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The Representation of Native Americans in Film:

Focalization, Political Economy, and Anachronistic Space

A Thesis in English

by

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Dedication

To my parents, Rafael and Carina,
for being my first teachers and instilling
the love of knowledge in me from an early age.

To my Uncle Joel, my Aunt Deyanira, and
my Grandmother Daisy, for all of their encouragement and support.

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Abstract

While minority representation in American film is very low, it seems as if Native Americans might be one of the least represented groups. Additionally, most portrayals in film today are of Native Americans in historical settings. These types of filmic representations relegate Native Americans to the distant past, almost as if they do not exist today, erasing the richness of their culture and the urgency of their current struggles. In this thesis, I begin from this observation in order to analyze the different types of films that feature Native American characters, and how their varying approaches reveal the current narrative Hollywood has created about these groups. I draw on post-colonial theory, theories of representation of marginalized people in film, and studies of the political economy of Hollywood films, including the Western genre. The films I analyze in this thesis are: *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), *The Lone Ranger* (Verbinski, 2013), *Even the Rain* (Icíar Bollaín, 2010), *The New World* (Terrence Malick, 2005), *Pocahontas* (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995), *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), and *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre, 1998). The thesis concludes by demonstrating the ways in which film can become a meaningful medium to remind the world of the presence of Native Americans in the present day and their ongoing struggles with the effects of colonialism.

Introduction

The idea for this thesis began after I watched Bong Joon-ho's film *Parasite (2019)*. I noticed one scene where the characters are dressed in Native American costumes. As I watched the film, I tried to understand the reason for this odd choice. The juxtaposition between the characters in historical dress at a dinner party hosted in a house with very modern architecture made me realize how often Native Americans are portrayed in a historical setting and are almost never portrayed in contemporary settings. This inspired me to look deeper into filmic representations of Native Americans. The fact that representations of Native Americans have expanded beyond Hollywood, and the American film industries, into international films outside of the Americas, makes the study of their filmic representations all the more critical, as these films will likely influence the perception of Native Americans on a global level. And so, for this thesis, I decided I should start with the Western genre, since it was so formative to early depictions of Native Americans in film. I proceeded to look at the political economy of Hollywood in order to consider the systematic reasons why these representations have been resistant to change. Finally, I looked at the concept of anachronistic space which was made so blatantly visible in Bong Joon-ho's film and how Native American produced films have begun to push back against this categorization.

In the first chapter, "Native American Representation in the Western Genre", I look at a traditional Western film, *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), and a more modern, revisionist Western, *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), to see how Indigenous representation has evolved within the genre and to fully grasp how the genre has influenced other Hollywood portrayals of Native Americans. This chapter includes a break-down of the most common stereotypes and

demonstrates how they are reductive. Furthermore, I show how these stereotypes can become roadblocks to Native American self-representation, despite some of these stereotypes' seemingly positive traits. Another important issue discussed in the first chapter is the concept of focalization. Focalization, as described in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's work *Unthinking Eurocentrism Multiculturalism and the media,* is the perspective from which a story is told. I argue that the Western genre in particular has a propensity toward focalizing a settler-colonialist perspective. This is because of ideologies like Manifest Destiny, which informed the genre.

In the second chapter, "The Exclusion of Native Americans from the Political Economy of Hollywood" I consider how the structure of film studios like the Walt Disney Company, and their increasing diversification, deprioritizes authenticity in filmmaking, instead prioritizing profits through merchandising and other avenues. Furthermore, I show how these large studios hold power over individual creatives and even whole unions, making the system more resistant to change. The chapter also discusses the history of hiring practices within Hollywood along with the prioritization of celebrity actors, and how these practices exclude large groups of minorities, including Native Americans, even leading to troubling instances of "red-face". The chapter ends with an analysis of the self-reflexive transnational production, *Even the Rain* (Icíar Bollaín, 2010), a film about the filmmaking process. I discuss the film's complex arguments about the exploitation of Native American labor as well as the film's possible participation in the exploitation of indigenous extras and actors.

In the final chapter, "Native Americans Occupying Anachronistic and Contemporary Spaces," I look at the concept of "anachronistic space" as defined by Anne McClintock in her book, *Imperial Leather,* and how it portrays Native Americans as primitive and from an anterior

time. I also look at how popular myths like the Pocahontas myth reappear in many depictions of Native Americans outside of the western genre and how the gendering of Native American lands as female is another facet of the "anachronistic space" concept which further romanticizes colonialism in these narratives. As such, I analyze the occurrence of this phenomenon in the prominent Hollywood films: *Pocahontas* (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995), an animated Disney film made for children; *The New World* (Terrence Malick, 2005), a critically acclaimed indie arthouse film; and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) a blockbuster science fiction film; all of which feature Native Americans in anachronistic space and the Pocahontas myth. I then compare these films to *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre, 1998), a fully Native American produced independent Canadian-American film, and show how it pushes back on the depiction of Native Americans in anachronistic space and the romanticization of colonialism. I argue that films like this one are advancements in the self-representation of Native Americans, allowing them to depict problems that are currently affecting their communities. I conclude that *Smoke Signals* should be the new standard for Native American representation and point to the hopeful continuation of this self-representation in recent audiovisual narratives like the television series *Reservation Dogs* (2021).

Chapter 1

Native American Representation in the Western Genre

Native American representation in the Western Genre has a complicated history. This essay delves into how Native American representation in the traditional Western has evolved, by analyzing and comparing the traditional 1930s Western, *Stagecoach,* and the more modern 1990s Western, *Dances with Wolves.* I argue that these Western films center settler-colonialist characters and feature stereotypes of Native Americans ranging from the "brutal savage" trope to the opposite "noble savage" trope. I trace the change from the overtly harmful stereotypes of Native Americans in *Stagecoach* to the less harmful stereotypes in *Dances with Wolves*. This essay aims to show how these "nicer" stereotypes are still harmful and perpetuate settler-colonialist ideologies. Furthermore, I contend that despite the advances made in representation between *Stagecoach* and *Dances with Wolves,* ultimately, the Western genre remains focalized through a Eurocentric settler-colonialist lens that obscures the voices of Native Americans and limits their agency for self-representation.

The definition of accurate and authentic representation has been a topic of critical debate. In its most basic sense, representation is speaking on behalf of someone else. As such, the person who is being portrayed can never be fully represented by someone else. Studying the representation of minorities in literary and filmic works often centers around identifying positive and negative stereotypes, determining whether a stereotype is negative or not, or determining whether the positive stereotypes in a literary or filmic work outweigh the negative stereotypes. This is important work, as stereotypes are often incorporated in works persistently with little to no critique and can become naturalized. These stereotypes can later manifest as implicit biases in

the public consciousness. Within the Western Genre, there have been a few stereotypes that dominate the portrayal of Native Americans. Most prominent of these are, the "brutal savage" trope, the "noble savage" trope, the sexually promiscuous Native American woman trope, the violently victimized Native American woman trope, and the "vanishing Native American" trope. Aside from stereotypes, another important element to consider when studying the representation of a group is the "focalization" of the narrative. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explore this concept of focalization in their book, *Unthinking Eurocentrism Multiculturalism and the media.* They explain how focalization should factor into any analysis of representation:

> A "positive image" approach … elides issues of point-of-view and what Gerard Genette calls "focalization." Genette's reformulation of the classic literary question of "point of view" reaches beyond character perspective to the structuring of information within the story world through the cognitive-perceptual grid of its "inhabitants". The concept is illuminating when applied to liberal films which furnish the "other" with a "positive" image, appealing dialog, and sporadic point of view shots, yet in which European or Euro-American characters remain patriating "centers of consciousness" and "filters" for information, the vehicles for dominant racial/ethnic discourses. (Shohat and Stam 205)

This quotation shows how even positive representation of minorities (as in, ones that contain mostly positive stereotypes) may not represent the minority's perspective if the narrative is focalized through the perspective of the majority culture. Since most Hollywood films, including Westerns, tell stories from a settler-colonialist focalization, the minority group's point of view is obscured and confused for what is, in actuality, a settler-colonialist point of view. Equally significant, Shohat and Stam emphasize the importance of asking the question about which

"voice" the narrative is focalized through, and also, which audience the narrative is intended for? If the literary or filmic text is intended for an audience of the majority population, the narrative will often be geared in a way that accommodates their ideological viewpoints. This is why self-representation is essential to attaining respectful representation that centers the voices of the group being represented. Keeping the concept of focalization in mind will help to illuminate the ideologies being conveyed through these filmic or literary texts.

The Western Genre

Few genres can be said to be more "American" than the traditional Western Film with its tropes and conventions originating far back in American history. Matthew Bernstein comments on how much the Western genre is entrenched in the United States' literary past, in his article, "The Classical Hollywood Western Par Excellence": "The Western is a uniquely American genre, with a history that extends back well before the invention of the cinema. Westerns inherited narrative formulas developed most notably in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, of the early 1800s, and from dime novels of the late nineteenth century" (Bernstein 320). Despite these early beginnings, the setting for most Westerns is typically later, usually between 1860 and 1900. Bernstein describes the Western as a genre that occupies a point in American history where the ideology of the country was going through a transitional period. The country had just been ripped apart by civil war and hence the "frontier setting provides the basis for any Western's fundamental conflict, be it the struggle to subdue "savage" Native Americans or to eliminate immoral white killers" (Bernstein 321). In the Western, these antagonists serve as the unifying enemy for the divided social state of the country.

The fact that one genre can hold such a powerful place in American culture, one that influences the perception of America and its history both domestically and abroad, is a great testament to the power of genre. In his article, "Film Genre and the Genre Film", critic Thomas Schatz defines the function of genre: "As a social ritual, genre films function to stop time, to portray our culture in a stable and invariable ideological position. This attitude is embodied in the generic hero—and in the Hollywood star system itself—and is ritualized in the resolution precipitated by the hero's actions" (Schatz 461). Schatz claims that genre films celebrate certain cultural attributes and ideologies; they capture the ethos of a society. This definition of genre can even be seen outside of film. Ancient Greek tragedies, for instance, a genre of theater and a precursor to film, followed formulaic rules that celebrated their society's culture and imagined history. But in addition to being celebrations of culture, genre can perpetuate and naturalize the ideological views held by the author, and as such, affect the ideological views of society. On the perpetuation of ideology in genre films, Schatz says:

> Each genre's implicit system of values and beliefs, its ideology or world view—determines its cast of characters, its problems (dramatic conflicts), and the solutions to those problems. We might define film genres, particularly at the earlier stages of their development, as social problem-solving operations: they repeatedly confront the ideological conflicts (opposing value systems) within a certain community, suggesting various solutions through the actions of the main characters" (Schatz 456).

