

*Savages to Satirical: A Look at Native American
Representation in Film*



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Honors Senior Thesis

DePaul University

Introduction

Native Americans are portrayed unfairly in mainstream Hollywood; unfortunately, most filmgoers in the United States are likely familiar with depictions of Native Americans as savages, that is, as bare torso-ed, shoeless, irrational warriors, who -- when they are not running through the woods and yelling -- are most likely obsessed with scalping and removing all white people from the land. Likewise, filmgoers may be familiar with depictions of “noble savages” which might visually appear savage, but who are sentimentalized, and have some sort of wisdom to impart to the dominant culture.

While these “savage” and “noble savage” stereotypes have been dominant representations of Native Americans since before the advent of film, in the 1990s, the film industry in the United States experienced an increase in the variety of its Native American portrayals. Two of the most widely known films from this era were *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990), both of which were created by “white” Hollywood for a mainstream audience and largely focused on “historical” depictions of Native Americans. *Pocahontas*, for example, is set in the seventeenth century, whereas *Dances with Wolves* is set shortly after the American Civil War in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. By contrast, other popular, but less known films such as *Smoke Signals* (1998), and *Naturally Native* (1999) were produced and directed by Native Americans about Native Americans at this time. In contrast to the historical settings of the white-produced films, these films focused on modern Indians – more particularly, reservation-dwelling individuals with unique family histories and unique insight on the United States’ on-going colonial project.

This thesis will examine portrayals of Native Americans in the United States film industry in the 1990s, by analyzing the four films mentioned above. Throughout, I will analyze how Native American people and culture are represented in the films, as well as examine any

stark contrasts or comparisons between the different films. Furthermore, the concept of multiculturalism in the 1990s will be explored and how it impacted the creation and acceptance of these films. Ultimately, by situating my analyses into their historic contexts of the 1990s, my analysis will show how and why, the 1990's was a pivotal time in the United States in regard to Native American representation in films.

Background

Scholars Peter Rollins and John E. O'Connor have noted that Native Americans have long been depicted as noble savages through a number of mediums:

The image of the Indian in dramatic, violent and exotic terms was incorporated in the reports of missionaries and soldiers, in philosophic treatises, in histories and in the first American bestsellers, the captivity narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the image of the Indian varied in these early descriptions, one is struck by the tone of admiration and frequent references to honor and nobility even in the context of cruelty and savagery (Rollins and O'Connor X).

Films in particular, they argue even, "since the silent era" have used "melodramatic formulas" related to Native Americans as a way "to attract audiences" (Rollins and O'Connor 2). Filmmakers and Hollywood executives could count on profitable returns on movies with this "melodramatic formula" of the Native American. No doubt, Hollywood directors, producers, and executives noticed the allure of the American people, in part, their perceived "wildness" and that their way of living appeared to differ drastically to that of "civilized" whites. Filmmakers exploited these perceived differences. As Rollins and O'Connor have argued, a market-driven Hollywood did not create these stereotypical personifications of Native Americans, they did profit from them.

Before continuing with history of the predominant stereotypes of Native Americans in film, the problematic nature of the “savage” stereotype must be discussed.

Historically, the media presented stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples to the general population in order to justify the treatment of ‘savages’ in invaded countries. The media perpetuate stereotypes of and disrespect for Indigenous Peoples. This can range from the TV broadcasts of old Westerns in which Native Americans are portrayed as ignorant, savage and murderous; to the misrepresentation of Indigenous issues and the lack of Indigenous points of view in news stories; to inaccurate and disrespectful portrayals of Indigenous cultures in day to day broadcasting (Nielsen and Robyn).

In other words, the history of the “savage” stereotype is linked to the idea of settler colonialism, and the attempts orchestrated by white people to display this group of people as “uncivilized” and “needing saving.” This is an issue because the settlers were deciding what was best for a group of people without understanding and appreciating their way of life. Therefore, every time a Native American is portrayed as a “savage” in films in the United States, there is a long-seeded history of abuse attached to this depiction that must be recognized.

Relying on the long-held notions of Native Americans as either savages or noble savages led Hollywood to fail to distinguish between Native American tribes and nations, and in fact, “moviegoers came to expect Indians to be presented in a characteristic way. Language elements, cultural beliefs, and religious rituals of one tribe have been attributed to others – or, more often, invented on the set” (Rollins and O’Connor 32). In other words, lack of detail and overall laziness on the part of Hollywood in researching the Native American people perpetuated stereotypes about Native Americans, that they are all the same (more or less) and that while

“white cowboys represent the shining future, whereas ‘Indians’ are the dimming past. Cowboys are logical. ‘Indians’ are irrational” (Young).

But just as there has tended to be no appreciable difference between the film representation between tribes, it is crucial to appreciate the difference between the portrayals of Native American men and women. For example, in simplest terms, the portrayal of a Native American woman consists of, “the figure of the tribeswoman torn between divided loyalties...[this figure] has proven to be synonymous with Euro-American fantasies of colonial sympathy and erotic cultural crossings (Mitchell and Hearn 106). In other words, Native American women are portrayed in a way that suggests that they love their tribe, but are willing to betray it in order to help the white settlers in hopes of a potential marriage.

