

Cinematic Representation of American Indians: A Critical Cultural Analysis of a
Contemporary American Indian-Directed Film

by

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ABSTRACT

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit) as a theoretical framework, this dissertation analyzes a contemporary cinematic film directed by an American Indian filmmaker *about* American Indians and answers the question of whether the visual texts are unmasking, critiquing, confronting, and/or reinforcing reductive and stereotypical images of American Indians. Using Critical Thematic Analysis as a process, this dissertation interrogates *Drunktown's Finest* (2014) to understand ways a contemporary American Indian filmmaker engages in counterstorying as a sovereignist action and simultaneously investigates ways the visual narrative and imagery in the film contributes to the reinforcement of hegemonic representations—the static, constrained, White-generated images and narratives that have been sustained in the hegemonic culture for over a century. With an increase in the number of American Indian filmmakers entering into the cultural elitist territory of Hollywood, moving from the margins to the center, I believe Natives are now in a better position to apprehend and reconstruct a multidimensional and complex American Indian identity. I posit that the reshaping of these mass-mediated images can only be countered through the collective and sustained fostering of a more complex imagery of the American Indian and that authorship of the representation is crucial to changing the hegemonic imagery of American Indians.

DEDICATION

In appreciation to my husband, Andrey; to my son, Isaya, who unknowingly is teaching me to live life in the present; and to my parents, who taught the value of hard work and how to love.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Framing of the Study

John Purdy exclaims in his contribution to a 2001 collection on *Native American Representations* that the conventional stereotypical narratives and images of American Indians maintain a hold on the imagination of society and states that those stereotypes “may be problematized, possibly even shaken, but not dislodged by critical studies” (p. 101). He proceeds by adding that the debate about these misrepresentations has not resulted in any “appreciable degree in the popular consciousness of people around the world” (p. 101), despite years of efforts to counter the hegemonic representations. My genuine curiosity to explore this statement drove this study.

There is no better way to illuminate and engage discourses on race, identity, and representation than through an autoethnographic narrative beginning from my place of origin and upbringing. As the reader, visualize in raw footage my identity in the context of my cultural space—a female, American Indian living in a picturesque, tourist-driven economy popularized by John Wayne and his savage Indians; a remote location on the Navajo reservation “where tourists could putatively step outside of time and space to see “Real” Indians (or what passed for the “real” in the settler’s national mythology)” (Raheja, 2010, p. 43).

Periodically, on weekends, my parents would drop us off at “the junction,” an intersection where grandma capitalized on the financial potential of tourists by selling Navajo-made jewelry. The tourists were coming to the Southwest region of the United States as a nostalgic eulogy to the early days of westward expansion. Germans were the most common tourists in the Four Corners region. Study on appropriation and

commodification later on in life brought me to realize that Germans had an obsession with Indians; in regions of Germany it is not uncommon to find German hobbyists living in teepees and emulating American Indian cultural customs (Kimmelman, 2007). Jurgen Michaelis, a German “Indian” who has acquired the name “Lonely Man,” tells of his experiences in Germany: “At powwows— there are dozens every year—thousands of Germans with an American Indian fetish drink firewater, wear turquoise jewelry and run around Baden-Wurttemberg or Schleswig-Holstein dressed as Comanches and Apaches” (Kimmelman, 2007, para. 5). He is only one of many fantasists, who carry out “Playing Indian.”

In high school, the obligation to meet the world language requirement to get accepted into a university led me to learn the German language. While selling jewelry, I would speak to the German tourists in my newly acquired German. My engagement with them in their own language confounded the boundaries of their perspective of American Indians. Foreigners had to negotiate in their minds the dissonance between the modern American Indian standing before them speaking to them in German and the stereotypical image that had saturated their minds and drove them to the region. Our presence—me, my grandma, and other contemporary American Indians—was evidence to them that American Indians had outlived the destiny of “sure extinction,” a proclamation made in 1828 by Supreme Court justice Joseph Story (Deloria, 1998 p. 64).

Reflecting on my childhood, two versions of “Indians” (used to refer to the film industry’s creation in this dissertation, not contemporary American Indians) were present in my life—the American Indians in history books that are part of the anthropological ethnographic past and the hyperreal constructed Indian (Owens, 2001)—the savage

Indian, typical Plains Indian, nature-loving Indian, and other stereotypes reinforced by the images that have circulated in western films. However, because none of these images reflected what I knew about contemporary American Indians, I could not personally relate or identify with the Hollywood representations.

During my “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967, p. 110) of transition to college life from reservation living, *Pocahontas* (1995), an American animated musical romantic-drama produced by the Walt Disney Corporation was released. Ignorant of the controversy surrounding the film’s narrative, and, Disney’s “force in inscribing and perpetuating inaccurate, stereotypical images” (Purdy, 2001, p. 101), in my cognitive absence, I dressed up as an Indian maiden to go trick or treating with my friends. My costuming was not of an American Indian; it was a meta-image of a Hollywood Indian that could easily be emulated through the braiding of my long black hair and wearing a polyester fleece fabric buckskin costume. I never intended to achieve an authenticity; the topic of “authenticity” is a heated issue in the context of American Indians in films. According to Purdy (2001), this issue of authenticity has “become a heated, contentious issue[] only recently and [is] of little interest to a relatively small audience” (p. 100). He further pinpoints the “who” as scholars and academics “for whom the economic, sociological, and political ramifications that misrepresentation carries with it are intolerable” (Purdy, 2001, p. 100).

In high school and college, the absence of Native educators and the educators’ lack of knowledge of American Indian literature/discourse explains my unawareness of the American Indian struggles of cultural appropriation, commodification, and other actions that refer to the apprehending of Native sovereignty. Indicting the educational

material and the scholars who disseminate the information in the education system, Mihelich (2001) explains, “too often the curriculum focuses on the same historical past as the film industry” (p. 135). I was aware of the attempts of cultural genocide through boarding schools (my father has shared these stories), the forcible relocations to urban cities, and the negative stereotypes of American Indians as alcoholics, but the widespread issue of media’s role in misrepresenting American Indians remained an issue not shared to me by anyone in my life. I simply lived as an American Indian, not knowing my identity was in question or that others had a genuine interest in “playing” Indian. More recently, when reflecting on the *Pocahontas* debacle (dressing up for Halloween as an “Indian”) that occurred nearly two decades earlier, in relation to the current discourse in society, I recognize that “Things Indian” (Shanley, 2001, p. 28) has reached a national level of attention; at least, that’s my impression. However, I also am now a graduate student situated nearer to the frontier of American Indian scholarship and possess knowledge of how one group can have dominance over another and how certain mechanisms (ideology, etc.) sustain the order in society (Hartsfield, 2004).

Storytelling and Survivance

The vivid narrative I shared was not simply an action of telling a story but is situated in this dissertation to bring to light important concepts. Brayboy (2005) postulates that “[s]tories serve as a way to orient oneself and others toward the world and life” (p. 439); my college Halloween garbing is no exception. The story that I openly share is part of the framework that has guided my dissertation and influenced my belief that, collectively, as part of a larger community, we share a part in reshaping representative images. It would only be appropriate to distinguish between the traditional

stories told by elders and the visual stories shared through film. Traditional Indigenous stories serve to transmit knowledge (Brayboy, 2005); they are “private matters and hallowed” (Singer, 2001, p. 76) and are not “frivolous or meaningless” (Weber-Pillwax, 2001, p. 156). Emphasizing the importance of stories and storytelling, Brayboy (2005) writes, “stories are not separate from theory, they make up theory” (p. 439) and can be used as a mechanism to speak back to hegemony. On the other hand, the visual medium has, historically and in the contemporary, been a persuasive and powerful instrument for the dissemination of stories and imagery, real or fictitious. It has the ability to shape public beliefs, worldviews, and values, as well as perceptions about other people.

When interpreting a scene in the film *Navajo Talking Picture* (1984) in which Arlene Bowman, the film producer, persistently attempts to persuade her grandmother to be filmed, Singer (2001) reflects on the grandmother’s refusal saying “cameras were not associated with cultural survival, cameras were of no interest to her” (p. 76). While I agree cameras were not historically part of cultural survival, I argue that, in the contemporary age, the capturing of visual stories on film is a powerful force that can play a part in countering the hegemonic representations of American Indians. O’Shaughnessy and Stadler (2008) remind us that through this visual tool “people receive most of their entertainment and information about the world” (p. 34), and Raheja (2010) describes it as the “primary representational field” (p. 1). It is in this visual space that American Indians’ identity and narrative have been apprehended. Bataille (2001), expressing the role media plays in the shifting the control, writes: “whoever controls your definition controls your sense of self... and the more audience we have, the more Native American people are going to be able to claim themselves, and take it back from Hollywood....” (p.

99). I believe film, as a popular culture that is widely consumed, is a powerful outlet through which American Indians have the best chance of regaining control and redefining their identity and their destiny.

Paradoxical Presentation and Survivance

In reflecting on my Halloween attire, my dressing up as a “hyperreal Indian” was never to attain authenticity. Elizabeth S. Hawley (2016) explains how dressing up in a Hollywood Indian attire implicates the Native. In an interrogation of a staged *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* (2016) performance, she writes, “Native people are expected to adhere to the stereotypical construction of Indian identity, but in performing this role, they reify the stereotype” (p. 7). Further complicating this notion, she explains the cyclical nature of this paradoxical presentation; “[a]t the same time, non-Native people perpetuate the problematic cycle by only characterizing as “Indian” those Native people that adhere to the stereotype that non-Native people have constructed and come to expect” (p. 7). Another reading of my performance is that, in a trickster fashion, I was reasserting my agency by dressing up in the maiden outfits to mock the European American representation—what Owens (2001) has expressed as projecting a romantic fabrication of the Euro-American back at himself—by manipulating their expectations through my staging.

It could be argued that in my ignorance I was appropriating the identity of my own people, when in fact, in my performance as an Indian maiden, I was exerting agency by exercising authorship over my own identity. I, as an American Indian woman, was in control. I was dressing to fit the stereotype while manipulating the perceptions on my terms. My agency is best described by Mary Louis Pratt (1992) through her insight on

reshaping hegemonic ideas; “while a subjugated people cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they use for their own, and what they use it for” (p. 6). Expressly, while I cannot control the imagery of Indians in films, I could deflect the Hollywood visually imagined Indian by complicating it through my own performance.

I am not alone in my effort to speak back to the hegemonic powers through my actions. Native scholars from different disciplines, including film writers and producers, have been in the mix of agitators who speak the language of “survivance” through their visual contributions, demonstrated in the film *Smoke Signals*. Survivance, a term coined by Gerald Vizenor (1999) is the renunciation of the dominance, tragedy, and victimry achieved through the active sense of presence and the continuation of native stories.

Reinscriptions and Confronting

Pocahontas was not the only film from which I started to explore the notion of representation; *Smoke Signals*, a film produced by an American Indian producer and screenwriter also brought me to a place of reflection. Many excellent visual projects have fallen prior to, after, and in the interstitial mediascape; however, it is these two popular media texts that offered an avenue through which I could begin to explore ways dominant narratives are reinscribed and confronted. These two family-friendly films sit in juxtaposition to one another—the concrete and the abstract, the authentic and the illusory, Native produced and White-generated. In Chapter 3, I compile analyses conducted by scholars on *Pocahontas* and *Smoke Signals* and highlight ways these films contribute to, reinforce, and confront dominant ideologies.

Smoke Signals sits as an effective tool that has confronted and transformed the American culture about American Indians (even for a fleeting moment). In an editor's introduction, David Delgado Shorter and Randolph Lewis describe the release of the film as a "transformative event in the history of Indigenous media in the United States" (Hearne, 2012, p. xi). Hearne (2012) describes the film as having pedagogical legs because it pushed conversation on contemporary American Indian issues, while also provoking what Ladson-Blling (1998) refers to as "cognitive conflict to jar white dysconscious racism" (p. 16)

The first time I watched *Smoke Signals* a few years after it was released, I knew it had depth, but I could not fully comprehend the significance of the film until I began reviewing analyses and understanding institutionalized racism and the naturalized hierarchal structures (hegemony) in American society. I appreciated this film's effort to enlist visual storytelling to amplify the voices of the oppressed and to seek liberation and sovereignty, a goal of CRT and TribalCrit. And, far more than speaking back to, disrupting, and interrupting the national stereotypical conventions, it engaged me in a cognitive dialogue about my own identity and ways American Indians negotiate their identity in light of Hollywood's representation.

Nearly 20 years have passed since the first showing of *Smoke Signals*. One question my dissertation attempts to address is, in our contemporary landscape, where are we in the discourse surrounding American Indian representations? More specifically, in what ways are American Indian producers interrupting and disrupting the long-standing, dominant stereotypes? And, while I agree with Purdy (2001) that it "has become clichéd to call attention" (p. 100) to the misrepresentations, I believe fostering and sustaining the

conversation about misrepresentations, cultural appropriation, and the many “isms” surrounding this subject through multiple media outlets (film, radio, articles, etc.) and through an interrogation of the pedagogies disseminated to the larger public is vital to reshaping the American Indian representation. With the recent entrance of American Indians into the cultural elitist territory of Hollywood, I believe Natives are now in a position to apprehend and reconstruct a multi-dimensional and complex American Indian identity. This endeavor would not have been possible without earlier efforts by American Indian advocates and activists (and non-Natives), including Indigenous media-makers, who have intervened to challenge Hollywood’s definition of Indigeneity and its accompanying narratives.

Just as *Smoke Signals* pays homage to earlier contributors, this study is by no means a stand-alone project; it is built on the backbone of other studies conducted by scholars who have contributed to the conversation of representation of American Indians. Their analyses of films and publications on ways the visual space is used to project dominance and agency are gathered to gain an understanding of ways contemporary filmmakers are unmasking, critiquing, and confronting the dominant narrative. In my own analysis of an American Indian produced film, I take the reader beyond the initial image and into a broader discourse about “*All Things Indian*” (Shanley, 2001, p. 28) and examine the imagery in the context of the social and cultural landscape.

To provide an understanding of American Indian representation, this dissertation provides a broad overview of the history of the construction of stereotypes, using thematic strands to highlight the dominant narratives in films produced during the twentieth century in Chapter 2. I then proceed, in Chapter 3, with a review of analyses

conducted on two films—*Smoke Signals* and *Pocahontas*—to understand how more recent films contribute to the representation of American Indians. can reinforce, problematize, and confront mass-mediated images. In Chapter 4, I provide a more comprehensive overview of the theoretical lens I adopt for this study—Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory. In Chapter 5, I introduce the method and design. Chapter 6, I conduct my analysis of *Drunktown's Finest* (2014). In Chapter 7, I summarize the study, provide conclusions of my findings, and share future research suggestions.

Statement of the Problem

Representation of American Indians found in films can be traced to the first explorers' contact with the Indigenous people. From the time of this early contact, the Europeans constructed a generic Indian that later became codified in film. With Euro-Americans dominating the control over the film industry, the imagery of American Indians became authored and controlled by them. Their control over representation and distribution has threatened the people's identity and their sovereignty. "Representations," according to David Murray (2001), "are what we live by and with" (p. 80); it is ultimately the consumption, or the filtering, in understanding the world around us. Representation becomes problematic when one group/entity "stands in" and simplifies, construes images, and speaks for an entire population of people and, in so doing, threatens the complex linguistic, spiritual, and cultural customs of a people (Murray, 2001). This has been the problem with the American Indian identity, it has been constrained to finite images that are perpetuated by a White definition that began centuries ago.

The replays and the popularity of the Hollywood representations through tropes—

the reductive images and the eliding of the history of American Indians—form the realities of the public and reinforce colonialism and hegemony. Scanning the mediascape in the present period, we find that in the present age of visual media, films continue to be produced with Hollywood-constructed Indians and formulaic stories, such as the recent release of *The Ridiculous Six* (2015)—a film that subverts American Indian culture and identity. Fortunately (speaking from an Insider’s perspective), through the subversion of media text, American Indians are countering the racist, stereotypical images.

While some scholarship has envisioned American Indians “as the innocent dupes of ...institutional power, patriarchy and colonialism” (Raheja, 2011, p. 3), arguably, American Indians have *not* been bystanders of colonialism or representation. Rather, it is the nature of hegemony that gave Euro-Americans, later through Hollywood, the power of influence to give others a collective picture of the Indigenous occupants of the land.

Purpose of the Study

In more recent years, there has been in an increasing number of filmmakers, writers, professors, and many others who have sought to correct Hollywood’s historically narrow view of American Indians. While their contributions have been commendable, the remarks in various forums and social media during the 2017 Standing Rock siege, in addition to the recent appropriation transgressions by well-known rock group No Doubt and clothing company Victoria’s Secret (dressing up in “Indian maiden/headdress” attire) provide ample evidence there remains an increasing need for American Indians to stand against the hegemonic representational forces. Media texts are the fastest way to convey information and have become avenues that some Natives have used to confront the mass-mediated images and narratives so often circulated by mainstream popular culture.

“The images of American Indians presented via popular culture ...have the potential to have a powerful impact on the American public perception of American Indians through challenging and reshaping hegemonic representations” (Mihelich, 2001, p. 136). However, with hundreds of media texts vying for the attention of viewers, it is difficult to change the discourse without sustaining the images. Further, with American Indian films making up only a small number of all the movies produced, it is even more imperative that the films they distributed are interrogated to see where possibilities lie for resistance and to investigate the American Indians representation. I strongly believe that “in the struggle to regain power to determine [our] cultural identit[y] and futures through economic, governmental, social, educational and kinship configuration” (Shanley, 2001, p. 28), it necessitates reflection and reexamination. If we accept the notion that visual storytelling is a progenitor of beliefs and representations, then it would seem imperative that we examine what our modern visual storytellers are telling us about American Indians.

While my contribution is not through the creation of a visual product that can help broaden understanding about American Indians, my dissertation can make a contribution by inviting viewers to think critically about ways American Indian filmmakers are using the visual space to apply what Raheja (2010) refers to as “visual sovereignty.” They can use it as a space of “resistance and compliance,” as well as both a paradoxical space where the critiquing of filmic representation takes place and a space that redefines the stereotypical conventions under the control of the American Indian.

My efforts are part of a larger contribution aimed at equalizing power. While, as an American Indian, I find myself in the backstage of the curtains *only* analyzing the

films and not in the trenches of producing films or standing in opposition with water protectors as we saw at the recent Standing Rock campaign, I feel this scholarship is no less important.

Significance of the Study

Hollywood content generated by non-Native people tends to be influenced by consumption-based stereotypes. While efforts to change the White-generated representations have been met with resistance, it is imperative American Indians forge forward in their efforts to equalize power relations. Using the same medium monopolized for years by Euro-Americans, American Indians have broken through the ranks and created movies that are contesting and changing the cultural and political inequities in our society (Singer, 2001; Hearne, 2012). Understanding that these cultural products serve as pedagogies for the public understanding of American Indians, it is critical that the visual products are analyzed to determine what is being distributed as a cultural product to the national narrative. Scholars, Native and non-Native alike, have made contributions by way of examining such films as *Smoke Signals* and other films produced and acted in by American Indians; however, more recent analysis of contemporary films remain sparse.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms are provided to ensure understanding and uniformity of the terms throughout the study.

American Indian: A member or group of people of the Indigenous people living in America.

Hegemony: The ascendancy or domination of one element of a system over others; a hypodescent rule (Hartsfield, 2004).

Indian: A term used to describe Indigenous people of America by explorers of the New World. In this dissertation, this term is also used to describe the Hollywood-constructed Indian and is not used interchangeably with American Indian or Native American.

Visual Sovereignty: a cinematic practice used by Indigenous people to confront the degrading visual imagery that circulate around visual representations of American Indians, while also flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in the disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotypes (Raheja, 2010).