Here, Schatz claims that film genres are modes of conveying and comparing different ideologies to propose solutions to social problems. Using this characterization of the function of genre, the Western can be viewed as a genre that tries to reconcile the opposing ideologies of individualism

and social conformity. One of the "solutions" that the Western seems to be implying is the ideology "Manifest Destiny," where the cowboy figures as a civilizing force of progress and a champion of individuality.

Manifest Destiny as an ideology encouraged settler-colonialism, westward expansion, and the expulsion of Native American's from their land. In his book, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present,* Howard Zinn presents some quotations from American newspapers published right before the start of the Mexican American war that give a glimpse into the narratives and ideologies that were circulated in the public sphere during the mid to late 19th century:

> Speaking of California, the Illinois State Register asked: 'Shall this garden of beauty be suffered to lie dormant in its wild and useless luxuriance?' … The *American Review* talked of Mexicans yielding to 'a superior population, insensibly oozing into her territories, changing her customs, and out-living, out-trading, exterminating her weaker blood. . .' The New York *Herald* was saying, by 1847: 'The universal Yankee nation can regenerate and disenthrall the people of Mexico in a few years; and we believe it is a part of our destiny to civilize that beautiful country.' (Zinn 213)

In this quotation, we can see the ways in which this ideology uses a call to the "civilizing mission" to justify the invasion of Mexico, with a population that was, and still is, very much indigenous. The term "Manifest Destiny" was coined by the editor of the Democratic Review, John O'Sullivan, in 1845. He spoke of, "'Our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions'" (Zinn 207-

208). Paired with the "civilizing mission" is the individualistic desire for "free development", in the economic status that provides more freedom from societal conventions and class restrictions. Thus, we can see that the ideology of Manifest Destiny was weaponized in order to provoke the invasion of Mexico and was later used to justify the expulsion of Native American nations from their land.

Western Tropes and Stereotypes

There are several tropes that are quite common to the Western genre. The cowboy trope is one of the tropes that most incorporates ideological positions from "Manifest Destiny". Viewing the cowboy trope through Schatz's conceptualization of the inner workings of genre reveals the cowboy's function as the embodiment of the conflict between the uncivilized west and the hyper-civilized east. Schatz claims: "The Western hero, regardless of his social or legal standing, is necessarily an agent of civilization in the savage frontier. He represents both the social order and the threatening savagery that typify the Western milieu" (26 Schatz). The Western hero reconciles these contrasting ideologies by employing western individualism under a moral code that is based on the civilizing mission of the "East". The cowboy enforces the social order by protecting the townsfolk from the antagonists without being confined to the bureaucracy of the law. Bernstein explains how the rugged individualism of the cowboy appeals to American audiences: "Westerns", he argues, "have been popular with American audiences in part because they suggest in their narrative formulas the ways in which unique individuals (who embody the values of self-interest) can be reconciled with the shared, communal values of a town that discounts extreme individuality" (Bernstein 322). The cowboy figure's emblematic

individuality is a reflection of the high value placed on individuality in American culture. It is easy to see how the cowboy figure of the Western invokes the individualistic ideological narrative of the "American Dream" and the ideological narrative of the civilizing mission present in "Manifest Destiny" and even the "Monroe Doctrine". Through their use of this figure, Westerns have the potential to legitimize these nationalist ideologies and to perpetuate them in the culture.

The other tropes that will be discussed in this essay are those that focus on Native American characters. The first of these is the "brutal savage" stereotype. It is one of the oldest stereotypes about Native Americans and served to legitimize the colonization of the Native American peoples. This myth followed an existing European convention of vilifying the Other; often labeling these cultures as barbaric for not sharing their language or customs. For Native Americans, this narrative began early on with Christopher Columbus' claim that the Caribe peoples of the Caribbean practiced cannibalism despite there being little to no evidence of their supposed cannibalism. Afro Caribbean civil rights activist, Richard B. Moore, writes about how Columbus used this stereotype to persuade the regents of Spain to enslave the indigenous peoples in his article, "Carib 'Cannibalism': A Study in Anthropological Stereotyping": "It is here affirmed also that the common stereotype which pictures which Caribs as customary and voracious cannibals, who made war and hunted down other human beings to devour them, is demonstrably erroneous, and has been used to attempt to justify their enslavement" (Moore 119-120). In a similar fashion, in North America, Native Americans were declared uncivilized in order to take away their rights to their land. Zinn gives one such instance in Massachusetts: "The governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, created the excuse to take Indian

land by declaring the area legally a ‘vacuum.’ The Indians, he said, had not ‘subdued’ the land, and therefore had only a ‘natural’ right to it, but not a ‘civil right.’ A ‘natural right’ did not have legal standing” (Zinn 13). This tactic of using some Native American tribes’ nomadic lifestyle to portray the Native Americans as backward, uncivilized, and primitive is also present within the “noble savage” stereotype. Within the Western Genre itself, the “brutal savage” trope is quite prolific. Many Westerns feature Native Americans as ruthlessly violent, scalping, pillaging, unintelligently grunting, in full war paint, and accompanied by war drums and screeching war cries. Needless to say, this is one of the most harmful stereotypes about Native Americans.

In contrast, the “noble savage” stereotype was often utilized in opposition to the “brutal savage” stereotype in defense of Native Americans. Though this stereotype had existed and had been applied to other European peoples, it was often applied to peoples who were colonized, like the Gaelic and Celtic people of Ireland and Scotland. The application of this trope to the Native Americans and other indigenous people was an expansion of this practice. One of the first people to express the “noble savage” trope was the French philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, who in 1580, wrote his essay, “Of Cannibals,” to counter the idea that Native Americans were uncivilized. In his essay, we see one of the more prevalent characteristics of the stereotype, that the Native Americans were closer to nature than Europeans:

> They are savages at the same rate that we say fruits are wild, which nature produces of herself and by her own ordinary progress; whereas, in truth, we ought rather to call those wild whose natures we have changed by our artifice and diverted from the common order. In those, the genuine, most useful, and natural virtues and properties are vigorous

> and sprightly, which we have helped to degenerate in these, by accommodating them to the pleasure of our own corrupted palate. (Montaigne 3-4).

In his defense of the Native Americans of South America, Montaigne argues that their closeness to nature makes than less barbarous than the Europeans, with their cultures based on "artifice." He simultaneously critiques European culture and its "corrupted palate," while calling the "simpler" Native Americans more virtuous. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau further propagated the stereotype in his essay "A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," but took the opposite approach, arguing that the "civilized man" was superior to the "savage man". Other intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as John Dryden, Thomas Southerne, Aphra Behn, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Garbielle Mably, Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, and Denis Diderot, popularized this stereotype in their critiques of European culture. In his essay, "Beyond the "Ecological Indian": Environmental Politics and Traditional Ecological Knowledge in Modern North America" Gregory D. Smithers describes the ways that Europeans perceived Native Americans' relationship to the environment:

> In contrast, Europeans and Euroamericans imagined Native Americans as transhistorical figures possessing nurturing feminine qualities that allowed them to remain connected to the rhythms of the natural environment, thereby anchoring an emotive spirituality thought to be long extinguished in the white man's soul. (Smithers 86)

Despite the attempts to use the "noble savage" trope to counter the "brutal savage" trope, both stereotypes are harmful and infantilizing. These tropes divide Native Americans into two camps, of "good" or "bad", where the peaceful Native Americans who avoided conflict with European forces are placed in the "good" category, and any Native Americans who resisted colonization

are placed in the "bad" category. Smithers quotes a Native American woman, Melissa Nelson of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, and presents her point of view on this trope as applied to ecological activism: "(She) observes that conceptualizing Native Americans as 'either simple, pure, and in tune with nature, or savage, selfish, and harmful to the land' highlights a 'conspicuous lack of understanding of the diversity and humanness of Native Americans'" (Smithers 90). This concept can be expanded beyond the scope of ecological activism to apply to all instances where Native Americans are placed within an unrealistic binary.

Native American women have suffered some of the more degrading stereotypes about Native Americans. Maryann Oshana explores the stereotypes of Native American women that specifically plague the Western Genre, in her article, "Native American Women in Westerns: Reality and Myth." She explains how Native American women in film are either omitted, stereotyped, or are presented as disposable victims to motivate the male protagonist. Oshana points out that in films like *The Half Breed* (1952) and *The Last Train From Gun Hill* (1959) women are frequently portrayed as the victims of violence, often rape or murder, only to serve as the motivating factor for the male character in revenge based plots. She elaborates: "These films are not at all concerned with the actual brutalization of the woman involved (in fact, she is often not shown at all), but rather with the effect which the rape/murder has on the man in her life-often a white man" (Oshana 48). The women in these films are rarely given agency and exist only as a plot device for the male protagonist.

Oshana also discusses interracial relationships in films such as *Far Horizons* (1955) and *The Oklahoman* (1957). They are often portrayed as forbidden love stories that often conclude with the Native American woman being punished for the forbidden relationship, either

with exile or death, while the white male protagonist remains unharmed. Oshana claims: “We can conclude from such examples that racial prejudice is stronger than love and the woman bears this burden. She alone is punished because of her relationship with a white man, even when they are living among the Indians” (Oshana 48). *Dances with Wolves* features a variation of this trope with the relationship between Dunbar and Stands with a Fist, but the ending is a happy one, which may have to do with the fact that both characters are of the same race, as I will develop later in the paper. Native American women are also stereotyped as sexually promiscuous women who will abandon their partners. This stereotype is present *in Stagecoach* when the innkeeper's Apache wife leaves her husband and assists in a robbery.

Finally, the “vanishing Native American” stereotype is when a narrative implies the impending doom of a Native American tribe. Critic Cécile Heim defines the Vanishing Native American narrative more fully in her article, “Neoliberal Violence: Colonial Legacies and Imperialist Strategies of the Contemporary Western Adventure”. She defines the trope through an analysis of the character, Tonto, in Disney’s 2013 film, *The Lone Ranger*:

> Although the 2013 movie tries to give Tonto more importance by attributing more agency to him, this attempt fails due to the overarching symbolic violence at work in the Vanishing American narrative. This myth emerged out of a series of nineteenth-century American literary works and presumes the inevitable decline of Indigenous peoples because of their supposedly insufficient socio-political and technological development. (Heim)

This stereotype, like the Western, also finds its origin (or at least popularity) in James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, specifically “The Last of the Mohicans.” It is harmful because, in a sense, it

continues the cultural genocide of Native Americans in the popular consciousness by referring to Native American peoples and cultures as if they do not exist. Many Westerns, *Dances with Wolves* included, suffer from this trope. Critic Larry R. Bowden, who, in his article, "Dances with Wolves," praised the film for its inclusion of the Lakota language, among other things, laments the film's conclusion with the "vanishing Native American" trope: "Here, I must register my dismay that Costner still follows the western plot formula, 'wipe the Indians out in the end.' In fact, the Lakota story does not end thirteen years later. As Leader Charge has said, 'In spite of all that was done to destroy Lakota ways, we are still here!' The Lakota and other Native Americans not only were but are a living and vibrant culture" (Bowden 396). This stereotype may be the most commonly occurring stereotype of all of those mentioned. Films that feature this stereotype perpetuate the implication that Native American culture is a thing of the past, something relegated to history, ignoring the expression of Native American cultures today. I will return to this topic in the third chapter, as it is quite relevant to the representation of Native Americans in other genres.