Furthermore, there is a very particular depiction of mixed relationships between Native Americans and whites that needs to be discussed. Several works of literature and films alike contain Native heroism and included themes of exciting and dangerous love between Natives and whites. “American writers...enshrine the figure of the Indian brave in poetic verse, the myth of the domesticated Indian princess serves to highlight the masculine virtues of his hero (Mitchell and Hearn 106). Therefore, the Indian woman became not only a beauty that could be conquered by the white man, but also the embodiment of all the fierce qualities of a man, making her more masculine than a typical white woman and therefore more exotic.

This gendered division must be furthered explained. “Male and female differences came to override the racial concerns of the previous eras... [literature] exemplifies the ways in which Native Americans, nonetheless, continued to serve as phantasmic projections of the culture’s most entrenched desires (Mitchell and Hearn 107). In other words, Native women are portrayed with a fierceness and fighting spirit that white men admired. However, they were also portrayed

as vulnerable and something to capture; the white man could make the Native woman surrender her ways to come live in the world of civilization. Literature based on interracial relations between Native Americans and whites, then, played on the white man's desire to "save" and "colonize" all of those who were different than they; it exemplified their desire to take people of different walks of life and assimilated them into their idea of the "right way of life." This problematic portrayal of mixed-relationships between Native Americans and whites will be further discussed during the Pocahontas analysis.

The intrigue in "the exotic" of Native Americans has continued to persist in the United States, and therefore, the inaccurate portrayals do as well. However, one of the most fascinating aspects about the interest in the exoticness of Native Americans is that although they are used for certain roles, it has been well documented that white actors, especially men, have been cast as Native Americans. For example, "the more prominent, higher-paying Indian Chief roles [in certain films] went to non-Native American actors, while Native Americans were stuck in the background—and paid a lower rate than other actors in the same supporting parts" (Young). To further explain this, it must be understood that although Hollywood loved the idea of how different and exotic the way of life for Native Americans was, they continued to "white-wash" Hollywood by filling major Native American roles with famous white actors in hopes that the name of this actor would help the movie be a bigger box-office hit, such as Johnny Depp starring in *Lone Ranger* as "Tonto."

The casting of non-Native persons for Native American inspired roles has been a longstanding practice in Hollywood. However, "the absurdity of casting non-Indians reached its pinnacle in the mid-1980s" (Rollins and O'Connor 15). It was at this point that several different films about Native Americans were being produced, but with white, lead actors

and actresses (such as Mel Gibson in *The Last of the Mohicans*). This, combined with several other factors, gave way to the 1990s being a time for inspiring change and a push for better representation by the Native American people.

Multiculturalism in the 1990's

The idea of multiculturalism in the United States during the second half of the 20th century is an important concept in regard to Native American film representation. “The 1960s witnessed a significant historiographical shift in how America viewed its past. The civil rights movement drew attention to the often difficult plight of ethnic minorities in America” (Flavin 1). It was at this time that the United States began to experience a wide variety of multicultural movements; people were becoming more aware of the vast diversity in the country and the negative ways that many minorities were treated. As historian Francis Flavin has argued: “Those who interpret the past are often influenced by the social, cultural, and political issues of their own time, and these issues often prompt them to reconsider long-held assumptions within the context of those newly-arisen issues. Not surprisingly, the changes of the 1960s influenced historians, writers, filmmakers, and other Americans—causing them to view Indians in an increasingly sympathetic and favorable light” (Flavin 1).

In other words, the documentation and written history of Native Americans underwent a drastic change; no longer were they being described as “savages” who were in desperate need of colonization, but rather they were shown in a new light, a more sympathetic light. The historians, “perceived Indians as a historically-oppressed minority victimized by imperial conquest and as a dignified, peace-loving people who lived harmoniously with nature” (Flavin 1). However, it must be noted that such a drastic shift in the way history can turn one stereotype into another.

According to Flavin, replacing one simplified stereotype with another doesn't necessarily lead to better understanding. Despite this challenge, the revamped method of describing Native American history that came about thanks to the Civil Rights Movement "challenges people to contemplate the past from new—and often provocative—viewpoints."

Furthermore, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the United States went through something known as "culture wars." This particular time in history was characterized by the American culture being deeply divided. There were "those who believe there are absolute moral truths contend with those who place moral authority in individual judgement" (Thompson 1). In other words, this was a period of time in United States history when Liberals and Conservatives disagreed on a variety of social and political ideas. "Armed with these competing visions...culture warriors clash on issues of abortion, homosexuality, feminism, school prayer, multiculturalism, popular culture and university curricula" (Thompson 1).