Film Selection

I focus this dissertation on interrogating a media text produced by an American Indian filmmaker. The product at the center of this research question is a “Fourth Cinema” film. Fourth World Cinema is a term taken up by Barry Barclay (2003) to describe films produced by Indigenous minorities working “outside of the national boundaries of the national orthodoxies’ of colonizing nations” (p. 9). While there is a plethora of Fourth Cinema films produced over the last 25 to 30 years by the broader community of Indigenous people, for the purpose of this analysis, I narrowed the selection to a movie produced in the last 5 years to gain insight into the contemporary media landscape on cinematic representations.

In my selection criteria, I excluded documentaries, primarily because documentaries are motion pictures intended to document reality. I also excluded movies based on novels because they are led by a created narrative. In the selection of films, no preference was given for level of mainstream. Additionally, several recommendations

were made by my committee members based on their personal knowledge of contemporary films, from which I chose the following film for this dissertation:

- *Drunktown's Finest* (2014), directed by Syndey Freeland (Navajo), is a drama about three young American Indians—a rebellious father-to-be, an adopted Christian female, and a transgender person—who strive to escape the hardship of living on and near the Navajo reservation.

An analysis of *Drunktown's Finest* will be conducted in Chapter 6.

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumption

It is my assumption that American Indian directed films are inherently more “authentic” in comparison to movies produced and directed by non-Natives. Further, American Indians who are producing films about Indigenous people want to “speak back” and change the dominant narrative.

Limitations

My four limitations to the dissertation include:

- incomplete knowledge of American Indian history,
- lack of knowledge of the thousands of films that have circulating in the mediascape,
- inability to generalize beyond these films,
- my own subjectivity.

I am limited by what I have learned from history books. I worry my incomplete knowledge of history and lack of knowledge about the wide selection of American Indians films may limit my interpretations of contemporary films. Thousands of films

have been produced in brief periods of time and, considering my constrained time, I only viewed a limited number of films. The only way I can counter this limitation is to continually broaden my views of American Indian history and continually examine analyses conducted by other scholars on American Indian produced films.

The findings extracted from these films are not generalizable; however, this does not negate the fact that there is an unmasking, confrontation, and reinforcement of the dominant narrative, if these findings are part of my study.

In developing the dissertation, I incorporated my own story so readers can gain insights into my position on this subject; however, I acknowledge that my epistemology and ontology may differ from other individuals who were are not American Indian. It is by this very attribute that gives me a privilege because I can provide insights into historical issues and determine if the filmmakers are creating multi-faceted imagery and indigenizing the filmic space.

Organization of the Proposed Dissertation

Chapter 1 describes the problem and the significance of the problem, states the purpose of my analysis, and outlines the research questions that will guide the study.

Chapter 2 lays the foundation of this dissertation by focusing on existing scholarship on the representation of American Indians in early films and examining previous cinematic analysis. This chapter surfaces the prominent depictions found in film to provide historical renderings on the images of American Indians. Analyzing earlier films about American Indians and examining the context in which they were represented is vital to understanding how contemporary American Indian filmmakers engage in this field of discourse. This chapter will become the intertextual reference for

Chapter 6. Chapter 2 is not intended to be exhaustive considering the breadth of material already published on the representation of American Indians in films; rather, my intent is only to provide a blueprint and reference for the reader.

In Chapter 3, I will provide a review of the analyses conducted on two films—*Pocahontas* and *Smoke Signals*—and compile it in a summary. The intent of this compilation is to gain an understanding on the ways films are reinforcing and countering hegemonic representations of American Indians. One is produced by a non-Native, the other produced by a Native.

In Chapter 4, I will provide an overview of the theoretical framework for my study—Critical Race Theory and Tribal Critical Race Theory. The following chapter (Chapter 5) describes the overall study design and the use of Critical Thematic Analysis as a process for extracting themes to analyze.

In Chapter 6, I offer a close reading of the film, *Drunktown's Finest*. The film is analyzed and framed around the research question—in what ways do contemporary American Indian-directed films unmask, critique, confront, and reinforce through visual storytelling, the conventional stereotypes? Just as Hearne (2012) did in her analysis of *Smoke Signals*, this chapter goes beyond the surface meaning by focusing on “the Native film’s meaning and effects in the world” (p. xviii) to offer a more complex analysis.

In the last chapter of the dissertation, Chapter 7, I will summarize the study and my findings and draw conclusions from the findings. In this chapter, I will offer recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To enlighten the reader on the history of representations and the shifting changes in White-generated narratives of identity, this chapter draws from existing scholarship on American Indians and film. This chapter barely touches the growing body of research on this subject; a discourse that has received considerable attention in more recent years. Circulating in the various fields of research are pieces authored by American Indians and non-Natives. These include, but are not limited to, articles by John E. O'Connor (2003) who focuses on Hollywood's constructed Indian; Michelle H. Raheja's (2010) study of representation of American Indians in film and their participation in shaping stereotypes; Beverly R. Singer's (2003) chronicles of Indigenous filmmakers and their contribution to cultural sovereignty; Angela Aleiss's (2005) exploration of American Indians in cinema and contextualization of Indian imagery within social and political climates; M. Elise Marubbio's (2006) analysis of depictions of American Indian women in film; Ted Jojola's (2003) examination of the historical shaping of characters in relationship to the commercial and artistic endeavors of Hollywood from an institutional approach; and many other scholars who have done the legwork by producing comprehensive scholarship that serves as the backbone for this chapter.

I begin Chapter 2 by tracing historical origins of the constructions of "Indian" and proceed down a contemporary route to show how images are "predicated on constantly shifting binary oppositions and paradoxes along a vast circuitry of representation" (Raheja, 2010, p. 36). In other words, an unbalanced, simplistic depiction (American Indian representation) that is molded as the opposite to the dominant (normative) category, and shifts, but remains incomplete in the representation. Next, I group

prominent themes and discourses that emerged in the various film reviews and analyses, which include the concepts of Vanishing Indian, Invisibility and Visibility, and Playing Indian. These thematic strands become intertextual references for the content examined in Chapter 6. This begins with the analysis of the representations.

The Genesis of Representation

Historical literary texts (reports by explorers, missionaries) trace representation of American Indians to the earliest Indian/White contact. These early depictions viewed distinct tribes as one community with the same customs and languages. The colonizers viewed the American Indian people through a singular, narrowed lens, and, as such, “imaginaries that were concocted for one [I]ndigenous person or group were effortlessly extended to all American Indian people” (Luther, Lepre, & Clark, 2011, p. 34). The depictions ranged in description as violent, savage, cannibalistic, exotic, noble, and many other attributes. By all accounts, Indians were considered less than human and sat in the lower social strata of evolution. Visual depictions by artists portrayed them as domestic and regal, in settings far removed from reality and historical accuracy (Bataille, 2001, p. 3).

From the earliest years to the contemporary, Europeans have had contradictory impulses toward the Indian; so much so that in early years, while depicting them as savages, Europeans took elements of the American Indian identity and appropriated it for their own use, “a compelling and obviously satisfying form of traditional expression” (Green, 1988, p. 30). Rayna Green (1988) and Philip J. Deloria (1998) refer to this practice as “playing Indian.” This performance, in its various forms, has deep roots in the establishment of the American identity and, according to Green (1988), it is how the

settlers “demarcate[s] the boundaries of an American identity” (p. 30) from their own British ancestry. Deloria (1998) describes the perplexing notion in the forming of the national identity in relation to the Indian savage: “[s]avage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self. Coded as freedom, however, wild Indianness proved equally attractive, setting up a ‘have-the-cake-and eat-it-too’ dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion” (p. 3). To “challenge its continuing reiteration creates a kind of cultural ‘identity crisis’” (Green, 1987, p. 31) for the European, as it violates their deeply cherished identity. In this next section, I provide a broad overview of the complex cultural and social dynamics in American society and the interplay of the “savage Other [that] assured Americans of their own civilized nature” (Deloria, 1998, p. 36).

Perpetually Vacillating

“I think the cinema was created to film first Nation people.”

—André Dudemaine, *Reel Injun*, 2009

During the first century of film production, films about American Indians were cranked out by the industry in the order of thousands (Churchill, 1998). Film has been the field where the representation of American Indians, as stock characters, has become visually solidified. By way of this visual space, millions of people have been introduced to an Indian. The irony lies in the reality that few of those obsessed with Indians have interacted with a real-life American Indian, although their appetite has grown for the dramatizations and imagery conjured by their own White constructors. Bataille (2001), Bird (1996), Churchill (1992), and other scholars argue that the construction of this Indian is a reflection of its creator and of White culture more than American Indians

themselves. Robert Berkhofer (1978) coined the term “the white man’s Indian” to describe the created and creator.

What graces (or disgraces) films appear to be variegated constructions but are generalized stockpile identities that portray American Indians with varying levels of savagery (Raheja, 2010). One of these stock characters is the savage Indian who violently attacks the naturalized Euro-American; this attack comes to serve as a “mobilizing prelude to victory” (Raheja, 2010, p. 16)—a prelude that would become a joke in the 1998 film *Smoke Signals* when Thomas declares “Cowboys always win.” The characterization of Indians as savage is ubiquitous and stretches back to the earliest one-reel films. In one of the earliest silent films, *The Battle at Elderbrush Gulch* (1913), the the expository subtitles of the film become the core narrative: “[W]ar-dance lashes the passions of the Indians into a savage.” In the short film, Indians take part in the “Feast of the Dogs.” They Indians in the film attempt to steal the puppies from innocent children. In the process, the Chief’s son dies, and in retaliation the Indian proceeds to exert “the ever ready spark of hatred to revenge.” The half-naked savages hop around in war bonnets shaking and swaying back and forth, preparing for an encounter with the White men. The puppies are treated more humanely as they are placed in baskets, with attempts to persuade the uncle to keep the puppies in the house. The kindness to the dog is a stark contrast to the Indians who are “primitive drifter sleeping on the bare ground in ephemeral encampments made of sticks and skins” (Davis, 2016, p. 114). In these scenes, political oppression is carried out under the guise of humane treatment of animals. The Indians as representations of savagery are present throughout the film.

The woman is no less stereotyped by her race and gender. Her identity is a “bipolar split,” (Bird, 1996, p. 80) meaning her construction in media varies; she can be noble or inhumanly lustful, good or bad. While the male Indian character is a savage, the Indian woman takes on the form of a seductive threat. Elizabeth Bird (1999) provides a provocatively disturbing description of her as a sexual convenience, “[s]he is a drudge who is at the beck and call of her savage husband, produces baby after baby, and has sex endlessly and indiscriminately with both Whites and Indians” (p. 73). A tamed version of this construction can be seen in the silent film *The Squaw’s Love* (1911), and reiterations are seen in films throughout the last century. In later films, she becomes deeply devoted to the White man and sacrifices herself for him.

Howe, Markowitz, and Cummings (2013) have argued that the assemblage of stereotypes that have been constructed and appear in popular culture are primarily comprised of stockpile images that “have always been sufficiently abundant and variegated to allow for the coexistence of radically divergent ideas about what type of beings Indians are and what they ought to become” (p. ix). In line with this depiction, *His Last Game*, appearing in 1909, departed from the storylines of Indians as violent initiators of attacks and placed the Indian character in the plot that intersected Americans’ love interests: baseball, alcohol, and Indians. Baseball, ingrained in the psyches of American, took this movie outside the traditional realm of horrendously savage and introduced a more tamed Indian. However, the Indian does not depart far from his savagery. In this film, he declines alcohol from the White man but, when provoked, he lashes out and kills the man. In Howe, Markowitz, and Cummings’ (2003) review of the film, they indicated it was set in “Indian Territory,” which, arguably, did little to change

the stock image, narrative or the the identity of the primary actors, who were White actors dressed in “Indian” costumes. Another film produced during the early years of the industry’s development—*The Red Man’s View* (1909)—while not as violent as its predecessors, replayed the preordained theme of Euro-Americans as winners. The White men in this film are portrayed as understanding, even as they force the helpless Indians off their land. Based on Howe, Markowitz, and Cummings’ (2013) statement that movies project what the Indian ought to become, in the case of these movies, the Indians become defeated, sexualized, and animalistic.

Throughout the last century, the narratives continued to vacillate between “[t]wo polar ends of an oppositional spectrum of the imagination,” (Riley, 2003, p. 62) of savage and noble. Kathryn Shanley (2001), in her examination of *The Indians American Loves*, provides historical contextualization of the noble savage, a name coined by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Shanley describes how, prior to the film era, the noble construction promoted “settlement and commercial exploitation of America” (Castro, 1983, xv). Robert E. Norton (1990) in a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* described the noble savage as “sort of native guile, but are clearly inferior to the white settler in intellectual and moral qualities” (para. 1). This version of Indians has revisited the screen on more than one occasion.

Early in the twentieth century, the noble savage and violent savage were reeled simultaneously in theatres, “when small production companies churned out two-reel westerns weekly.... A patron might leave one movie house where he had just seen a sympathetic—though not necessarily accurate—Indian and walk into another theatre where the natives on the screen were totally inhuman” (O’Connor, 2003, p. 28). O’Connor,

providing a view of the development of American Indian representation, argues that the industry was not filled with Indian-haters who vacillated between these images; it was driven by the demand of the market and disseminating an image of peace-loving Indians made for little excitement. In fact, the public expected Indians to be presented in characteristic ways. Two classic examples that appeased the minds of Whites are found in *The Indian Brothers* (1911), where a renegade Indian kills a chief and vengeance ensues, and in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1911), where a treacherous Indian plans to lure two young European girls into the wilderness and keep them in captivity. These films rarely (if ever) reflected the lives of actual American Indians or their issues; they were created to appease the exhibitor's appetite.

In the early years of the film industry, there was no absence of American Indians. One prominent figure in the film industry was James Gordon Young Deer, a man who claimed American Indian heritage and earned a reputation of being the first American Indian producer. He produced more than 100 one-reel silent Westerns for Pathé production company, some of which have been referred to, by Angela Aleiss (2005,) as unusual tales. In 2013, after extensive research “of dusty archives and faded vital records and tracking down” his wife's (Lillian St. Cyr) family, Aleiss (2013) came to the conclusion he was an “imposter” (para. 1). He promoted himself as American Indian and produced film under the guise of being an Indian, but was not an Indian. A few legitimate American Indians who contributed to the early film industry in the early years of the industry included women: Molly Devereaux and May Alice Nelson. Using the stage names, Minnie Ha-Ha (Molly Devereaux) and Molly Spotted Elk (May Alice Nelson), they played in such films as *Old Mammy's Secret Code* (1914) and *By Right of*

Birth (1921). Raheja (2010), examining their roles, found documentation to support the belief that they recognized that the film industry's Indians bore little resemblance to the realities of the American Indian people and their communities; however, they remained committed to acting; which led Raheja to believe that the actors/actresses preferred to exert their influence in some capacity rather than be completely excluded from film.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the perceived threat of mass destruction—thought to be brought on by the baggage of modernity— and spiritual decline drove Europeans to seek out primitive, earth-based societies—a romantic nostalgic—that was attributed to the Indian (Marrubio, 2006; Riley, 2003). To the Euro-American, American Indian culture, through the prism of romanticism, stood in opposition to the social conventions of modern man and, as such, was more closely integrated with the natural environment. Based on this representation, interest in American Indians was reinvested with newfound “aesthetic and ethical values” (Riley, 2003). American Indians linked to a symbol (environmentalist) cast them in new light. Thomas E. Woods, Jr. (2007) illuminates the White man's role in the cultivation of this Indian and myth:

Environmentalists who have cultivated the myth of the environmental Indian who left his surroundings in exquisitely pristine condition out of a deeply spiritual devotion to the natural world have done so not out of any particular interest in American Indians, the variations between then, or their real record of interaction with the environment. Instead, the intent is to showcase the environmental Indian for propaganda purposes and to use him as a foil against industrial society (para. 8).

Many movies were imbued with nature and American Indians, one of the most popular, *Nanook of the North*, produced in 1922 by Robert J. Flaherty, who traveled north to capture an Inuit family's struggle to survive (Singer, 2001, p. 17). "[H]umanistic... starkly beautiful and sympathetic" are the words from the *Encyclopedia of the American Indian Literature* to describe a film that had taken a groundbreaking approach by creating a film centralized around an Inuit legend that comprised of all Inuit cast. This film, admired as a documentary, has been criticized for not being authentic as a result of several staged scenes.

Two years following the release of *Nanook of the North*, American Indians were given the right to vote with the passing of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. Just as films "unquestionably reflect the cultural realities of their makers and serve to project these themes both inwardly and outwardly as cultural productions" (Weakland, 1995, p. 50), the theme of citizenship of American Indians manifested in *The Vanishing American* (1925). In this film, Nophaie falls in love with the kindhearted White schoolmistress, Marion (Riley, 2003). In the midst of discrimination and racism, Marion makes a bold statement to Nophaie (both oppressed by their identity), "This is still your country." Achieving the American identity, however, comes with the price of leaving the past behind and sacrificing identity and ownership of livestock. Marion's suggestion that "You are an American as much as any of us... And this is a war for freedom, for the right. For oppressed people everywhere..." leads Nophaie to enlist and fight for their country. Despite this sacrifice of life, the Indian continued to remain outside the dominant culture, according to an argument by Michael J. Riley (2003) in his critique of *The Vanishing American*.

A few years after the movie *The Vanishing American*, which “was incapable of freeing itself from the stereotypes and preconceptions of its day” (Riley, 2003, p. 70), *The Silent Enemy* (1930) was released. *Silent Enemy* has been described as portraying the realistic struggles of the Ojibwe Indians to find food in the face of winter, an ethnographic authenticity, it has been called. The promotional flyer boasted of the unconventional approach because the prologue was spoken by a real Indian and it was “Filmed in the Wilderness with *an all-Native cast* [emphasis added].” Molly Spotted Elk, an American Indian who played a key role in this film, indicated that the producer regularly sought out the advice of the cast (Singer, 2001). Singer goes on to explain that the movie sought authenticity but retained elements of earlier stereotypical narratives, with American Indian actors wearing generalized attire, not tribal-specific clothing. Retention of the stereotypes is seen in the prologue, which shows a Plains Indian chief appearing in buckskin to greet the viewers with “How,” an all-too-common, White-constructed Indian greeting.

The decade leading to the mid-1900s was a time when thousands of American Indians fought alongside their Euro-American counterparts. However, in film, their narratives did not match the sacrifice they made; they continued to be depicted as violent savages. *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) provides a classic example of a common film generated and disseminated during this period; in the movie, the settlers are repeatedly attacked by the Mohawk Indians. During this same period, almost as an insult to the Indians who fought in the war, *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), a fictionalized account of the life of George Armstrong Custer, “a great Indian fighter” was released. In keeping with the pattern of films produced about American Indians during this period, the

movies valued Whites more than American Indians, an insight offered by Nolley (2003) in reference to Western films, but, no less applicable to other movies.

Western films had their greatest vitality during this period with John Ford films gaining popularity. In an analysis of John Ford films, Nolley (2003) suggests that Ford's films, much like earlier films, "invoke[d] the conscious and unconscious fears of the audience" (p. 86) by bringing to life scenes and remarks by characters of the viciousness of the Indian. Nolley (2003) goes on to explain the power of Ford's movies: "[He] shows how graphically and powerfully racist fears fill in the undefined spaces in an ambiguous situation, creating a sense of danger where there may be none, creating a perceived enemy out of a potential friend" (p. 87). Despite filming numerous films on the Navajo reservation among the Navajo people (primarily in Monument Valley), Ford produced films focused on bloodshed between the Indian/frontiersman, and, his narratives displayed his allegiance to Anglo-White values. Monument Valley became the familiar backdrop in many of his films: *Stagecoach* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *How the West was Won* (1962), *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983), *Forrest Gump* (1994) and many other films. Of the movies he produced, the tension and dominance between the Indian/frontiersman is best displayed in *Fort Apache* (1948), when the White character "plunges the cavalry flag into the ground" (Aleiss, 2005, p. 91). Later, however, Ford made "serious effort to transcend Hollywood imagery-indeed to condemn the tragic heritage of America's racial stereotype" (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003, p. 7).