Native Americans as Invisible Threat

Close analyses of scenes from *Stagecoach* and *Dances with Wolves* allow us to see these stereotypes and focalization in action. *Stagecoach* is a 1939 black and white sound film that was directed by John Ford and starred Claire Trevor and John Wayne in his breakout role. It is a traditional Western set during the late nineteenth century that follows a group of white strangers of different socioeconomic backgrounds, divided by class, who are united by their fight to survive a ride on a stagecoach through Apache territory. The film portrays the Apaches as the

ever-looming threat to the main protagonists, painting them in very harmful stereotypes. The film rarely shows any of these Native Americans on screen, but their presence in the film's iconic wide shots of the Western landscape is an ominous threat that lurks just over the horizon. It is the tension that drives the film. Bernstein shows how the film portrays the Native Americans as a threat that is endemic to the environment, saying: "These shots, and the musical juxtaposition of grand symphonic melodies that quickly become dangerous Native American rhythms stress at once the grandeur of the western expansion and the hazards it entails, showing how the wide-open spaces encourage individual freedom but also great vulnerability. In Westerns of *Stagecoach's* vintage, Native Americans are cast as a force of nature" (Bernstein 333). The Apaches are never given a motivation for their attacks on the settlers, which places them neatly into the "brutal savage" stereotype. The film's main antagonist is Geronimo, a prominent historical figure, who was an Apache warrior. Geronimo was a household name many Americans would have had some familiarity with. The film capitalizes on the fact that people will know that he is a threat. Even though Geronimo only appears in the film once, he is the mastermind behind all of the Native American attacks and his name drives much of the fear in the film. Stefan L. Brandt introduces the term "specter" in his article, "The American Revolution and Its Other: Indigenous Resistance Writing from William Apess to Sherman Alexie," to comment on the way that Geronimo was perceived in the "white imagination" as evoking a "ghostly presence":

> In this context, I want to employ the term 'specter' to refer to the ghostly presence of Native Americans in the dominant white imagination. French philosopher Jacques Derrida uses the concept to identify figures in the hegemonic imagination that are

> perceived as menacing and disruptive. ... The spectral quality of the Native American is recognizable in the figure of Geronimo, an Apache leader fighting against the intrusion of white settlers into native grounds in the 1880s. (Brandt 41)

One scene that shows the disruptive quality of *Stagecoach's* Geronimo very clearly, comes right after the protagonists triumphantly cross the river. The audience is lulled into a sense of relief by upbeat, non-diegetic music. The comedic stagecoach driver cracks a joke about charging the baby half fare for the ride. The camera cuts to a beautiful wide shot of Monument Valley, with the stagecoach in the distance below, before suddenly panning sharply to the left to reveal a whole cavalry of Apache warriors. Intense trumpets and drums that remind the audience of Native American war songs begin to play. The scene cuts to a close shot, tilted upwards on Geronimo looking down grimly at the stagecoach. This presents Geronimo, and the Apaches, as menacing and ghostly invisible threats.

Another short moment that can easily be overlooked, but that exemplifies the stereotype of the Native Americans as invisible threats, takes place when the group arrives at the ferry. They find everything burned and destroyed, presumably by the Apaches. Hatfield takes off his coat to cover the slightly exposed body of a woman, implying that she was raped and killed. Slow violins play in the background accompanying the tragic end of this unknown woman and the heroic chivalry of the "Southern gentleman". He then looks to the hills and sees a glimmer of movement in the distance. The music becomes more intense and gives a sense of threat or dread that threatens the white protagonists. In this short moment, the film places the audience's identification with the former confederate soldier and places the Native Americans in direct opposition to the audience's sympathy. Because no explicit reason is given for the Native

Americans' violent actions, the "senseless" and "ghostly" violence can be interpreted like a force of nature endemic to the West that the protagonists are swept up in.

Native Americans as Primitive Tribes

Looking at a more modern Western, *Dances with Wolves*, we see that the notion of Native Americans as an invisible threat is less prominent. Instead, this film features the "noble savage" trope in order to counter the earlier proliferation of the "brutal savage" trope in Westerns. But, as we will see, the "brutal savage" trope does make an appearance in this film as well. *Dances with Wolves* is a Hollywood-produced American Western film that was released in 1990 and won an Oscar for Best Picture. The film portrays the Lakota in the late 1800s, just before the full encroachment of white settlers on their land interrupts their traditional way of life. The film portrays the Lakota as sympathetic characters who become friends with the white protagonist, Lieutenant Dunbar. At the time of the film's release, it broke ground for hiring Native American actors for most of the roles and for including the Lakota language prominently in the film. The film also condemns the military invasion of Native American land by portraying several members of the United States military as antagonists. Furthermore, Lakota characters Kicking Bird and Wind in His Hair are given significant amounts of screen time that allow for the characters to be developed more fully than many previous Native American characters. But, despite these great attempts to improve Native American representation, the film has many of the same problems as *Stagecoach*. Even though the Lakota are portrayed in a better light than previous Westerns, not all of the Native Americans receive the same treatment in the film. The Pawnee are portrayed in the same "brutal savage" stereotypes as previous westerns. The Pawnee

kill Timmons very brutally, they threaten the Lakota, and they massacre Stands with a Fist's seemingly peaceful white settler family. There is no explanation for the Pawnee's violence in the film. They are never portrayed as the nation that they are, a nation that acts in self-interest and self-determination, expelling intruders on their territory, and going to war with a rival nation that probably spans a history of conflict. In contrast to its treatment of the Pawnee, the film justifies the limited violence that the Lakota do partake in. It portrays the Lakota as a peaceful tribe that is only violent out of self-defense. They are "noble" Native Americans who help the white protagonist at every turn, sacrificing their own wellbeing to do so. The contrast between both tribes is also manifested visually. The Lakota are seldom shown in war paint as opposed to the Pawnee who are in red war paint every moment that they are on screen. A quotation from the film narrated by Lt. Dunbar gives the film's perspective on the Pawnee's battle with the Lakota: "There was no dark political objective. This was not a fight for territory or riches or to make men free. It had been fought to preserve the food stores that would see us through the winter, to protect the lives of women and children and loved ones only a few feet away" (*Dances with Wolves*). The film degrades what is essentially a complex economic war between the Pawnee and the Lakota to a primitive war of survival. In the film's context, the buffalo are not depicted as economic capital, rather, they are simply, in Lt. Dunbar's words, "food stores". The Pawnee and Lakota are not portrayed as independent nations that act in self-interest, instead, the situation is regarded as a battle between primeval warring factions. The film simplifies the highly complex political interactions between the Pawnee and Lakota nations into a binary, "brutal savage" versus the "noble savage."

Native American Women as Temptress or Victim

The female representation in *Stagecoach* and *Dances with Wolves* shows two opposing sides of the spectrum for the representation of Native American coded characters. Often, they are either painted as women who trick their unsuspecting husbands or they are victimized. *Stagecoach* shows us an example of the former trope in the only prominent Native American character in the film; an Apache woman who is the wife of the Mexican innkeeper at Apache Wells. The woman is introduced as a mysterious and alluring figure through her melancholic song which serves as a distraction, to allow bandits to steal the horses. Her song's lyrics speak of sad nostalgia for a lost love. After her song, the woman leaves with the bandits. Thus, the Apache woman is exoticized as a beautiful enchantress, or a siren-like figure, who is both tempting and fickle, leaving her husband for a past lover. In *Dances with Wolves*, the representation of women appears at first glance not to include victimization, but at a second glance seems to contain lingering vestiges of the trope that centers violence towards Native American women. In the film, we are first introduced to the love interest, Stands with a Fist, as she cuts herself in ritualistic mourning. Lieutenant Dunbar "rescues" Stands with a Fist from this Native American cultural practice. Since Stands with a Fist is coded as a Native American, despite being a white woman from a settler-colonialist family who was adopted into the Lakota tribe, this is an instance where the Native American woman is shown as the victim of violence, even if it is self-inflicted. The fact that Stands with a Fist is racially white, does factor into the response to this violence. Unlike other portrayals of violence towards Native American women, Stands with a Fist is cared for by the white protagonist after she is hurt. She is not hurt to a degree that ruins her reputation or where she must be avenged, instead, she is aesthetically

injured to show the white protagonist's selflessness and chivalry towards this white woman who has been adopted into the Lakota. This plot point also includes traces of the interracial romance trope, where the white man marries a Native American woman. *Dances with Wolves* subverts this stereotype by giving Lt. Dunbar and Stands with a Fist a happy ending instead of the customary tragic ending for the woman. Nonetheless, the film avoids the "interracial" part by making Stands with a Fist a white woman who is only a Native American through adoption, thereby betraying 1990s Hollywood's anxiety over representing interracial romance. As Donald Hoffman explains in his article, "Whose Home on the Range? Finding Room for Native Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans in the Revisionist Western":

> As so often in the film, Costner manages to have it both ways, to combine noble sentiments with the desire to appease the possible prejudices of his presumptive audience. Thus, Stands With a Fist is Indian enough to suggest a forbidden exotic love object, while at the same time she is sufficiently white to prevent a direct confrontation of the miscegenation taboo. (Hoffman 47)

This presents several problems for the representation of Native American women in the film since the most prominent "Native American" woman in the film is a white woman. The characterization of the love interest as a white woman who has been adopted into the tribe allows the film to uphold Eurocentric beauty standards and thereby make the interracial relationship, or more aptly defined, intercultural relationship, acceptable to a mainstream US audience.

