

**“I GUESS YOUR WARRIOR LOOK DOESN’T WORK EVERY TIME”:  
CHALLENGING INDIAN MASCULINITY IN THE CINEMA**

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*In Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West.*

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In literature, film, painting, photography, history, sports, advertising, fraternal organizations, and any number of other cultural media, whites have manipulated the symbolic indian to perform innumerable tasks.<sup>i</sup> The indian— distinguished here from Native American people— is a stock character in the non-Native psyche, a metaphor rather than a fully functioning human. Non-Natives historically have used the indian as a symbol to make statements about themselves and their place in the world, letting it serve as a foil to critique or herald their own values and habits. The thousands of indians in Hollywood films and TV serials over the years have lacked key human traits, not to mention the many tribal characteristics that were absent. However, Native people— through growing political clout and direct participation in movie making— have begun to influence on-screen portrayals much more over the last 30 years than previously, which has led to the arrival of identifiably Native American images in several recent efforts. By directly challenging the hypermasculinity of the symbolic indians, Native Americans have accomplished some of the most significant revisions of indian representations to date.

For at least the last century, hypermasculinity has been one of the foremost attributes of the indian world that whites have imagined.<sup>ii</sup> With squaws and princesses usually playing secondary roles, indian tribes are populated predominantly by noble or ignoble savages, wise old chiefs, and cunning warriors. These imagined indian nations comprise an impossibly masculine race. Because of such perpetually outlandish representations of indian gender, masculinity has become a crucial arena for contesting unrealistic images of indians and introducing Native American perspectives into films. Filmmakers have both played on and repudiated the forms that indian masculinity assumes, creating such characters as Native American nerds and struggling fathers, and they have strengthened female characters to some extent without emasculating Native American men, creating much more convincing portraits of Native life than earlier works.

At the risk of oversimplifying a full century of indian images in cinema, a brief review of classic indian roles will delineate some of the standard manipulations of masculinity and establish the context from which recent Native American film depictions

are emerging.<sup>iii</sup> Following the review, I will discuss three recent films that demonstrate the capacity new representations of Native American masculinity have for dismantling stereotyped, racist images of Indians.

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The noble savage, the good Indian, is a virtuous, dignified, stoic, hard-working man. He provides for his people, though he is sometimes portrayed without any connections to a living family or tribe. He believes in personal responsibility and loyalty, and he bravely answers calls to arms for noble causes. One with nature, he is free of the corruptions industrial society places on a man's character, yet he embraces the causes of "civilization" and white Americans. He is physically superb, animal-like in his athletic abilities. In many ways, he embodies the ideal traits white society ascribes to manliness. Some classic examples of the noble savage include Chingachgook from *The Last of the Mohicans* (1991), Tonto from *The Lone Ranger*, Squanto, and Iron Eyes Cody in the "crying Indian" commercial from the 1970s.<sup>iv</sup>

The ignoble savage, the good Indian's redundantly-named evil twin, embodies many of the flaws of normative white masculinity. Representing the wicked potential of masculine strength gone wrong, he is cruel and barbarous, killing and raping in unprovoked rage. He is drunk and lazy, deceitful and treacherous in his essence. He is never portrayed as having any family, except on the occasions where he has a drudge of a wife whom he works like a mule to compensate for his laziness. A godless hindrance to civilization, he embodies the wild, threatening side of nature, and he obstructs the Manifest Destiny of the United States. Like the noble savage, he is physically powerful. These traits combine to fashion both a cautionary figure, and a figure against whom the superiority and righteousness of the heroic white man— or even the noble savage— is evident. Magua in *Last of the Mohicans* (1991) and Scar in *The Searchers* (1956) are good examples of the ignoble savage, though just about any Indian in a John Ford film will fill that role as well.<sup>v</sup>

Good and evil Indians have been used for various ends in white American culture. As a substantial body of scholarship shows, Americans at times identified themselves with the noble savage to emphasize the unique character of their new nation, as they struggled to distinguish themselves from European cousins whom they viewed as morally bankrupt.<sup>vi</sup> In other instances, whites portrayed Indians as ignoble savages in order to justify colonial policies and mask the painful truths of American acts of genocide.<sup>vii</sup> The effect of these representations in countless movies is to erase sympathy for Indians (and thus, Native Americans), implying that they deserved the

brutalities committed against them. Further, ignoble savage depictions link heroic white masculinity and American nationalism to killing indians, tying the ignoble savage to the American foundational myths of regenerative violence on the frontier.<sup>viii</sup> At other times, whites entirely erase Native Americans from their history so the blood of conquest does not stain the national myth of righteous pioneers populating an empty North American continent.<sup>ix</sup> In their presence and absence, hypermasculine indians have been particularly significant in American nationalist myths.

Indians are usually imagined only in the past, which is part of the reason they are so important to myths of nation-building. Indians never made it out of the national expansion era of the 1800s. Through the centuries, it has proven easier and safer for whites to write romantically about past battles between Natives and whites than to write about current situations in which audiences might be culpable.<sup>x</sup> Further, trapping indians in the past has meant that Native Americans of today feel pressure to certify their ethnic identity by resembling the hypermasculine white construction of the Lakota of 1860-1890, currently popular culture's favorite tribe and time period. This allows white people to dictate the terms of modern tribal identities even while Native Americans try to escape wholesale adoption of American culture by returning to ancestral traditions.<sup>xi</sup> Hypermasculinity, combined with the tendency to keep indian stories set in the past, has made indians particularly manipulable in national myths, a characteristic especially obvious in Westerns, movies with masculine nationalist myths of rugged individualism and regenerative violence at their very core.<sup>xii</sup> Being trapped in the Western genre inextricably links indians with masculine myths of nation-building, making masculinity absolutely central to American constructions of indians.

Hollywood has also produced a string of indian sympathy Westerns, such as *Broken Arrow* (1950), *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), and *Dances With Wolves* (1990), in which indians are drawn as tragic victims of certain segments of the white population.<sup>xiii</sup> These movies typically contain plots suggesting the predictable demise of indians at the hands of a few corrupt pioneers or government types unless a white hero saves them from doom. The white good guy not only validates heroic white masculinity once more, but he also provides a safe surrogate for white viewers, a person with whom they can identify to relieve the guilt they might feel if all whites were depicted wickedly.