Post World War II, another thread of films emerged that differed from the Western themes of bloodshed and racial divide that had become the generic conventions of John Ford films. Unlike Ford, producer Delmer Daves approached film through a

different prism, one that envisioned racial co-existence and favored interracial unions in his filmic discourse, all while introducing a solution to the “Indian problem,” (uncivilized Indians). His solution to the problem of uncivilized American Indian was their assimilation, as seen in the movie *Broken Arrow* (1950). In successive films, this new-found agenda, the assimilation plea, becomes a popular theme. In the movie *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1969), the Indian character, Willie Boy, tried to accept the White ways by assimilating, “but tragically, and under the influence of alcohol, the power of his tribal culture caused him to abandon White examples and to revert to ‘savagery’” (Sandos & Burgess, 2003).

Even while films emerged about assimilation, another cycle of political commentary about the Vietnam War emerged with the release of *Billy Jack* (1971). Amanda Cobbs (2003), in her commentary about the countercultural use of Indians in the film describes *Billy Jack* as, “says more about Americans coming to terms with their feelings about the Vietnam conflict than they do about their lives, experiences or feelings of actual Native American people” (p. 210). Films served as cultural products that project feelings about events, and the Indian was the filler to carry forward the message.

In the 1970s, the growing unrest by American Indians (Singer, 2001) led to major political, social, and cultural events that included the forming of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the seizing of Alcatraz Island. American Indians had grown tired of the invisibility and continued colonization and wanted to draw attention to the conditions in contemporary American Indian communities. As sparks ignited in the social and political landscape, an environmental message was broadcast on television of an elder Indian man crying over the environmental destruction in a campaign referred to

as *Keep America Beautiful* (KAB) (Raheja, 2010). While this was not a film, the visual imagery helps us gain insight into the vacillation in the American society and the way Indians go “in and out of fashion in American popular culture” (Cobb, 2003, p. 212).

The movement to release the Indian from the national identity gained momentum around the 1980s when a strong emergence of independent films featuring American Indians as contemporaries, in varied, tribally-specific identities, emerged. While many of the independent films were not disseminated in theaters, American Indians were producing their own films and telling their own stories (Singer, 2001), a practice that had been unheard of only 50 years prior. Although these films—*Hopiit* (1982), *Navajo Talking Picture* (1984), *Her Giveaway: The Spiritual Journey with AIDS* (1988), among other films—had fewer audiences, they opened the door for American Indians to control their own stories and images. Singer (2001) calls this period, a decade of abundance.

With the number of producers and actors of American Indian descent growing in the film industry, Indigenous scholars had surmised that Western movies, with their display of Indians as savages, had breathed their last breath, until a revisionist Western appeared in 1990—*Dances with Wolves*. The film has received mixed reviews. Some film enthusiasts have praised *Dances with Wolves* for its careful depiction of the Lakota life and clothing; others described the movie as “pander[ing] to white fantasies of being assigned an Indian name in its title character, and with names like ‘Wind-In-My-Hair’” (Hearne, 2012, p. 25). Other scholars have critiqued the film as introducing a White Savior. In a critical review of the concept of White savior, Matthew Hughey (2014) argues that race is at the heart of these films, and the introduction of these films is intended to “repair the myth of a great white father figure whose benevolent paternalism

over people of color is the way things not only have been but should be” (p. 19). The narcissistic nature of this is expressed by Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon (2003) who writes, “The messianic white self is the redeemer of the weak...rescues people of color from poverty and disease, or leads Indians in battle for their dignity and survival. This is a narcissistic fantasy found in many Hollywood movies” (p. 33). The role of the Indian in these films, Hearne suggests, is to help the White man authenticate “his journey of self-discovery,” (p. 9) therefore it is not about American Indians, it is about the White men.

Unlike the films in the early to mid-1900s, more movies produced in the last 20 years are casting American Indians to play their own parts and are setting stories in the present. *Naturally Native* (1998), *Smoke Signals* (1998), *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002) are only a few of the hundreds of films that use the visual space for self-representation and offer an alternative approach to filmmaking that is not predicated on the dominant culture’s fantasies, but reflect the lived experiences and desires of American Indians (Raheja, 2010).

In this next section, I explore dominant themes and discourses surrounding American Indians in film. The visual culture, since the advent of film, has produced seemingly varying depictions and narratives; however, research by numerous scholars (Aleiss, 2005; Marubbio, 2006) reveals the representations fall in categories that reify a particular stereotype and narrative. This thematic structuring will be the intertextual reference for Chapter 6, wherein an American Indian directed film is examined to find out if the film’s narrative and imagery complicates the visual logic that has been part of the national discourse.

Racial Mixing and Separation

Portrayals of miscegenation serve as a powerful reminder of the cultural and racial attitudes of particular periods. The history of racial comingling reveals a great deal not only about the film industry serving as a publicity industry for social norms, but also about the changes in norms that historically divided people into discrete groups. While interracial comingling appears to be popular in films throughout the last century, few studies have been conducted specifically on this subject in relation to American Indian films. Scholars such as Angela Aleiss (2005) have examined the cultural division in *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies*; however, even with this expository piece, this field of study remains sparse. In her analysis exploring the concept of racial cohabitation in *The Squaw Man*, a film produced in the 1914, Aleiss found that the movie “clearly spell[s] out the risk of an Indian/white marriage” (p. 19). Undergirded in the film is the belief that Whites should not marry Indians, and miscegenation is undesirable (Aleiss, 2005; Raheja, 2010). In many of these films, the perceived differences between the Indian and the White was played up, almost to express the audiences’ own hidden prejudice, according to Aleiss. In examining *The Squaw Man*, Aleiss (2005) writes that the film’s publicity message made clear the differences that created the gulf between the two groups: “When you fall in love with an Indian girl, she does not stand aside when you fight. No siree, she comes of a terrible ancestry” (p. 19). The same idea is also uncovered by M. Elise Marrubio (2006), in her analysis of films that displayed American Indian and Euro-American cohabitations as temporary unions. She summarizes this in her recount of movies: “the two live a short but idyllic life that disintegrates when the maiden realizes that her [White] husband really

loves another, or that he must return east and wants to take their child with him” (p. 15). In some films, the movie ends tragically, such as in *Duel in the Sun*'s infamous shooting in which the protagonists both die (Aleiss, 2005).

“Futile endeavors” is the description Aleiss (2005) uses when referring to the Indian/White romance in many of the American Indian movies (p. 7), largely because the outcomes end in “unhappy cohabitation” or “ambivalence.” For example, in *The Chief's Daughter* (1911) a White man seduces an Indian, then rejects her and she returns to her people. In *The Vanishing American* (1924) Nophanie, the Indian man, falls in love with Marion, a school teacher; he enlists in the military and upon his return finds she is married to a White man (later he finds out she did not marry him). Finally, in both versions of *Pocahontas*, the 1953 and the 1990 animated version, the Indian Pocahontas throws herself down to save the White soldier only to remain separate. In examining the early films, Aleiss (2005) found that the Indian/White unions were objectionable to some critics, and thus the subject remained “tricky” (p. 23) in light of the interracial prohibition enforced by the film industry. While Black-White miscegenation was heavily regulated, the Indian-White relation remain mixed. Despite the regulations, the impact of the social pressures surrounding racial mixing is seen in two version of the film, *The Last of The Mohicans*. In the 1936 version, the American Indian man, Uncas, is shown as clearly falling in love with Cora (a White woman); however, in the 1965 version, the narrative is reenvisioned and takes on a nullified approach by showing them not in love.

While movie plots may have become more complex over time, more notably in full-feature films where the topics of racial tensions and statuses were explored, the message that has permeated film is that of racial separation between European and

American Indians. And, if there was a mixed-raced union, the White and American Indian couple could only remain together outside of society's boundaries and were outcast to their own people (Aleiss, 2005). While this is the filmic visual discourse in early films, in more recent films, there appears to be a generally positive or more neutral characterization of unions among American Indians and Whites. In *Shouting Secrets* (2014), Q'orinanka Kilcher brings her White boyfriend to the reservation with her and tells her parents, "we're life partners." Later, she reveals she's pregnant. The film embraces the mixed-race union, which troubles conventional narratives of division.

Another theme that continually emerges in films produced by non-Native is that of liminality; this is explored in the next section.

Liminality and Cultural Marginality

Cultural marginality of American Indians has been a cinematic fascination that has permeated films stretching across the last century. In early films, the already-mediated American Indian is characterized as straddling between two worlds—the traditional world and the White world. The film *Strongheart*, produced in 1914, uses the cinematic space to touch on the narrative of cultural liminality. In the film, a Carlisle Indian School graduate who is sent away to school and eventually returns to the reservation to take up a tribal leadership position finds himself in two opposing worlds. He is never fully able to adjust to either. Another movie with a similar storyline is *Redskin* (1929). The main character is taken to a boarding school and eventually returns home to his people, but his rejection of the traditional practice banishes him from the Navajo people. He becomes an outcast to both worlds. These films are insistent on positioning the subjects not only as Outsiders from the White world but also Outsiders to

anything they see as ill-fitting, including their traditional life. For these characters, no peace can be found in the liminal state.

In other movies, the American Indian finds a small measure of peace by abandoning their American Indian identity, a common storyline found in films in which the American Indian assimilates into the dominant culture. Take for example, the 1951 release of *Jim Thorpe – All American* film about a biracial Olympic star. Based on a true story, Thorpe’s story is one of marginality and struggling to find a peaceful Indian/White co-existence. Even when a sacrifice is made to assimilate, the Indian never attains full-stature nor becomes an equal to the White men.

Playing Indian

The act of appropriating American Indian culture and identities, otherwise referred to as “Playing Indian,” is a persistent tradition in American culture that “stretch[es] from the very instance of the national big bang into an ever-expanding present and future” (Deloria, 1998, p. 7) as discussed earlier in the chapter. In the book *Playing Indian*, a source that provides insightful information on White men’s fascination with American Indians and their eagerness to play Indian even as they lacked understanding about American Indians, Deloria suggests that the American used this “play” to define themselves. One of most notable events he uses to illustrate his point is the Boston Tea Party, where colonists mimicked the American Indian. In this performance, the colonists appropriated the American Indian attire to express an identity that is different from the overseas British citizens, thereby defining themselves. This concept of playing Indian continues to manifest itself in contemporary films, with movie stars such as Johnny Depp playing an Indian role in *The Lone Ranger* (2013)—a film that

is entrenched with problematic imagery. Countering this film is the movie *Smoke Signals*, that was created by an American Indian filmmaker to “speak back” to the dominant imagery and narrative.

Smoke Signals uses the visual space to speak back to Hollywood about its incessant history of stereotyping and generalizing Indians. In a scene in the film, Victor, an American Indian man chastens his cousin brother, Thomas, on his identity and challenges him through a question, “Don’t you even know how to be a real Indian?” In an act to correct his “brother’s” (cousin’s) Indianness, Victor proceeds with explicit instructions on the traits and look of a real Indian, one that the Euro-American knows better than Indians: stoic, look mean, nod your head—an emulation of the warrior character that has been the visible sign of Indianness “recognizable in the wider world” since the advent of film (Hearne, 2012, p. 69). Victor, in his attempt, reinforces the Indian that was rendered through costuming (playing Indian) by using key signifiers of racial and cultural significance. Rather than remaining “politically and genealogically specific” (Hearne, 2012, p. 69), Victor and Thomas engage in a discourse of Hollywood’s Indianness. In their exchange, “Victor attempts to make Thomas exchange the medicine man stereotype for his own internalized stoic warrior stereotype” (Meness, 2012, p. 106). In the upcoming exposition on invisibility/visibility, the true insidiousness of Hollywood’s images of American Indians is further explored.

Invisibility and Visibility

Since the advent of film, American Indians have been presented in a complicated and contradictory discourse of invisibility and visibility. This rendering of invisibility has been presented in a number of ways, including through the fusing of the American

Indian identity into a single designation. The syncretism of American Indians into a single category of “Indian” is a hegemonic designation implying that they are—and were—all the same in regards to culture, behavior, language, and social organization (Singer, 2007). This single, collective identity denies the existence of the hundreds of American Indians from the different tribes (currently, 567 recognized tribes in the U.S.), which thereby erases them entirely. Mihesuah (1996) reverses the historical conjecture by pointing out that lumping Indians together into one category is the same as presuming that all Europeans are alike.

One image that has received notable attention in film and remained in the public’s memory is the Indian found in such films as *Comanche* (1956) and *Stolen Women: Captured Hearts* (1997) or the female equivalent found *The Far Horizon* (1955). All are red-faced with long, black hair parted in the middle (with or without braids) and a feather sticking up from their head. This hypervisible Indian, found in hundreds of films and advertisements has complicated the lives of contemporary American Indians in that to qualify as a “Native American” you have to look like the perpetuated, generic “Plains Indian” (Adare, 2005, p. 16); this is the “litmus for “authenticity” of contemporary Indian identity” (Cobb, 2003, p. 216). If an American Indian does not look like a “Plains Indian,” they must not be. Consequently, those who did not meet the perceived conceptions are rendered invisible as a result of the one-dimensional images. Gloria Goodale (2002) points to the embedded nature of this stereotype in our society using a comment made by Chris Eyre: “[p]eople in middle American want to see Indians in their romantic way. They’re not as interested in seeing Indians in 2002, if they’re not Plains Indians with headdresses” (para. 11). This invisibility is not for a lack of American

Indians appearing in movies; in fact, hundreds of American Indians or Hollywood's Indians have been scripted in films, in all genres.

The perpetual nature of holding American Indian identity hostage to a constraining White-generated ideal rather than freeing Indians to construct their own identities is problematic. Their constructed identity is visible, while the real life American Indian remains invisible. These easily identifiable representations are summed up by Adare (2005) in *“Indian” Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction: First Nations’ Voice Speak Out* in this way:

“Tonto-figure” or other “Strange, romantic, demonic, dangerous...Indian as virile barbarians” (i.e., the “typical Hollywood Indian man”) bursts onto the screen, wearing “a long, flowing, feathered headdress, a breech cloth... and moccasins” and wielding “a fierce-looking tomahawk,” while his sister, “the little Indian Maiden” or “the Indian princess,” who is “maidenly, demure, and deeply committed to some white man” (i.e., the typical Pocahontas), sports a long or short “beaded and fringed buckskin dress and a beaded headband with one feather sticking straight up in the back.” (p. 2)

In reviewing Adare's summary of White-constructed stereotypes, visibility is not the cure for invisibility; in fact, that is part of the problem because American Indian visibility often involves a hyper-visibility that effectively acts as a camouflage (Raheja, 2010). In an early feature film from 1929, *The Red Skin*, Richard Dix is decisively filmed on the Navajo reservation—in Canyon de Chelly and Chinle boarding school—and yet the lead character is a White actor. While going “the extra mile to set the story” (Howe et al., 2013, p. 10), the real American Indian and his history are rendered

invisible, as the White actor playing Indian gains the spotlight. By making invisible the history, the film blinds others to the injustices that occurred in boarding schools.

Invisibility comes in other forms, including showing Indians as “composite Indians” who are “faceless, voiceless, and stationary, seen but not heard” (Howe et al., 2013, p. 27). In the movie, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), the Indians are simply backdrops with “blankets pulled up over their shoulder. Men with black ten-gallon Stetson hats covering their eyes... women with scarves hide their faces” (Howe et al., 2013, p. 27). They are participants but rendered invisible.

Nolley (2003) points out the valuation of the lives of American Indians and Whites are seen in narratives of deaths; “viewers of Westerns are normally encouraged to grieve over white deaths and generally to rejoice in Indian deaths.” The differential treatment of death scenes further shows their invisibility, “White funerals are shown: Indian funerals almost never are” (p. 81). The practice of erasing those who are present can also be seen in the omission of American Indians in the pre-and post-credits in films.

Hariman (2013) points out that this notion of invisibility connects closely to the idea of possession in that “[v]isibility is an important property, one that represents status, legitimacy, rights, privilege and powers” (para. 1). Recognizing the importance of the visibility of American Indians throughout the history of films, American Indian actors have found ways to increase their visibility, such as in the famous scene in *A Distant Trumpet* (1964), in which the Indian dressed in the Hollywood popular Plains Indian attire speaks scathing words to the soldier in the Navajo language. The dialogue is centered on the need to have power even if only understood by his people:

White Officer: “If I don’t return, general Kuwait, will find you and you will be dead, all your people.”

Navajo chief (spoken in the Navajo language): “Nothing. You obviously can’t do anything to us; that much I do know. Without reason, you follow us.”

White Officer: “He is not a fool. You are.”

Navajo man (spoken in the Navajo language): “Like a snake, you crawl in your own feces.”

Earlier films had shown American Indians hollering and screaming and, therefore, rendered as invisible through their savagism. This film, while attempting to render the Indian invisible, gave him the visual space to speak back on behalf of those in the background who are left out of the script. The dialogue between the White and Indian actors could not be understood by Outsiders; in this sense, the Indians are exerting agency.

Centralized in many of these early films is the image of the “Vanishing Indian.” O’Brien (2013) writes that “[t]he fascination with indigenous culture and the myth of the vanishing Indian were both driven by European notions of “authenticity,” this notion of Vanishing Indian, an age-old myth is explored in the next section.

Vanishing Indian

In an article in *Indian Country Today*, Dino Gilio-Whitaker (2015) writes, “Of all myths associated with American Indians no myth is as pervasive as the myth of the vanishing Indian” (para. 1). Vanishing Indian was not a single trope but a “structuring ideology” (Hearne, 2012, p. 5) that informed the national discourse and was presented in

filmic images. It is a pervasive concept embedded in various disciplines, including film, science, literature, art, and federal policies.

Throughout history, Europeans through this lens have “cast Indigenous people as relics in a national imagined frontier... built through settler’s innovation and determination” (de Finney, 2015, p. 172). Scholars (Churchill, 1998; Hearne, 2012) have argued that in early-contact years European immigrants counted on the extermination of the American Indian through mass epidemics and massacres as a way to attain land for themselves. When annihilation of the Indian population was no longer palatable for the Euro-American, policies shifted to “forcing people to assimilate into the imagined cultural mainstream” (Hearne, 2012, p. 6); this led to assimilationist education policies, the Indian Relocation Act, and other policies that positioned American Indians to become “subjects to a type of paternalistic control” (Riley, 2003, p. 65). Later, as an act to protect Indian and their artifacts, museums collected and began displaying Indian relics. Riley writes that the supposed sympathetic action to protect the American Indian lifestyle has carried with it ingrained assumptions that the American Indian people are antiquated “and hence, are rendered as emblematic of the past rather than as viable participants in the world of the present” (p. 67).

Various permutations of “Vanishing Indian”—rooted in biological determinism—have been manifested on screen. Raheja (2010), in an interrogation of American Indians in film, writes that their portrayal was framed as fitting into the “Social Darwinistic reading of history” (p. 64) and recedes to a point of near vanishing. A film released in 1925, *The Vanishing American* confirms this conception about American Indians. In the prologue of the silent Western film, the inevitable destiny of American Indians is

characterized with the presentation of a quote from the proponent of Social Darwinism, Herbert Spencer: “We have unmistakable proof that throughout all past time there has been a ceaseless devouring of the weak by the strong... a survival of the fittest” (cited in Rollins & O’Connor, 1998, p. 59). According to the framing in the video, the extinction of American Indians was inevitable—brought on by the forces of nature and not men’s actions. Successive scenes in this film show dinosaurs fighting and historical Indians strategically displayed in the film to allude to the fact the American Indian are endangered and vanishing. Renato Rosaldo (1989) refers to Indians portrayed as historical figures existing in the past as part of an “Imperialistic nostalgia,” which makes racial dominance natural. The implication of this type of rendering is commented on by Rollin and O’Connor (2003), who write, “cultural preconceptions have shaped both the reinvention of historical details, as well as the way they are read through the cultural expectations of their audiences” (p. 63). Other films, such as the early rendition of the *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920), uses a similar illustration to communicate that American Indians are relics, using caves and silhouettes to make the point. This perceived disappearance has affected perceptions about American Indians, “[B]ecause of being perceived as a vanishing race, the indigenous population was no longer seen as a threat. Instead, the image of the Indian or the Noble Savage came to serve an “allegorical purpose”” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 90). Meaning Euro-Americans could now appropriate the American Indian culture and “symbolism for its own” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 90).