Native American Culture as Comparative Censure

In *Dances with Wolves,* we find that much of the film is about the self-discovery of the white protagonist and hence invokes a common tendency in Hollywood films to use people of color to uphold whiteness. Richard Dyer explores the ways in which literature has used minorities to highlight or define whiteness in his article, “White”. He says:

> The presence of black people in all three films allows one to see whiteness as whiteness, and in this way relates to the existential psychology that is at the origins of the interest in “otherness” as an explanatory concept in the representation of ethnicity. Existential psychology, principally in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, had proposed a model of human growth whereby the individual self becomes aware of itself as a self by perceiving its difference from others. (Dyer 827)

Because of this, even though *Dances with Wolves* tries to tell a story about the Lakota, in actuality, it succeeds primarily in telling a story about a white male protagonist. The film is about Lt. Dunbar’s self-discovery and adventure in the West, one that allows him to undergo a transformative process that turns him into a Lakota. The film places Dunbar in opposition to the other white people in the film, and in associating him with the Lakota, the film validates Dunbar. Armando José Prats argues that Dunbar’s alliance with the Lakota allows Dunbar to avoid the blame placed on other settler-colonialists, in his article, “The Image of the Other and the Other *Dances with Wolves*: The Refigured Indian and the Textual Supplement:”

> Such "true" Indians enabled the white hero, among all whites, to transcend (though perhaps merely to evade) the darker consequences of conquest. Even as Costner declared

> his oneness with the fast disappearing Indians, he stood poised to claim his exemption from the national guilt. (Prats 6)

Furthermore, Dunbar's association with the Lakota turns him into a similarly mythically virtuous character as he is absorbed into the "noble savage" stereotype along with the Lakota. Throughout the film, Dunbar is depicted as being more in touch with nature than the other white characters in the film. He has a faithful horse and befriends a wolf. He buries the dead deer and shows sympathy for the killed buffalo. In contrast, the white soldiers mercilessly kill his horse and wolf, while some white hunters kill hundreds of buffalo. The film uses Dunbar's closeness to nature to show that he is worthy of becoming a Lakota since he shares in their appreciation of nature. Even his interactions with the wolf are the reason why he receives his new name, Dances with Wolves. Dunbar's markedly different interaction with nature distances him from the white characters and codifies him as a mythic Native American under the "noble savage" trope.

Dances with Wolves attempts to inspire sympathy for the Lakota by aligning them with Dunbar, the protagonist that the audience identifies with. Prats remarks on the irony of Costner's plan to refigure Native American representation through his non-Native American persona and voice:

> Costner's master plan for refiguring the Indian is to invest his own cinematic persona with virtually the whole sense of what it is to be, or to have been, wild and free – an Indian. The voiceover supports, indeed enforces, that basic strategy. For we never know any Indian in *Dances with Wolves* as intimately as we know this white-man become-Indian… White though he is, and white as both his voice and his "writing" reveal him to be, Dunbar is to be Indian archetypally. (Prats 7)

This centralization of Costner's perspective and voice shifts the narrative away from the Lakota. It focalizes a settler-colonialist perspective over the Native American perspective by telling the story of a white savior figure who sacrifices his happiness to protect the Lakota from the soldiers and advocate on the behalf of the Lakota among other white people. Like previous westerns, Dunbar is the lone cowboy figure who rescues the town and then leaves because he is not able to settle down. As the cowboy figure, he is placed in opposition with his society through his association with the Lakota in order to critique settler-colonial social norms. Similarly, Prats claims that *Dances with Wolves* follows a pattern of writers from the majority population who use their perception of Native American culture to critique settler-colonialism:

> Here, too, as in the centuries of white representation of the Indian, the fully 'human' Other doubled as the white man's censure of his own culture. Three years before *Dances with Wolves,* Patricia Nelson Limerick identified this motive in the art of George Catlin, who painted North American Indians during his sojourn in the West (1832-39). In Catlin's scheme of things, Limerick writes, 'Indians are most significant as their existence spot lights the flaws and failures of white people.' This 'arrangement,' she adds prophetically, 'persists with undiminished vigor' (Prats 6)

These types of narratives about Native Americans, often framed as defenses of Native American culture, do not include the Native Americans' perspective. Rather, they serve as critiques of European culture and are quite common to this day. These narratives defend some Native American cultures, upholding them to a mythic status that can at times be infantilizing while degrading others as simple and backward. Both of these outcomes end up centering European

cultures as a metric to measure Native American cultures against, instead of centering the representation of Native American cultures as they view themselves.

Our past and current Westerns have been plagued with settler-colonialist focalizations and the presence of ideologies like Manifest Destiny which were used to justify colonization. This has made it is very difficult to achieve self-representation of Native Americans within the Western genre. Whether or not the Western genre can ever allow for Native American voices to pierce through the ideological foundations of the genre remains to be seen. Shohat and Stam point to the work that the Native American community has enacted on its own accord in their push for self-representation and their fight against misrepresentation. Shohat and Stam give one example from the early twentieth century of their outspokenness: "A 1911 issue of *Moving Picture World* (August 3) reports a Native American delegation to President Taft protesting erroneous representations and even asking for a Congressional investigation" (Shohat, Stam 181). Native Americans have been fighting for their voices to be heard since they began to be depicted in film and deserve representation that focalizes their perspectives and voices. This essay aims to highlight the shortcomings of the genre in order better understand how we can grow closer to a place where Native Americans can exert the agency to represent and center their own stories in film.

Chapter 2

The Exclusion of Native Americans from the Political Economy of Hollywood

In order to look beyond the discussion of Native American stereotypes and the centering of settler-colonial perspectives and ideologies, we must look at how the political economy of Hollywood upholds these structures. According to Janet Wasko and Eileen R Meehan, the term "political economy," when applied to the film industry, describes the contextualization of the: "individuals, working cohorts, companies, and markets constituting the entertainment-information sector of the US economy… within the ongoing development of capitalism." (Wasko 150). Looking at the political economy of Hollywood is crucial to identifying the reasons why diversity in Hollywood is so sparse. This chapter will look at how the political economy of Hollywood functions and how it has continued to exclude minorities, especially Native Americans, from the filmmaking process, starting with the largest studios and ending with an example of a film from an independent and international arthouse studio.

The Political Economy of Hollywood

The political economy of Hollywood is structured in such a way as to make the industry resistant to change, including the change that results in the inclusion of diverse perspectives. The film industry often claims that the fluctuating nature of creativity makes it very difficult for them to predict profitability, especially when paired with the enormous risk associated with six-figure budgets. As such, studios claim that their best course of action is to avoid change whenever possible and stick to tried and true methods that have generated profits in the past. But, as Janet

Wasko explains in her book, *How Hollywood Works*, these studios often manufacture this risk and make unnecessarily expensive films to destroy competition from smaller studios:

> Expensive blockbuster, star-studded features promoted by massive marketing campaigns are characteristic of Hollywood's attempt to attract massive box office revenues, as well as to build further profits from subsequent distribution outlets. These skyrocketing costs are one of the main reasons why Hollywood filmmaking is said to be risky. (Wasko, Why it Matters How Hollywood Works, 2)

These larger studios are able to sustain these high budgets due to their diversification of income. Many of these studios own theme parks, smaller studios, and television stations, and sell merchandise. Alexandre Bohas explains how this phenomenon manifests within one of the most influential studios in Hollywood, Walt Disney Studios. The Walt Disney Company is a massive company that, in essence, specializes in the acquisition and merchandising of intellectual property. Beyond their film studios, the Walt Disney Company owns several theme parks worldwide, massive merchandising lines, radio stations, record labels, a publishing house, several television stations, and their streaming platforms which include Disney+ and to some degree, Hulu. Within their film rights alone, Walt Disney owns Lucasfilm Ltd, Marvel Studios, Pixar Animation Studios, Walt Disney Animation, and the recently acquired 21st Century Fox Studios, adding National Geographic, Blue Sky Studios, and the film rights to many properties including Marvel's X-Men. As such, Disney's financial status allows them to make blockbuster films with extremely high budgets to outperform their competition. Furthermore, Disney's films often serve as advertisements for their other properties. A character in a film might spawn toy lines, apparel, a theme park ride, soundtracks from the film, etc. These diverse forms of income

change the goal of studio heads as they prioritize making profits from these alternative methods over making creative films that exist purely as standalone films. This leads studios to become more controlling over certain aspects of their films. In Bohas' book, *The Political Economy of Disney*, he says:

> The entire film-making process is strictly ordained in a way to keep creative talent from having too great an influence on the decision-making process... Thus, while the producer often remains at the origin of the project, he employs several teams to develop the script in order 'to eliminate personal characteristics'… Major studios prefer to remain in control of the whole production process: they buy the scenarios (spec script), the film ideas, (pitch) and the film copyrights of books even though most of what they purchase will never be turned into films. (Bohas 17)

Studios tend to resort to micromanaging, controlling all of the details of a project to control their probability of generating revenue. These studios are often comprised of mostly white men due to hiring practices that prioritize connections (as will be explained in more depth later in this chapter), a resource that is often not available to many minorities. As such, the management from these studios often ends up overriding the creative visions of the few minority directors, producers, writers, actors, etc. that do make it into the industry. Even if these studio managers step back and avoid micromanagement, they still control financing and may fund projects that center settler-colonial perspectives due to unintentional biases. Even more troubling, the diversification of incomes for these studios also weakens the power of workers' unions to affect meaningful change:

> Workers at these sites are represented by a wide array of labor organizations, many of which are unrelated to those unions active in the film industry. Generally, then, the trend towards diversification has contributed to a weakening of trade unions' power as well as a further lack of unity among workers. So if production is stopped by a film industry strike, their income may be slowed, but money can still roll in from other sources." (Wasko, Production 28)

As such, unions even as large and powerful as the Screen Actors Guild can only do so much for actors when a strike will only put a slight dent into the Walt Disney Company's profits. Change within the system must come from the top. The immense system that is the Walt Disney Company is, in essence, too big to fail and too big to change. Other large media companies that are similarly positioned are the Sony Corporation, Universal Studios, and WarnerMedia.