Multiculturalism, however, was a much less divisive issue than some of the other hotly debated ones. "Survey data show that while few Americans support the 'hard multiculturalist' position that calls on the government to help racial and ethnic groups to maintain their original cultures, most Americans prefer an 'inclusive nationalism' that 'coexists with the widespread acceptance of pluralism in cultural practices'" (Thompson 7). In simpler terms, the culture wars of the 1990s was a time of increased acceptance of minority groups in the United States; it was a time that multiculturalism was something that people finally understood. This contributed to the push for better representation for Native Americans in films in the United States because the better understanding of multiculturalism introduced people to the idea of the negative portrayals of Native Americans that were being used by the media.

Pocahontas

Pocahontas, directed by Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel, is an animated Disney movie that tells the story of a young Native American woman and her experience with English colonizers coming over to the New World. In the film, the British come to Pocahontas' land in hopes of starting a new life, and also looking for resources that they can profit from; a fact that makes the Native American people less than excited. In the film, the Powhatan tribe believes that these Englishmen will destroy the land and hurt the tribe. Pocahontas' father, the chief of the tribe, disapproves of his daughter's desire to get to know the newcomers and detests her relationship with one of the Englishmen, Captain John Smith. Later in the movie, Pocahontas falls in love with Captain John Smith and helps to devise a plan to prevent an all-out war between her tribe and his people. *Pocahontas* was released in 1995.

Pocahontas was Disney's first Native American "princess" and is considered to be one of the most independent Disney princesses ever created. In fact, literary scholar Megan Condis, comments that, "Pocahontas was definitely a very different type of character in that she isn't as defined by romantic relationships and she's a lot more active. Also, she is one of the first princesses to actually take an active role in governing" (Brook).

While this film is considered a classic for many who are fans of the catchy songs (such as "Colors of the Wind" or "Just Around the Riverbend"), this movie is incredibly problematic. Not only is there a foot-long list of the historical inaccuracies that are present in *Pocahontas*, but blunt and obvious racism oozes out of several scenes.

One of the most interesting aspects of this movie is that it was considered to be progressive during its time. The director made a point to show viewers that Indians weren't just "savages." For example, in the opening scene, the Englishmen are departing for the New World

and are seen saying good bye to their families, as well as doing other various tasks, such as readying the ship. The viewer can clearly understand that each person in this society has a specific role; they have a job that needs to get done in order for the men to sail to the New World. Similarly, when the movie first shows the Powhatan tribe, there is a very similar structure to their society. Although the Native Americans are wearing different clothes, have different appearances and live in a totally different setting, there is also an order to their society. Men are out hunting, to provide food for the women and children. The women are gathering water and various other items to take care of their families. It appears as though there are different jobs designated for each member of the tribe, very similar to the Englishmen. In short, both societies are shown to be, well, civilized.

However, although *Pocahontas* did its best to be progressive, there are several reasons as to why it did not succeed. The most important reason has to do with the movie creating an idea that the Native Americans and the Englishmen merely misunderstood each other's cultures, and that this misunderstanding was at the crux of the problem between the colonial powers and the indigenous Powhatan. According to the film's logic, if the two groups just talked out their problems, rather than resulting to hasty violence, there would, in fact, be no problems at all. In fact, "Disney goes so far as to try to turn the narrative around by having the Powhatans call the settlers the "savages.." (Bodenner). There is an even a catchy song in the movie where the Powhatans sing about how the settlers are savages as they prepare to fight them off their land. However, an important aspect for viewers to realize is that the Englishmen were invading the Native American's space; there was no reason for the Native Americans to *not* be upset.

Pocahontas creates this idea in viewers that both groups of people were equally at fault through use of a "white voice." "Much like coverage of mascot issues often features white voices

in the interest of ‘fair and balanced coverage,’ the movie ends with the two groups considered even, with no indication of the devastation yet to come” (Bodenner). This idea of Hollywood using a “white voice” to tell the historical story of Native Americans is often seen throughout films in the United States, especially during the 1990’s. In fact, one film critic even said, “*Pocahontas* was a clunky attempt at the sort of watered-down corporate ‘inclusivity’—seen everywhere in the 1990s—that downplays differences of background and opinion, and completely ignores the grim wheel of history in favor of a fuzzy, feel-good narrative that viewers never have to really ponder afterwards.” In other words, *Pocahontas* was seen by some as a very progressive movie; showing that both Native Americans and whites could be viewed as savages, or showing both groups as having well-functioning and organized societies. However, the reason that *Pocahontas* is not considered so progressive by many is the fact that they tried to tell the story of a group of people who were oppressed and forced to assimilate into a society they had no desire to be a part of by using a “white voice.” The “white voice” completely disregards the historical accuracies of what happened between the Native Americans and white settlers and focuses on turning the narrative into one where both parties are at fault.