To capture the American Indians’ eventual fading, films have shown them vanishing in scenes like the vast openness of the land, the Indian maiden dying at the end of the film, and other transitory filmic portrayals of the Indian (Aleiss, 2005; Kirkpatrick,

1999; Marubbio, 2006). Another popular portrayal of vanishing is the “Indian riding exhaustedly on his pony into the setting sun,” (Hearne, 2012, p. 6), a popular image that has become frozen in time in artwork and photography and found in pieces created by Edward S. Curtis. The films and works of art that place Indians as relics “present U.S. imperialism as a *fait accompli*” (Hearne, 2012, p. 6); this rendering complicates the lives of present-day American Indians by denying “them a place in the Euro-American conceptualization of ‘mankind’” (Hawley, 2016, p. 6) and as present figures.

In 1971, a quintessential symbol of the American Indian appeared in the Keep America Beautiful (KAB) public service announcement. Iron Eyes Cody, as an elderly man appeared before viewers in the stereotypical “Plains Indian” attire—buckskin and braids—and lamented the destruction of the environment. His anachronistic appearance is part of the bound, essential categories that the Euro-American has created. In examining the character, Raheja (2010) writes, “Native Americans are rendered harmless and unimportant through dominant discourses that treat Indigenous people as spectral entities, when they are treated at all” (p. 107). Native scholars have argued that the syncretizing of past and present, in an anachronistic portrayal of American Indians in contemporary films and in their nesting next to the prehistoric fossils, is problematic. Raheja’s (2010) commentary adds a different perspective in her belief that it was better that they were represented in some way because their visual presence “allow Native American actors and representations to enter the public memory and take on their own social life, even if in sometimes racist and stereotyped fashion” (p. xii).

To gain an understanding of how filmmakers are reinforcing and confronting the hegemonic representations of American Indians and their themes, a review of the

analyses conducted on two films—*Pocahontas* and *Smoke Signals*—are compiled and shared in Chapter 3. This provides the basis through which other films can be examined.

CHAPTER 3: SYNTHESIZING ANALYSES OF TWO FILMS

In Chapter 3, two films, *Pocahontas* and *Smoke Signals*, are reviewed in light of the thematic categories from the previous chapter. Reviewing scholarship of the analyses conducted on these two films provides an important inroad to seeing how other scholars examine films—characters, roles, and archetypes—and extract meaning surrounding the notions of reinforcing and countering. The two movies, *Pocahontas* and *Smoke Signals*, were selected because of the plethora of analyses conducted on them and because they both were positively received when they were released.

***Pocahontas*: Review of Critical Analyses**

Several collections of writers' perspectives on the film *Pocahontas* have surfaced since it was first released in 1995, including "Deciphering Pocahontas," a piece by Ono and Beuscher (2001) that focuses on the relationship between the media and the commodification of *Pocahontas* and Amy Aidman's (1999) analysis of the reactions of young girls to the Disney film. The presence of these scholarly pieces offers intriguing perspectives on how an animated figure can be used to oppress and control, even as authentication is thrust into the film in the form of screen voices by American Indians. Reviewing scholars' analysis of the film and drawing conclusions, they critiqued that it retained little to no historical authenticity. While this movie is an animated film, it offers significant insights into ways recent films are representing American Indians. This film also provides insights into ways film can be used as a hegemonic tool to carve into the psyches of young children an imagery of an American Indian. This film, unlike earlier overtly racist and savage-driven films, clothed itself in a cloak; this is expressed by Ono and Buescher (2001): "Disney appropriated the experience of the oppression as if to end

it, while simultaneously creating and sustaining new ways to oppress, thus in fact contributing to the history of oppression through its various strategies and practices” (p. 35). In other words, Walt Disney hid behind their cloak of “innocence” and the perception that the Indian stereotype was positive, which is a counter to the reductive images.

While other films have been criticized for their explicit racial stereotyping, this film was, on the contrary, “applauded because of the metamorphosis of the usual docile Disney heroine into an adventurous young woman who stands up for her beliefs” (Dundes, 2001, p. 353) and “embod[ies] our millennial dreams for wholeness and *harmony*, while banishing our nightmares of savagery” (Strong, 1996, p. 406).

Appearing to present a positive image through a positive stereotype, the film carried more weight than previous films with outright negative stereotypical images because of the commonplace appearance of Disney in people’s daily lives and its popularity and transmission to global audiences. However, pulling back the layer of perceived innocence, scholars who analyzed this film found that the film co-opted history and, having little concern to share accurate social, political, geographical information, the movie sold Pocahontas as cultural and historical truth. Much like films throughout the last century, American Indian people were colonized through the sanitization of their history. Further, it turned genocide into a contemporary romance, subordinating the Native people, and packaging their version of Pocahontas to cultural elites—all the while maintaining “colonial privilege” (Ono & Buescher, 2001, p. 36). It is in this way that Pocahontas became a colonial invention.

The creators of *Pocahontas* promised that it would be a departure from the usual

male-centered story line and previous stereotypical portrayals of American Indians, addressing the public's concern by interviewing a cultural expert from the tribal community to garner historical details. The producer proclaimed that Pocahontas would be treated with respect and present a balanced view of an American Indian figure.

Russell Means, an American Indian activist, offered his perspective:

When I first read the script, I was impressed with the beginning of the film. In fact, I was overwhelmed by it. It tells the truth about the motives for Europeans initially coming to the so-called New World. I find it astounding that Americans and the Disney Studio are willing to tell the truth. (Edgerton & Jackson, 2012, p. 202)

Despite reaching out to a cultural expert and accolades by a respected advocate, *Pocahontas* emerged as a film that retained the viscous male stereotypes and re-introduced the New Age, modernized Native woman. This White-constructed stereotype of Hollywood, a re-inscription of a postmodern version of American Indian women, is one that few Indigenous girls can identify with.

In an attempt to understand the “U.S. tendency to appropriate, transform and ...reproduce figures and forms,” Ono and Buescher (2001) “map[ped] out the overlapping and interlocking materialities of race, gender and sexuality” (p. 24) found in the film *Pocahontas*. Before presenting their findings, it should be acknowledged that Pocahontas was a real historical figure who existed long before she was appropriated, resignified, and commodified (Ono & Buscher, 2001) by Disney. Pocahontas was the daughter of Powhatan chief, Wahnunsenaca. Vincent Schilling (2017) in a critical analysis of the real tale of tragedy writes that she was a young “Native girl who was

kidnapped, sexually assaulted and allegedly murdered by those who were supposed to keep her safe” (para. 4). Years of extensive research regarding Pocahontas and her encounter with John Smith reveal she was between 10 to 13 years old, a young girl, when the colonist arrived in the spring of 1607. In the resignification of the figure, her culture, history, and age were disregarded. In the new slate, Disney redesigned Pocahontas from a “11” (Faiola, 1995), “12 or 13 [year old] into [a] flirty, full-grown vixen” (Maslin, 1995). More than adding a few years to her development, in the film she takes on the embodiment of what Paul Rudnick (1995) describes as “lusciously sexual” (p. 67). Strong (1996) adds a contemporary flair by using a visual descriptor, stating that the Disney Pocahontas has a “Barbie-doll figure, [and] an Asian model’s glamour” (p. 406). These are the tamed words used to describe the recasting of Pocahontas within a Western, capitalist frame. Other critical analysts apply more provocative words to describe her contoured hypersexualized body—the “Pornographic ‘Native American Barbie’” (Ono & Buescher, 2001, p 32). The reconstitution of an American Indian as a sexualized figure makes the American Indian woman appear as an object of the “colonial imaginary and as cultural commodit[y]” (de Finney, 2015, p. 169). The sexual appeal to men, not her personhood, is the allure that grabbed men’s attention and brought them to the theater. Maslin (1995) describes this:

Fathers across America will soon be volunteering in record numbers to take the children to the movies, and here’s why: Pocahontas is a babe. She’s the first Disney animated heroine since Tinker Bell with great legs... She’s got aloe eyes, a rosebud mouth, billowing black hair and terrific muscle tone. And she is the centerpiece of the film that’s as great-looking as its heroine. (p. 33)

“Babe” is a far cry from the words Shirley ‘Little Dove’ Custolow McGowan, a cultural expert, used to describe Pocahontas; rather, “respect and honor” were more akin to Pocahontas. Custolow describes her reaction to the film as disappointing. This same expression was echoed by historians who claim that Disney’s rendition stands in juxtaposition to the role and power of Indigenous women. In *What Would Pocahontas Think Now?: Women and Cultural Persistence*, Kidwell (1994) reviews the origin stories of American Indian women in history and argues they were powerful members in society, although generally their influence was indirect. Their roles and motivations were often misinterpreted by the White people. In history books, Pocahontas lays down her life to save John Smith, which assures the survival of the new colonists. From the European lens, she is cast as a hero because her actions “ultimately benefited the advancement of American society” (p. 150). However, her motives arose from her own cultural values, one that has been obscured in history books and reinscribed with meaning in the popular animated film. Aleiss (1995) writes that *Pocahontas* the movie is a pure expression of filmmakers’ fantasies about Indian women. This is Hollywood’s tradition, trapping women in a “patriarchal definition” (para. 2) and defining her life based on a male relationship.

Laboring to avoid the criticism of stereotyping ethnic people, Disney hired American Indians to give voices to the animated characters. Russell Means, a prominent figure in the American Indian Movement (AIM) and an activist for the rights of American Indians, gave voice to Pocahontas’ father in the animated film, and he proclaimed that *Pocahontas* is “the finest film ever done in Hollywood on the Native American experience” (Faiola, 1995, para. 14). On the contrary, Ono and Buescher

(2015) believe the movie industry once again rewrote the history of American colonial encounters and replaced the historical slaughter of millions of American Indians with a “cute tale that functions to ‘civilize’ and relegitimate colonialism” (Ono & Buescher, 2015). In response to the criticism of recreating the film into a fantasy and fable, Walt Disney president Peter Schneider commented, “We set out to do something inspired by the legend, not to make a documentary” (Faiola, 1995, para. 9).

As scholars have suggested in their analyses, reinvention meant dignity was stripped from Pocahontas, and the new creation became a post-modern product merely designed for the purpose of profit and commodification. Ono and Buescher (2001) describe Pocahontas as serving an economic purpose; “[T]he commodification of Pocahontas appears to be an emblem of contemporary capitalism not only in the way it functions but also in its ubiquity and ability to generate the generic form that sells” (p. 34). Situating themselves behind the “titanium-clad brand image” of innocence and entertainment, the Disney Corporation exploited local traditional stories for “private gain...” (p. 2), all while diverting attention from the oppression and exploitation.

What better way to colonize in contemporary times than to invent an Indian who springs from the Euro-American psyche of the yesteryear (Owens, 2001). This image, however, sits beyond the psyche and manifests itself in the lives of children every day through the ubiquitous marketing materials that flooded the nation after the release of *Pocahontas*. Ono and Buescher (2001) provide a scope of the products marketed to consumers, everything from picture books, coloring books, backpacks, clothing of various types, and fake wood cases to costumes and an array of toys. Some products drew on the relationship between John Smith and Pocahontas by “connecting boy’s desire

to the adventure of John Smith, with Pocahontas being the *adventure to be found*” (Ono & Buescher, 2001, p. 31). This is the short list of products that flooded the country and diverted that attention away from Pocahontas as an object (image) that exploited American Indians.

Another film that was released within three years of *Pocahontas* was a film that received many accolades from the American Indian community; this next section focuses on the analyses conducted on this film, *Smoke Signals*.

Smoke Signals’ Analyses Compilation

Smoke Signals—a road-trip film produced by an American Indian producer, Chris Eyre (Cheyenne and Arapaho), and screen writer, Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d’Alene), and with the central characters all portrayed by American Indian actors—became an outlier in the stream of conventional films that replayed familiar themes of conquest and colonization.

In the assemblage of analyses conducted on *Smoke Signals*, “breaking the ranks,” “challeng[ing] the conventional credos” (Cobbs, 2003), and “landmark first” (Hearne, 2012, p. xv) are in the plethora of appraisals that speak to *Smoke Signals’* contribution to the Native mediascape as an influential film that shifted the hegemonic pendulum from the position of dominated (White control) to a position of agency (Indian power). Amanda Cobb (2003) writes in her analysis that “Hollywood’s Indian may no longer belong solely to Hollywood” (p. 206). This is not an overstatement, in her opinion, in light of the colonizing history of America where the American Indian has been precluded from full participation since the advent of film. Explaining this event, Sandra Osawa (1994, June 4) believes “racism” prevented American Indian producers and screen writers

access to mainstream filmmaking. Cobb (2011) supports this in her belief that limited access kept the American Indian identity from self-definition in films.

By no means is there a lack of applauding, as Beverly Singer (2001) expresses Eyre and Alexie's accomplishment as "a prophecy fulfilled." A few years earlier Steve Lewis (Lakota/Tohono O'odham tribe) had proclaimed: "I think it's only a matter of time before our generation gets the expertise and a story that we can go with, that we can possibly turn into a small, all-Indian, independent feature" (Singer, 2001, p. 61). This accomplishment, however, did not occur alone and should not be recognized as the only American Indian film; it was built on the backbone of other film scholars who have worked to reimagine the virtual space and overcome "virtual genocide" (Singer, 2001, p. 62).

Among the numerous admirers lay critics who claim *Smoke Signals* resembles *PowWow Highway* (1989), or at least a "souped-up version" (Cobb, 2011, p. 208). Critics point to the similarities between the films—contemporary American Indians, one an angry protagonist, who take a road trip off the reservation. Both films use flashbacks and comedic effects, and, while they appear to have similarities, are different in the issues they address. A commonality that both of these movies share is their portrayal of American Indians as fully dimensional figures, not the singular, monolithic idea that is seared in the minds of millions of people. And, even with the portrayals of an alcoholic father as part of the story, Cobb (2011) writes, it "served to reinforce the complexity and humanness of the characters" (p. 210). Hearne (2012), dedicating an entire book to the analysis, found that this mainstream movie "capture[d] and repurpose[d] American pop in

service of an Indigenous agenda” (p. 127); in this agenda lies instances of countering the dominant representation.

Smoke Signals: Countering the Representations

Departing from the simplistic formulaic plots, *Smoke Signals* created a film with a “sophisticated, complex and highly political subtext about Native American stereotypes” (Cobbs, 2003; Gilroy, 2001; Mihelich, 2001), and in this way countered the representations in “iconoclastic, humorous ways (Hearne, 2012, p. xvi), which allowed for the subtext to not be *overtly political* (Cobbs, 2003, p. 213). *Smoke Signals* used humor to serve as an activist pedagogy by taking familiar conventions and narratives and using it to speak to the cinematic history, such as the comical reference made by Thomas Builds-A-Fire: “You know, the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV!” In Hearne’s (2012) close textual reading of this comment, she suggests that the intent is to draw the viewers’ attention to issues of “media, audience, exhibition, and reception” (p. 1), particularly related to the Western film. This comment of “Indians watching Indians” speaks to multiple audiences—the characters in the movies and the Native viewers watching *Smoke Signals*. The power of these comments lies in understanding that this scene “bridges the fictional world of the film and the real world of its viewers” (Hearne, 2012, p. 3).

Cobb (2011) approaches the same comment in *Smoke Signals* about “Indians on TV” by examining historical representation of American Indians and pointing to the conceptual entrapment of their identity and the role of consumerism. She explicates on this point by writing: “Native people are not merely objects of popular culture; they are also consumers of and participants in that very culture that capitalizes on their distorted

and manipulated representation” (p. 216). She identifies that the viewer’s cognitive saturation of the dominant stereotypes has become the litmus test to identifying a real Indian, a concept expanded upon in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, in the section on Vanishing Indian.

Drunken Indians, a common stereotype that has persisted for decades in the media, makes an appearance in *Smoke Signals* on more than one occasion. Some scholars read the insertion of these scenes as reinforcing stereotypes (Mihelich, 2001). Others redirect the focus to ways the producer counters the narratives by highlighting scenes that show disruption to the generational connection to alcohol: “the older generation (Arlene and Arnold) are fighting alcoholism, a somewhat younger group (Velma and Lucy) are dealing with recovery, and the youngest generation (Thomas and Victor) are nondrinkers altogether” (Cobb, 2011, p. 218). The reading of the film from the perspective of one scholar is focused around changes and hope for the future surrounding alcohol; the other reading is devoid of hope (Cobbs, 2003).

Through the use of strategic techniques (flashbacks, voice-over, etc.), Eyre and Alexie create a story that speaks to multiple audiences, including Euro-American viewers, and then proceeds to use “humor as tool for incisive political commentary” (Gilroy, 2001, p. 25). This next section focuses on the techniques the filmmakers employed.

Intertextual references and symbolism. *Smoke Signals* is freighted with political references and symbolism. The film begins with a voice-over by Thomas that is imbued with obscurities: “On the fourth of July, 1976, my parents celebrated white people’s independence by holding the largest house party in tribal history.” The

deliberate obscurities allow Hearne to unpack the meaning, specifically this 4th of July scene points to “U.S. nationhood,” the Declaration of Independence, the “founding father,” the “Great White Father,” colonization, and other destructive affairs that are political. The political thematic strand is weaved throughout the film, a strategic employment by Alexie. Political references come to the fore when Lucy’s comments to Victor and Thomas about leaving the reservation that the United States is “as foreign as it gets... Hope you guys have your vaccinations.”

Various statements open up opportunity for the audience to unpack how common discourses are freighted with issues of inclusivity and exclusivity. As Hearne (2012) writes: “‘*We the people*’ do not refer to all people but rather to white men...” (p. 82). The continual return to these symbols brings to light the contested space that American Indians occupy and must contend with.

Throughout *Smoke Signals*, the filmmaker incorporates various techniques to “Indigenize” the filmic space (Denny’s, John Wayne’s teeth, Independence Day), such as when “Arnold finds Young Thomas and brings him to Denny’s for breakfast” (Hearne, 2012, p. 118). Hearne unfolds how this scene, recounted through a story by Thomas, becomes a metaphor for understanding hunger and poverty on the reservation. This leads to a story about a common pan-Indian food, the fry bread, and the ways “... the power to make white foods functional and meaningful in an Indigenous context” (Hearne, 2012, p. 120). In “*Smoke Signals* as Equipment for Living,” Jennifer Meness (2012) used this story as an entry point into how attributes in various American Indian communities became a pan-Indian culture and the ways these collective conditions (pow-wow) create a community for American Indians living off the reservation. She describes the synergy:

“Just seeing other people of one’s own race helps one feel a cultural connection and temporarily soothes the longing for ‘home’” (Meness, 2012, p. 97).

Smoke Signals and humor. John Warren Gilroy (2001) describes the use and effect of humor in *Smoke Signals*: “the palliative effect of humor works to dissolve racist stereotypes even as it softens the blow of social commentary” (p. 25). Hearne (2012), in agreement with Gilroy’s comment, expresses her own description of how humor works: “Native humor, then, can be a subversive strategy that fosters social cohesion and is simultaneously a way of confronting complex issues” (p. 26). Meness (2012) recalls the many times the film uses this strategy, “Jokes that reference Custer, Columbus, the Catholic Church, broken treaties, and oppression” (p. 99). Some of the humor is inclusionary, intended for the Insider, such as the scene at the outset of the film when FallsApart makes reference to his van having “broken down at the crossroads since 1972.” This art of only arresting certain groups, Alexie refers to as trapdoors, “an Indian will walk over them and fall in, but a non-Indian will keep on walking” (West & West, 1998, p. 31). Basically, the Indian understands the joke, but the Outsider remains oblivious to the comment. Alexie and Eyre’s skillful and purposeful use of words educate the non-Native through such comments by the characters, like “*We’re Indians, remember—we barter*” and “A good piece of fry bread could turn any meal into a feast” (Meness, 2012, p. 101). In this way, the Outsider understands the cultural significance that is incorporated in the film.