The absence of diversity in Hollywood has been a problem that has plagued the industry for decades. Part of the reason why Hollywood has been unable to create more space for diversity is because of hiring practices that rely on internal connections. "Closing Doors: Hollywood, Affirmative Action, and the Revitalization of Conservative Racial Politics" by Eithne Quinn discusses how 1960s Hollywood was intentional in its exclusionary policies:

> Nepotism was often inscribed in union admissions procedures. Questions on the membership applications of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, the powerful union consortium that covered all film industry technical crafts, were depressingly reminiscent of Jim Crow grandfather clauses. A question that regularly

> appeared asked, "What type of vocation did your father and/or guardian pursue for a livelihood?" (Quinn 471)

Quinn shows how industry unions intentionally weaponized these types of questions which had no bearing on the job description because they were aware that many minorities would be disqualified by these questions, keeping them out of the industry. At the time, the six major studios, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, Twentieth Century-Fox, Columbia, Walt Disney, Paramount, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, had workforces where only approximately 7% were minorities, and these were mostly employed in low-level jobs, despite minorities making up at least 18% of the population in the Los Angeles area at that time. (Quinn 469-470) While it is not surprising that this blatant form of nepotism kept the industry closed off to outsiders in the 1960s, Kristen J. Warner points to how remnants of these exclusionary policies exist in present-day Hollywood's hiring practices. In her book chapter, "Strategies for Success? Navigating Hollywood's "Postracial" Labor Practices," Warner highlights practices by casting directors, staff writers, and showrunners that prioritize hiring people in their existing networks:

> In a panel on working as an assistant, four women—three white women and one ethnically ambiguous woman—described how they each got their start in the business… when asked about accessing entry-level assistant positions, each panelist agreed that leveraging existing relationships and networks was absolutely crucial to employment in the entertainment industries. Indeed, even the panelists' own hiring practices reinforced this "truism." They discovered new talent through alumni networks, family members, and friends (Warner 173)

These practices often exist unchallenged as the industry standard, hampering the possibility for minorities to gain a meaningful foothold in the industry. Additionally, the immense competition within the industry drives down wages for many workers in the industry. Most film studios are often positioned in the cities of Los Angeles and New York City where the cost of living is very high and a low wage is not sustainable for most people who do not have generational wealth to fall back on in times of scarcity, making these careers a difficult choice for many lower income earning minorities.

Diversity, specifically on the acting side, is also stifled by the instability of the Casting Director job market. Casting is a freelance occupation, and due to the incredibly high supply of workers that are always trying to break into the industry, casting directors are often not guaranteed a second job. As such, hiring more diverse candidates is a much more precarious decision for casting directors due to Hollywood's propensity to prioritize the hiring of "marketable" actors, which, due to Eurocentric beauty standards, often means white actors. Warner cites an example of an exception to this norm in *Orange Is the New Black*, where the casting director, Jen Euston, was able to hire minorities, but only after becoming an established casting director with reoccurring work. This is not a viable situation for most casting directors since many do not have the financial stability to be able to walk away from a job that they do not agree with, making this type of casting rare.

Unfortunately, beyond the issues that plague casting directors, casting can at times be driven by the stardom of a particular celebrity. This perpetuates a cycle where famous white actors continue to get parts that could go to more unknown diverse actors. There have even been times when a part that is specifically made for a minority to play is given to someone who does

not fit the description due to their "star power". Megan Basham's article, "Unmasking Tonto: Can Title VII 'Make it' in Hollywood?" discusses the disturbing issue of "redface" in Disney's *The Lone Ranger (2013).* She defines "redface" as "the practice wherein non-Native actors don face paint to portray Native Americans, often as stereotypically brutal and ill-spoken" (Basham 549). This practice occurred often within older films, particularly within older Westerns. Basham discusses a modern appearance of redface found in Disney's *The Lone Ranger* which cast Johnny Depp for the role of the Native American character, Tonto. Instances of redface are not only deeply offensive but also rob Native Americans of potential acting jobs. Basham cites troubling statistics about the amount of employed Native American actors from SAG-AFTRA in 2009 that show how the Native American community, in particular, is severely underrepresented today:

> Native American actors continue to be underrepresented and misrepresented, receiving the lowest percentage of representation by race in Hollywood and losing even Native American character roles to non-Native actors like Depp. The most recent casting data compiled by the SAG-AFTRA reveals that Caucasians dominated 72.5% of all acting roles, while Native Americans were hired for only 0.3% of all roles, in 2007 and 2008. Though Native Americans make up a small percentage of the overall population, they are still proportionately underrepresented. According to the United States Census Bureau, the group characterized as "American Indians," makes up approximately 2% of the population. (Basham 549-550)

This shortage of roles for Native American actors makes situations like those found in *The Lone Ranger (2013),* where Depp took the role of Tonto, even more detrimental to the community. We

can see how the political economy of Disney played a part in the casting of Johnny Depp as Tonto. Disney's *The Lone Ranger* characterizes Tonto almost identically to Captain Jack Sparrow, the beloved character from their highly successful film franchise, *Pirates of the Caribbean*. *The Lone Ranger's* director, Gore Verbinski, also directed the first three *Pirates of the Caribbean* films which were originally based on the "Pirates of the Caribbean" ride at the Disney theme parks. Verbinski's incarnation of Tonto has several of the same running gags as Sparrow. He often seems unconcerned when in danger, has special objects such as a stuffed crow on his head, does random things that do not make sense, such as feeding said crow, is cryptic when speaking, and has exaggerated movements reminiscent of a Charlie Chaplin performance. As such, it seems that Disney was trying to replicate the success of the Pirates films through the highly recognized intellectual property of the "Lone Ranger" character with the same actor that gave the previous franchise its fame. As such, they were not interested in telling a story about a Native American with a Native American actor, they instead saw an opportunity to create more merchandising opportunities by utilizing the same methods that worked for a previous franchise. This in turn harms not only the Native American community, by taking up a spot for a Native American actor and misrepresenting the film, but it also harmed the film through this offensive use of "redface" and by stifling the possibility of a more unique and creative direction for their incarnation of the Tonto character. As it stands, the film bombed at the box office and Disney has seemingly tried to hide the film by not even including it within their catalog on Disney+.

Another of Disney's most prominent depictions of Native Americans in film, is Walt Disney's *Pocahontas*. Beginning in the 1980s, Disney had their "golden age" under the leadership of Jeffrey Katzenberg, and with some inspiration from Broadway along with the use

of new technologies, resulted in films like *Aladdin* (1992, John Musker and Ron Clements), *The Lion King* (1994, Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff), *Pocahontas* (1995, Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg), *Mulan* (1998, Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook), among others, which often featured diverse characters. With these films, they broke into global markets, with *The Lion King* being the prime example of their success:

> Produced for only $80 million, it grossed $750 million at the worldwide box office while earning $1.5 billion in sales of consumer products during the ten years following its release. Consequently, the use of this narrative and imagery is a model with regard to cultural synergies made in all the divisions of the Disney studio. (Bohas 120)

But, much like *Dances with Wolves* (1990, Kevin Costner), these films, though attempting to counter stereotypes and present more positive representation for children, often center settler-colonial perspectives. There is no better example of this than *Pocahontas*, a fairytale retelling based on the accounts of John Smith, a colonist from the 1600s, which was romanticized and made more palatable for children. While Disney hired a few Native American voice actors to play the Native Americans in the film, not all of the Native American characters were portrayed by Native Americans. Grandmother Willow, for instance, was played by Linda Hunt and the singing voices for Pocahontas and Powhatan were provided by Judy Kuhn and Jim Cummings, all of whom are not indigenous. Furthermore, none of the writers or producers were Native American. Another problematic issue about Disney's approach to this film is the merchandising of the Pocahontas image. As Noel Brown points out in, "Ways of Being: Identity and Hollywood Animation", "Disney remains susceptible to the charge of reinscribing the very 'coloniality' such films appear to disavow, appropriating local cultures for commercial purposes while

disingenuously claiming to uphold ‘diversity’” (Brown 126-127). Due to the very nature of the Disney system, the Pocahontas character and image are commercialized for profit, commodifying the diversity of the character and the culture she represents.

Hollywood’s Political Economy Exposed in *Even the Rain*

The Spanish arthouse film, *Even the Rain*, directed by Icíar Bollaín in 2010, explores the exploitation of Native Americans by both the film industry and the government. The film was internationally co-produced by companies from Spain, Mexico, and France and received the Ariel Award for Best Ibero-American Film and three Goya Awards. While this film may not be considered part of Hollywood, it is still affected by the large power Hollywood holds over filmmaking best practices and the space that Hollywood films take up within the film market. *Even the Rain’s* plot centers around a Spanish film crew that travels to Bolivia in the early 2000s in order to find indigenous actors for their film about the Spanish colonization of Hispaniola. During the course of the film’s production, they find their star, an indigenous man named Daniel, who has the revolutionary spirit of the film’s subject, the Taino chief, Hatuey. The film delves into how international companies, including film studios, exploit indigenous people in countries that do not have strict protections for laborers. With its multiple layers of narrative, *Even the Rain* compares the modern exploitation of Native Americans in Bolivia with the colonization and genocide of the indigenous people of Hispaniola.

Even the Rain starts off its critique of the film industry by showing how the film’s protagonists, Sebastian, the film director, and Costa, the producer, mishandle the open casting for

the roles of the indigenous characters and extras in their film. The opening scene of the film starts from the view of a car window, traveling over unpaved roads through a makeshift marketplace, establishing the scene as Cochabamba Bolivia in 2000. Sebastian and the crew arrive at an extremely long line of indigenous people waiting to audition in response to their open casting call. Tight medium shots show how packed the place is of people standing in the hot sun. Costa tells Sebastian that they cannot see all of the people for auditions and convinces Sebastian to tell them to leave. As they are asked to leave, the diegetic sounds of hundreds of people talking at once multiplies the sense of offense. One man advocates for the rest, saying "No, Ma'am, we're not leaving. We're going to wait here until we're seen." The security officer violently pushes the man to leave, starting a small fight. Costa intervenes and the man, named Daniel, explains that the casting call promised that everyone would have their chance to audition and many had been waiting for hours after traveling from far away. In this scene, the film is establishing the filmmakers' accidental injustice towards these prospective Native American actors through their carelessness. Daniel acts much like a union organizer, organizing the Natives to advocate for their promised chance to audition.

We see more of the fictional filmmakers' inclination towards exploiting Native actors in the next scene in the car. As Sebastian, Costa, and Maria drive to the production site, Maria films them with her documentary camera and asks why they are even shooting in Bolivia in the first place, despite the film taking place in Hispaniola. Through the low resolution black and white perspective of Maria's camera, we see Costa explain that Bolivia is full of "starving natives" which means, more extras for less. The change from color to black and white breaks the viewer from the immersion of the film and highlights his words. Later in the film, when the film crew

meets with a government official during the protests, Sebastian tries to advocate for the Natives by telling the official that a 300% increase in water prices is unsustainable with the low wages in the country. The violence of the injustice is made poignant by the diegetic sounds of the protest outside of the building, interrupted by the occasional sound of gunshots. Conversely, inside the building, the atmosphere is calm and shows how the officials and film crew remain untouched by the violence of the protests. They leisurely drink champagne while the Natives outside fight for their right to access water. The official calls out the hypocrisy of Sebastian's statement since he only pays the extras two dollars a day. A similar version of this hypocrisy can be found in the real world, within Bollaín's filmmaking process. The details on the wages paid to extras on the set of *Even the Rain* are not available, but Christopher Carter comments in his article, "Material Correspondences in Icíar Bollaín's *Even the Rain*: Ambiguities of Substance," on how Bollaín recognizes the ways in which cheaper labor in Bolivia allowed for the making of the film:

> Although Bollaín claims that her crew showed more labor consciousness than her fictional producer, she expresses concern about the formation of onset classes and the difficulty of avoiding them. If her imagined filmmakers constituted straightforward scapegoats, viewers could leave the experience feeling cleansed of the bad faith the film portrays. But *Even the Rain* provides no such comfort, insinuating instead the audience's complicity with the modes of power displayed onscreen. (Carter)

Within *Even the Rain*, the film never resolves the issue of just compensation, even after Sebastian is called out on his hypocritical actions by the government official. The question of whether Sebastian's final film somehow justified the exploitation is posed, but never truly answered. We don't even see this fictional world's response to Sebastian's film. Instead, the film

pivots to the relationship between Costa and Daniel, glossing over the injustices towards the Native actors by repairing their relationship.