Directors of some sympathy Westerns intended the indians in their films to be metaphors, at least in part, for other abused groups. They use Native American histories to make moral statements about race relations in general, a technique which has contradictory effects. On one hand, it reminds people of the brutalities Native Americans have endured in their interaction with the United States, but on the other, it

diminishes the significance of the original story by reducing it to the status of a metaphor for some other, more immediate problem. For example, in *Little Big Man* (1970), Arthur Penn intended his film to critique the Vietnam War as a continuation of American imperialism. As the film was shooting in 1969, news of the US military's 1968 massacre of several hundred Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, Vietnam, leaked to the public. By the time the public saw *Little Big Man*, its depiction of Custer's slaughter of over 100 Cheyenne on the Washita River in 1868 came to stand as an indictment of the My Lai massacre more than the Washita massacre.<sup>xiv</sup> Certainly the two incidents are products of the same US imperialist agenda, but in a sense the allusion also diminishes a tragic event in Native American history to a *metaphor* for injustice instead of an *actual* injustice.

From indian sympathy films emerged the wise old chief character, a variation on the noble savage. Vine Deloria describes this character type as one who "contains the classic posture of mysterious earth wisdom. He speaks primarily in aphorisms and rarely utters a word that is not wise and sentimental. He is always in favor of love and understanding and never advocates that we take up violence against those who have wronged us."<sup>xv</sup> As a direct descendant of the noble savage, the wise old chief follows the time-honored tradition of embracing the causes of the "good" white men. He has grown in popularity over the last 30 years, having first been embraced by the hippies, and now the New Agers and men's movement groups as they rifle through world religions looking for inner peace.<sup>xvi</sup>

One scholar suggests that the spirituality of the wise old chief removes his political threat by feminizing him.<sup>xvii</sup> In that sense, the function of the wise old chief is not only to reassure white audiences that it was indeed their Manifest Destiny to own the continent, but also to restate the link between white masculinity and national expansion. The wise old chief's passivity links indianness to subordination and femininity while simultaneously linking whiteness and masculinity to the right to own the land. This diversion from the hypermasculinity of earlier images reveals that the success of recent Native American efforts to reform male images is not as simple as toning down indian masculinity, but that it involves removing indians from the discourse of white masculinity altogether.

Portrayals of indian women in films have been scarcer than images of indian men, but they, too, have said more about white American masculine myths than about Native Americans.<sup>xviii</sup> In fact, perhaps the most obvious feature of images of indian women in film is that they are so outnumbered by hypermasculine images of indian men. This could be said of cinematic images regardless of race,<sup>but this imbalance cuts to the heart of</sup>

the reason that Native American filmmakers lately have deployed gender images so successfully to create more recognizable cinematic images of themselves.

Over the last 30 years, Native people have found ways to influence and manipulate the images of themselves that non-Natives see on the big screen and on television. A transformation began when Native American actors such as Dan George in *Little Big Man* and Will Sampson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) played significant indian characters. Their characters were symbolic, to be sure; as Old Lodge Skins, George played the wise old chief adopting the white guy and imparting all the knowledge of his people upon him, while Sampson's indian character, Chief Bromden, at least partly symbolized a free spirit trapped by the rigid expectations of American social norms. But each of these actors cracked through the indian shell, bringing Native American mannerisms, gestures, and faces to the roles— traits that were absent when white actors played indians. While *Little Big Man* follows the tired stereotype of the wise old chief, it also plays on that cliché by injecting humor, fallibility, and anguish into George's character, making him more human and more Native American than any previous movie indian. Sampson impressively portrays a patient in a psychiatric hospital pretending to be deaf and mute. Since beads, feathers, and mysticism are absent, and the movie was set in the present, the symbolism of his ethnicity is barely evident. The net effect is that Sampson comes off as a human in a human situation rather than as a cardboard cutout.

White authors created both *Old Lodge Skins* and *Chief Bromden*, and both of the movies were also directed by whites, revealing that collaboration between whites and Native Americans can produce effective portrayals.<sup>xix</sup> Without the talents, knowledge, and— yes— ancestry of George and Sampson, though, the characters whites created would have been incomplete. White actors playing indians always seem so busy trying to be indian that they cannot develop other facets of their characters. Not so with George and Sampson, whose unstrained ease and comfort in roles as Native Americans allowed them to focus their efforts on separate aspects of their identities. In these movies, Native American actors began to reveal fully human, three-dimensional Native American men whose function was not merely to validate white American masculinity or nationalism. And more importantly, Native people recognized themselves in these characters.

### ***Powwow Highway***

Released in 1989, *Powwow Highway* is the first feature film that could reasonably be called a Native American film, rather than an indian film. It takes steps towards

presenting new gender images, especially in Gary Farmer's portrayal of Philbert Bono, but unfortunately it also reiterates some of the same old stereotypes about Indians and Indian gender. The movie is based on the novel by Huron author David Seals,<sup>xx</sup> and the main actors are Native American, but nearly everything else in the movie was assembled by non-Natives, creating a fragmented, almost schizoid final product.

Perhaps the strongest appeal of *Powwow Highway* is that it features late 20th century Native Americans as main characters who deal with modern issues and have at least partially Native American perspectives. A road buddy/ action/ adventure flick about two Cheyenne men on a multipurpose quest, it is packed with jokes, character traits, and themes that are not readily intelligible to a person unfamiliar with modern Native America. It addresses the issue of mining on reservations, the collusion of the federal government with mining interests, the history of the American Indian Movement (AIM) on Pine Ridge, the importance of teaching Native children their cultures, "rez cars," suburban migration, powwow culture, water contamination on reservations, and mixed receptions of traditionalism among tribal members. The significance of these themes would elude most non-Natives, but they are (or were, at least) refreshingly meaningful to Native American viewers.

The road buddy format allows *Powwow Highway* to address the split and convergence between competing notions of ethnic identity embodied in Buddy Red Bow, the glamorous militant political activist who shuns the cultural aspects of Cheyenne identity, and Philbert Bono, the nerdy traditionalist who never participated in the activism of the 1970s. As with all road buddy movies, the divergent characters come together in the end, resolving the conflict as they each combine aspects of the other's identity with their own.<sup>xxi</sup> The intersection of their identities echoes AIM history, where urban Native militants and certain traditional reservation Natives allied with one another in the turbulent 1970s, though the movie polarizes the two characters more than Seals' novel. An examination of the contrasting characters reveals interesting messages about Native American masculinity.

Buddy Red Bow is the macho political activist. He is presented as strong, smart, confrontational, and potentially volatile in the same tradition as Hollywood action heroes such as Mel Gibson in the *Lethal Weapon* series. In other words, he is on a testosterone overload, as demonstrated in several scenes of indignant rage. Racism and government treachery always provoke these rages, making Buddy seem justified in his actions. True, no one gets killed, but the fisticuffs, knife-throwing, jailbreaks, and exploding cars all end up helping the protagonists towards their goals, so that in the

final analysis, the American myth of regenerative male violence is confirmed by Native Americans.