Meness (2012) points out that joking about religion, the “love-hate relationship” with Christianity, is not off limits (p. 100) in *Smoke Signals*. Using a story to connect the cultural values of the community to Christianity, Thomas tells a tale that involves Arlene

(an Indian), fry bread (commodity), and Jesus (White man's beliefs): "Arlene Joseph makes some of the best Jesus fry bread, fry bread that can walk across water, fry bread risin' from the dead." Her ability to divide the fry bread to feed "multitudes" also connects it the Bible and gives Arlene (the character) a persona of a deity. Thomas's story of Arlene's wondrous ability to use a government surplus commodity to create a meal to address the circumstances of scarcity extends the discourse to explore the scarcity of food on the reservation (Hearne, 2012) and use of government commodity to feed the multitudes of American Indians. This movie does not brush over details or social issues but creates a space where the issues can be problematized and examined.

Another classic scene that uses humor to drive a message about authenticity of Indians occurs on the bus as Victor and Thomas travel to Phoenix to retrieve his father's ashes. In the scene, Victor accuses Thomas of always sounding like a medicine man and asks, "Don't you know how to be a real Indian?" In the next scene, a conversation unfolds about Thomas' internalization of a stereotypical medicine man role (Cobbs, 2011), supposedly from watching the movie *Dances with Wolves*. He endeavors to stop Thomas from copying the Hollywood medicine man and change his exterior identity to an "authentic" Indian. Hearne (2012) describes how theatrical this image is: it requires "props, gestures, facial expression, costuming and especially hairstyle ... to carry it off" (p. 69). The scene focuses on "the powerful relationship between filmic representation and American Indian identity" (Gilroy, 2001, p. 24) and "illustrates the true insidiousness of Hollywood images of Indians" (Cobbs, 2011, p. 216). Using humor, the filmmakers brought to the fore important subjects that affect American Indians.

Hearne (2012) describes Alexie's argument of the importance of using humor not only in *Smoke Signals*, but also in general, as the "most effective political tool out there, because people will listen to anything if they're laughing" (p. 49). Many scenes in the movie approach humor through storytelling. Alexie points out that storytelling is audience-dependent and he has a role: "the whole thing is just as much about me, as the storyteller, as it is about the story...[t]he storyteller is part of the story" (Hearne, 2012, p. 49). The storyteller has control of the story and can change based on the audience; in this way, it can serve as a political leverage.

Storytelling as Political Leveraging

In *Smoke Signals*, the narrative is "literally told" (Cobb, 2011, p. 208) through the voice of Thomas, the film's orator, who closes his eyes when telling a story. His stories are not simple, they are strewn with complexity and layers (West & West, 1998, p. 30), such as in the scene when Thomas recounts the story that killed his parents: "a fire rose up like General George Armstrong Custard and swallowed up my mother and father." Hearne (2012) adds that his "stylized artifice in the storytelling scenes becomes the sign of his legitimacy and authority as a narrator for the film as a whole" (p. 59), but is the avenue by which the screen writer makes a political statement; thereby, in this way, this is more about the screenwriter. Alexie implicates self in the movie through his acknowledgement that this is "a sort of schizophrenic multiple personality of myself that I develop within the movie" (West & West, 1998, p. 30).

These compilations of *Pocahontas* and *Smoke Signals* provide insight into ways filmmakers reinforce and challenge popular culture using the filmic space. In Chapter 6, I explore a recent film, *Drunktown's Finest*, to unpack ways the filmmaker represents

American Indians and examine whether it is more in line with *Pocahontas*' self-serving stereotypes or *Smoke Signals*' counter-narrativizing.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Chapter 4 of this dissertation introduces Critical Race Theory (CRT) and delves briefly into its history, concepts, and tenets, and also introduces Tribal Critical Race (TribCrit) theory. CRT and TribalCrit are the broad theoretical underpinnings to the research. In the first section, an overview is provided of CRT, and, in the next section, TribalCrit is summarized.

Critical Race Theory

Responding to the slow progress of the racial reform of the 1960s, CRT (although not coined that at the time) emerged from early work germinated by Derrick Bell and other critical legal studies and feminist scholars (Mari Matsuda, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Kimberle Crenshaw, etc.). Kimberle Crenshaw (2002), in *The First Decade: Critical Reflections, or a "Foot in the Closing Door"*, reflects on the social narrative of CRT origins, including Derrick Bell's departure from Harvard Law School, Harvard students' (including Crenshaw) exercising political will against the institutions decision, and other events that in the embryonic phase led to scholars "looking both for a critical space in which race was foregrounded and a race space where critical themes were central" (p. 15). Many scholars recognized a need for sophisticated discourses of racial critique; as Delgado (2003) puts it, "new approaches and theories were needed to deal with the color blind, subtle, or institutional forms of racism that were developing and an American public that seemed increasingly tired of hearing about race" (p. 125). Rooted in legal studies, the early years focused on contesting the dominant discourse on race and racism in the legal sector, specifically on the systemic disempowerment of African Americans (Bell, 1995; Calmore, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995;

Delgado, 1995, 1996; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solarzano, 1997). Later, the ideological premise that undergirded Critical Legal Studies would open up new terrain for a host of intellectual inquiry to address the contemporary forms of race and social power. Describing the inception of CRT, Crenshaw (2002) writes, “[w]e would signify the specific political and intellectual location of the project through ‘critical,’ the substantive focus through ‘race,’ and the desire to develop a coherent account of race and law through the term ‘theory’” (p. 16).

CRTs theoretical line diverges from the standard convention of race and focuses on the “role of race and racism in perpetuating social disparities *between* (emphasis added) dominant and marginalized racial groups” (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). Barnes (1990) describes CRT’s role in privileging the perspective of racial groups by purporting that CRT “distinguishes the consciousness of racial minorities and acknowledges the feelings and intangible modes of perception unique to those who have historically been socially, structurally, and intellectually marginalized in the United States” (p. 1894). While the focus is on the marginalized or people of color, CRT is intended for any scholar reflecting critically about race issues.

The Expansion of Critical Race Theory

Around the 1990s, CRT exploded “from a narrow subspecialty of jurisprudence chiefly of interest to academic lawyers into a literature read in departments of education, cultural studies, English, sociology” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. xvi) and from a racial dialogue focused on the Black-White dichotomy to a broad terrain of discourse. The new subspecialties convened under the interest of transforming lives by critically

analyzing the structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization (Solarzano, 1997).

Scholars from different disciplines began to adapt CRT and cultivate the tenets to meet the specific needs of marginalized subgroups. The subgroups have a developed body of literature that focuses on specific issues, including stereotypes, immigration, racism, sexism, sovereignty, classism, language, naturalization, culture, and other forms of subordination. These sub-disciplines include Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Asian American Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribCrit), and Critical Race Feminism (Fem-crit). This collective body endeavors to “disrupt and transform racialized power relationship regardless of the actors involved” (Hylton, 2010, p. 338). The mere emergence of these different specialties is evidence race continues to be a pervasive component and has contemporary significance.

The Basic Tenets of Critical Race Theory

The five themes that make up the basic perspective and pedagogy of CRT are: (1) the Centrality and Intersectionality of race and racism; (2) the Challenge to Dominant Ideology of race Neutrality, Objectivity, Color Blindness, and Meritocracy; (3) Race is Socially Constructed; (4) the Commitment to Social Justice; and (5) the Centrality of Experiential Knowledge (Bell, 1995; Calmore, 1992; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995). While not all scholars subscribe to all the tenets with fidelity, they agree on the proposition.

Centrality and intersectionality of race and racism. Race is deeply entrenched in our society, and it is perceived as normal, not aberrational and, according to Delgado and Stefanic (2001), is “...the usual way society does business” (p. 7). As part of the

fabric of the American society, it is common and can go unnoticed by the majoritarian. In this way, the premise of CRT is that race and racism are endemic and permanent. For those who are affected by racism, it is central in their lives, rather than a marginal factor (Solarzano, 1998). While there is a centralizing of race and racism, it should be recognized that they intersect with other forms of identities, which can compound each other and can form more than one dimension of inequality and subjugation. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state, “no one has a single, easily stated unitary identity” (p. 9). Adding to the viewpoint that everyone has overlapping identities, Hylton (2005) proceeds, “class cannot be theorized in isolation from ‘race’” (p. 84); as much as American Indian is not a unitary identity, it intersects with gender, socio-economic status, and other identities that can become the context for oppression and subjugation. Crenshaw (1991) provides a description using the Black women’s plural identities:

Many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood...the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (p. 1244)

Challenging objectivity, meritocracy, and color-blindness and race-neutrality. CRT challenges the claims of race neutrality, meritocracy, color-blindness, and objectivity (Gardinar & Welch, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), as well as the notion that laws are applied impartially and equally without regard for identity. As Calmore (1992) points out, these claims are a camouflage for the self-interest and power of dominant groups in the United States. Basically, marginalization of racial groups

continues because the White majority benefits from it. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) add, the ““interest convergence” or material determinism... advances the interest of both white elites (materially) and the working-class people (psychically) and thus, there is little incentive to eradicate it” (p. 7).

Scholars bring to light the concept of “interest convergence” by citing the 1954 landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*. In this case, a unanimous decision was reached that segregation in schools violated the 14th amendment and was unconstitutional. Bell (1980) argues that this decision, while purporting to benefit people of color, in fact benefited the White interest by improving the global political image of the United States during a period when accusation arose that racist acts were being committed against African American servicemen. Bell believes that the broadcasting of these incidents internationally led to the overturning of segregation in schools.

Race is socially constructed. In 1986, Michael Omi and Howard Winant released the book *Racial Formation in the United States* which detailed the historical development of race and the argument that races are social constructions, not based on genetics or biology. Recognizing the shortcomings of earlier conceptions of race, Omi and Winant (1994) offered a racial formation theory linked to the evolution of hegemony, they suggested that “race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation...efforts to explain racial inequality as a purely social structural phenomenon are unable to account for the origins, patterning, and transformation of racial differences” (p. 263). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) write, it is “[n]ot objective, inherent, or fixed, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (p. 7); therefore, race is not about skin color but a manifestation of how we

treat each other. More concisely aligned with this new conception is a definition by Banks (1995) that speaks to how power is mediated through the construction of racial definitions. She writes, races are “human invention[s] constructed by groups to differentiate themselves from other groups, to create ideas about the ‘Other,’ to formulate their identities and to defend the disproportionate distribution of rewards and opportunities within society” (p. 22). In fact, the physical traits on which race was based have “little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order traits, such as personality, intelligence, and moral behavior” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). This is a theory that is contrary to the long-standing belief that justified a number of subordination projects, including the enslavement of African Americans and the need to have paternalistic control over them

Commitment to social justice. Scholars of CRT not only try to understand the social process and structures but also have a commitment to pursue anti-racial social justice and offer a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression (Matsuda, 1991; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The guiding principle of CRT is to “eliminate racism as part of a broader effort to end subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin” (Malagon, Huber & Velez, 2009, p. 255).

Centrality of experiential knowledge. A final tenet of CRT is the belief that People of Color are creators of knowledge, and their experiential knowledge is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding racial subordination (Delgado Bernal, 2002). “[L]ike other substantive critical theoretical frameworks” (Hylton, 2012, p. 23), CRT is determined by an ontology that argues reality is subjective and individually constructed,

social reality is experiential and can be transmitted through counter stories, and through the method of storytelling the subject illuminate concepts, ideas and experiences.

Through counterstorytelling, the dominant narratives, which are the majoritarian stories that privilege the White Patriarchy, are challenged. This method, which CRT advocates, places the authority in the hands of those who have direct experiences of oppression.

Over the years, the unique voices of color have offered storytelling and counter-storytelling in myriad forms, including family histories, parables, and chronicles (Delgado, 1996; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002).

Application of Critical Race Theory

Hylton (2005) describes CRT as a “pragmatic perspective that engages a theoretical framework” (p. 83), and as such, CRT can be applied effectively to various disciplines, including law, education, and racial climate. Since the initial emergence of CRT, it has been applied to a number of disciplines to address issues surrounding race and racism. In 1995, Ladson-Billing and Tate developed a critical race theoretical perspective with the focal interest in education, analogous to CRT in legal studies. CRT in education highlights the prominence of race inequality and racism in educational institutions and works toward the disruption of the oppressive conditions that impact the trajectory of People of Color (Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Hiraldo, 2010; Huber, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Using this framework, Solarzano (1998) examined the ways racism takes form in teacher education and how it maintains the subordination of Students of Color. Two years later Solarzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) used CRT to address racial microaggression by focusing on how it influences the collegiate campus racial climate and the performance of students. In 2001, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal

also used this framework to examine student's resistance through storytelling, using two events to extend the concept of resistance to focus on the transformative potential.

A few years later, Indigenous scholar, in 2005, Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, recognizing the need to address issues affecting Indigenous peoples in the United States, developed Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). In 2007, Solarzano and Velez (2007) introduced Critical Race Spatial Analysis (CRSA) to education—an emerging research methodology that utilizes digital mapping technology to create a visual representation of where race and racism is located. In 2008, Linda Perez Huber developed the concept of racist nativism—"the institutionalized ways people perceive, understand and make sense of contemporary U.S. immigration that justifies *native (white)* dominance and reinforces hegemonic power" (Huber, 2011, p. 379).

As part of a larger CRT community, each of these scholars deconstruct dominant paradigms that perpetuate ideologies rooted in White superiority (Anzaldúa, 1999; Córdova, 1998; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Huber, 2008) and have paved and are paving the way for understanding ways various disciplines can approach issues of race and racism using critical race methodologies.

Tribal Critical Race Theory

To address the complex relationship between American Indians and the United States government and the liminal space (legally, politically, and socially) of Indigenous Americans, Brayboy proposed a theory that he coined Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit). TribalCrit offers a lens through which American Indian specificities can be analyzed—the "multiple, nuances, and historically- and geographically-located

epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 427). The nine tenets in summary are:

1. Colonization is endemic to society.
2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain.
3. Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.
4. Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.
5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens.
6. Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation.
7. Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, but they also illustrate the differences and adaptability among individuals and groups.
8. Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.
9. Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work towards social change.

The unique positioning of American Indians as a racial and political group sets this theory starkly apart from other CRT subspecialties. It addresses the American Indian grouping as a legal/political group based on the government-to-government relations.

TribalCrit Tenets

Brayboy's engagement in the specificities is an intellectual contribution that is distinctively progressive in the sense that it sets forth the notion that American Indians are unique in their struggles and that their struggles are no less about racism but more about colonization. These tenets bring understanding to the intellectual and physical space that American Indians occupy.

The first tenet of TribCit is colonization is endemic to society. Narrowing the concept of colonization to the contemporary, Brayboy (2005) writes, “[b]y colonization, I mean European American thought, knowledge and power structures that dominate *present-day* (emphasis added) society in the United States” (p. 430). Subsumed in this definition is the goal to colonize American Indians to become like those in dominant power. To achieve that there is a replacement of the Indigenous heritage languages with the English language, replacement of paganistic practices with Christian beliefs, and replacement of the economic, political, social, legal, and aesthetic institutions (Battiste, 2002); this has been part of the colonizing history of American Indians and is a modern threat.

Colonizations' endemic nature is exercised in education through the dismissal of Indigenous epistemologies for European way of knowing, Brayboy (2005) writes: “Eurocentric thinkers dismissed Indigenous knowledge in the same way they dismissed any socio-political cultural life they did not understand; they found it to be unsystematic

and incapable of meeting the productivity needs of the modern world” (p. 5). This was achieved through the agenda of “kill the Indian, save the man”—a form of cultural genocide that was espoused by Richard H. Pratt, a military officer who was given the authority to govern the education of American Indian children. The goal of cultural genocide was to destroy the specific characteristics of American Indianness and force them to take up a different identity. Simply put, the agenda was to dispossess the “Indian” from the American Indian, the process of which would leave the subject intact but would Americanize the American Indian into an American product.

This goal of colonization led to the forcing of American Indian children to off-reservation schools and the eradication of their Indian identity in boarding schools. In examining the endemic nature of the colonization of American Indians, Brayboy (2005) positions the Indigenous subject as becoming subsumed by the colonizer through the “colonization of the mind”—operating in the mode of thinking and operating like the colonized. Brayboy (2005) writes,

The colonization has been so complete that even many American Indians fail to recognize that we are taking up colonialist ideas when we fail to express ourselves in ways that may challenge dominant society’s ideas about who and what we are supposed to be, how we are supposed to behave, and what we are supposed to be within the larger population.” (p. 431)

The physical, cultural and psychological colonization has affected the identity of American Indians such that they have become invisible to the Euro-American. Brayboy (2005) writes “the everyday experiences of American Indians, the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, have essentially been removed from the awareness of dominant

members of U.S. society. These viable images have instead been replaced with fixed images from the past of what American Indians once were” (p. 431), and seen as a single “racial” group, without a legal/political identity.

The second tenet is the proposition that policies toward American Indians are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain. Multiple authors have researched the history of American Indians in relation to the government and contend that the dominant culture was and is exploitive to the American Indians. Vickery and Hunter (2016), citing separate pieces by Iseburg (2000) and Nabokov (1999), write,

Since explorers and white settlers began to appear in North America in the late 15th century, Native Americans have experienced a series of challenges against their reproductive, cultural, spiritual, political and environmental and, altogether, human rights. They have been forced from their homelands, first through land grabs by European settlers and later through the U.S. government’s appropriation of Native territory—resettlement that resulted in involuntary livelihood changes.

(p. 3)

Europeans operate under a different ideology, evident in their view on land and personal property. From their perspective, uninhabited land is open for settlement. The acquisition of more land is related to social prestige, a deeply rooted value orientation that has led to the encroachment of Indian land. An Indigenous orientation values the land and sees it as holding life-sustaining crops and spiritual-sustaining properties (Brayboy, 2005). Two doctrines elucidated in Brayboy’s piece that justified the usurping of land, both rooted in White supremacy are Manifest Destiny and Norman Yoke. The Norman Yoke policy argues that “not only do individuals have a right to utilize and

exploit natural resources on lands that are considered ‘vacant,’ but they have a moral obligation to do so.... Manifest Destiny [is]... the idea that it is God’s destiny for the new settlers to have the land” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 432).

These “policies were rooted in a self-interested reading of legal concepts that allowed White settlers to rationalize and legitimize their decisions to steal lands from the Indigenous peoples who already inhabited them” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 431). In the continual course of colonization that lasted hundreds of years, the Indians are first dispossessed of their land and then placed in reservations rich with natural resources, which later became the product of desire by the government. Brayboy describes the action as, “Tribal nations...were molested and land rich in oil and natural resources was stolen for the monetary benefits of its “new owners”” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 432). This is no small matter, when considering American Indians had been divested of a majority of their land base.

The later action of extracting minerals from reservations “left a legacy of more than >160,000 abandoned mines in the Western U.S., that are home to the majority of Native American lands” (Lewis, Hoover & Mackenzie, 2017, p. 130). While this “advance[d] the interest of [the] white elites (materially)” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7), it created health concerns for those living near the abandoned mines. These individuals have an increased likelihood of developing multiple chronic diseases (Lewis et al, 2017). The colonization does not stop there, according to Vickery and Hunter (2016), “Native American lands have increasingly become targets for unwanted land uses such as dump sites, nuclear and weapons testing facilities, and resource extraction” (p. 3).

Brayboy (2005) argues that the policies toward American Indians are rooted in White supremacy, as recognized through favoring of the classic White canon and the epistemological construction of White people. Shakespeare, Plato, and more recently Foucault and Marx are seen as emblems of the cultured and civilized (Spracklen, 2013). In colleges and universities, students are expected to know about the philosophical canon of dead White men, despite the numerous publications by American Indian scholars, including but not limited to Louis Owens, a Choctaw Cherokee novelist, and the contributions of Gerald Vizenor, an Anishinaabe critic and writer who introduced trickster hermeneutics—a prose that “invites his audience into a reading process that emphasizes the mobility of concepts and the performative nature of words themselves” (Carlson, 2011, p. 14). White supremacy, Brayboy (2005) writes, “is viewed as natural and legitimate and it is precisely through this naturalization that White supremacy derives its hegemonic power” (p. 432).

