably by hunting down and killing Lt. Howard Cushing in 1871 while Cushing was intent on killing Cochise. In the film, when Cochise dies and is buried, Geronimo is put in the privileged position of assisting with the burial, when in actuality, such an honor would have been granted only to close kinsmen or honored chiefs, not to an, at that time, obscure shaman from another tribe. The film also minimizes the roles of the other leaders. For example, all of the historical accounts describe Mangas Coloradas as being of great stature,⁴⁰ yet in the film he is of medium build, and his political role in uniting the Apache tribes is reduced to being Geronimo's patron.

A final argument for the inappropriateness of Geronimo as a representative of the Apache is that in the Apache worldview, surrender is not a heroic act. Geronimo himself would bemoan the ignominy of his life as a prisoner of war, and often wish during his confinement that he had died fighting like Victorio and Coloradas. Indeed, Victorio and Cochise each achieved some degree of freedom for their people, while Geronimo's legacy was twenty-seven years of imprisonment, a fate literally worse than death or torture to the Apache. Moreover, Geronimo's actual death was most unheroic, resulting from an accident following a drinking binge in which he fell off his horse, lay in a puddle of water overnight, and died of pneumonia—a scene which is mercifully absent from both films.

To return to Nachbar's distinction between pro-progress and anti-progress films, I contend that these new "sympathetic" films, for all of their appearance of being anti-progress, are in fact pro-progress. However, the progress that they celebrate is not that of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Americans "opening up the wilderness to civilization." Instead these films are intended to celebrate (for all their morbidity in some cases) the moral progress and cultural sensitivity of late twentieth-century Americans. In some ways, however, not only do these movies relieve the anxieties of modern Americans about their culpability for attempted genocide, but by giving examples of historical figures who chose not to participate in the subjugation of the Indians, they provide a retroactive redemption of the whole enterprise. They also contribute to a modern belief that these issues have all been successfully addressed now that we have all become sensitive to them. The audience vicariously identifying with the sympathetic white character provides a cultural purging of this guilt, which eradicates the long-term effects of the attempted genocide and ongoing attempts at dislocation of Native peoples from the popular consciousness.

Native American films often portray an inevitability in the loss of lands and life by the Indians, and, by and large, the "sympathetic" films contribute to this as well.⁴¹ The continuation of this theme in the "progressive" or "sympathetic" film is not only insulting in that it implies a Darwinian industrial or technological inferiority of Native cultures, but contributes to the invisibility in mainstream media of the ongoing oppression of Native peoples in the United States. This sense of inevitability provides a cultural disapproval of the tragedy, together with a release of tension and guilt about its inevitability.

Sometimes bad things just happen to good peoples, and sometimes genocide was just meant to be. This absolves both the individual imperialists and the institutionalized American imperialism of any blame. Furthermore, it's historically inaccurate. Although some Native peoples and cultures have vanished entirely, many others continue to exist, some thriving and some struggling, but all still dealing with the problems of American colonialism. It's ironic that the conquest of the Americas by Europeans is so universally reviled when addressed in current popular culture, yet this very perception of universal moral condemnation helps obscure the ongoing forms of that oppression.

Although these films deserve varying degrees of praise for their attempts to show "the Indian point of view" and avoid previous stereotypes, as long as they, consciously or not, continue to serve white (or black) concerns, they won't succeed. Some scholars have suggested that the only remedy is to use all-Native casts and crews, including, writers, directors, and producers, such as in *Smoke Signals*. However, ethnicity itself provides no immunity from serving those concerns, as evidenced by the many Native actors who have portrayed characters that met this need. Indeed, as was demonstrated by the controversies within the Native community over such films as *Pocahontas*, there is no single Indian point of view. Moreover, while potentially more sympathetic than an average non-Indian, is a Cherokee like Wes Studi inherently better suited to play an Apache than any other non-Apache? Or is he hampered in this portrayal by not being an Apache? Such critics as Ward Churchill would seem to suggest that only members of a specific nation should portray that group.⁴² However, on a practical level, this would so drastically reduce the number of qualified people for any film as to render most impossible.