There are moments of subversion of this myth, though, and more than one layer of meaning to Buddy's warrior image. From one perspective, his vet status makes him a walking cliché. As Ted Jojola notes, the story of the Indian vet out for justice was crusty by the time *Powwow Highway* was made because of the long string of movies with that storyline dating back to the 1960s.<sup>xxii</sup> Beyond that, Vietnam vets seeking justice were a favorite theme in mainstream cinema since the 1970s in such movies as *Gordon's War* (1973), *First Blood* (1982), and *Out for Justice* (1991). Buddy's veteran status can be read as affirmation of his masculine strength, a shorthand way of saying he is one tough customer with a political chip on his shoulder. Such a rendering confirms earlier stereotypes about the hypermasculinity of Indians. Being a Vietnam veteran, however, has more significance than simply adding to his hypermasculine persona when the story is viewed from a tribal perspective.

Many Native American cultures, including the Cheyenne, afford veterans substantial prestige within the community, so Buddy's status as a vet with three Purple Hearts takes on more meaning in a Native American context. In most Native societies, tradition holds that the more experience a man gains in war, the higher a status he achieves (though it must be noted that warfare is not the only way for a man to raise his status). Add to this the fact that Native Americans have perhaps the highest military participation rates of any ethnic or racial group in the 20th century,<sup>xxiii</sup> and it becomes evident that Native American viewers may have a perspective on Buddy's veteran status and its relation to his masculinity and stature that would not be obvious to non-Natives. Being a veteran makes him a man of status and a potential leader. So although the film certainly manipulates the renegade vet image in standard ways, it may also be read as a product of a Native American author manipulating Cheyenne warrior traditions and their associations with modern veterans when he wrote the book on which the movie was based.

The two other Native vets in *Powwow Highway*, Jimmy Campbell and Wolf Tooth, offer a different perspective on Vietnam vet status than Buddy does. Jimmy Campbell was a POW in Vietnam who, Wolf Tooth tells us, "spent 31 months in a tiger's cage. He finally escaped, but he had to slit four throats to do it. He's got just about every medal there is." Jimmy's knife-throwing skills save Buddy from an attack by political enemies, which would appear to make him a tough guy. Instead, he is portrayed as an emotionally and physically disabled shell suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. On one level, Jimmy is a critique of the tragedy of American colonialist

wars and their effects on the many Native American vets and Native peoples in general. But on another level, his experiences inflate his own and Buddy's masculinity by glamorizing the conditions they endured and escaped. The layered, almost contradictory meanings simultaneously confirm and disrupt the hypermasculine indian image, making many critics love and hate *Powwow Highway* at the same time.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Like Buddy, Wolf Tooth is a veteran of both Vietnam and the American Indian Movement, yet he does not embrace the hypermasculine ethic in the same way as Buddy. He and his wife, Imogene, live on the Pine Ridge reservation, but they move away in the course of the movie because of political intimidation and violence there. With Imogene pregnant, she and Wolf Tooth decide that they must leave their home to find a safer, more stable life. Buddy criticizes the decision to move, to which Wolf Tooth replies, "You wanna fight everyday of your life, you live in Pine Ridge. I had enough of that shit in Nam." With these words, Wolf Tooth challenges Buddy's confidence in the potential regenerative value of violence, and thus temporarily undermines the hypermasculine indian image for the viewer. In fact, the image is undermined repeatedly in the movie by all the Native men aside from Buddy, but the movie also continues to glamorize Buddy's hypermasculinity. The scene where Buddy throws a plate of glass from Philbert's wonder-car at a police cruiser in pursuit, magically making it flip onto its roof, illustrates the fragmented nature of the images. In mid-throw, Buddy mystically changes from a denim-clad activist throwing a Buick window at a cop to the noble savage, dressed in buckskin and feathers, throwing a stone hatchet. This heavy-handed attempt to link past and present battles affirms the old indian images that Native Americans have been trying to overcome for so long.

Philbert Bono, on the other hand, is neither a veteran of the Vietnam War, nor of *Wounded Knee 1973*, and his character counters the hypermasculine indian image more than any other feature of the movie. Philbert is a tubby, simple-minded outcast in the beginning of the movie. Flashbacks show that he was a nerd in grade school, ostracized by cool Native boys like Buddy. In fact, the only reason Buddy associates with Philbert in the movie is because Philbert has a car he can use to give him a ride to Santa Fe to bail out Buddy's estranged sister, Bonny. Towards the beginning of the movie, we find that Philbert has decided that the time has come for him to become a warrior, and throughout the rest of the movie, he is "gathering medicine," collecting four "tokens" that will signify approval of his quest from spiritual powers. Along the way, he has several visions and continually gains spiritual power, finally receiving his fourth token. Buddy mocks Philbert's warrior quest and his spirituality at first, but gradually

comes to embrace it, as the road buddy format demands. Similarly, Philbert comes to share Buddy's taste for resisting the enemy.

Philbert has little masculine prowess in the way it is typically portrayed, and in that aspect, he begins to undermine the standard hypermasculine portrayals of Indian men. That is not to say that Philbert's character is stereotype-free. His big vulnerable teddy-bear image, combined with his passionate, occasionally hokey spirituality makes him verge on becoming a New Age mystic mascot rather than a real person. Seals wrote an irreverent, coyote-style spirituality for the novel's Philbert, while the movie's Philbert is a more closely white version of Indian spirituality. In addition, Philbert's visions in the movie tend to confirm the stereotype that the only real Native Americans were warriors in 19th century buckskin clothes, diminishing the advances the movie makes by showing Native Americans in a modern setting. What is new and appealing about Philbert, though, is that he is neither cool nor tough. He steals money from the police and pulls the bars out of the window of the jail cell that is holding Buddy's sister Bonny, but he does not throw punches or swing hatchets like Buddy. He dresses badly, eats too much junk food, and has no social skills. Philbert develops a father-like relationship with Bonny's young daughter, Skye, to whom he teaches aspects of Cheyenne culture. He relates more to her innocence and fascination with Cheyenne culture than to the manliness and political aggression of Buddy Red Bow. In these ways, he is a character who cannot be easily subsumed into the old hypermasculine images. Philbert almost slips into the "dumb buck" Indian role, but he is redeemed by his mentoring relationship with Skye, his compassion, his generosity, and the cunning he reveals in solving the central dilemmas of the plot. He successfully relies on Cheyenne stories and Cheyenne values to save the day, but he is also an unpopular, irksome oaf, making it difficult for the viewer to link his Cheyenne identity to hypermasculinity.

Powwow Highway's depiction of Native American women brings it back to the old Indian masculinity, though, since the sole function of the women is to demonstrate the masculine heroism of the two buddies. The only Native woman with any meaningful role in the movie is Bonny, who is portrayed as an Indian princess— blameless, pure, and in need of rescue by the dashing warriors. The movie implies that she is arrested falsely in order to get Buddy away from the reservation during a crucial vote on a mining referendum. Bonny of the movie is shown as a helpless, innocent victim, even though David Seals wrote Bonny as a more complicated character. While the federal government did target her for arrest to get Buddy away from the reservation, she was also a drug dealer and part-time hooker in the novel.<sup>xxv</sup> In portraying her as a princess,

the movie *Powwow Highway* not only missed an excellent opportunity to push images of Native American women beyond stereotypes, but it forced Philbert and Buddy into clichéd roles as manly protectors of the virtuous woman.