Another interesting facet of the stereotyping done in the movie *Pocahontas* can be seen in the relationship between Pocahontas and Captain John Smith. One must discuss the impact of her “heroicism” as an Indian woman to fully understand the stereotypes placed upon her in this movie. “Because the figure of such heroics arrives at Smith’s side in the form of an Indian woman, the colonial imagination could assuage itself with visions of being rescued by the erotic symbol of a taboo union (Rollins and O’Connor 12).” This “erotic symbol of a taboo union” consists of the idea of engaging in a relation that was not entirely accepted at the time; a hint of danger and adrenaline lurks in their partnership because of where both persons hail from. This

portrayal of mixed-race intermarriage involving whites and Native Americans is commonly seen in literature and films, but especially so in the story of Pocahontas. Writers used this idea of “forbidden love” with the “savages” as a way to entice readers or viewers and add more zest to their stories. Interracial relations between Native Americans and whites, then, played on the white man’s desire to “save” and “colonize” all of those who were different than they; it exemplified their desire to take people of different walks of life and assimilated them into their idea of the “right way of life.” In other words, Pocahontas was an Indian prize to be won by the white man.

Furthermore, the aspect of animism in Pocahontas casts a problematic, and stereotypical, shadow on the Native American community. “Animism is the religious belief that plants and animals possess a spiritual essence” (“Examining Racist”). Throughout *Pocahontas*, viewers frequently see Pocahontas consulting and conspiring with her companions; Meeko the raccoon, and Flit the hummingbird. Pocahontas’ sidekicks are at her side during the film, and even take part in a few of the musical numbers. The usage of these animals, while perhaps unintentionally, has been harmful to the Native American communities. “It has a real impact on Native practices that are seen as otherworldly. It also erases the aspect of colonialism where many indigenous languages and practices were deemed as evil or witchcraft by settlers” (“Examining Racist”). *Pocahontas*, then, takes a beloved and respected belief in the Native American community and makes into something resembling a joke. The animals are there for comedic relief; they bring no other purpose to the film other than to entertain viewers with frantic and silly behavior. *Pocahontas* uses animism not in a way that promotes the belief, but rather as a way to make the Native Americans seem even stranger and more foreign. Meanwhile, the movie also simultaneously ignores the historical relevance of white people and colonialism being introduced

to animism. The movie shows animism as just being accepted as something Native Americans do, rather than the issues it caused during colonization. As mentioned previously, this belief was seen as a form of witchcraft; something that was feared during this time period. Therefore, this movie turns a serious and problematic issue into something of a joke, and completely ignored the historical and cultural impact that this belief had.

Pocahontas is an animated Disney film full of catchy songs, colors and, as always, a plot where a princess figure falls in love with a handsome savior. However, although this movie is beloved by so many, it needs to be looked at through an academic and cultural lens. Not only are there several historical inaccuracies, but it is also packed full of material that can be culturally offensive to Native Americans. Native Americans are portrayed as savages who need saving, incapable of living any other life than the one of colonization, and as foreign strangers who chat with animals and trees on a regular basis. The impact of this movie could have been great – it could have been a story that showed the beauty of Native American culture and the issues that arose when settlers came to the New World. However, that is not the case, and *Pocahontas* is a film from the 1990's that does little to promote cultural awareness.

Dances with Wolves

Dances with Wolves, directed by Kevin Costner, is a movie based on the original fictional novel written by Michael Blake. This story centers on a Union Army lieutenant who travels to the American frontier in search of a military post, and of his experience with a group of Lakota Indians while there. The story continues as the soldier develops a relationship with this particular band of Lakota Indians and leaves behind his previous job to go enjoy the “simplicity” of the Native American people's lifestyle. The Native Americans welcome him into the tribe and give

him the name, "Dances with Wolves." The plot thickens when he falls in love with one of the tribe's women; a white woman who was raised by this Lakota tribe. More twists and turns occur during the story that involve fighting between different tribes of Native Americans and white people. This 1990 western film won several awards and is regarded as an exceptional film about Native Americans and their culture.

Similar to *Pocahontas*, *Dances with Wolves* was a smashing success at box offices across the country. It won award after award, and won praise for the director and everyone involved in the creation of this film for "finally telling the story of the American Indian." However, despite the apparent love and admiration for this film, there are many who criticize the film for being racist and enforcing already present Native American stereotypes.

The first time that the viewer sees Native Americans in *Dances with Wolves* it is made apparent what the viewer should think of them. The first glimpse that the viewer gets consists of three Native Americans scalping a white man for no reason other than pure entertainment. Three Pawnee Indians ride into view, and immediately begin to chase the white man who runs and screams in fear. The directors made a point to show viewers how proud these Pawnee warriors are; as they happily scalp the white man and hold up their souvenir with a triumphant chant. This first glimpse at Native Americans is incredibly problematic; it does nothing other than enforce offensive and disgusting stereotypes that were present in various other films concerning Native Americans. It reinforces the idea that not all Native Americans are fully human; rather some have the innate to desire to murder and destroy any person that crosses their path.

Furthermore, the first scene where Native Americans are introduced to viewers plays a larger role in why the film actually does not do a good job showing Native Americans in a "sympathetic light." The first time the Pawnee tribe is shown, they are perceived to be cruel,

dangerous and scary by viewers. However, viewers eventually fall in love with a different tribe; the Lakota, who befriends Dances with Wolves. So, the question becomes, why show one tribe in a sympathetic light and the other as cruel, violence-obsessed savages? The answer is simple; white interaction.