The third tenet of TribalCrit is that Indigenous people occupy a unique space in that they are both racial and political/legal groups that exist within a contemporary society but are rarely treated as such, according to Brayboy (2005). In 2004, President George W. Bush acknowledged the deep-rooted nature of the legal/political status in an Executive Order that outlines the “special relationship” of American Indian tribal communities to the federal government, one that is recognized on a government-to-government basis.

There is much to be argued around the idea that American Indians are a racialized entity. This practice of defining American Indians under a single grouping has contributed, historically and contemporarily, to their dispossession and deculturalization.

For one, it is the White power that has usurped the authority to identify groups and stratify them on a hierarchy, and second, race-based identification to a single identifier does not take into consideration the 567 American Indian tribes, with distinct cultures and languages, that occupy the United States.

The idea that the identity has been taken up by the government is drawn upon by Smith (1999) who points to identity being governed by blood quantum-membership to a tribe based on American Indian ancestral bloodline-and reservation as spaces that are regulated; these all serve the colonizing society. The requirement to use a system of membership to identify as an American Indian to a specific tribe, an enactment by the government, has been the subject of contentious debate (Schmidt, 2011):

American Indians, unlike any other American ethnic group, must constantly prove their identity, which in turn, forces them to adopt whatever Indian histories or identities are needed to convince themselves and others of their Indian identity, and thus their unique cultural heritage. (p. 1)

This notion of governing blood quantum through a White research method (quantitative approach) is problematic in that it is being used to legitimate race, deeming it valuable and “timeless, beyond the influence of culture and history” (Verma, 2004, p. 61). This process of instituting a process valued by the European trumps the tribes exercising their own autonomy.

The fourth tenet is the belief in and desire to obtain and forge tribal autonomy, self-determination, self-identification, and ultimately tribal sovereignty. These concepts converge as legal terms and are rooted in power and control. Tribal sovereignty is having political objective or authority as distinct American Indian tribes; autonomy is self-

government, which is “linked to the ability to interact with the U.S. and other nations on a nation-to-nation basis” (Brayboy 2005, p. 434). Together, these concepts form the belief that American Indian tribes have the authority to manage their own affairs. However, simple as it sounds, the American government has denied them this right, informally, during the treaty-making process and more legally with the Marshall Trilogy, which played a part in the government’s right to define sovereignty for tribes in the United States. Self-determination “rejects the guardian/ward relationship” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 432) and is focused on tribes having political independence that is not subsumed by external powers. Lastly, but not the least of these, is the notion of self-identification-defining themselves.

Through TribalCrit, the concept of culture, knowledge, and power takes on new meaning when understood through an Indigenous epistemology and ontology. This is the fifth tenet of TribalCrit. In committing to examine through this lens, there is a natural migration away from the Western ways of knowing, as the two are juxtaposed to one another. Take for example culture; from a Western perspective, it is distilled to a matrix of customary beliefs and social forms and the features of everyday existence (culture, n.d.). From an Indigenous lens, culture is “simultaneously fluid or dynamic, fixed or stable...tied to a group of people and often a physical place,” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 434) and continually getting reshaped by influences. Shawn Wilson (2008), author of *Research Is Ceremony*, writes about the Indigenous lens, specifically related to research paradigm, and shares the important concept that all ideas develop through the formation of relationship. This concept of relationality is at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous, according to Wilson (2008). The relationship is not only to people, but also

the relationship to land. Brayboy (2005) also makes the point that for many Indigenous people culture is rooted to land.

Knowledge is another concept that is problematized by Brayboy. He distinguishes between three different types of knowledge that exist in accord with one another: cultural knowledge, knowledge of survival, and academic knowledge. Brayboy (2005) explains these distinguishes these knowledges:

Cultural knowledge is an understanding of what it means to be a member of a particular tribal nation; this includes particular traditions, issues, and ways of being and knowing that make an individual a member of a community.

Knowledge of survival includes an understanding of how and in what ways change can be accomplished and the ability and willingness to change, adapt, and adjust in order to move forward as an individual and community. Finally, academic knowledge is that acquired from educational institutions. (p. 434)

Brayboy (2005) contends that the blending of these knowledges is key to the American Indians' survival. He argues that the strategic and directed use of the knowledges generates power—"the ability to survive rooted in the capacity to adapt and adjust to changing landscapes, times, ideas, circumstances, and situations" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 435). He explains that "power through an indigenous lens is an expression of sovereignty...[i]n this way, sovereignty is community based" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 435) and "culture is the base for knowledge that ultimately leads to power" (p. 436).

The author of TribalCrit vehemently rejects the call for assimilation of American Indians, a concept he addresses through his sixth tenet. A replay of history shows that many policies were instituted for the specific purpose of preparing American Indians for

assimilation. Many of the assimilation policies were translated into practice in education institutions where the main objective was to obliterate the cultural heritage and identity of the American Indian and replace them with White American values (Brayboy, 2005).

Addressing this issue, Brayboy (2005) writes:

While trust responsibility and sovereignty were supposed to be the guiding principles of Indian education, “appropriate” is a relative term whose meaning was left to officials at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to define. Often “appropriate” education was assumed to be that which eradicated Indianness or promoted Anglo values and ways of communicating. (p. 437)

Remaking an Indian entailed detribalizing them and transforming them into cooperative pseudo-Americans (Reyhner & Eder, 1989). CRT scholars’ explicit rejection of assimilation is even more repudiated when considering the success of the Indigenous people is predicated on maintaining a strong sense of Indigenous identity. Their ways of knowing are vital factors in the success and self-determination.

The seventh tenet of TribalCrit emphasizes the importance of tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future; it honors the adaptability of groups and recognizes the differences within individuals and between people and groups (Brayboy, 2005). In this tenet, Brayboy brings to the fore scholarship that points to the different value orientations and the valuing of these orientation—the Euro-Americans value competition and the Indigenous value cooperation (Brayboy, 2005). Research by both Burkhart (2004) and Deloria (1988), as indicated by Brayboy (2005) suggests cooperation is devalued in White educational institutions and viewed “as an inability to work alone or to be self-sufficient, rather than a potential source of strength and a way to

more fully address issues of concern to both individuals and communities” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 438). In vignettes offered by Brayboy in the introduction of his articles, the students in the graduating class reiterate of importance of community. Their attainment of “formal, western education becomes a tool of empowerment and liberation for the community” (p. 438), this is a conception that differs from the Euro-American values, in which, individualism is valued.

Honoring stories and oral knowledge are central features of TribalCrit. Much like Critical Race Theorists who use stories to challenge the dominant narrative and empower those who have been marginalized, TribalCrit uses stories to strengthen their community. This is the eighth tenet. Brayboy argues that stories are legitimated forms of data from the Indigenous perspective and, historically, are the way that culture and knowledge was imparted. “These stories do not have to be told by accomplished academics or writers; rather, the stories valued by TribalCrit are the foundations on which Indigenous communities are built” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 439). Both written and oral are equally valued. Expressing the importance of the data, Brayboy (2005) argues that act of “hearing” is valuable to understanding the nuances in stories. He expounds on this idea by placing the onus on the “hearer rather than the speaker for delivering a clearly articulated message” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 440).

Espousing to the CRT tenet of committing to social justice, CRT also believes there needs to be a component of action or activism. TribalCrit theorists “expose structural inequalities and assimilatory processes and work toward debunking and deconstructing them...” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 440). The focus is on meeting the needs of the communities and “creat[ing] structures that will address the real, immediate and future needs” (p. 440).

TribalCrit continually reminds us that American Indians are situated in a long history of colonization and assimilation policies, these have formed the identity of American Indians as simultaneously political and racial. As I examine the film, *Drunktown's Finest*, there will be a continual return to these tenets.

In the next chapter, I provide an overview of the process I used to search for scenes that reinforced and countered the representations.

CHAPTER 5: METHODS AND DESIGN

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), both grounded in critical theory, are the paradigms and methodological approaches utilized in this study. While CRT and TribalCrit offer a paradigm, methodological assumptions, and ways those in marginalized positions achieve the goal (storytelling or counterstorytelling), they do not have a strict process from which a study can be approached. Understanding that methodology is the theoretical approach to the problem and method includes the techniques used for data collection, I selected Thematic Analysis as the action to answer the question “In what ways are contemporary American Indian-directed films unmasking, critiquing, confronting, and/or reinforcing, through visual storytelling, conventional stereotypes of American Indians?” in the *film Drunktown’s Finest*. It was especially desirable to use Thematic Analysis because it bridged the conceptual and translated the methodological.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely-used, flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and formalizing the identification and development of themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clark, 2006). It is a comprehensive process, whereby the researcher identifies cross-references between data (Hayes, 1997). The flexibility of this approach makes it a research tool that is widely used by scholars in different professions, including in the analysis of “videotaped encounters, simulations, transcript of speeches, memos...children’s readers, art, films, memos and personal letters (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 12). Part of the power of this tool is the ability to use it to “focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas” (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012, p. 10). It allows the

researchers to become involved in the process by collecting the data and becoming a translator of the data; therefore, it is crucial that the researcher have relevant knowledge of the topic and phenomena. In my case the lived-experienced and knowledge about the Navajo culture served to benefit my analysis.

While Thematic Analysis is not wedded to any methodological or theoretical frameworks, when amalgamated with CRT and TribalCrit it forms the basis for Critical Thematic Analysis (CTA). As a constructionist method, I applied CTA to “examine the ways in which the events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81), namely, within the discourse of hegemony and the broader social context. Familiarity with the effects of colonization on the reservation and issues of sovereignty allowed me to look beyond the surface level content and interpret latent content; this is seen in my expounding of statements made in the film (e.g., Is she my cousin, cousin or my real cousin?). Boytzis (1998), in response to the familiarity writes, “Researchers with no or little familiarity [...] tend to direct their attention to the manifest level” (p. 13). This also required setting aside my own perceptions, an important position that allowed me to see beyond the film’s manifest message.

Arguably most researchers use the common language of “emerging” to describe their identification of concepts embedded through their analysis; however, this is a passive account of the process of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In response to this general statement about the process, Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) write:

[it] can be misinterpreted to mean that themes “reside” in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will “emerge” like Venus on the half shell.

If themes “reside” anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (p. 205)

This statement supports the belief that researchers *do* take an active role in the process of extracting codes. Further, the notion of “giving voice” (part of CRT’s emancipatory aim) is no less an active process that involves the researcher. Fine (2002) explicates this by arguing that this approach “involves carrying out unacknowledged pieces of narrative evidence that we select, edit and deploy to border our arguments” (p. 218).

Boyatzis (1998) outlines the four distinct stages of sensing themes and developing codes in steps:

1. *Sensing themes*—that is, recognizing the codable moment
2. *Doing it reliably*—that is, recognizing the codable moment and encoding it consistently
3. *Developing codes*
4. *Interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework*—that is, contributing to the development of knowledge

In this study, major categories under which code would emerge were defined within the research question—subvert, disrupt, and/or reinforce. The data extracted was collected and analyzed around these themes and, in this way, the analysis was purposive rather than exhaustive. This next section provides information about the process I employed, using Boyatzis’ steps to produce themes to further explore and interpret.

Critical Thematic Analysis in Process

Boyatzis (1998) outlines that to get to the point of interpretation is a process: “Observation precedes understanding.... Recognizing an important moment (seeing) precedes encoding it (seeing it as something), which in turn precedes interpretation” (p. 1). To capture important ideas in the film, my process began with watching the films on more than one occasion; first, I watched the film as an entertainment product and to familiarize myself with the film—the first phase in the Braun and Clark’s proposal of conducting a thematic analysis.

In subsequent viewings of the film, I listened intently to the content (words spoken by the characters), wrote down the exact words, looked at the scenery used in the film, and examined the role of each character played in the film. I approached this film analysis by extracting “initial codes” that fit in the pre-established categories developed by my research question—disrupting hegemonic forces, reinforcing dominant narratives, and countering conventional way of perceiving American Indians in films. And, with my thematic analysis driving my research question, the sub-codes were not dependent on the number of times they emerged but that they answered, even loosely, an aspect of my research question; in that way, a single incident was sufficient enough to be explored.

I examined it through the lens of earlier films and identified areas where there was an inscription of the earlier stereotypes, Hollywood-constructed role or narrative. Through multiple viewings, I was able to identify themes, such as Felixia’s promiscuity. Felixia’s actions could be described as reinforcing the Sexualized Maiden trope, but her body used to exert sovereignty could be seen as subverting or disrupting. Further, it could be problematized by analyzing through the lens of “speaking back.” Her action

was the theme, which I expounded on and placed in the pre-established categories. I learned that no single theme fits into a single category; it can be interpreted from multiple views and perceptions.

Knowing that films produced in the last century included content that used juxtaposition to render American Indian characters as incompetent and in a lower category in a pseudo-evolutionary classification, I sought out dichotomies and comparisons. From this emerged a comparison of the women in the film; however, this was also not a single category as each character had their own personality. I looked at aspects that set apart the characters from one another: Nizhoni as an adoptive child and her adoptive mother as a doctor. With the multiple viewings, I continued to ask such questions as: do these reinforce the dominant narratives? Do they disrupt the long-standing beliefs? The categorizing of the codes that “emerged” was a crucial part of the process that helped me to organize my data.

As Boyatzis (1998) points out, “openness to information...[is] essential in developing codes” (p. 11). This I had to acknowledge from the beginning. At the manifest level, the films could be seen as reinforcing and contributing to the negative dominant narrative, such as the characters drinking alcohol and the association of American Indians being drunks. Openness required using an ongoing reflexive approach and asking the question, could this fit in another category? What other content in the film could change the analysis? Expounding on topics, such as effects of colonization (alcohol, etc.) and subsequent information (Nizhoni’s parent dying in an accident), brought forth a deeper understanding to the content in the film. CRT seeks to allow the reader to become knowledgeable about the feelings and realities of those affected by the

inequalities, and the expounding of the themes not only helped contextualize but also “gave voice” to the filmmaker. By bringing to the fore the effects of colonization and social issues touched on in the movie, TribalCrit identifies ways the visual images have a relationship with the lived experiences, which is an interest of critical theory scholars.

This is how the process of thematic analysis was used to carry out the analysis of the films *Drunktown's Finest*.

Film Selection

The study began with compiling a list of movies produced within the last 5 years by American Indian filmmakers (producers and directors) that had a primarily Native cast. The next step was to narrow the list to movies produced more recently. A number of books have been written that provide an overview of movies created recently. I felt it would be most compelling to select a movie that was not a part of these reviews.

After watching YouTube videos of the interviews conducted with the actors/actresses of *Drunktown's Finest* and hearing from the director the inspiration that drove the making of the movie: “When I was growing up I saw a news piece on ABC’s *20/20* describing my hometown as ‘Drunktown, USA.’ This film is my effort to defy that judgement of my community” (“Drunktown’s Finest,” 2013, para. 1), I decided that this film was the movie I would analyze. Her recognition of the stereotypes that drove her to produce the film was the draw for me to examine the movie.

CHAPTER 6: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *DRUNKTOWN'S FINEST*

American Indians have been arguing that the film industry has inaccurately portrayed Indigenous people and their histories, and, thus, began engaging in a complex dialogue with the dominant narratives by producing and directing their own films, using the visual space for counterstorytelling. A classic example is the 1998 film *Smoke Signals*, in which the producer used the visual space to speak back to the prevailing stereotypes in order to address the problematic depictions of one-dimensional characters and storylines. The filmmakers, Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie, produced a film that rendered Natives as complex, multi-dimensional subjects situated in the present. Like other films, *Drunktown's Finest* capitalized on its access to the film industry's center to share a film that could act as pedagogy for reimagining the American Indians.

Film analysis continues to be a useful tool for critical reflection and investigating ways American Indians are persistently engaging in dialogue with hegemonic forces. In this chapter, I analyze an American Indian-directed film, *Drunktown's Finest*, to better understand how a recent film directed by an Indigenous filmmaker is unmasking, critiquing, and/or confronting conventional narratives. Simultaneously, I look for instances where the filmmaker is reinforcing plotlines (invisibility, liminality, etc.) described in Chapter 2. One question that is inevitably addressed through this analysis, although not a part of the overarching research question, is whether and how the presence of American Indians (as insiders in the Hollywood space) changed the American Indian representation in the focal film?

Synopsis of *Drunktown's Finest* and Liminality

Drunktown's Finest, an Indigenous-led visual repository focuses on three Native American characters—an adopted Christian girl, a father-to-be, and a promiscuous transgender woman— whose lives are interwoven through their experiences and relationships. The distinctive locality of the film is the Dry Lake reservation set in the present day.

Nizhoni Smiles is a Navajo girl who was adopted by White parents, both doctors, after the death of her alcoholic parents. Her connection to her Native community is by ethnicity, from which her adoptive parents believe they saved her. Her mother makes notable this belief through her statement: “I knew your family; if I lived under the conditions they did, I probably would have drunk myself to death too.” Her adoptive parents expect her to sever her emotional ties to her extended biological family. Without their approval, she seeks out her biological family in hopes of settling the betwixt of her identity that transpires in her nightmares.

Luther “SickBoy” Maryboy, soon-to-be Navajo father, is attempting to escape “Drunktown” and leave his rebellious streak behind by joining the Army. As an introduction into the narrative of the movie, Sickboy assaults an Indigenous police officer while in an inebriated state; charges are dropped with the intervention of the Army recruiter. His desire to change is driven by his pregnant girlfriend, Angela, and his sister, Max, for whom he has legal custody. While retrieving moccasins from his mother, for his sister’s Kinaalda (Puberty) Ceremony, he assaults his White stepfather. Later, a fistfight between Sickboy and Westside gang member turns to retribution when they

ravage his girlfriend's apartment. He is disqualified for the military when his stepfather reports him for the assault.

Felixia John is a promiscuous transgender woman who lives with her traditional grandparents in a single-wide trailer on the reservation. Her grandfather, a medicine man, supports her gender orientation. She auditions for a "Women of the Navajo calendar" with hopes that notoriety will help her leave the reservation, but at the audition her sexual identity is revealed by another model. Her life intersects with Sickboy's after a brief interaction at a grocery store. A drunk Sickboy discovers her sexual identity while kissing her. Felixia, who exchanges sex for money communicates through Facebook with clients and receives a message from a White man from New York who is willing to cover transportation costs for her to come to the big city.

In the timeline of events, Sickboy struggles to stay out of police custody over the weekend but continually gets drawn to his past life. He endeavors to escape the reservation life by joining the Army; this is continually interrupted by repeated run-ins with the law and friends who propose activities that interfere with this escape. Nizhoni is spending her last weekend near the reservation with her White adoptive parents before leaving for college back east. She has a desire to find her birth family despite her parents' insistence to leave the past behind. Felixia's quest for acceptance as a Two-Spirited person (transgender) is marked by disappointment as she tries to embrace her female identity and become a model. Her life is marked by sexual encounters with men. The disjunctive narrative of all three primary protagonists converge at the Puberty Ceremony held for Sickboy's (Luther's) custodial sister, Max.

Liminality: A Major Element

Freeland's major element in the film is the three characters' liminality. Turner (1967) describes people in this betwixt of life as "threshold people" who "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (p. 95). Meaning, each of the characters are in a "marginal status of not having the old identity or a new identity" (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003, p. 403). As American Indian characters, they occupy a liminal space that is marked by their racial and political mental identities, which is further compounded by their personal "betwixt" that require negotiation. Sickboy, as a father-to-be, attempts to transition into a new phase in life but is easily seduced by his old life. Despite a military recruiter's effort to help him transition by expunging his criminal history to ensure admission into a society that is a "privilege and not a right," he continually wanes between what was, what is, and the potential of what could be. His desire to transcend from his old life into a new phase comes with inner crisis, an "emotional consequence induced by the separation phase" (Markowitz & Iborra, 2003, p. 403), a phase a person goes through to achieve optimal identity. Nizhoni, is no less secure in her marginal phase of finding her true identity. As a Navajo girl raised by White parents, she passes through a realm of uncertainty as a person who is convinced finding biological ties will resolve her identity issues. Felixia's identity is one of liminality as a transgender who desires acceptance by both genders.