When it came out, *Powwow Highway* provided a glimpse of Native American lives on screen, but it was riddled with inconsistency. It produced mixed messages about Native American masculinity, sometimes reiterating the old hypermasculine warrior images, and sometimes liberating Native American characters from them. The lasting value of the movie lies in scenes where it deflates the myth of the regenerative value of male violence, and in its portrayal of a human, oafish Native American hero. Such images begin to chip away at the white Indian and provide recognizably Native American characters.

### Grand Avenue

An HBO production released in 1996, *Grand Avenue* is notable for two important achievements. First, it features modern Native Americans living in an urban setting. Since a majority of Native Americans are now urban dwellers, it is important to address and represent the lives of urban Natives instead of always sticking to stories about reservations. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it overrides the standard Indian representation of hypermasculinity by presenting realistic and dynamic images of Native American women. Anyone familiar with Native Americans knows that in many Native communities, women hold an extraordinary amount of power and assume a variety of leadership roles. This reality had never been adequately portrayed on film prior to *Grand Avenue*, because whites never imagine that Indians live in female-centered, family-based communities.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Native American men in the movie<sup>xxvii</sup> are not portrayed as weak or hapless because of the focus on the strength of the women, though, as the emphasis is placed consistently on building the strength of the community as a whole. *Grand Avenue* is the most successful collaboration between Native Americans and whites in terms of its consistent Native American perspective, a fact traceable to the amount of creative control Miwok tribal member Greg Sarris exercised as author of the teleplay and co-executive producer.<sup>xxviii</sup>

*Grand Avenue* tells the stories of an urban community of interrelated Pomo tribal members. This gritty rendering addresses gang violence, teenage sex, urban migration, spirituality, uneasy views of tribal traditions, alcoholism, fathers' responsibilities, kinship, interracial relationships, intertribal relationships, labor conditions, and cultural conceptions of illness and healing.

The story begins with a middle-aged widow, Mollie, moving with her three children to Santa Rosa, California, after the family of her recently deceased husband forces her to leave his reservation. She shows up at the door of her cousin Anna, who helps her find a one bedroom house to rent up the street. Mollie does not realize that Steven, the unknowing father of her oldest daughter, Justine, lives on the block, too. In addition, an old basketmaker/healer named Nellie, who is related to all three households, lives a few doors away. *Grand Avenue* examines family and community dysfunction in several of its manifestations. Mollie is an alcoholic who has faced a life of adversity. Anna hides her failing marriage behind a veil of pride, while her daughter, Jean, is slowly dying of brain cancer. Justine lacks boundaries and lashes out at her mother in typical “bad girl” ways. Mollie’s 14 year-old daughter, Alice, feels the burden of responsibility for her family’s care. Incest lurks in the shadows when Steven’s son, Raymond, begins dating Justine without knowing they are related.

While the movie does not delve into the concept of “poison,” which is defined as culturally central to the community’s dysfunction in the novel,<sup>xxix</sup> it indicates that community health can be restored through proper family relations and a return to Pomo spiritual traditions. In that way, it gives the Pomo people the capacity to fix their own problems, rejecting the “tragic victim” image of indians, in which a white man would save them. The community’s growing reliance on their kin and Pomo traditions saves the families from destroying themselves, and it is Pomo women such as Alice and Nellie who provide the impetus and strength behind this regeneration. Men do not rush in to save the women; women save themselves and therefore the community, implying their centrality to its survival.

As stated earlier, the Native American men in this movie are not portrayed as weak or hapless because of the strength of the women. Rather, they also are defined in terms of their relationships to the whole, to the community. The two main Native men in the movie are Steven and his son Raymond. Steven is a handsome man in his late thirties married to an Apache woman named Rayna. Raymond is his son from a previous marriage who he raised mostly on his own. He got Mollie pregnant with Justine when they were seniors in high school, but he never took responsibility for her and Mollie never asked him to help. In fact, he forgot about her pregnancy until Mollie moved back into his neighborhood. Only Mollie and Steven know that he is Justine’s father. When Steven sees impending romantic involvement between his two children, Justine and Raymond, the threat of incest— the ultimate improper kin relationship— moves him to tell both Raymond and Justine they are siblings. His actions cause rage and pain for his children, as well as for Mollie, who did not want to deal with Steven or

let him into Justine's life. He wallows in self-pity, wondering if he has done the right thing, until Nellie arrives and tells him to quit pitying himself. Nellie reminds him that he made a mistake, as people are liable to do, but he will be redeemed because he took responsibility and established proper kin relations. Telling the truth about his relation to Justine turns out to be an incredibly painful act for all involved, but it is also redemptive. In a parallel plot, Steven intervenes to prevent fellow tribal members from selling a tribal cemetery, a temporarily unpopular move that eventually establishes proper relations between the Pomos and their ancestors. In each case, his actions relieve the stress, deceit, and bickering that caused great rifts in this little community that should have been so close.

While Steven develops into a strong person as *Grand Avenue* progresses, he begins the movie as one of the weakest of the characters, according to Sarris, even though he has all the characteristics that make him a successful man in white society—the house, the income, the pretty wife, the well-muscled body. Yet he cannot face his emotions or his responsibilities even as well as Mollie; at least she takes care of all her kids.<sup>xxx</sup> He learns from Mollie and gains strength through facing the truth, and that adds another layer to Sarris' new interpretation of Native American gender identities. *Grand Avenue* shows men becoming stronger and more confident in their male roles by learning new behaviors from the women.

Through *Grand Avenue*, Sarris suggests a new, more complex image of Native men. Steven clearly avoids the hypermasculinity of the old images, yet neither is he idealized as the noble savage or the wise old chief. As with Dan George's character in *Little Big Man*, Steven's fallibility makes him more realistic, more human. He causes pain even as he restores community health through humility and personal responsibility to kin, contrasting him with two-dimensional Indians created by white filmmakers.

While many cinematic images depict Indian masculinity as violent, even if that violence is justified, Sarris chooses to completely avoid that image, finally bringing Native American men into roles that have been available to people of other races for decades. He disregards any notion that Steven could be a perfect father, too, which is an aspect of the noble savage imagery that the mythopoetic men's movement embraced a decade ago.<sup>xxxi</sup> Steven's virtue lies in his eventual confirmation of the importance of appropriate kin relations and his confirmation of Mollie's strength. He is not heroized by such actions; rather, his adherence to Pomo traditions is validated. The ability to fight has nothing to do with his role as a man in the Pomo tribe. Rather, the movie suggests that his humility, his newfound willingness to confront his emotions, and his responsibility to his kin through all adversity are ideal virtues for him as a Pomo

man. To say that these are exclusively Pomo values would be misleading, but these certainly are values Sarris believes modern Native men need to embrace. His characters bring Native American men up to date in that regard.