Even the Rain also touches on the topic of language hierarchies within filmmaking. In the car scene mentioned previously, Costa laments Sebastian's choice to make the film in Spanish instead of English which would have allowed for a bigger budget and larger audience. John Williams explains why this is detrimental to Sebastian's film in his article, "Global English Ideography and the Dissolve Translation in Hollywood Film" that: "One can quickly surmise, however, that Hollywood studios have significant financial reasons for not representing 'foreign' languages in these cases. With few exceptions, monolingual American audiences have been notoriously insular and intolerant of 'foreign' language programming or films" (Williams 91). Thus, to gain a foothold in the lucrative film market that is the United States, many films are forced into producing English language films. Furthermore, the status of English as one of the most international languages allows English language films to reach more audiences than films in other languages. The preferential treatment of English language films is a problem that many international films encounter and is an obstacle that *Even the Rain* had to overcome as a Spanish language film. But, *Even the Rain* also highlights the way European languages, in general, are favored over indigenous languages. When Sebastian expresses concern over the fact that their film features Native American actors from the Andes who speak Quechua instead of Taino, Costa dismisses him by generalizing these Native tribes, exclaiming that it doesn't matter as long as they are indigenous. Maria sums up the situation, pointing out that while the Spaniards in Sebastian's film will be able to speak their historically accurate language, the Natives will not have that privilege.

One final issue that many Native American actors face, is not being chosen to lead a film, even when the plot would make more sense if they did. The screenwriter for *Even the Rain*, Paul Laverty, explains that he could not make Daniel the protagonist due to a lack of funding, even though Daniel should have been the protagonist:

> 'It was a difficult script to weave in and out,' he continues. 'The problem with having these three different narrative strands is that you still have to develop the two main characters, and you have limited time. You have to imply lots of things. Obviously I would have loved to tell the story from the perspective of the Indian leader Daniel [Juan Carlos Aduviri] - it's just we would never have been given the money by the financiers.' (Dawson)

Here we can see how the political economy of Hollywood has directly affected a film that would have chosen to have a Native American as the leading role in a film. Not only did this choice negatively impact the final message of the film, which claims to advocate for Native Americans while also centering white men, but it also was not the film that the filmmakers originally intended. Even so, this conflict between what the film wants to be, and what it is, is reminiscent of the conflict Sebastian faces while making his film. In his article, "*Even the Rain*": A Confluence of Cinematic and Historical Temporalities, Fabrizio Cilento reaches the conclusion that: "Bollaín's work is not a straightforward defense of indigenous cultures, but a film about how arduous it is to articulate such a defense" (Cilento 251) *Even the Rain* identifies the political economy of Hollywood as the main obstacle to Native American representation and a perpetrator of Native exploitation.

As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, there are several reasons why Hollywood's political economy is resistant to the inclusion of Native Americans within the film industry: Hollywood's micromanaging tendencies, the diversified interests of larger studios, historical discrimination, current hiring practices, financial instability, the preference for celebrity actors, and appropriating cultural icons to convert into merchandise. Not only does Hollywood's political economy exclude Native Americans, but it also leads to the exploitation of the few that are included, as we have seen with *Even the Rain*, a film that tries its best to be inclusive and reflexive. Regardless, *Even the Rain* is a step in the right direction and other independent films, due to their distance from Hollywood, may have greater potential to be more inclusive and representative of Native Americans.

Chapter 3

"Native Americans Occupying Anachronistic and Contemporary Spaces"

Native Americans have long been portrayed in popular literature and film as primitive and from a past time. This sentiment was emphasized in the ethnographic studies of European colonizers, explorers, and anthropologists, as Anne McClintock demonstrates in *Imperial Leather*. Despite this being an antiquated and largely condemned view in the present, the repercussions of this ideology and mythmaking about indigenous people from this period have made their way into popular depictions of Native Americans. This chapter will look at representations of the myth of Pocahontas in not only films that feature the Pocahontas character, like Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) and Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005), but also blockbuster films like James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) that only obliquely refer to the myth. It will argue that films that tend to depict indigenous people in a historical setting, or what McClintock calls "anachronistic space," romanticize colonialism. Finally, this chapter will show how *Smoke Signals* (1998), an independent film produced by a Native American writer and director, is able to defy this mythmaking and present Native Americans as occupying a space in the present day.

Anachronistic Space

In her study of colonial literature and discourse, *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock introduces the concept of, "anachronistic space" to describe the ways in which colonized people and their lands were imagined by the white ruling class of the time. She defines the term as:

> A trope that gathered… full administrative authority as a technology of surveillance in the late Victorian era. According to this trope, colonized people – like women and the working class in the metropolis – do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographical space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency – the living embodiment of the archaic 'primitive.' (McClintock 30)

The trope of anachronistic space and the perception of colonized people as "primitive" and existing "in a permanently anterior time" was often used by social evolutionists to explain the evolutionary "progress" of the European from primitive to civilized with different minority groups placed in varying stages on what was called the "evolutionary family Tree of Man." This was one of the most powerful narratives used at the time to justify the "civilizing mission" of the colonizers and also led to the invasive ethnological studies of native peoples. As such, travel into lands that were populated by these "primitive" people was viewed almost as traveling through time itself. McClintock explains that this displacement of actual colonized people onto an imagined anachronistic space symbolically leaves their lands empty and ripe for colonization:

> The colonial journey into the virgin interior reveals a contradiction, for the journey is figured as proceeding forward in geographical space but backwards in historical time, to what is figured as a prehistoric zone of racial and gender difference. One witnesses here a recurrent feature of colonial discourse. Since indigenous peoples are not supposed to be spatially there – for their lands are 'empty' – they are symbolically displaced onto what I call anachronistic space. (McClintock 30)

McClintock further explains that explorers often gendered indigenous land by portraying it as "virgin" territory, which in a patriarchal society would grant them a greater ideological claim to the land. She writes: "Within colonial narratives, the eroticizing of "virgin" space also effects a territorial appropriation, for if the land is virgin, colonized peoples cannot claim aboriginal territorial rights, and white male patrimony is violently assured as the sexual and military insemination of an interior void" (McClintock 30). McClintock's ideas have great significance when applied to the particular colonial history of the United States. One instance is McClintock's example of how Amerigo Vespucci named the land after himself, similar to marriage naming customs, in an attempt to ideologically shift the indigenous people's rights to the land towards himself, and Europe. Another illustration of the gendering of America can be seen in the naming of "Virginia", the first British colony in the Americas, which quite literally means virgin.

Anachronistic Space in *Pocahontas, The New World,* and *Avatar*

Set in the burgeoning colony of Virginia, the story of the historical Pocahontas transformed over the years into what we now know as the reoccurring "Indian princess" myth, perpetuating a gender dynamic that is similar to the one described by McClintock. The story is based on the unreliable writings of John Smith, a colonist from the 1600s, and the retelling of his encounter with the real Native American woman, Pocahontas, also known as Matoaka. John Smith's version of the story tells of how he was captured by the Powhatan tribe and sentenced to death by the chief but was saved by the chief's young daughter, Pocahontas, aged eleven or twelve. Smith left the Powhatan people a few weeks later and then made his way back to England. Pocahontas was later taken captive by the English settlers and held ransom until she married John Rolfe, eventually having a child with him and traveling to England. She passed

away on the voyage back to America. This version of the story morphed over time to make room for the myth of a romantic encounter between Pocahontas and John Smith.

The transformation of the Pocahontas story from historical narrative to myth transformed Pocahontas into an ideal Native American by the colonist's standards: bringing food to starving colonists, rescuing them from her "savage" people, and leaving her culture behind for the settler's "civilization." Dan Blumlo shows in his article, "Pocahontas, Uleleh, and Hononegah: The Archetype of the American Indian Princess," how early English and colonial writers began to describe Pocahontas, portraying her as a mother figure in the vein of the "noble savage" trope where she:

> …upheld 'the ideals of duty and self-sacrifice—ideals that were Christian and feminine in the context of white America in the mid-century.' According to nineteenth century historians, playwrights, and authors, Pocahontas not only accepted the supremacy of the English "willingly and cheerfully," but also expressed an "intuitive recognition of the superiority of the conquerors and their values." She thereby justified their conquest. (Blumlo 130)

Although Pocahontas does the rescuing, the Pocahontas character crafted by these colonial writers is a princess awaiting rescue from her own people and culture. Blumlo also posits that the popularity of the Pocahontas myth was due to a "sense of guilt" that many nineteenth-century Americans in the east experienced over the disappearance of the Native Americans. As a result, many tried to incorporate Native Americans into the American mythos in order to expunge some of their guilt and validate their presence in America. Later versions of the story added the

romance between John Smith and Pocahontas, even though historically, Pocahontas was about eleven years old when she would have met John Smith. An English author, John Davis, was the first to popularize the romantic version of the story, focusing almost exclusively on John Smith and the rescue scene, spurring other authors to bring their own spin to the story. This change from Smith's story of Pocahontas as an innocent young girl to Davis' story of Pocahontas as a young virgin, turns Pocahontas into an indigenous princess that is, much like the virginal lands of Virginia, ready to be conquered romantically by the colonist. Furthermore, according to European customs of the time, Pocahontas' royal status meant that her marriage to a colonist gave him (and his people) royal rights to the land. Viewed through this lens, the Pocahontas myth takes on a more sinister spin, one that was used to justify colonists taking indigenous peoples' land. Thus, the romantic version of the myth plays into the longstanding feminization of America, and its indigenous people, in order to romanticize colonization.