Viewers would not have fallen in love with the Lakota tribe if Kevin Costner's character had not befriended them. Rather, viewers would have assumed that the Lakota people were just like the Pawnee – prepared to scalp white people at any moment. But because the character Dances with Wolves was accepted by the Lakota people, viewers accepted the Lakota tribe. They weren't so bad after all; even a white guy was living with them! The interaction with a white person enables viewers to see the Lakota tribe in a more sympathetic light. However, if this was truly a "progressive" movie, viewers would have been able to understand the humanity in Native Americans without the help of white interaction.

The relationship between Dances with Wolves and Stands with a Fist must also be discussed in order for one to understand the full magnitude of problems that persist in this film. Stands with a Fist is the white, adopted daughter of Kicking Bird (the tribe's beloved medicine man). In the film, Stands with a Fist is in mourning as her husband has passed away; in fact, the first scene that viewers are introduced to Stands with a Fist, she is mutilating herself as a way to express her sorrow and to mourn for her deceased husband. This by itself is a problematic representation for the Native American community; the self-mutilation that is associated with the mourning process in this film is shown in a disturbing and uncomfortable way, making the Native Americans and their practices seem even more foreign and strange to white viewers. However, one of the most defining moments in the relationship between Dances with Wolves

and Stands with a Fist happens when they first begin to fall in love. One of the Indians in the tribe remarks, "It makes sense. They are both white."

The directors' decision to include this line in the film is highly problematic. This statement leads viewers to believe in the superiority of whites, and the necessity that they belong together. To further explain this, one must first understand the drastic differences between the ways the Native American tribesmen are portrayed and how *Dances with Wolves* (or Dunbar) is seen. "Lakota men are portrayed as more authoritarian and less civil to women than Dunbar" (Newton 166). For example, during the movie, when *Dances with Wolves* finds *Stands with a Fist* injured and afraid, he scoops her into his arms, and gallops to the Indian camp with her cradled to his chest. However, once arriving at the camp, viewers see the Native Americans pulling *Stands with a Fist* by her arms, across the dirty ground. These are two completely different forms of treatment; *Dances with Wolves* is portrayed in a more tender and loving way – his only worry is finding help for this woman. The Indians, on the other hand, still want that same help for *Stands with a Fist*, but seem to be more savage in brutal in the manner that they help her.

This relates back to the line of "It makes sense. They are both white" because it shows *Dances with Wolves* in a superior light. It shows this character as being the kindest, most tender and helpful man in juxtaposition with the more direct and less gentle Natives. "It is Dunbar's implied racial superiority in this domain that justifies the domestication and later the transfer of patriarchal rights from native *Kicking Bird* back to white Dunbar" (Newton 166). In other words, viewers are confronted with this idea that *Dances with Wolves* is superior to his Indian counterparts; that his nature is kinder and more gentle. Therefore, according to this thought

process, of course he belongs with Stands with a Fist. Why would he belong with anyone other than a woman whose race matches the superiority of his own?

Furthermore, the idea that this film helped tell “the Native American story” must be discussed. This movie is praised as being one of the first films to portray Native Americans as humans. Dr. Leslie D. Hannah wrote that “Dances with wolves opened up people’s eyes, but more importantly it opened their minds... it made it cool to be Indian. Suddenly everyone wanted to be an Indian or at least had an ancestor” (Rose). In other words, this film gave viewers the desire to learn more about the Native American culture that was portrayed in the film. However, the film’s portrayal was incredibly racist and offensive at times. It presented Indians as “tipi-dwelling, buffalo-hunting, eco-warriors living in peace and harmony with the land.” Sure, it was easy for viewers to fall in love and see the humanity in some of the Native American characters; Kicking Bird, for example, was like a cute, old grandpa that everyone wants to be around. However, this film did not make all Native Americans appear human. It still presented them with animalistic tendencies and made a point to represent the Pawnee tribe as terrible and cruel.

Movie critic Roger Ebert called *Dances with Wolves* “a sentimental fantasy where whites were genuinely interested in learning about a Native American culture” (Rose). And while the culture that was portrayed in the film is one that is not fully accurate, and while this film is riddled with problematic scenes and dialogue, it was different from the “Western” genre of movies that preceded it. As Rollins and O’Connor have noted, “As a result of its box office appeal, *Dances with Wolves*, accomplished what few other Western films have done. It ushered forth a new wave of Indian sympathy films and unleashed another dose of hysteria and revisionist historians” (Rollins and O’Connor 17). In other words, although this representation of Native

Americans was not perfect, or even ideal, it did change the way that movies about Indians were seen. Every Indian movie did not have to be about savages, depicting a more “humane side” of Indians to viewers could be just as profitable. Even so as Christian Rose has observed, even though “the film gave us characters who were recognizably human,” the world was “still waiting for Hollywood to show us Indians as doctors, lawyers, and teachers – as modern-day people” (Rose).