Similarly, Raymond's character moves images of Native American masculinity away from the established hypermasculine Indian in that Raymond avoids involvement with the violent neighborhood gangs. Sarris includes youth gangs in the community he portrays, but the only gang-affiliated Native American in the movie is Justine.<sup>xxxii</sup> It may have been realistic to show young Native men as gang members, considering the extent of the problem among Native communities, but Sarris chooses a different route. Young Native men already have enough pressure to prove their identity because of movie images; instead of producing new images of violent, tough guy Indians to live up to, Sarris made Raymond a whitewashed, city version of a Native American who, like his father, had to learn what it means to be Pomo through interaction with Pomo women. Justine had to teach Raymond how to be responsible enough to confront his family problems.<sup>xxxiii</sup> By arranging the representations of these characters in such a way, *Grand Avenue* reveals a modern Miwok's concerns about Native gender.

Raymond demonstrates Sarris' vision of Native masculinity in other ways, as well. He is a gentle, straight-laced 16-year old who likes playing sports. In a time and place where being a thug is the definition of cool, Raymond is a nerd. He is not a nerd in the pocket-protector, allergies, and thick glasses sense, but in that he is a straight arrow, a goody two-shoes. He is good at school and good at the decidedly unmasculine sport of tennis. He is awkward around young women. He does not drink or smoke. He stands in stark contrast to the violent young gangsters in the movie. Their dysfunctional masculinity reveals the models of masculinity available in his neighborhood, and shows that Steven raised Raymond differently. Like Philbert in *Powwow Highway*, Raymond is a nerd when compared to the boys around him. He does not participate in macho activities or try to be a tough guy. His clothes are not flashy. He is handsome enough, but his slight nerdiness removes the potential for the romantic allure of a macho persona.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The nerdiness that comprises one aspect of Raymond's identity counters the stereotypes non-Natives created for Indians. It takes him out of the white gender discourse that makes Indians into noble and ignoble savages. He is not menacing or wicked, like the ignoble savage. He is a decidedly modern figure, not an anachronism like the noble savage. He is a human, with human foibles, not a mythical figure. Contrasting with the savage motif, Raymond's social awkwardness is a cross-cultural phenomenon, which makes it easier for non-Native audiences to understand him as a

real person. Raymond dresses in bluejeans and button-down shirts, lacking the primitive appeal of the noble savage, so he will not be quickly co-opted by New Agers, European Indianists, or the men's movement. Making Raymond a little bit nerdy is a simple way to make sure Raymond is a Native American and a person, not an Indian.

### Smoke Signals

Spokane/Coeur d'Alene author/filmmaker Sherman Alexie uses a more classically nerdy character in *Smoke Signals* (1998) to even greater effect. Alexie wrote the screenplay and the book upon which *Smoke Signals* is based, and he exerted considerable influence on the movie in his role as co-producer with Cheyenne/Arapaho director, Chris Eyre.<sup>xxxv</sup> Being the first full length feature film written, directed, and co-produced by Native Americans to receive a major distribution deal makes it a particularly important milestone because of its potential for presenting Native American perspectives on film to a wide audience.

As with much of Alexie's work, *Smoke Signals* is in perpetual dialogue with popular white constructions of Indians, and like *Powwow Highway*, the movie uses the road buddy format to address Native American identity and its relation to Indian images. Thomas Builds-The-Fire, the nerd of the movie, stands in contrast to Victor Joseph, the cocky basketball star, and as expected in the road buddy genre, they come to a new understanding of each other's perspectives by the end of the movie.

The film begins with a bicentennial Fourth of July house fire that killed Thomas' parents. Baby Thomas was thrown from a second-story window by his parents just before they perished, and Victor's father, Arnold Joseph, caught him. Thomas never finds out that it was Arnold who accidentally started the blaze in a drunken fireworks mishap, so he "adopts" Arnold as a father-figure out of admiration for the heroic man who saved him. Arnold buckles under the burden of years of secret guilt for starting the fire, and it is one of the factors that eventually pushes him to leave his family on the reservation when Victor and Thomas are still boys. He dies in Phoenix, where his neighbor, Suzy Song, calls Victor's mom to see if someone wants to come down and claim his remains and his beat up pick-up truck. Victor does not have enough money to make it to Arizona, so Thomas offers to chip in if he can join him on the trip. Victor reluctantly agrees, unexcited by the prospect of spending several days with a chatty nerd in a second-hand three-piece suit. So their journey begins similarly to the *Powwow Highway* journey, with the macho man turning to the meek man for a ride.

As they proceed, Victor's conflicted relationship with his father becomes a bone of contention between him and Thomas. Through flashbacks and dialogue, the

audience sees that Victor loved his father ferociously, but that his father's inconsistent expressions of love and volatile behavior— both results of his alcoholism— caused Victor untold amounts of pain. In one scene, for example, just as young Victor was feeling close to his father, Arnold hit his son and scolded him for spilling a beer, creating confused and conflicting emotions for the boy. The effects of Arnold's alcoholism and self-hate haunted his son. When he left home for good, Arnold finally broke Victor's heart. Throughout the rest of the movie, Victor's resentment and love mingle in a dysfunctional morass that finds expression only in anger, self-pity, and arrogance.

Thomas, on the other hand, idolizes Arnold Joseph. To him, Victor's father was the man who saved him from the fire that took his parents, the man pictured on the cover of Time Magazine in a poignant political moment in the 1960s, the man who took him out to breakfast at Denny's. Thomas never experienced the pain and abandonment that Victor associates with Arnold. On a trip loaded with emotions and memories, Victor snaps as Thomas begins to tell another eulogic tall tale about Arnold.

Victor: I'm really sick and tired of you telling me all these stories about my dad like you knew him.

Thomas: But I did know him.

Victor: What do you know about him Thomas? Did you know he was a drunk? Did you know he left his family? Did you know he beat up my mom? Did you know he beat me up? Just let it go, Thomas. He's nothing but a liar.

Thomas: Your dad was more than that.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

An earlier conversation between Suzy Song and Victor evokes the same discordant views of Arnold Joseph, views which must be understood both literally and figuratively.