Granted that the production of accurate and authentic Native film is desirable, and as long as a market for Native American films exists, they will be made; it would be beneficial to attempt to assure that they are accurate and authentic, particularly those that deal with historical events and figures. The solution is for filmmakers, both Indian and non-Indian, to ground themselves in a thorough knowledge of the Native American cultures and histories that they are portraying. They would also benefit from an awareness of the forms (pro-progress, anti-progress, the inevitable vanishing Indian, "progressive," and the Heart of Lightness) that Native American films have taken in their service to white concerns, and the ways in which they have warped history to serve those concerns.

However, even when films that are aware of these issues are created, they run into the problems of distribution and promotion. Modern films created in whole or part by Indians, often from Indian literature and addressing Indian concerns, such as *Powwow Highway* (1989), *Dance Me Outside* (1995), *Smoke Signals* (1998), *The Fast Runner* (2001), *The Business of Fancy Dancing* (2002), and *Skins* (2002) remain for the most part relegated to art houses, which means that they're unavailable to most filmgoers. Audiences, whether Indian or not, are still much more likely to see *Windtalkers* or *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* than *Skins* or *The Business of Fancy Dancing*. Moreover, even when scripted and directed by Native Americans, the highly centralized nature of the production and distribution of films threatens the creators' control over

them. For example, the title *Smoke Signals* was added by film company executives, although there are no smoke signals used in the movie, no one mentions smoke signals, and the Coeur d'Alene tribe, the subject of the film, did not historically use smoke signals.

Additionally, the focus of these films might contribute to their reception by different audiences. Native filmmakers have a greater interest in portraying the lives of modern Indians; Chris Eyre's stated objective in making *Skins* was to "represent contemporary Native America to a world that needs it." Eric Schweig, the star of *Skins*, also said of making the film that he was "glad to get up in the morning and put on pants and put on a shirt rather than a loin cloth and buckskins and all that nonsense. All that does is perpetuate all the ignorance we had to put up with in the past five hundred years."⁴³

However, the white audience remains hungry for the historical and vanished Indian. Even *Windtalkers*, set in the twentieth century, is primarily assimilationist in tone. Thus it seems most likely that rather than supplanting the Hollywood Indian film, the Native-made film, which focuses more on contemporary issues⁴⁴ and eschews the problematic tropes discussed in this essay, will continue to live in the shadow of the Hollywood "horse opera" that remains focused on white concerns.

NOTES

1. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 101.

2. Although the protagonist of *Thunderheart* is an Indian, at the beginning of the film he is essentially a white man, completely disconnected from his cultural heritage. His character development through the film is manifested in his discovery of this lost heritage. Thus, he gives literal form to the white fantasy that if one travels to the reservation and listens to the elders, one will discover that one is in actuality an Indian, not only culturally but racially as well. This fantasy is played out in part by the large numbers of whites (and some blacks) who will claim partial Native blood with scant evidence.

3. Annette M. Taylor has criticized the show for its comingling of disparate Native cultural artifacts. Although not rejecting Taylor's critique entirely, she seems to have overlooked the actual cultural and biological intermingling of the different Native Alaskan cultures. Her objection that Marilyn adopts the ways of Chilkat Tlingits, yet claims an Athabaskan grandmother, appears to imply that such a multiethnic Native Alaskan is an impossibility. See Taylor in S. Elizabeth Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 229

4. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 42.

5. There is some evidence, as well, that non-white Americans will easily identify with white protagonists, for example, the Clarks' study that black children will choose white dolls over black ones. See Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark, "Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children," in *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1947).