Modern interpretations of the Pocahontas myth can be seen most prominently in Disney's *Pocahontas*, an animated musical released in 1995, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, and produced by Walt Disney Feature Animations and Walt Disney Pictures. The animated Disney film promptly falls into this romanticization of the myth. In the film, Pocahontas is portrayed as a Native American princess that is understanding, magically connected to nature, and that is ready and willing to risk everything for John Smith, whom she has just met. The film attempts a critique or condemnation of colonialism through the villain, a very explicitly British character, Governor Ratcliffe. Noel Brown describes the way Disney distances American identity from British identity in order to distance American identity from colonialism in his book, *Contemporary Hollywood Animation*:

> While Disney has a long history of representing British people as villainous… on this occasion it is the pre-history of US society that is called into question. The villainous Governor Ratcliffe (David Ogden Stiers), who refers to the Native Americans as 'bloodthirsty savages', is clearly figured as the undesirable face of British imperialism, but John Smith (Mel Gibson) embodies the heroic virtues of pioneers of repute such as Davy Crockett. Despite actually being English, the character's American accent and appearance (blond, tall, slim, blue-eyed) differentiate him from the physically and morally unattractive sailors who accompany him on the voyage. (Brown 120)

In this film, John Smith is very much portrayed as an early American hero figure. Despite being British, he is the only British character that is given an American accent. Smith is explicitly contrasted with Ratcliffe in the song "Mine, Mine, Mine" where the characters sing about laying claim to the Powhatan tribe's land and its resources. Ratcliffe, in classic Disney villain style, starts the simultaneously upbeat and ominous song about finding gold and acquiring status, saying: "The king will reward me, He'll knight me ... no, lord me!" All the while he orders the soldiers to: "Mine, boys, mine ev'ry mountain, And dig, boys, dig 'til ya drop" but refuses to help, "I'd help you to dig, boys, But I've got this crick in me spine." The scene is full of shots that show the destruction Ratcliffe is inflicting on the landscape. Set in the dark forest, we see piles of dirt flung in the air, pine trees are cut down, cannonballs flying and barrels of gunpowder exploding, all in time with the beat. When the film is not showing this destruction, it instead shows Ratcliffe's daydreams of himself in fancy colorful clothes as a rich lord. The song ends with a crescendo of explosions and destruction followed by a fading close-up shot of Ratcliffe with a menacing smile after he stakes a British flag into the ground. In contrast, John Smith

breaks out of the dark foliage into a more brightly lit area with a majestic waterfall. He is small in the frame, emphasizing the beauty of the landscape. As he sings, the music becomes more uplifting and heroic emphasized by the many violins: Smith expertly climbs the waterfall and sings: “Hundreds of dangers await, And I don't plan to miss one” all of which emphasize his brave and adventurous spirit, but, he continues: “In a land I can claim, A land I can tame, The greatest adventure is mine!” The song shows Governor Ratcliffe’s greatest desire is to obtain gold and status by laying claim to the land. Similarly, John Smith’s desire to have “the greatest adventure,” is only actionable by laying claim to the land and taming it. In the end, both characters lay claim to Powhatan land.

Disney’s *Pocahontas* accurately portrays John Smith as a colonist, but, by portraying him as the hero, it fails to critique his ideological view of wanting to claim America in pursuit of adventure. The closest the film gets to critiquing John Smith is when Pocahontas argues with him over his use of the term “savages” and his patronizing argument that they do not know how “uncivilized” they are. The film’s response to this anachronistic argument is found in the song, “The Colors of the Wind.” Pocahontas begins her inspirational song by addressing John Smith’s use of the term “savage”, singing: “But still I cannot see, If the savage one is me, How can there be so much that you don't know?” and “You think you own whatever land you land on, The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim, But I know every rock and tree and creature, Has a life, has a spirit, has a name.” In essence, Pocahontas is claiming that John Smith’s idea of civilization is wrong because they are not in tune with nature and only look at the earth as a thing to possess. In this argument, Pocahontas claims that she and her people are closer to nature than the British, and are thus more civilized, falling into the noble savage trope. Pocahontas also

sings: “You think the only people who are people, Are the people who look and think like you, But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger, You'll learn things you never knew, you never knew” While this argument is much more coherent and avoids the noble savage trope, the visuals counter some of the power of the statement. While those lines are sung, Pocahontas stops Smith from killing a bear and the “footsteps” she mentions are bear prints leading to a den with bear cubs. This scene makes a direct comparison between the lyrics that refer to Smith’s perception of Native Americans as less than people, with the life of a bear, directly contradicting Pocahontas’ humanization of her people by turning the “stranger” in the line, “footsteps of a stranger” into an animal instead of a person.

The film ends with a standoff between the Native Americans and the colonists after Kokoum, Pocahontas’ potential lover, is killed accidentally by one of the colonists. John Smith jumps in front of the chief, Powhatan, taking a bullet for him and saving his life. He is then sent back to England to recover and Pocahontas is left mourning the tragedy of their separation. The film romanticizes this colonial encounter between Pocahontas and John Smith by downplaying the severity of his colonial actions, being light in its critique of the harmful rhetoric and actions he does take, and then by making him the key romantic love interest and redeeming him by making him into the white savior who saves Powhatan. *Pocahontas* (1998) not only portrays Native Americans in a literal anachronistic space by recreating this historical fiction of the colonization of Virginia, but it also tries to paint the image of “good American” colonists like John Smith being welcomed to America by noble “Indian princesses” like Pocahontas.

Terrence Malick’s arthouse film, *The New World* (2005), furthers the romanticization of the Pocahontas myth by centralizing the story around the romantic encounters between John

Smith and Pocahontas. It is a film, as made evident by its title, that is deeply focused on early colonial America as a place. It romanticizes this idea of an untouched, undiscovered landscape that clearly falls into an anachronistic view of indigenous lands. The film opens with a medium shot of a river while animal sounds can be heard distinctly in the background. Pocahontas' voice quietly narrates a prayer of sorts to mother earth, asking for assistance in telling this story about the land. The scene then quickly cuts to an upwardly tilted shot of Pocahontas as she finishes her "prayer" and then proceeds to the title credits that play over graphics of colonial-style maps. From the very start, the film prompts the viewer to see Pocahontas as a spiritual person who is deeply connected to the land. We are also prompted to believe that this is her story told from her perspective. The film's lush cinematography continues to focus on the untouched beauty and open emptiness of the Virginian landscape with long shots that show only the rustling of large fields of grass and the sound of crickets and birds chirping. The Native Americans are often shown slowly traversing the fields stealthily, rising from the fields out of nowhere to surprise the colonists, at times peacefully, but other times, in an ambush. Pocahontas is similarly placed within the golden fields, but she interacts more playfully with the landscape, playing a game where she mimics a deer frolicking in the fields. John Smith also traverses the fields, but in his slow walk, he is clearly presented as an outsider to this environment, where to him the fields exist as both danger and paradise. McClintock shows how women's bodies, especially the bodies of women who were racialized, were considered by some Victorian scientists to be anachronistic spaces in and of themselves: "Victorian men of science found a fetish for embodying, measuring and embalming the idea of the female body as an anachronistic space" (McClintock 42). We can see how these concepts still retain some influence, because, like the land, Pocahontas herself is

similarly fetishized. She is given few speaking lines and many of the close shots focus lingeringly on her body, emphasizing her beauty, while the scenes where she does speak emphasize her youthful and virginal innocence and her seemingly inherent goodness. In one line towards the end of the film, Pocahontas asks John Smith if he had found "his Indies" since he had returned to England in order to go on another journey to find a path to the Indies. He responds "I may have sailed past them" implying that his failed romance with Pocahontas was "the Indies" he was searching for. This comparison between Pocahontas and John Smith's colonial pursuits shows how in this film, the Virginian "New World" and Pocahontas are one and the same anachronistic space.

Avatar (2009, James Cameron), another highly successful film, is a science fiction film produced by 20th Century Fox (Now 21st Century Fox). It was directed, written, produced, and co-edited by James Cameron. The film was the highest-grossing film worldwide and held the spot until 2019 when Avengers Endgame overtook it before returning as the highest grosser after a rerelease of the film. It is the second highest-grossing film of all time, behind *Gone with the Wind*. *Avatar* won three Academy Awards: Best Art Direction, Best Cinematography, and Best Visual Effects. James Cameron claimed that his inspiration for the film was "every single science fiction book I read as a kid. And a few that weren't science fiction. The Edgar Rice Burroughs books, H. Rider Haggard — the manly, jungle adventure writers. I wanted to do an old fashioned jungle adventure, just set it on another planet, and play by those rules" (Cameron). As such, Cameron drew on colonial adventure narratives which featured native peoples as occupying "anachronistic space". Furthermore, Cameron films *Avatar* through an ethnographic lens, the same lens which during the Victorian period, provided a view of indigenous peoples as

primitive. As such, it is not surprising that in *Avatar*, the indigenous people are portrayed as if they are from the distant past. The narrative is told from the point of view of Jake Sully, a former marine who travels to another land looking for adventure. He documents his encounters with the Na'vi, an alien race that is quite literally an amalgamation of indigenous cultures and stands in for exploited or oppressed indigenous peoples (Bennet 106). In his article "James Cameron's *Avatar:* access for all" Thomas Elsaesser quotes David Brooks, who described the Na'vi as follows:

> The peace-loving natives – compiled from a mélange of Native American, African, Vietnamese, Iraqi and other cultural fragments – are like the peace-loving natives you've seen in a hundred other movies. They're tall, muscular and admirably slender. They walk around nearly naked. They are phenomenal athletes and pretty good singers and dancers. (Elsaesser 249)

Jake Sully takes on a role similar to that of a cultural anthropologist in his encounters with the Na'vi. We can see this very clearly in the scene where Jake records logs of information that he gathers from Neytiri about the Na'vi. One scene shows Jake staring into a webcam, providing introductory details to the log. There are graphics on the margins of the screen as if we are viewing this through the playback of the video onto his computer screen. The lighting is tinted blue simulating the difference in viewing style from real life to the webcam's lens. The depth of focus of the camera is also much shorter. All these details indicate to the viewer that this video is part of a scientific study of indigenous peoples. Jake continues narrating as the graphics and blue tint disappear as the camera lens returns to normal and we get the impression that we are looking at reality again. The scene proceeds with montages of Jake as the avatar, led by Neytiri in the

forest, interacting with the Na'vi and learning to be like them. The ethnographic log sequence of scenes ends with a shot of Jake hunting while successfully following the Na'vi customs. Throughout the film, Jake is a participant observer who is studying the Na'vi people and we the spectators observe them as well through his "ethnographic" account. Cameron's decision to portray the exploration of Pandora as the ethnographic account of a pseudo anthropologist reinforces the idea of the Na'vi as a distinct, primitive species occupying an anachronistic space.