First, Alexie is examining the actual problems of father-son relationships among Native Americans. The problems are common enough to people of all cultures, but this should not be interpreted solely as an attempt to bridge cultural differences by stating that at root, all humans have the same problems. While it is true that the father-son relationship in *Smoke Signals* is humanizing, understanding it solely through that lens fails to account for the Native American context. The movie discusses the localized impacts of colonialism on Native American men and the people in their worlds. It depicts a Native American family coping with the dysfunction caused by rampant alcoholism on reservations, and a Native American man whose life and family were destroyed by a celebration on the United States' bicentennial, indicating the role that the creation of the US had in the family's misery. So while there are universal themes, this story specifically contemplates Native American fathers and their families in a colonized nation at the end of the 20th century.

Second, the conflicting interpretations of Victor's father are not solely about his literal father. The varying perspectives people had on Arnold mirror the internal conflicts Native Americans sometimes face when coming to terms with the legacies of their ancestors (or forefathers, to make the connection explicit). Thomas, the storyteller, embraces and embellishes Arnold's memory without contemplating his faults. Victor, wounded by the effects of colonialism on his father, spurns his memory and focuses only on his faults. Suzy Song, who says Arnold was "like a father" to her, knew him as a complicated man who had his faults, but who was also honorable in his intentions. Thus Arnold's three "children" understand his legacy, and metaphorically, the legacy their forefathers left them. By communicating with each other, Victor and Thomas metaphorically develop new understandings of their ancestors by the end of the movie that are more in line with Suzy Song's. Colonialism tripped up their forefathers, and sometimes they tripped themselves up, but they were worthy, if flawed, individuals. Again, this can be seen as a universalizing move by Alexie and Eyre in that all people must grapple with the legacies of their ancestors, but it should be understood primarily as a critical issue that Native Americans need to address. Native Americans face shame, poverty, and high rates of suicide and substance abuse as direct consequences of colonialism and racism. Sometimes it feels as though these problems have been passed down through the generations like unholy heirlooms, since Native Americans today seem to grapple with the same demons as their ancestors. Still, their ancestors' resistance and cultural survival are a source of great strength and pride that Native Americans draw on to overcome obstacles in the present. *Smoke Signals* poignantly addresses that conflict between romanticization and rejection of ancestors.

Another strength of the depiction of Arnold is that it does not directly engage white understandings of him. The perspectives on Arnold, at least, are strictly Native American. This represents quite a change in cinematic history, where even Indian sympathy films have nearly always involved interaction or conflict with whites in some way. This is a significant accomplishment in both *Grand Avenue* and *Smoke Signals*. Even *Powwow Highway*, though it was grounded in the stories of two Native American men, was propelled by conflict with whites. *Smoke Signals* and *Grand Avenue* reveal certain aspects of Native American lives that largely exclude white people. It is not that Native Americans do not normally interact with whites or that whites do not have an impact on the lives of the characters, but that there are times when white people are irrelevant to the story being told. The depictions of Arnold reveal to the audience that Native Americans have internal worlds separate from whites.

While Arnold's image is insulated from white cultural constructions, Thomas and Victor certainly are not. They directly engage popular white constructions of the Indian to great effect, through both dialogue and character development. Alexie establishes Thomas as an "antiwarrior."<sup>xxxvii</sup> He intends the hypo-masculine nerd to directly combat the images of hypermasculinity into which Indians have been locked throughout the history of the white American imagination. Thomas wears a three-piece suit and thick glasses that keep sliding down his nose. He is small, skinny, and unathletic. He wears a frilly apron while cooking for his grandma, who is his closest companion.

Evan Adams, the actor portraying Thomas, added significantly to the antiwarrior image by playing Thomas as if he were an old woman from his reservation.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Alexie loves that androgynous aspect of Thomas that Adams brought to the screen, and he wishes he would have thought to write him that way in the first place, so pleased was he with the result.<sup>xxxix</sup> Thomas's ambiguous gender identity opens the possibility for audiences to interpret him as gay, as well, which further erodes white constructions of Indian men. Together, Adams and Alexie introduced a character that counters the ability of the Indian icon to circumscribe Native American male identities.

In a scene where Thomas and Victor are on the bus to Phoenix, Victor confronts Thomas about his failure to adhere to the warrior image that movies created for them, and chides him for trying to be a different kind of white version of an Indian.

Victor: Why can't you have a normal conversation? You're always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances With Wolves*? A hundred, two hundred?  
Embarrassed, Thomas ducks his head.

Victor: Oh, jeez, you have seen it that many times, haven't you? Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?

Thomas: I guess not.

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

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

Thomas tries to look serious. He fails.

Victor: No, like this.

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

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

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

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

Thomas gets stoic. He's better this time.

Victor: And second, you got to know how to use your hair.

Thomas: My hair?

Victor: Yeah, I mean look at your hair. It's all braided up and stuff. You've got to free it. (He shakes his hair out and runs his fingers through it) An Indian man ain't nothing without his hair. (Pause) And last, and most important, you've got to get rid of that suit Thomas. You just have to.<sup>xl</sup>

This scene crystallizes the ramifications of white portrayals of Indian men in films. Whether a hypermasculine warrior or a mystic medicine man or even an Indian princess, these images taunt Native American people as they try to live up to the movie image of the Indian. There is no small amount of irony in the fact that in portraying Native American young men in a realistic manner on film, Alexie felt he needed to have them grapple with and even accidentally adopt white images of Indians from films. No clearer statement could be made about the need for Native Americans to be in control of Native American cinema.

Not only does Thomas' nerdiness undermine interpretations of him as a warrior, it also thwarts potential interpretations of him as a medicine man or wise old chief. An Indian medicine man needs to be solemn and wise, but Thomas is goofy and socially irksome. Director Chris Eyre notes that a non-Native American "would've made Thomas into a shaman in two minutes. I'm not making Thomas into a shaman and prostituting him that way."<sup>xli</sup> So when Victor denounces Thomas' affection for the Indian medicine man image, he effectively ends the potential for comfortable interpretations of him as a modern mystic in the Indian tradition.

While Victor's embrace of the warrior image is half sarcastic, Alexie and Eyre quickly undermine it, as well. At a bus stop, Thomas changes out of the suit into jeans and a "frybread power" t-shirt, takes off his nerd glasses, stiffens his jaw, and lets his hair blow free in the wind, giving him that warrior look following his lesson from Victor. He walks across the parking lot in slow motion, striking the warrior's pose, convincing the audience that he has transformed into the hypermasculine stud Indian Victor tries to be. As he nears the bus, he puts his glasses back on and grins sheepishly at the posturing he has just done, revealing that the warrior image is a joke to him.

The work of devaluing the warrior ethic is not over yet, though. When they get back on the bus, they find two rednecks have taken their seats. Victor tries to intimidate them out of the seats with his warrior look, but one of them says calmly, "Now listen up. These are our seats now. And there ain't a damn thing you can do about it. So why don't you and Super Indian there find yourself someplace else to have a powwow,

okay?” A staredown ensues, which Victor loses, and he dejectedly pulls Thomas to the remaining seats in the back of the bus, near the washroom.