Critical Analysis of Space and Locality

This Land Is Not a Place to Live

The political and spatial locality of the American Indian reservation is crystallized by Nizhoni in her framing of the film's identity in her opening statement: "They say this

land is not a place to live; it's a place to leave. Then why do people stay?" This comment, that is also part of the theatrical trailer, necessitates an interrogation. In the unpacking of the statement, the analysis requires a critical reading that extends beyond the cinematic representation; the exegesis is predicated on the subject.

There are two probable subjects in the "*They say this is not a place to live.*" The first probability is the insiders, the American Indian people living on the reservation; the second is the Outsiders, vaguely speaking, the representatives of the imperialistic U.S government who placed the American Indian in the confined, marginal space. Arguably, if the American Indian is expressing this opinion, they do so through a stance of *recognition*; if the White man makes such an utterance, he does so to *implicate* self – even if implicitly without responsibility or recognition. Despite the subject, the reference to land is of a geographic location that was formed through political action by an authoritative, dominant power.

Articulated by the American Indian. Interrogating the comment "*they say this land is not a place to live*" from the perspective of the American Indian people necessitates exposition regarding the space and the history of colonization that rendered the reservations a straightjacket, as *not* a place to live. By the twentieth century, history had culminated with the designation of parcels of ancestral and stolen, in defined regions given back to the original owners, the American Indian tribes. The allotment of reserved land was mapped out by U.S. political leaders to include regions of the country that have been described as "inhospitable" and "uninhabitable" and consisted of only a small fraction of their original space. Scholars have argued that the European colonist had no difficulty in convincing themselves they had ample reason, a divine and ordained right, to

possess and entitle the land, namely as part of the patina of “Manifest Destiny”—a concept that is consumed by the belief that the expansion of the United States was justifiable and inevitable.

The European’s unilateral decision to claim land from American Indians and the attractive adjunct to “settle the land” (Keohane, 2008, para. 5) by assimilating the Indigenous people into White ways has resulted in a legacy of trauma and unresolved generational grief that manifest into personal, social, and economic problems on reservation lands. A theory formed by Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn (1998) explains the historical loss in the form of current problems facing American Indians: “the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over one’s lifetime and from generation to generation following loss of lives, land, and vital aspects of culture” (p. 56). The exhibiting of the aftereffects of trauma that are manifesting on reservation land, the land that is “not a place to live,” is summed up by Saito (2015) who describe the symptoms:

...American Indians living on or near reservations in 2005 had a 49 percent unemployment rate, and 29 percent of those with jobs earned wages below the poverty level. On many reservations, especially on the Northern Plains, unemployment rates over 80 or even 90 percent are common. Indigenous peoples have the lowest life expectancies, highest infant mortality rates, highest suicide rates, and highest rates of death from exposure and communicable diseases in the United States. (p. 45)

The comment “They say this land is not a place to live,” when interpreted from the perspective of the American Indian, offers a *recognition* of the reservation milieu as a

place of disproportionately high rates of poverty, little economic activity, health issues and many social ills that resulted when the complex intermarriage between the ideological and social forces formed the hegemonic powers, that in turn enforced ideas that formed the reservation lands and displaced the lives of American Indians.

Articulated through the master narrator. If “they” is articulated through the lens of the master narrator, the promulgation of the dominant ideology that has saturated filmic storylines—White man as good guy and Indian as standing in the way of progress—becomes the reference to redeem the subject. This is despite historian, David E. Stannard’s (1992) insightful analysis that the White-Indian encounter was the “worst human holocaust the world has ever witnessed, roaring across two continents non-stop for four centuries and consuming the lives of countless tens of millions of people” (p. 146). This notion of “White man as good guy” is propelled by the national account of liberty and freedom *for all*, albeit, the fact that beneficiaries are those who have the racial identity of White. In the examination of these notions, structures and ideologies were framed around the desires of the Euro-American “not against the needs and values of tribal communities” (Pommershein, 1989, p. 248).

The blaming of the American Indians shifts to an *implication* of the White men when we peel back the layers and reveal that behind the reservation system is a domination that protects a specific group. Cheryl Harris (1995) posits that racial identity and property are interrelated concepts, and following the conquest of the American Indian people, “whiteness became the basis of racialized privilege [...and as a] property continued to serve as a barrier to effective change as the system of racial classification operated to...” (p. 276) protect the group of people who are beneficiaries of the boundary,

reservation system. From this perspective, the selection of specific land areas and the mapping of boundaries around the reservations were conscious strategies that produced and reproduced the inequalities that supported the hegemonic structure in society. As if writing to cut to the heart of the discourse of how Whiteness as property serves the dominant group and subordinates the American Indians, Saito (2015) state, “the wealth and power owes its existence to the ongoing colonization of Indigenous lands and people” (p. 32). In other words, through the confining of American Indians to reservations, the property interest of Whites is reproduced. Incrimination to this notion came in the form of admission on September 8, 2000, when the head of the Bureau of Indian affairs formally apologized for the agency’s participation in the forced relocation and assimilation of the American Indian to the White man’s way of life (Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2005). This confession takes the viewer from a place of blaming the American Indian for creating their own social ills on the reservations and *implicates* the White (government) who created the reservation system as part of creating inequalities.

A close reading of the rest of the question is examines in the context of space and locality in the next section.

Then Why Do People Stay?: Analysis of Space and Locality

The comment does not stop at “They say this land is not a place to live it’s a place to leave.” Nizhoni continues with a question: “then why do people stay?” This can be analyzed from the viewpoint that the invisible hand of hegemony keeps the American Indian people in their subordinate position in a location of poverty and despair.

However, this would only position Indigenous people as eternally passive, invisible, and void of choice, which is a colonialist stance that privileges the dominant ideology and

interests and leaves the Indian as victim, which is a politically weighted position that reinforces hegemony.

The visual images of Max learning the Navajo language and Felixia's grandparents holding sacred ceremonies offer an opportunity to read beyond the initial assumption that reservations are "islands of poverty and despair" (Pommersheim, 1989, p. 246) and Indians are victims and repositions the lens to extol the space as a location of survivance, where there is an "active sense of presence" (Vizenor, 1999, p. vii). The lives of those on the reservation, in character and film, are physical imageries of their own continuation of Native stories, thereby their mere existence is a renunciation of tragedy and victimry. Reading from this perspective reclaims Indigenous geographies as a place, by its very existence, where there exists countervailing forces of strength and resilience. Pommersheim (1989) describes this space as:

Hidden in this web of description and claims lies the important notion of the reservation as place: a physical, human, legal, and spiritual reality that embodies the history, dreams, and aspirations of Indian people, their communities, and their tribes. It is a place that marks not only the enduring survival of Indian communities from a marauding western society, but also a place that holds the promise of fulfillment. It is a place that marks the endurance of Indian communities against the onslaught of a marauding European society; it is also a place that holds the promise of fulfillment. (p. 246)

Freeland's insertions of visual imagery as cultural renewal and revitalization repositions *Drunktown's Finest* from a movie about the dysfunction and defeat to a film with

emancipatory aims, which offer an account that goes against the grains of seeing American Indian reservations as “incubators of misery, emasculation, and perversity” (Nordlinger, 2016, para. 48). Freeland recognizes the geographic location as a space where the subjects are viable images who negotiate a transforming society, while still retaining cultural values, not riding into the sunset as the cinematic representation has replayed.

Reading *Drunktown's Finest*

Films produced by non-Natives about American Indians and their history have been criticized as sympathizing over the “West,” disappointing historians over the inaccuracies and the negative portrayal of American Indians, and pitting them in frames with polarized antagonist and protagonist, in ideologies and worldviews (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003, p. 4). Others have meagerly portrayed contemporary American Indian lives, a disappointment to American Indians who “complain about the lack of sensitivity of filmmakers to the true story of American Indians” (Singer, 2001, p. viii). And, more recent films have been criticized as Indian sympathy films that capitalize on the responding to the early dilemmas and criticisms.

And, even when American Indians played their own parts in film, they were very rarely given credit for their performance nor did they have a distinctive personality: therefore, the portrayals were unrelatable and unrecognizable to the contemporary American Indian. The agreement among scholars and communities is that many of these early films did not take into consideration the complexities of the Indian and the tribal specificities but have treated American Indians as apparitional excesses in the dominant culture's imagination (Raheja, 2010, p. 145) and have been the “objects of fable and

fantasy” (Rollins & O’Connor, 2003, p. 5). An explanation of the dissemination is offered up by Rollins and O’Connor (2003): “there have been few power bases in the political arena from which Native Americans could bring pressure on Hollywood. In the struggle [...] the Native American dimension has been the least defended—and hence the most vulnerable—of images” (p. 5).

With American Indians now entering the Hollywood center, they are forming a new artistic record, a new visual story, that takes into consideration the criticisms and offers portrayals that counter the Hollywood Indian, and mirrors authenticity: this is central to this section of the analysis of *Drunktown’s Finest*. Before beginning this analysis, I come before the reader with the recognition that I also am an American Indian who speaks Navajo and has lived on the Navajo reservation in a community where the majority of people are Navajo. I have visited the locations that are part of the scenes in *Drunktown’s Finest*. I write from an overarching assumption that this filmmaker attempted to defy the long-standing narrative, as the director eluded to in her interview at the Sundance Film Festival when referencing how the media has slandered her community.

Indigenizing the Visual Space

In an interview, Freeland reports that this particular film project was born out of a desire to counter the late-1980s controversial *20/20* segment that dubbed Gallup, New Mexico, “Drunktown, USA.” As such, this film, as an aesthetic project, set out to “defy the judgment” of her community by showing the “complexity, dimension, and hope” (Interview Aji, October 28, 2013) both of the community and American Indian identity.

The work on “Indigenizing” the space takes place in the location shooting. As a form of sovereignty, footage is taken from locations near and on the Navajo reservation and regions of Gallup, New Mexico. Following the statement by Nizhoni, the camera meanders across stretches of land familiar to the Native eye—men, in boots and Wrangler jeans walking across sandy terrain, a common scene near and on the Navajo Nation where the rugged terrain is a common physical feature as the land is some of the roughest regions in the Southwest area of the United States. The film then proceeds to scan trading companies, pawn shops, a drunk man passed out on the sidewalk near a fence, and a Native woman beading. Less than 2 minutes into the movie, the scene of sheep crossing a two-lane rural road is the focus of the lens. A car slows, and the unintimidated sheep wander slowly across. The particularity is seen in the capturing of trains—a true marker that the film is near Gallup, NM, a town that sits along Highway 66. El Rancharo hotel and motel, once a home to actors who filmed Western films in the region is captured in one scene. Later, the camera rests on Felixia’s grandparent’s home, an older single-wide trailer situated next to a Hogan—a traditional and sacred dwelling for the Navajo people. Unmistakably, this is actual footage of the Navajo reservation and Gallup, New Mexico.

As if the visual depiction were not enough to render the film Indigenized, Freeland incorporates symbolic narratives (White-Indian confrontation), politicized references (“That’s not like a treaty, is it?”), cultural insider references (“Do you mean like cousin, cousin, or Navajo cousin?”), and a coming-of-age ritual (Puberty Ceremony), as well as spiritual references that not only point to historical events, but also to issues affecting the American Indian communities. These elements collectively render this

aesthetic project authentic where the Native filmmaker has “managed to gain control of the camera and the rest of the filmmaking process” (Singer, 2001, p. ix).

Freeland creates an atmosphere of lived fiction, that is, arguably, real enough to be satisfactory to an “Insider,” a Navajo acquainted with the space, community and people. Couple this with the incorporation of comments used by Indian actors that point to the importance of relationships (“Do you mean like cousin, cousin, or Navajo cousin?”) and the Insider feels a sense of privilege that shifts the power from the White viewer, who is accustomed to seeing themselves or their constructed Western lands through their own White constructions of Indian life. The limiting of the camera’s lens to actual reservation land threatens the traditional practice of framing around fables and fantasies.

The sound bridge that accompanies the beginning of the film is a melodramatic country song enhanced by an unmistakable Indian accent that extends the Indigenization to sound:

I have sunk as low as the man could go; the world has turned me down.

Then you pick me up and you kiss me sweet and you changed a beggar
into a king. Yes, you took the rags from off from my back and you gave
me your love to keep me warm... (Richardson, 1957)

This sound bridge functions to extend the film’s discourse surrounding the lives of the characters and their positioning within their community—“low as the man could go.” The end of the song, “you gave me love to keep me warm,” points to a transformation brought on by love and the importance of community and relationship.

Indigenizing was not limited to the space and locality, it extended to the detailing in the characters' clothing.

Max and the Kinaalda. Visual signifiers of “Indianness” have been achieved through costuming of the Indian woman in a generic attire, with a buckskin outfit and a feather in her hair. Unlike earlier films, Freeland clothes Max, Sickboy’s sister, for her Puberty ceremony, in her finest Navajo clothing—a traditional velvet dress, a sash belt around her waist and a Pendleton blanket draped over her. Her clothing and imagery on the last day of her ceremony is a challenge to the colonial representations, an image subverted with “Whiteness” by the producers of *Pocahontas*. Unlike the filmic character, Pocahontas, Max is a subject to be respected. Her ceremony is coordinated and carried out by an important cultural figure, the medicine man, who makes the film’s viewers aware of the importance of her coming-of-age ceremony in his words: “ceremony honors the young woman’s fertility and her body is molded for hozho and strength.” Max is part of a ceremony centered around optimal identity formation. Her state of “betwixt and between” of childhood to womanhood is delineated and advanced through the ceremony, whereby she abandons the life of a child and gains the responsibilities of a woman. Her identity and role in the movie are a stark juxtaposition to the narratives in early films, in which American Indian become the White man’s fantasy, such as in the film *Pocahontas*, in which the character’s physical comeliness trapped her in a patriarchal gaze.

Visual signifier: Navajo code talkers. Non-Native filmmakers have been criticized for monetizing stories about American Indians and eliding their histories. *Drunktown’s Finest* positions itself in the minority by offering in one scene an image of how the Navajo people contributed to the national narrative, by momentarily fixating the

lens on a painted mural of the Navajo code talkers. This cinematic documentation is a contrasting image to the common Non-Native produced narratives that show “Indians... are *out there*, they have no cultural link to...” (Richardson, 2010, p. 35) the United States and that “civilization cannot be founded *with* them but only *against* them” (p. 35). In this sense, they are an irredeemable *Other* assigned the role as “indistinct enemy” (p. 35) who is defeated and unworthy of any recognition. This image is a counterpoint to this rendering. Displaying the Navajo code-talkers not only moves the movie away from being about American Indians as a generic category and into a realm of tribal-specificity but also challenges the notion that American Indians fit in the category of *Other* by showcasing an image that brings recognition to the significant event of their role in shaping America.

The Navajo code talker image may offer itself as a repository in response to the metaphorical question posed in the beginning of the film, “Why do people stay?” It seems to say that within these reservation walls are generations and generations of heroes who are pulled to the land because there is a message of survival built into the red walls of the community and the Navajo language, which was used to baffle and bring the nation to a victory.

Colonialism is Endemic

As a means to explore the cultural influences of the dominant culture on the American Indian community and in keeping with the theme of offering authenticity overlapped with entertainment, Freeland introduced a contentious element to the film—the subculture of gangs.

Gang subculture. This insertion of the reservation subculture subverts the dominant narrative by offering a portrayal of a distinct social identity that formed from an ideology introduced by Westerners. While the artistic construction of what happens when people cross paths with gang members is vaguely explored (tagging the home of the girlfriend in retribution for hitting a gang member), the social influences and changes that impede on the cultural identity of present-day American Indian communities is evident by the introduction of the gang culture and in this way, reconfigures temporality. This subculture of gangs troubles the boundaries of past, present, and future by countering belief that Indians exist in a homogenous static time. When the reading of this image comes through the lens of the concept of virtual reservation, the filmic space is “less invested in authenticity than in reconsidering the relationship between the visual image and larger cultural and cultural and political context” (Raheja, 2011, p. 5) by creating and contesting self-images.

The introduction of gangs, while colliding with the mass-mediated representations of Indians, introduced a reality that is a diversion from prior narratives. Freeland, arguably, uses the virtual space to contextualize the here and now. For the Native filmmaker, the demystification of the cultural influence comes as a liberation, despite a transparency that may seemingly reinforce the dominant perspective of subordinating groups. In this way, the film invites the viewer to make judgment at the expense of the people and suggests that this is the influence of the Euro-American contact. While the portrayal of gang violence on the reservation makes it hard to read agency in the film, the departure from the dominant narrative, itself, actually fulfills the agency. On the surface, it would appear that sovereignty comes in the form of revising and reframing dominant

films with positive portrayal. The capacity to offer more authentic portrayals that are multi-dimensional distinguishes this film from earlier films produced by Euro-Americans.

It subverts the hegemonic view by showing the real struggles on American Indians reservations and the ways they have become vexed spaces touched by modernization and its many influences. This element while part of an antagonist narrative provides insights into the symptoms of disintegration and the fragmentation that facilitated the emergence of gangs, including poverty, unemployment, education issues (e.g., dropout, etc.), and substance abuse. Indeed, while this counters the portrayal of Indians as anachronistic figures who live far from the pressures of dominant culture, it can be argued that it reinforces the negative stereotype of American Indians as violent, which is a resurrection of the savage stereotype. Transparency in the form of self-representation of Indian problems becomes a tool to exploit and undermine the people who show authentic portrayals.

Problematizing the “drunken Indian.” The American Indian as a “drunken Indian” has been an enormously popular stereotype that has been replayed in films throughout cinematic history. American Indians have argued that this portrayal was constructed to negatively show American Indians as an inferior race that lacks self-control and morality. *Drunktown’s Finest* seems to reinforce this message as numerous frames of film floated in and out of scenes of people partying, a drunk man lying on a sidewalk, and gang members holding a bottle of liquor while posing for the camera. In one scene, Sickboy runs into Felixia at the supermarket, and he asks her, “Aren’t you missing the alcohol? Where’s the party at?”

Many Native filmmakers have used the imagery of drunken Indians in their films. Their rehashing can be seen as playing a role in reinforcing negative stereotypes, but the filmic images of Angela urging Sickboy to leave that past behind recreates the film as a didactic tool. Because research exists that supports the belief that “aboriginal have struggled with addictions, individually and collectively” (Walker, 2008, para. 17) the continual return of the drunken Indian to American Indian films teaches youth about the dangers of alcohol and the ways it can affect families, as seen in Felixia having no biological parents. The theme of alcoholism is a vehicle that serves to amplify truth and in so doing, highlight the root causes, “residential schools, the Indian Act, child welfare issues, Indian agents, geographic isolation, racism, intergenerational trauma—the list goes on” (Walker, 2008, para. 17)

Acknowledging the history, we fast forward to the contemporary time to shed light on the region that was the focal point of the movie, Gallup, New Mexico. In 2014, this town was proclaimed to be the most dangerous city in New Mexico. Larger news conglomerates spotlighted this by sharing statistics of the prevalence of “alcohol” issues. In 2015, CBS news reported there were 14 tragedies of people who succumbed to the cold as a result of their drunken state between October 2014 and April 2015. The New Mexico Indicator-Based Information System (NM-IBIS) reported McKinley County as having one of the “highest rates of alcohol-related deaths, with rates more than twice the state rate and more than three times the national rate” (NM-IBIS, date). In a 2015 article in the *Los Angeles Times* online magazine, the author highlighted the business part in perpetuating the problem: “Gallup has 39 liquor licenses and 22,000 people, amounting to one of the highest per-capita rates in the state” (Duara, 2015, para. 12).

While the film does not actively engage the audience in dialogue, the film's heavy saturation with images of ruptured families and the absence of parents as a result of alcohol may well confront the 20/20 rendition that marked the area as DrunkTown, U.S.A.