Avatar also draws upon the Pocahontas myth in its portrayal of the romance between Sully and Neytiri. She is ever portrayed as an exotic, extremely attractive, and idealized woman. After she saves his life, she teaches him their ways and it is their romance that draws him to the side of the Natives. As Bennet puts it: "Sully has succumbed to the spectacular and dark pleasures of the jungle, losing a sense of stable, geographically anchored, and racialized identity to undertake a sexual relationship with a local woman, and 'go native'" (Bennet 112). In this iteration of the Pocahontas myth, the colonist "goes Native", which at first appears to run counter to the colonial narrative, but it still results in giving the colonist the rights to indigenous land, which is Pandora in this case. Furthermore, despite *Avatar's* commendable eco-activist themes, many of which have been praised by indigenous people, *Avatar* falls into some of the same pitfalls that plague many of the texts it took inspiration from. Like many early ethnographic accounts that were recorded through a western lens, the film becomes a limited attempt to understand a culture through a settler-colonial lens. *Avatar* accidentally falls into the trope of placing indigenous people, (especially women) and their lands, as romanticized anachronistic spaces.

Indigeneity as Contemporary

In contrast to the conceptualization of anachronistic space in *Pocahontas (1998), The New World (2005),* and *Avatar (2009),* Chris Eyre's independent film *Smoke Signals* (1998) portrays modern Native Americans living on a Coeur D'Alene Indian Reservation in the 1990s. This independent film was written, directed, and produced by Native Americans and the parts were all played by Native American actors. The film is based on a short story called, "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona", by Sherman Alexie, a Spokane-Coeur d'Alene-Native American writer who also wrote the screenplay for the film. It follows two young men who go on a road trip together and deal with parental loss. The most prominent way that *Smoke Signals (1998)* breaks with the convention of portraying Native Americans as occupying anachronistic space is by telling a contemporary story about modern-day Native Americans set in the 1990s. It looks at the complexities of issues that Coeur D'Alene families face, like alcohol addiction, abuse, abandonment, and poverty, among other things, many of which are the tail ends of cycles of trauma that began because of colonialism. *Smoke Signals* complicates the vanishing trope by highlighting Native Americans' presence in the modern time, while also calling upon the issue of fatherly absence or estrangement and comparing it to vanishing. The film shows how fatherly absence is a result of colonial trauma. It also uses humor to subvert stereotypes and popular narratives like those explored throughout the previous chapters.

Smoke Signals demonstrates how firmly set in the modern age it is from the very start. It opens with establishing shots of a radio station newscaster van broadcasting about the traffic in the town, showing several empty roads foregrounded by hazy mountains in the background. Contemporary music plays on the radio in the background. A few scenes later, the first

protagonist, Thomas, is introduced as he carries a large radio playing music, and the second protagonist, Victor, plays basketball in a high school gym. These are all situations that emphasize the contemporary setting. Furthermore, introducing the protagonists in a high school is a staple of the teenage coming of age genre which has been severely lacking Native American representation. Despite taking place in a modern setting; the film never lets us forget that we are on a reservation. One of the other boys playing basketball wears a t-shirt that says: "Reservation Hoops!" and the radio broadcaster describes the uneventful news on the reservation. Even so, this acknowledgment of the setting foregrounds the protagonist and their cultural context but does not overtake them to place them in an anachronistic space. And while the film does position the story firmly within the Indian reservation, it is not an exploration of the reservation or any place in particular. Many of the shots are medium shots and close-up shots. There are few wide or establishing shots. Thomas and Victor travel throughout most of the film, but it does not portray much of the landscape that they traverse. The film is not focused on place at all, instead, the camera remains fixed within the bus, focusing on the relationships and the interactions between people. This is in direct opposition to the films discussed previously, which are all voyeuristically focused on place. In *Smoke Signals*, Thomas and Victor stand on their own, apart from the reservation and apart from the places they travel through. In contrast to previous films that locate Native Americans within anachronistically coded space, *Smoke Signals* disconnects its protagonists from place but sets them firmly in the modern time.

At its heart, *Smoke Signals* is a film about storytelling. Thomas is the main storyteller throughout the film, "carrying on the oral tradition." Every time Thomas begins a story, he closes his eyes, and the same lulling music plays. His voice changes to be more descriptive and

emphatic. The cinematography alternates between close-up shots of Thomas speaking and wider shots of the scene he is describing. Many of his stories are about mundane things, but he tells these stories in a way that makes you expect a magical outcome, but in the end, the story concludes with the logical answer but is humorously satisfying. In this way, Thomas' stories also poke fun at the stereotype of Native Americans' magical connection to nature. In the scene after Victor has just learned that his father, Arnold, passed away, Thomas approaches him in the supermarket to give his condolences. When Victor asks how he knew about Arnold's passing, Thomas replies: "I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight." Thomas' statements are ironically contrasted by the fact that he is inside a supermarket, removed from the wind, birds, and sunlight. He continues: "And your mom was just in here crying." This last statement is the most logical conclusion, but because stereotypes have prompted the viewer to imagine the more mystical answer, it comes as a humorous surprise. Another similar scene happens during one of Thomas' stories. Thomas begins his story by saying that it took place the summer Arnold left, lending the story more narrative significance with this detail. He then says that one day he had a dream to go to Spokane and stand by the falls. The story starts off quite mystical and otherworldly, but Thomas quickly contextualizes the story and situates it within the modern world, giving specificity to the setting, saying, "You know, those ones (waterfalls) by the Y.M.C.A." As he goes on, the softly playing non-diegetic music begins playing as close-up shots show the river and then young Thomas sitting on a bridge. The scene alternates between the flashbacks, close-ups of Thomas telling the story, and close-ups of Victor listening. When Thomas tells Arnold that he was waiting for a vision, our expectations of a mystical quote or something similar from Arnold are again subverted as Arnold only laughs and says, "All you're

gonna get around here is mugged" and then takes Thomas to Denny's, a fast-food restaurant. Interestingly, when compared to *Avatar's* ethnographic voyeurism, Thomas' willing storytelling returns the agency to Native voices. By giving one of the protagonists the agency in telling their story, Sherman Alexie is pushing back on Hollywood's propensity to tell Native stories for them.

The film also addresses the pressure to conform to outside standards of indigeneity. Joanna Hearne meditates on Hollywood's propensity to delineate acceptable expressions of indigeneity in her book *Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising:*

> In Hollywood, "playing Indian" is a profitable enterprise if it is done within certain restrictive parameters — such as the scenarios of primitive "vanishing" Indians and stereotypes of noble savages discussed in the previous chapter. Hollywood studios have, in that sense, attempted to steal the right to perform and socially "speak" the definition of Indigeneity to the public. (Hearne 35)

Smoke Signals grapples with how young Native Americans are influenced by Hollywood's image of indigeneity in one scene where Victor confronts Thomas about his obsessive storytelling. Victor asks Thomas why he is, "Always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something." Victor implies that Thomas willingly places himself within an anachronistic space that Hollywood has created in films like *Dances with Wolves*. He also asks him how many times he has seen *Dances with Wolves*, to which Thomas does not reply, implying that he has seen it too many times to count. Victor then says: "Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" implying that Thomas' performance of his indigeneity is a reflection of Hollywood's definition of indigeneity, making it inauthentic. Victor decides that he will have to teach Thomas

how to be a "real Indian," removing him from the "magical Native American" stereotype. But as Victor describes his definition of a "real Indian," we find out that it is also a performance that places Native Americans within an anachronistic space. Victor proceeds to tell Thomas that he must stop smiling and look like a warrior that has just finished killing a buffalo in order to gain respect from white people. But in the next scene, despite Thomas' transformation into Victor's version of a "real Indian" when they return to their seats on the bus to find two white men seated there who refuse to give them their seats back. In response, Victor and Thomas sing a song ridiculing John Wayne for never showing his teeth which later morphs into a traditional style of Native American singing. Their song becomes a way for them to express their indigeneity without conforming to Hollywood's standards and also doubles as a form of protest.

Despite the decades-long tendency to portray Native Americans as inhabitants of anachronistic spaces, Native American-led storytelling has begun the work to transform these popular depictions. Hearne points out that Indigenous activism is a major part of this movement: "Indigenous activist performances — and Native filmmaking as an instantiation of such performance — draw attention to Indigeneity as contemporary rather than past, present rather than vanished, human rather than stereotype" (Hearne 35). But, Indigenous activism has even found ways to reappropriate films produced by non-indigenous people that center settler-colonial perspectives and present indigenous people as occupying anachronistic space. In one case, indigenous people weaponized their association with anachronistic space in order to spread awareness:

> Soon after *Avatar* became such a world success, the Internet learnt about the Dongria Kondh, who took appropriate action: they began making their children look as beautiful

> and 'primitive' as they possibly could, in order to present them on YouTube, explicitly suggest analogies with the Na'vi, and appealing to Cameron to become an advocate of their plight. (Elsaesser 251)

In another case, indigenous people adopted the image of the Na'vi as a symbol of resistance: "Similarly, young Palestinians, not unlike the Chinese, saw political parallels – this time about blockades and occupation – and began to dress up as the blue creatures, in order to protest, in the village of Bilin near Ramallah, against the Israeli security fence" (Elsaesser 251). Furthermore, films like *Avatar*, have themes that may align with policies that many indigenous activist groups are often proponents of, such as eco-activism. These instances, where filmic images are embraced by indigenous activists or refashioned in order to further indigenous activism, complicates our perception of these films and the film industry's role in indigenous expression and activism.

Authentic Native American storytelling through film should be free to represent the spectrum of experiences that make up American indigeneity. It should recognize the complexity of Native American identity, as anthropologist Orin Starn addresses in his essay, "Here Come the Anthros (Again): The Strange Marriage of Anthropology and Native America Author(s)": The distinctiveness of 21st-century native ways of being…does not derive from isolation or some primordial core of values or knowledge. To the contrary, …tradition and culture always bear the marks of violence and displacement…" (Starn 195). In essence, Native American identity and cultural expression have been shaped by colonialism and the narratives that have been told about them. Films like *Smoke Signals* express that complexity through a distinctly Native American voice. Audiovisual media depictions whose production is fully controlled by Native American

filmmakers, like the recent television series *Reservation Dogs* (2021), continue to show Native Americans inhabiting contemporary spaces and their perspectives. In conclusion, as Starn so aptly articulated:

> There can be no decolonization in the sense of turning back history's clock, and yet it's become clear enough that one can be distinctively native and yet also fully modern as against the mythology of Manifest Destiny with its expectation that Indians would have no place in 20th- much less 21st-century America. (Starn 195)

And film is the perfect medium for Native Americans to communicate that message.

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