Thomas: Jeez, Victor, I guess your warrior look doesn't work every time.

Victor: Shut up, Thomas.<sup>xlii</sup>

And with that, the warrior ethic is deflated and defused. Alexie and Eyre will not allow their characters to become cardboard cutouts of Indian men.

The film's intent, according to Eyre, is “to personalize [Native Americans]. It's supposed to deconstruct the icon [Indian] and let you get to know Victor and Thomas as people. It's an invitation to come see Thomas as [a Native American] and as a person.”<sup>xliii</sup> “It could have been about two guys in Croatia, but the sensibilities are specific. They are Native American, about us representing ourselves.”<sup>xliiv</sup> Even though Alexie and Eyre were aware that a large part of their audience would be non-Native, the movie was made largely with the Native American audience in mind. They find the most satisfaction in the reactions Native Americans have to seeing people they recognize as Native American on the screen. If they help non-Natives understand Native Americans as human beings with hometowns, families, and foibles, that is certainly important, but it is not the only benefit.

## The Results

The depictions offered in the three movies discussed here should not be understood as providing new, singular definitions of Native American masculinity. “Native American” encompasses hundreds of different cultures with varying conceptions of masculinity, and even within each tribal culture, different people will have different ideas about the virtues, faults, and responsibilities of manhood. A Miwok and a Coeur d'Alene tribal member cannot be expected to share the same ideas about masculinity, just as two Miwoks should not be expected to agree on the traits of manhood. Some Native Americans view violent defense of their rights as a positive tribal characteristic,<sup>xlv</sup> while others view violence as an affliction. Many Native American teenagers would cringe at the thought of being associated with the nerd, Thomas Builds-the-Fire, while others see him as their hero.

These films cannot define what a “real” Native man is. They reject the hypermasculine image that whites gave Indians. They offer a vision of what a Native man can be, and what he certainly is not; they have been moderately successful at bringing more Native women characters into central roles, thereby countering the white tendency to imagine whole tribes comprised of men. Their greater success, however,

has come through redefining Native men. As nerds, struggling fathers, veterans, wounded sons, husbands, and activists in Native American communities, the new Native American male characters undermine the hypermasculinity of the white construction of the indian, thereby undermining one of the most consistent characteristics of white indians. This has allowed recent depictions to emphasize the humanity and diversity of Native men and women. In confronting and discarding the hypermasculine portrayals of indians, Native actors and filmmakers wrench the power to define Native Americans away from non-Natives, and successfully establish Native American perspectives in the cinema.<sup>xlvi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> I combine some of the thinking of Gerald Vizenor and Robert Berkhofer in distinguishing between the term “indian” (uncapitalized), which connotes the symbolic character of the white imagination, akin to a troll or an elf, and the term “Native American,” which connotes the people descended from the original human inhabitants of the Americas. In real life, Native Americans call themselves by many names, including Indians, American Indians, First Nations people, and Native Americans, to name a few, or by their tribal names. The purpose of making the distinction between indians and Native Americans in writing is to emphasize the extent to which the indian is truly a construction of the white imagination having little resemblance Native Americans. Of course the concept of any universal term or category for all the indigenous nations of the Americas is itself deeply rooted in colonialism, but such terms— for better or worse— have become more meaningful at the beginning of the 21st century. Gerald Vizenor, *The Everlasting Sky: New Voices from the People Named the Chippewa* (New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1972); Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

<sup>ii</sup> For a more complete discussion of the early development of this trend, see David Anthony Tyeeme Clark and Joane Nagel, “White Men, Red Masks: Appropriations of ‘Indian’ Manhood in Imagined Wests,” this volume. Prior to this time, images of indians were sometimes feminized to suit colonial interests, but the masculine noble and ignoble savages were already typical representations. See Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998).

<sup>iii</sup> It is not my intention here to reiterate the entire history of indian images in film and popular culture. Several volumes have already tackled that task, and I direct anyone interested in more work in that direction to S. Elizabeth Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996); Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, eds., *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Louisville: University of Kentucky, 1998); and Robert F. Berkhofer’s work, cited above. Readers should understand that the introduction here is presented rather simplistically for the purpose of brevity. Reception of these characters varied from individual to individual, as a body of recent scholarship reveals. Many Native American youths, for example, loved Tonto when he first appeared on television in the 1950s because he was a famous good guy played by an identifiably Native American actor, Jay Silverheels. Steven M. Lee’s essay in this volume, “‘All the Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes’: The Utilization of the Cowboy-Hero in Contemporary Asian American Literature,” addresses audience response superbly.

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- iv See also Sally L. Jones, "The First but Not the Last of the 'Vanishing Indians': Edwin Forrest and Mythic Re-creations of the Native Population," in S. Elizabeth Bird, ed. *Dressing in Feathers*, 13-27.
- v A large number of essays have discussed the ignoble savage imagery of indians in film. Any of the books cited here will have some reference to such imagery, though the introduction to *Dressing in Feathers*, cited above, by S. Elizabeth Bird specifically shows a good example of the "drudge of a wife" imagery on page 6. Also on the relationship between ignoble savages and their wives, see Frank Goodyear, "The Narratives of Sitting Bull's Surrender: Bailey, Dix & Meade's Photographic Western," *Dressing in Feathers*, 29-43, esp. 37.
- vi See Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*.
- vii While no one has ever admitted to creating ignoble savage imagery for these purposes, dime novels, Western movies, and Wild West shows certainly achieved this end. Sally L. Jones discusses a telling example of this phenomenon from the South in the 1830s. Theatergoers there were outraged by portrayals of indians as people worthy of sympathy because they were, at the time, trying to remove all tribes near them to lands west of the Mississippi, justified to some extent by assumptions of indian savagery even among the so-called civilized tribes. Jones, 17. See also C. Richard King, "Segregated Stories: The Colonial Contours of the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument," also in *Dressing in Feathers*, 167-180; Ken Nolley, "The Representation of Conquest: John Ford and the Hollywood Indian, 1939-1974," in *Hollywood's Indian*, 73-90. For a broader discussion of the ways the United States has written imperialism out of its history, see Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1993), especially "Introduction," by Amy Kaplan.
- viii See Pat Dowell, "The Mythology of the Western: Hollywood perspectives on race and gender in the Nineties." *Cineaste*, 21, no. 1-2, Wtr/spr 1995, 6 (5); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1973); Clarke and Nagel, this volume; and Lee, this volume.
- ix See Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of the Americas*. ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1992); Bruce Greenfield, *Narrating Discovery: The Romantic Explorer in American Literature, 1790-1855* (New York: Columbia University, 1992).
- x See Joel W. Martin, "My Grandmother Was a Cherokee Princess': Representations of Indians in Southern History," in *Dressing in Feathers*; Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, (New York: Columbia University, 1983).
- xi Gerald Vizenor's parable of Tune Browne satirically critiques this predicament. "Socioacupuncture: Mythic Reversals and the Striptease in Four Scenes," *Crossbloods: Bone Courts, Bingo, and Other Reports*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), 83-97. See also Ward Churchill, "Indians Are Us?" *Indians Are Us?: Culture and Genocide in Native North America*. (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), 207-292.
- xii See, for example, *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), *The Searchers* (1956), or *How the West Was Won* (1962). See Lee, "All the Best Cowboys," this volume, for an excellent discussion of the ways white cowboy masculinity frames American nationalism.
- xiii Angela Aleiss discusses certain forgotten films from the silent era that qualify as indian sympathy films, such as *The Vanishing American* (1925) and *Frozen Justice* (1929). She recovers very important information about Native American involvement in cinema in this era, but there is little analysis of film content in this article. Angela Aleiss, "Native Americans: The Surprising Silents," *Cineaste* 21, no. 3 (summer 1995): 34. Also accessible by internet: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/NativeAmericans.html>
- xiv *Soldier Blue* (1970) has similar political intentions. John O'Connor, "The White Man's Indian: An Institutional Approach," in *Hollywood's Indian*, 37; and Margo Kasdan and Susan Tavernetti, "Native Americans in a Revisionist Western: *Little Big Man*," also in *Hollywood's Indian*, 121-136.
- xv Vine Deloria, "Foreword: American Fantasy," *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, Gretchen Bataille and Charles L.P. Silet, eds. (Ames: University of Iowa, 1980), xi.