6. Phillip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
7. D. Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of The Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), 107.
8. William T. Pilkington and Don Graham, eds., *Western Movies* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 140
9. Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); Michael Hilger, *The American Indian in Film* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1986).
10. Michael Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Film* (Lanham, Md. : Scarecrow Press, 1995)
11. Nachbar argues that *Ulzana's Raid* is neither pro- nor anti-progress, but is instead an absurdist or nihilistic work, and that somehow arguing "ain't none of us right" will end the film exploitation of the Indian. (Jack Nachbar, "Ulzana's Raid," in *Western Movies*, eds. Pilkington and Graham [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979], 139.) However, the film mangles the historical facts into the inevitable dying Indian motif, with a resigned Ulzana submitting to his destruction by an Apache scout. In actuality, Ulzana's raid was a success, obtaining more than 250 horses and mules and much needed ammunition for Geronimo's band in 1885, with the loss of only one warrior, versus thirty-eight American fatalities. (David Roberts, *Once They Moved Like the Wind: Cochise, Geronimo, and the Apache Wars* [New York: Touchstone, 1993], 263.) Thus, it is not a neutral condemnation of both sides' atrocities, but is pro-progress, not in asserting its moral righteousness, but in asserting its inevitability.
12. Eliot Aronson, *The Social Animal*, fifth ed. (New York: W. H. Freedman, 1988), 116.
13. Appleford address this theme briefly in his work "Coming Out From Behind the Rocks," but does not analyze the differences between its light and dark forms. (Robert Appleford, "Coming Out From Behind the Rocks: Constructs of the Indian in Recent U.S. and Canadian Cinema," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 19, 1 [1995]: 99.) He merely states that both separate the colonized and colonizer into "self and "other" a la Edward Said, yet a further discussion of what those selves and others are is warranted.
14. For more on this surprisingly anti-miscegenistic turn in such a modern film, see Kilpatrick, 128.
15. An interesting parallel to the "Kunta Kinte" scene in *Roots* in which the protagonist insists on his African name, Kunta Kinte, despite the insistence of the slave owner that he accept the English name Toby. For more on whites taking Indian names, see Deloria's *Playing Indian*, and Robert Baird. (Bird 202)
16. The protagonist in these films is almost always male, with a few exceptions. Two films that have a female protagonist in the "Heart of Lightness" plot are *Winterhawk* (1975) and *Greyeagle* (1977). Both were written, directed, and produced by Charles B. Pierce, and have a very similar plot: white woman abducted by Indian comes to appreciate Indian culture and falls in love with her captor. In the latter, the heroine also discovers that she is genetically an Indian as well. Although these movies are sympathetic to Indian culture and critical of white atrocities, the sexual politics are problematic.
17. Even in *Squanto: A Warrior's Tale* (1994), while the protagonist is the title character, the dramatic climax occurs when a monk, who had previously considered Squanto barbaric, comes to appreciate his humanity and protects him from harm.

18. Fox, the network of *King of the Hill*, also introduced a Native character in a supporting role on its hit show, *Malcolm in the Middle*, when the oldest boy in the family, Francis, married Piama, a Native Alaskan.

19. A sample exchange occurred when the show's protagonist Hank Hill was preparing to take his son and friends for a camping outing complete with pseudo-Native American ceremonies in "The Order of the Straight Arrow."

Hank: John Redcorn, can you show us some Indian stuff we can do for the boys?

John: The ceremonies of my people are sacred and are not to be shared lightly with outsiders.

Hank: Yeah, that's great, like when you keep saying everything is sacred and stuff.

20. Original air date, 6 February 2003.

21. Dale, a chain-smoking redneck with a love of conspiracy theories, on thinking that he is an Indian: "Finally, my love of tobacco and my distrust of the federal government make perfect sense." He asks Redcorn, "So, is there a store where you get all your beads and feathers and stuff?" Redcorn sighs, "Actually, it's a website."

22. Ironically, the filmmakers demonstrate their awareness of this myth-making process. After capturing Victorio, the Buffalo Soldiers are surprised to discover that he is small, elderly, and mild. John Horse dismisses their concerns by announcing that this is Victorio, "the man, not the myth." Yet the filmmakers are surprisingly lacking in self-awareness, or are shameless in appropriating the historical Victorio into their own myth construction. For their myth of compassionate Buffalo Soldiers, they need an adversary worthy of compassion, and are not shy about creating such a Victorio. The historical Victorio, even in his old age, was awe-inspiring. One survivor of the Apache wars described him as "The most nearly perfect human being I have ever seen." Eve Ball, *In the Days of Victorio: Recollections of a Warm Springs Apache* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970), 41, 53.