Smoke Signals

Smoke Signals, directed by Chris Eyre, is both a humorous and serious story about Victor, a young Native American man. The story begins with the history of Thomas; when Thomas was a baby, his parents were killed in a house fire. Arnold, Victor’s dad, saves Thomas from the fire. After the fire, which viewers later learn that Arnold accidentally started, Arnold becomes an alcoholic and leaves his family and the reservation to move to Phoenix. The movie then jumps to when Victor receives news of his father’s passing. Thomas and Victor hit the road to go get Arnold’s remains to bring them back to the reservation. The two boys are extremely different from one another. The film shows the brothers fighting through the tension to learn from one another, to learn about their father, and to learn about themselves as well. The movie shows viewers a glimpse of the contemporary Native American world.

Smoke Signals is an important film in the Native American genre for one important reason; it was written and directed by Indians and casts Indians as Indians. In fact, “it is the first full-length movie written, directed, co-produced and performed by Native Americans” (O’Sullivan). The film focuses on the lives of two Indian boys and their adventures on and off “the rez.” There is no scalping, no war cries, and no half-naked men dressed in animal-skin loin

clothes. Rather, the film is about a coming of age story, and a young man dealing with grief and loss.

Right from the start, the viewer can clearly see how drastically different “white Hollywood” portrays Indians than the way they are portrayed in *Smoke Signals*. For example, in the previous films, viewers either see the Native Americans for the first time dressed in stereotypical Indian clothing; loin clothes, war paint, beads, moccasins. However, in *Smoke Signals*, the viewers are greeted by individuals dressed in the same way any other American would dress; the Native Americans in this movie are wearing jeans, leather jackets, hats, button down shirts. There is no war paint or feather headdresses in sight.

However, it is important to recognize the difference in historical contexts between *Smoke Signals* and the other two movies. The “white Hollywood” movies are set in a totally different era, in times much earlier than the modern-day one used for *Smoke Signals*. This, however, just furthers the point about white Hollywood being obsessed with the Indians of the past; they, Hollywood executives and producers, are unable to let go of this stereotypical idea of the Native American culture; the glamorized culture that helps sell movie tickets at the box office. *Smoke Signals* is different and important because it focuses on the daily life of the Native Americans in modern day; the cast and creators of the film were able to produce a story that didn’t have to be about the Native Americans of the past. Instead, the film focuses on the Native Americans of today and some of the common problems that they face.

Not only is this movie important because of the cast and creators, but it’s also impactful in how it deals with common stereotypes and misconceptions about Native Americans. For example, one of the most commonly used element in this film is satire. The characters are constantly cracking jokes about “what it means to be Indian.” There are a slew of jokes about the

white man taking land, hair, bartering, and much more. For example, at one point during the film, Victor and Thomas are on a bus to Phoenix. Victor is trying to teach Thomas how to look more “Indian,” as Thomas is dressed in a dorky suit and can’t stop smiling. Victor says to him, “Indians ain’t supposed to smile like that. Get stoic. White people will run all over you if you don’t look mean. Look like a warrior. Look like you just came back from hunting buffalo.” This, of course, is a jab at how most Americans view Native Americans; as stoic warriors from the past. However, Thomas responds to this with, “But Victor, our tribe never hunted buffalo! We were fishermen!”

There are several moments like this throughout the film; through their jokes, the characters are exposing the ridiculousness of how many Americans view Native Americans today. At one point in the film, when Victor is watching a TV program with Native Americans in it, Thomas jokingly remarks, “the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV.” Again, viewers clearly see the creators of this film taking a stance on common stereotypes and misconceptions through humor and satire. This exposes viewers to a new idea; that Native Americans are aware of the stereotypes that surround their culture and history and are able to laugh at the lunacy of it all. This is important; the more viewers that are aware of the ridiculousness of stereotypes that glamorize the Native American culture, the less likely they are to believe in the reality of those stereotypes.

Furthermore, prevalent issues such as alcoholism and racism are touched on during the movie. Victor’s father, Arnold, is a drunk. After the fire, he cannot live with what he has done, so he turns to alcohol to help soothe his troubled heart. This puts an incredible strain on Victor’s family, and is eventually the reason why Arnold ends up leaving for Phoenix. Throughout the film, there are more subtle remarks from various characters about the chronic over usage of

alcohol on the reservation. Again, this is something that makes *Smoke Signals* relevant and significant. In fact, Native Americans have some of the highest rates of alcohol and drug abuse among minority groups in the United States. “Certain factors may contribute to the development of alcohol use disorders among Native Americans as well as prevent them from seeking help. Economic issues, cultural loss, domestic abuse, and physical and mental health issues” are all factors of alcoholism on Native American reservations (Guarnotta). While many viewers may not agree with the use of satire to present an issue as important and prevalent as alcoholism on Indian reservations, at least there is a conversation happening about its existence. By even making sly remarks about it, characters are showing viewers the prevalence of alcoholism in Native American culture. The more this problem is talked about, the more likely finding a solution becomes. In other words, *Smoke Signals* became a platform for the topic of issues that Native Americans face today, such as alcoholism.