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- xvi With apologies to those who are shocked to learn that people are offended by white attempts to make aspects of other people's spiritual traditions their own. The problems come when white people believe they are experts in the given tradition, and pronounce themselves authorities. Because of unequal power structures between whites and non-whites, many people absurdly grant white "experts" more credence than the people whose traditions they study, at which point white people have stolen the ability of a people to define their traditions for themselves. See Ward Churchill, *Indians R Us?*
- xvii Dowell, "The Mythology of the Western..."
- xviii See Rayna Green, "'The Pocahontas Perplex': The Image of Indian Women in American Culture," *Massachusetts Review* 16 no.4 (Autumn 1975) : 698-714.
- xix Thomas Berger, *Little Big Man* (New York: Dial, 1964); Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking, 1962). Arthur Penn directed *Little Big Man*, and Milos Forman directed *Cuckoo's Nest*.
- xx David Seals, *The Powwow Highway* (New York: Plume, 1979).
- xxi See Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- xxii Ted Jojola, "Absurd Reality II: Hollywood Goes to the Indians," in *Hollywood's Indian*, 12-26. *The Born Losers* (1967) introduced Billy Jack, the archetypal renegade indian vet.
- xxiii See Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (Austin: University of Texas, 1996).
- xxiv See Eric Gary Anderson, "Driving the Red Road: *Powwow Highway*," in *Hollywood's Indian*, 137-152.
- xxv Tasunkanupa's website, 30 May 1997. Site no longer available. Essay in possession of the author.
- xxvi Maggie Eagle Bear (Sheila Tousey) moved in this direction in *Thunderheart*, as a fictional representation of the assassinated Micmac AIM activist, Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, but since she is killed before the end of the movie, the permanent presence and value of female leadership is never fully realized. Instead, the men save the day in this two hour testosterone bath of a movie. Like *Powwow Highway*, though, *Thunderheart* is a conflicted mix of Native American and white influence. On one hand, it values traditional Lakota spiritual practices, uses Lakota language, informs the audience of dire circumstances on South Dakota reservations, condemns the history of federal abuse of Native lands for uranium mining, and tries to portray some of the violent political turmoil of Pine Ridge in the 1970s. On the other hand, it suggests that an FBI agent came in and saved all the traditional Lakotas, that the uranium mining was stopped, and that the general public would not have accepted a brown-skinned hero. This is not to imply that collaborative efforts cannot work, because certainly *Grand Avenue* provides proof that they can. Rather, it suggests that collaboration is not an easy thing to master.
- xxvii HBO aired *Grand Avenue* both as a continuous three-hour movie and as a mini-series in the summer of 1996. I refer to it as a movie in this essay for simplicity's sake.
- xxviii I do not want to diminish the role of director Daniel Sackheim, who also directs TV's "NYPD Blue" and "Law and Order." His considerable skill in directing dramas certainly raised the quality of this production to a high caliber, though I doubt he was the key to the successful presentations of Native American perspectives in the movie. Greg Sarris deserves the lion's share of commendations in that regard, though the very talented Native American cast (yes, A Martinez is Piegan) certainly contributed to the final product, as well.
- xxix The teleplay is based on Sarris's excellent novel of the same name. Greg Sarris, *Grand Avenue* (New York: Penguin, 1994).
- xxx Greg Sarris, conversation with author, January 19, 2000.
- xxxi See Sherman Alexie, "White Men Can't Drum," *The New York Times Magazine*, 4 October 1992: 30-31.
- xxxii By making Justine a gangster, he reaffirms the strength of Native American women, and he eventually shows that she is strong enough to leave gangster life behind.
- xxxiii Sarris, conversation with author.

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- xxxiv On the romantic allure of Indian men, see Peter van Lent, "'Her Beautiful Savage': The Current Sexual Image of the Native American Male," in *Dressing in Feathers*, 211-227.
- xxxv Sherman Alexie, *Smoke Signals: A Screenplay* (New York: Hyperion, 1998). Screenplay based on Alexie's collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993).
- xxxvi Alexie, *Smoke Signals*, 109.
- xxxvii Sherman Alexie, conversation with author, May 4, 1999.
- xxxviii Evan Adams, personal correspondence, May 16, 2000; Evan Adams, conversation with the author, June 12, 2000.
- xxxix Alexie, conversation with author.
- xl Alexie, *Smoke Signals*, 61-63, with minor adaptations.
- xli Bob Ivry, "From the Reservation of His Mind," *The Record* (Bergen, NJ) June 28, 1998.
- xlii Alexie, *Smoke Signals*, 65.
- xliii Ivry, "From the Reservation of His Mind."
- xliv Michael Fleeman, "'Smoke Signals': Doors May Be Swinging Wide Open," *The Standard-Times* (New Bedford, MA), 4 July 1998, sec. B.
- xlv See, for example, Karen Blu, *The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University, 1980):144-160.
- xlvi<sup>xlvi</sup> Thanks to Shadiin D. García for her support and theoretical contributions, to the editors of this volume as well as Carol Miller and Paul Pfeiffer for editorial suggestions, to Eric Buffalohead and Kirk Crowshoe for provocative discussions of Native American films, and to Matt Basso for soliciting this essay.