23. There is no case to the author's knowledge of any U.S. Army unit, white or black, ever locating Chiricahua without the use of Apache scouts.

24. Conversely, the Apache knowledge of herbalism and medicine that served them so well in the Southwest would be worse than useless when they were forcibly transplanted to the swamps of Florida and Alabama. According to Stockel, while in captivity many Apache inadvertently poisoned themselves by substituting indigenous swamp plants for similar-looking southwestern flora in their folk remedies. Henrietta H. Stockel, *Survival of the Spirit: Chiricahua Apaches in Captivity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1990).

25. One of the most blatant is Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. The Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem is built over the site of a bulldozed Palestinian village, and many Palestinians remain in refugee camps, complete with barbed wire, watchtowers, and identity cards. The irony of the slogan "Never Again" would be humorous, if it weren't so tragic. Of course, in some cases the opposite is true. For example, many Jewish activists in the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s said that they were motivated to assist the African Americans in their struggle because they would have been grateful for the help of others during the Holocaust. However, such a response cannot be extrapolated automatically from that experience.

26. Chelsey Goseyun Wilson, conversation with author, New York City.

27. For many years the Apache believed that the retreat of federal troops from Arizona and New Mexico in the 1860s was in response to a recent campaign against them by the Apache, led by Cochise. This was actually due to the Civil War, of which the Apaches had no knowledge.

28. The Chiricahua oral tradition insists instead that Victorio took his own life in the battle after he was surrounded and out of ammunition.

29. The Code Talkers' participation is certainly open to critique. The use of a Native language as a munition can be seen as yet another appropriation of such native resources as gold and uranium, for the expansion of American imperialist ambitions abroad.

30. Ward Churchill refers to *Windwalker* as "sublimely ridiculous," but unfortunately he offers no reason for this assessment. Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 168.

31. Its video box describes it as "Native American with English Subtitles," a curious language, this "Native American." Consider a French film being labeled "European with Cherokee Subtitles."

32. Most of the films discussed in this paper concern the Apache, the nation most commonly portrayed in Western films. Additionally, because of certain elements of Apache culture (e.g., ritual torture and a raiding economy), it was one of the most "alien" and "savage" to American culture, both during the wars in question and in their on-screen portrayals. Thus presenting a sympathetic Apache requires much effort by filmmakers and audiences.

A further note on terminology: Most of the Apache portrayed on film are of the Chiricahua tribes, notably the Chihenne (Mangas Coloradas, Victorio, and Nana), the Choken (Cochise), and the Bedonhoke (Geronimo). I use the term *Apache* to refer mostly to the Chiricahua, with no generalization intended to the many other Apache tribes, such as the Aravaipa, Mescalero, and San Carlos. I have also chosen to use the terms *Apache* and *Chiricahua* rather than the Apache word for "ourselves," *Indeh*, as this is article intended for a general readership.

33. Angie Debo, *Geronimo: The Man, His Time, His Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 280.

34. S. M. Barrett, *Geronimo's Story of His Life* (New York: Duffield & Co., 1906), 139.

35. *Ibid.*, 128.

36. Roberts, 224.

37. Debo, 39.

38. Barrett, 127.

39. Debo, 108.

40. *Ibid.*, 32.

41. Churchill, 169.

42. *Ibid.*, 175.

43. "Starz! On the Set, 2001," on *Skins* DVD, First Look Media, 2003.

44. One hopes, however, that Native filmmakers will not abandon the historical periods to mainstream filmmakers entirely. Many historical Indians did wear buckskins, but they also had full human lives worthy of sophisticated storytelling. It would only be a partial victory if the skills and sensibilities of Native filmmakers were kept focused exclusively on the modern age.