Racism towards Native Americans is another issue addressed throughout the film. There are quite a number of scenes with white people giving Thomas and Victor dirty glances and even scenes where the phrase “in’jun” is used quite a number of times. However, the scene that was the most impactful when it comes to dealing with racism was when Thomas and Victor are boarding the bus to leave the Indian reservation. One of their friends, a girl named Lucy asks the boys if they have their passports. When they respond, confused, that they aren’t going anywhere foreign, just in to the United States, Lucy responds, “The United States is as foreign as it gets!” As soon as the boys board the bus, they are subjected to stares and whispers of the other (white) travelers. This scene is crucial for viewers because it speaks loudly on the racism that Native Americans face in present day. The obvious mistrust that white people have towards Native Americans is still present. Of course, to go along with the theme of the rest of the movie, the boys made jokes

about the racism in a satirical way. Nevertheless, this film took time to address prevalent cultural issues that Native Americans face today in an entertaining, but meaningful way.

Naturally Native

Naturally Native, directed by Valerie Red-Horse and Jennifer Wynne Farmer, is the story of three Native American sisters, Vickie, Karen and Tanya, who start a company to sell cosmetics inspired by traditional methods and ingredients, passed down to them from their father. Despite the fact that Karen, the sister who just graduated with her M.B.A., has created a solid business plan for the sisters' business idea, the three entrepreneurs continue to face rejection and insult from various potential investors. This fictional film focuses on the story of these women and their dream to launch their own line of "Naturally Native" products. The story contains all sorts of drama including racism, alcoholism, family strife, and more.

Naturally Native is the first film by and about Native Americans to be completely financed by a tribe. Director Valerie Red-Horse and co-producers Dawn Jackson and Yvonne Russo "approached the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe of Connecticut, who run the world's most successful casino. The tribe liked the script.... The Mashantucket Pequots gave her \$700,000" to produce the film (LoBianco).

Similar to *Smoke Signals*, *Naturally Native* uses satire as a way to address prevalent issues in the Native American community. The satirical humor in this movie is used to expose and criticize the aspect of white society that incorporates inaccurate stereotypes into movie scripts. For example, during the movie, one of the characters, a white man named Craig, frequently asks questions about the sisters' Native American culture. However, his questions are usually rooted in stereotypes, and the result is the sisters laughing at whatever question was

asked. This is an important part of the film because it shows viewers that there are so many misconceptions about Native Americans that white people generally accept as truths. It gives a reason to be more aware of what you learn, and to not necessarily accept everything as a fact.

Furthermore, similar to *Smoke Signals*, racism and alcoholism are both tackled throughout the film. During the film, there is a scene where the three sisters go to visit a potential investor. The woman that they arrange a meeting with is a middle aged white woman who claims to be a spiritual psychic. During this scene, the potential investor is trying to get the sisters to be a part of her business; she charges clients to participate in various Native American activities, such as a naming ceremony. She claims that she was an Indian in a past life, she lights sage and begins chanting various prayers, and engages in other problematic and cultural appropriation behavior.

The selling of “the Native experience” is one of the key issues in Native American representation. In fact, white people selling Native American crafts and artifacts for profit became such a problem, the United States government stepped in to create The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990. This act is “a truth-in-advertising law that prohibits misrepresentation in marketing of Indian arts and crafts products within the United States. It is illegal to offer or display for sale, or sell any art or craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a particular Indian or Indian Tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization resident within the United States” (“The Indian Arts”).

While the scene in *Naturally Native* did have humor in the sense that the woman was so completely racist and looney it was funny, it also makes an impact on the viewer. It shows that white people often try to appropriate Native American culture and make it fit their needs. This woman was taking sacred Indian traditions and charging money. In the movie, Valerie’s husband

explains how problematic this is by saying, “it’s like the Pope charging for confessions.” This scene from the movie deals with cultural appropriation; the idea of a majority population taking practices and ideas from minorities without suffering the same oppression that was placed on them because of these practices and ideas. In other words, this woman found the Native American culture intriguing, and is trying to take parts of their culture for her own profit. This was an important scene to have in the movie, as this is a common problem for Native Americans, and by including it, *Naturally Native* exposed viewers to the idea and problems with cultural appropriation.

Furthermore, alcoholism is explored. Viewers see it many times; the sisters’ mother dies from alcoholism, and Valerie’s husband disapproves of her desire to drink wine as he knows that alcoholism is likely to run in the family are two great examples seen in the film. For example, when Valerie gets upset at her husband for not allowing her to drink wine she says, “If I were Caucasian no one would ever think twice about me drinking wine. But because I’m Indian – absolutely not!” Again, this was a very important part of the movie. It shows that some Indians do feel resentment towards the fact that many other people from their culture suffer from alcoholism; they are angry that these problems exist in their culture. Furthermore, it also shows the denial aspect in alcoholism, something all viewers should become aware of. Later in the film, viewers see Valerie struggling with drinking and agreeing to stop seeking refuge in alcohol. This scene, and the movie in general, helps to raise awareness for alcoholism by becoming a platform where alcoholism is talked about, especially amongst Native Americans.

This movie even touches on representational issues that Native Americans are subjected to in modern day. For example, during the movie, Valerie’s son tries out for a baseball team. When it is time for his first game, his father makes him quit the team. Why? Because the team

name is “The Fighting Indians.” The boy is wearing a shirt with the team name scrawled on it, accompanied by a caricature of an Indian. The drawing has a completely red face, and a mean, ugly grimace. He has feathers in his hair and wide, angry eyes. Valerie explains to her son that, “We don’t look like that. Are our faces completely red? Do our eyes look like that?” This scene should inspire viewers to look at the mascots of today. There are still Indian mascots used across the country – all of which are offensive to the Native American culture.

Although *Smoke Signals* and *Naturally Native* vary in numerous amounts of ways, they are both incredibly important films to the Native American film genre. The films touch on important issues that Native Americans face today in entertaining and satirical ways. Furthermore, and most importantly, the stories of these films focus on normal, everyday people. They show Native Americans living their lives today. No wars with white people, no galloping around bareback on a horse, no tomahawk throwing; just people being people – a concept that white Hollywood still has yet to grasp.

The 1990s: A Period of Representational Change

Up until the 1990’s, most Native American films were Westerns. They only showed Native people and culture in stereotypical ways. The road to better representation is one with many twists and turns, and it is almost impossible to say what exactly was the reason for change. However, there are many factors that were present during this time that helped the changes in representation that we saw in all four films – even if two of the four films, I argue, remain extremely troublesome with their portrayals.

Leading up to the 1990’s, there were several different movements and ideas offer insight into the eventual push for better representation of Native Americans in film. For example, “The

Indian Actor's Workshop was begun in the early 1960s and was followed in turn by the establishment of the American Indian Registry for the Performing Arts in the 1980s. Both organizations were committed to promoting Native actors in Native roles. This momentum... came as a result of advocacy among the ranks of senior Native actors" (Rollins and O'Connor 14).

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hollywood began to take on more "Native consultants" so that "Native playwrights and cultural experts were finally given an opportunity to add tribal precision and to insert snippets of real Native languages, rather than the usual made-up ones" (Rollins and O'Connor 18). In other words, these "Native consultants" became commonplace hires in Hollywood films to help add more authenticity. Although many of the films these consultants were working on had main characters that were white portraying an Indian, these consultants were still important because they did add more authenticity to films. Furthermore, in 1992, the Native American Producer's Alliance was formed. This was another attempt at providing an outlet for representational change for Native Americans working in the film industry.

Another potential factor helping to explain the representational change in the 1990s is related to the 1992 Quincentennial "celebration" of Columbus coming to America. As Rollins and O'Connor noted, "...it was supposed to be a banner year for indigenous peoples" (Rollins and O'Connor 17). But in fact, the 1992 Columbian Quincentennial set into motion a reconsideration of the place of the Native Americans in the United States' historical memory. It provided a reason for whites and indigenous persons alike to think about the way Native Americans were being represented; and the historical and cultural inaccuracies that were coming about due to this representation. In fact, the 1992 Columbian Quincentennial led to "anti-

Columbus furor” (Phillips). In other words, people were finally understanding the damage Christopher Columbus caused during his voyages to “the new world.”

As mentioned previously, it is incredibly hard to pin down the exact reason as to why there was a change in the 1990s and movies about Native Americans written, produced, and performed by Native Americans became commonly seen. However, a combination of several movements, including different organizations, employment opportunities, the Quincentennial celebration, and *Dances With Wolves*, are all factors as to why the 1990s saw a move from mere savagery and toward both sympathetic portrayals of Native Americans.

Conclusion

In conclusion, each of the four films that were analyzed are important; either for the way that they fall short of their attempts to positively portray Native Americans, or for the ways that they try to address stereotypes and stigmas. At any rate, representation matters. The way a race or ethnic group is presented in any form of media or art is incredibly important to the way that society views an individual.

Representations are vehicles that drive controlling and alternative images of race, gender, class, and sexuality, the social forces that govern our society. Popular cultural representations are fertile areas of study because they allow us to analyze the myths of our culture (Joseph 3).

In other words, representations of ethnic groups give one a better way to understand another person; they present an idea that one can identify with or one can identify them by. “Popular representations, where identity is imagined as both a site of social domination and agency, transform seeming fictions of racialization and sexualization into something close to

reality” (Joseph 3). Therefore, this portrayal of Native American people that is seen throughout film is important – it has been the basis for identification of this ethnic group for many years. What makes this problematic, then, is when this ethnic group is only portrayed in one certain way, and worse than that, in a way that is not accurate.

It is possible for Native Americans to be portrayed accurately. Viewers saw this being done in movies like *Smoke Signals* and *Naturally Native*. It is time for the modern-day Native American to shine in films; the Native Americans of today who live average lives being teachers, mailmen, doctors, or even accountants. It is completely unnecessary to continue to show Native Americans of the past all the time; it’s time for Hollywood to adapt, modernize, and rid itself of the inaccurate and offensive stereotypes of yesterday.

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