Other scenes in the film are symbolic, visual representations that are carried out in scenes.

Paternalism and the Indian. While the characters don't make any politicalized references, symbolism is woven into the film that when unpacked is freighted with paternalistic signification. One such scene unfolds when Sickboy goes to retrieve moccasins from his mother. When he arrives, he finds his White stepfather seated outside, drinking beer. Sickboy knocks on the door and is greeted by his mother who has bruises all over her face. While she retrieves the moccasins, his 6-year-old stepbrother comes to the door. The boy then turns to his father: "Daddy, can I have some?" (referring to the can of beer). His father willingly shares his can of beer with his son ("You want to play with the big boys, huh?"). The boy takes a drink and immediately spits it back in the can. His father slaps him across the face, "I'm sorry daddy." Sickboy grabs his stepfather and a fight ensues. With Sickboy on top of the White man, he continually hits him while he guards his head. The mother comes out of the home crying and leans over her husband.

When unpacked, this scene brings to the fore the relationship between the U.S. government and the Native people. The White stepfather serves as a metaphor for the "founding father," and the mother "the Indian people or reservation"—a figure colonized by the United States. This symbolic relationship between the founding father and the

mother is established through wardship that is continually disabused and rendered meaningless; the physical signs of her abuse (bruises on her face) are symbolic renderings of the treatment of the people and the land by the government. The child who is hurt represents the generations of American Indian people. The message, “want to play with the big boys” is arguably the way the generations have been treated by the U.S. government—made to believe that the U.S. or founding fathers want to play honesty but return with a slap to their face. With respect to this notion, Hearne (2012) writes, “The U.S. government in its self-appointed role as a guardian, codified relationships of dependency with tribes as ward” (p. 84).

Sickboy is a materialization of the “Indian activists” who have attempted to rescue the next generation by fighting back against the U.S. His life is one marked by dispossession, a result of the history of colonization and the mistreatment he sees occurring to the land and the people. After this encounter, the White man calls the police, Sickboy is once again arrested, and his dream of living a life of “privilege” in the military is gone. In a contemporary context, this notion that American Indians are stripped of their privilege can be seen in the way activists who protested at Standing Rock in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline are facing charges. The interactions between the characters are visual images of how the government continually uses its paternalistic power to keep the American Indian confined under its political domination. In this footage is a national narrative materializing before the viewers eyes of the colonizer and the colonized, the federal government and the tribal nations—America as an imperialist father.

This scene also presents issues that are affecting the American Indian communities (and communities nationwide), that of families with absent fathers (Hearne, 2012, p. 85). Sherman Alexie hits the nail when he makes the comment in an interview, “you’d find the same thing in every ethnic or racial community... fathers who are missing” (West & West, 1998, p. 33). The loss of father is evident in the lives of each of the characters. The absence of father is a stereotype that is reinforced in *Drunktown’s Finest*. This film presents the social breakdowns and dysfunction that are continuing struggles in the community.

Protecting the White man. After his stepfather slaps his 6-year-old son, Sickboy steps in to punish him for his actions. At the White man’s most vulnerable moment, Sickboy’s mother emerges from the hotel room (“What are you doing?”) to rest her body over her husband, much like Pocahontas uses her body as a shield to protect John Smith from her father. These scenic episodes are part of the nationalizing myth that have been promulgated in artwork and filmic images and, more recently, romanticized in the animated cartoon Pocahontas. In these films, the Native woman is defined by her relationship with a White man (Green, 1976, p. 713) providing an intolerable metaphor for the “Indian-White experience” (p. 714). Marubbio (2006) describes this as “the Native woman’s love for the White man and her need to be accepted into the colonizer’s culture are seen as a desire for civilization and an ideal Whiteness only attainable through [...] physical and emotional submission (p. 20). In early filmic narratives, this submissive woman dies as a result of her choice to align herself with the White European American colonizer (Marubbio, 2006, p. ix). While in this instance she does not die, the signs of submission are seen in the abuse shown on her face, which is a microcosm of patriarchal

dominance. Extending the reading of this character, she represents present-day issues of gendered colonial violence against Native women.

The analysis of the intersectionality between race and gender is further explored in the next section, juxtaposing to the White woman.

Intersection of Race and Gender

Carmen Moore's role as Felixia, a transgender subject in *Drunktown's Finest* complicates stereotypical representations of American Indian women and men, in that she is a subject that is non-binary, rejects her born gender assignment, and is situated within a territorial climate of heteronormative and patriarchal order. Her racialized and sexualized identity is explored to examine ways her representation in the film counter and confront the dominant narrative, contribute to hegemony, and legitimize representations about American Indian women. I specifically focus on three areas in this analysis: (1) using her body as a form of sovereignty to disrupt the colonial ideologies and thereby (2) subverting the dominant ideologies and (3) reinforcing the dominant narrative of the Sexualized Maiden.

Felixia: The carrier of power or reincarnation. Colonization took the task of subordinating Indigenous people to the political power of the Euro-American and permeating the whole of society with their ideologies. This hegemonic power has narrowly defined American Indian woman and their roles, many of which have been envisioned under the patriarchal and heterosexist lens. In *Drunktown's Finest*, Freeland constructs a subject, Felixia, who challenges the static definition of American Indian women by creating her as “*not* (emphasis added) the subject of power but the carrier” (Marubbio, 2006, p. 92). Her expression of the notion of carrier of power is seen in her

sexual freedom and intentional submissiveness to men. In one scene, she is in a stressful situation after the fight between Sickboy and a gang member. Hiding in the bathroom, she calls a man to pick her up. In this way, she has a power over men; they are at her beck and call. Her power resides in her overt sexual freedom and ability to use her body as a form of sovereignty. This is a threat to the idea that men can be promiscuous (have power) but women cannot. To regain control, in the film, the men push her away as an attempt to regain power. Through this notion of body sovereignty, she elevates herself with a power that sits outside the constrained rules established by the Western, White society, and simultaneously, as a transgender person, reaffirms a culturally accepted identity that colonization attempted to eradicate.

Freeland links cultural and gender identity by introducing the cultural mythology of “Two Spirit” in *Drunktown’s Finest* through Felixia, a transgender. This character, a representation of a “two-spirited” person, fits outside of the boundaries of the heteronormative gaze that Lisa Tatonetti (date) has criticized is missing from images in film. While Westerners believe in a strict binary concept of male and female, in the Navajo culture, there is an acceptance of an effeminate male, “Nadleehi”—a person who is biologically male and functions as a woman. In the film, Freeland resists the historical imperialism by introducing Felixia, who threatens the colonial patriarchal “ideal” of society, an ideal that Maria Lugones (2007) writes is “mythically constructed by coloniality and modernity.” (p. 51). In the film’s concluding close-up, Felixia’s father sits down next to her to affirm her identity after her maleness was revealed in the middle of a model shoot. To show his acceptance of her identity, Harmon her grandfather,

describes how the Nadleehi serves an important role by mediating between the men and woman:

A long time ago, all Navajos lived alongside the great river. Men, women, and Nadleehi (gay). One day, they began arguing over who was more important than the other. The men said they were because they hunted. The women said they were because they tended the crops. On and on they argued until finally they decided that maybe they were better off without each other. The men rafted across the great river and took the Nadleehi with them. And for a while, everything was fine, and then the men begin to miss their wives and children. But they were too proud to go back. So they sent the Nadleehi to check on things, and the Nadheeli returned with the message that things weren't so well with the women and that they missed the men and had no one to hunt for them. It became apparent that both sides needed each other. The men needed the women, the women, in turn, needed the men, and they both needed the Nadleehi. To this day, we carry this lesson, this balance.

This return to the gender identity of Felixia toward the end of the film brings to the forefront that, despite the pressure to conform to the dominant ideologies, the Navajo people have retained their cultural identity in the honoring of the “dual male and female natures” (Estrada, 2011, p. 171). Following the conversation, Felixia goes to the kitchen to assist her grandmother. Her identity having been established, she is fulfilling the commitments and responsibilities expected of her from the community.

Felixia's use of body and the cultural acceptance of her gender identity belie patriarchy and other normality claims that have been perpetuated, which thereby subverts the colonial narrative. She has found an acceptance through cultural mythology.

Acceptance through cultural mythology. This message of acceptance and the normality of Nadhleehi in the Navajo culture is a didactic tool that is highlighted to speak to Westerners who strongly subscribe to the dichotomy of sexuality. In the closing scenes of the movie, Harmon offers a story about Nadleehi and rather than assume people know about the traditional belief surrounding Two-Spirited people, the filmmaker takes the liberty of offering an in-depth explanation which allows the Outsider to view through the lens of a Native American, thereby countering the constructs imposed by the Western ideology. This is part of indigenizing the film, delineating the difference between the cultures and highlighting the acceptability of what Western culture sees as unbecoming, the manifestation of which is seen in the way the models refused to accept Felixia's identity. Freeland highlighting of Felixia's sexuality is not limited to the character in the film, perhaps unintentionally, this message evokes a response to the untimely death of Fred Martinez, in Cortez, Colorado, whose dual nature led to his bullying and his murder.

Reincarnation of the sexualized maiden. Despite the fact that there are hundreds of different American Indian tribes, "historically and contemporarily, the traditional perspectives of Native American Indian women [have] been generalized" (Portman & Herring, 2001, p. 185) and reduced to a few problematic stereotypes that have been promulgated by the media and movies over the last century. These include the Celluloid Princess, who "became instrumental in furthering the cultural domination" (McLerran, 1994, p. 2) as a helper or a lover; the Sexualized Maiden, "a lascivious squaw" embodied

by enhanced sexual and racial difference; or a hybrid maiden conflated with both the princess and sexualized maiden (Marubbio, 2006). The Sexualized Maiden, emerging in films in the 1940s, including *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Colorado Territory* (1949), is marked by characteristics of “beauty, mixed-blood heritage, overt sexuality, marginalization from white society, and deadliness to men” (Marubbio, 2006, p. 104). Felixia, who is able to pick up her phone and beckon a man, is undeniably attractive and desired by men. She has a sexual power of sorts and is a racialized American Indian woman who arguably could be a contemporary reincarnation of a Sexualized Maiden in her film persona, despite not having a mixed-blood heritage. Much like the Sexualized Maiden, she is promiscuous, with her sexuality predicated on fetishistic endeavors; in this way, she is a threat in her physical (body) power, however it remains unclear if her behavior is driven by her poverty (living in her grandparent’s home) or by her seeking acceptance. She shares a resemblance to the early rendition of the American Indian woman stereotype, in that “her racial heritage and position in American culture form the basis for reinscribing colonial narratives” (Marubbio, 2006, p. 93) on and about her.

The domination of the Indian woman is a signification that has been portrayed by Alfred J. Miller in paintings that display “young Indian woman upon whose passive, receptive body European colonists could carry out their project of exploitation and domination” (McLerran, 1994, p. 5). The Westerner that controlled nature is the same colonial/patriarchal mind that seeks to control the sexuality of women (Merchant, 1980; Smith, 2003). This marginalization and subordination is common in colonial discourse, wherein an American Indian woman becomes subject to the rule of men and her body becomes the site that is an inscription of imperial patriarchy. Ethnocentrism drives this

ideological framework, much like the men who desire Felixia are driven by their own interest. Namely, while her body as a property is valued and appreciated by men, it is only of interest for one reason, to fulfill their own desires momentarily. This is demonstrated in the tying together of two scenes. In one explicit scene, Felixia performs the desire of one man. Later, when she sees the same man at a casino, she sneaks up behind him and places her hands over his eyes (“Guess who?”). His initial reaction to this encounter with a mystery woman is excitement for who it could be (“Is it Carla?”). When she reveals herself as Felixia, an awkward conversation leads to an immediate exit of the man who leaves his winnings in the slot machine. She is quickly dispensed. Indeed, while her sexual promiscuity lures men in, she is subjected to their colonial matrix.

These amalgamations that form her identity as a “dark and alluring woman of mystery” (Marubbio, 2006, p. 92)—a femme fatale—while making her exotic and appealing to the male eye, are also the basis of her marginalization. Notably, while her sexual power is seemingly a disruption to the patriarchal order, when juxtaposed to the Christian White woman in the film, a doctor and a moral erudite, Felixia’s signification as a feral based on her behavior reinforces the long-standing belief that American Indians are impure and immoral, a “squaw.” This is the invisibility and hypervisibility paradox in this film.

The historical attitudes and social normalization that contribute to views of American Indian women as “sexual exotic property” (Marubbio, 2006, p. 231) based on a stereotype of their identity is a danger to American Indian women. This is aligned with Downe’s (2006) analysis that the violent abuses of Indigenous women “are connected

through a pervasive colonial ideology that sees these young women as exploitable and often dispensable” (p. 172). In this way, Felixia’s behavior reinforces a stereotype that has made American Indian women subjects of violence. Many scholars and researchers have expressed concern over the violence subjected on American Indian women. “The issue of colonial, race, and gender oppression” cannot be separated when speaking about attacks on American Indian women, Andrea Smith (2003) writes; it “is not just an attack on her identity as a woman, but on her identity as a Native” (p. 71). Smith (2003), in her experience as a crisis counselor, has heard Native women say, “I wish I was no longer Indian” (p. 71). Marubbio (2006) provides quantitative evidence of how the American Indian woman, as a result of the intersectionality of her gender and racial identity, suffers more violence than White women:

According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, the “average annual rate of rape and sexual assault among American Indians is 3.5 times higher than for all races.” The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported in 2000 that, between 1992 and 1996, at “least 70% of the violent victimizations experienced by American Indians [were] committed by persons not of their race.” (p. 231)

Amnesty International (2007), in research conducted in 2005 and 2006, amplified the perception of American Indian women that persisted even long before and after she reported the violence:

A number of the cases brought to Amnesty International’s attention indicated that police often automatically assume that Indigenous women had been drinking when they were targeted for sexual violence. One

Alaska Native survivor of rape told Amnesty International that if a woman is suspected of drinking and reports that she has been the victim of sexual violence, ‘the police will not respond unless she is either hospitalized or dead.’ (p. 48)

Freeland’s portrayal of Felixia promiscuity and drinking only reinforces the historic rhetoric about American Indian women, not only illustrative through words, such as “Sexualized Maiden” but also images in movies. Merskin (2010) posits that these media-generated and sustained stereotypes support exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence as applied to Native Americans.

Women in juxtaposition: A subtext. The ways in which the film portrays women produces some of the most colonizing images that reinforce dominant stereotypes about American Indians. The American Indian woman’s identity, that originated at first contact as the subject of the colonial gaze as “Other,” is juxtaposed to the White woman and “within the context of control, conquest, possession, and exploitation” (Anderson, 2001, p. 100). The images are varied—Indian princess tropes, squaw stereotypes, slovenly, immoral, and other stereotypes—and are constructed in contrast to the civilized, pure “Victorian lady.” When we cross over from the fictional space of the film and look at the characters through the lens of tropes, the character’s portrayals in the film raise concerning issues of reinforcing the century-long dominant narrative.

The American Indian women who make their presence known in the film are Felixia, the Navajo effeminate male; Felixia’s grandmother; and Sickboy’s pregnant girlfriend, Angela. Two of the characters’ representations, Felixia and Angela, can be assailed when their representation is link to earlier tropes. Felixia is a transgender person

who is contained on the Navajo reservation and is being raised by her grandparents. She lives a life of promiscuity that she hides from her grandparents. She goes in and out of her home without any restriction. Her quintessential performance of sexual freedom from the Western consciousness mirrors the trope of the licentious squaw.

Angela: Effects of colonization. Angela, Sickboy's pregnant girlfriend, confronts a constellation of challenges, including poverty and raising her boyfriend's daughter. She stays home and is dependent on her boyfriend to provide for her needs. Her identity as a mother out of wedlock and living in poverty ("We only have \$50") is subjected to criticism when not taken through the lens of the effects of colonization. Rather than recognizing the deep colonial roots made visible through her situation, in the colonial imagination, her situation is part of the social and economic ills that rationalized the sterilization of Native woman in the 1970s. Peeling back the layers of history, masked behind this stereotype, is a story of women who lived in an "egalitarian" society" (Smith, 2003, p. 77), which naturally was a threat to the Western patriarchy "because they belie patriarchy's defense of itself as "normal"" (Smith, 2003, p. 77).

The lens shifts to the Victorian lady, who in *Drunktown's Finest* is Nizhoni's adoptive mother, who finds time to prepare breakfast for her husband and Nizhoni, even while working as a doctor helping those in need. Much like her predecessors (played in earlier films), she is a model of domesticity, indefatigable, and industriousness. Through these contrasting images, a replay of comparison narratives—poor/wealthy, uneducated/educated, immoral/moral—surface and "history... interferes with the lives of contemporary Native women" (Anderson, 2016, p. 85) and renders them (Felixia and Angela) as morally reprehensible and deficient, which reinforces the natural hegemonic

ordering in society. Appropriate to this movie is Anderson's (2016) reading of history, "The image of the Native woman as the beast of burden in her society was drawn up to demonstrate the superiority of European womanhood and femininity, [...] and the necessity for replacing Native womanhood with European womanhood" (p. 83). The Indian framed by the White woman makes Whiteness more attractive.

This rendering of the American Indian woman "deflect[s] attention from the government and the public complicity" (Anderson, 2016, p. 83) of their treatment that changed their "role as producers within the economic structure of their societies" (p.83). When the audience searches beneath the stereotype that informed the American Indian identity, it is clear that colonialism has affected gender roles. Those most affected were women who once lived in societies that practiced gender equality; their lives were disrupted by European contact, causing a decline in their status and power (Shoemaker, 1995).

Nizhoni: A red apple. Rather than engage in symbolisms between stereotypes and reality, Freeland, through an engagement between two roadside workers—Copenhagen and Leroy Leroy—and Nizhoni, brings attention to the ways adopted or assimilated American Indians are stigmatized. Nizhoni is a Navajo girl whose adoptive parents sent her away to boarding school (not the Native American boarding school) "in Michigan since middle school" after the death of her parents. Perhaps one of the most telling scenes is when Leroy Leroy labeled her as a "bilassana (apple)... red on the outside and white on the inside." This statement not only represented a desire to keep American Indians within a defined, exclusionary identity of Indianness but also embedded in the statement the claim that there is no room for people who are assimilated.

This is made clear in Leroy Leroy's deliberate use of the Navajo language (*Dii 'ei bilagaana at'e*) to distance himself from the English-speaking Navajo who can only respond in English, "Hey, look, I know you're talking about me." In a New York Times article covering the dispute of "Who Decides Who Counts as Native American," one tribal member adds, "It's fighting words... to tell someone they're not really part of their tribe" (Jarvis, 2017, para. 6). To identify who is not a tribal member is an essential element to identity, one broached by the filmmaker who uses humor to approach the subject of who is and who isn't a tribal member. This also brings up the notion that American Indians have their own definition of indigeneity, which is tricky to define; in many ways this identification is debatable and elusive and crosses the lines of tribal membership. Madsen (2010) writes, "Geographical, linguistic, cultural, historical differences among the more than five hundred recognized Native nations of North American alone are effaced by the pan-Indian perspective in favor of a sense of 'Indianness' that transcends the specificity of each individual tribe" (p. 3). While this is the challenge, the ability to determine who is American Indian is, arguably, what makes tribes sovereign entities, although this is contested.

One way that Freeland further engages with history is through Nizhoni's adoption. Her identity as adopted into a White family is part of a long and complicated history. Before the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) of 1978, it has been reported that American Indian children were removed from their communities by the hundreds and thousands as part of a humanitarian project to rescue children from the poverty and social problems on the reservations and to mainstream children (Cross, 2008). A study conducted by the Association of American Indian Affairs in 1969 and

1974 indicated that between 25% to 35% of all American Indian children were separated from their homes. Nizhoni's mother, when rationalizing her actions to take Nizhoni without full consent from her grandparents, defensively explains, "You think we wanted you to hang out in some shack with some drunk alcoholic relatives out on a reservation?" This comment by the adoptive mother points to a larger problem, that the White man knows best how to save the Indian. Within this assumption lies a destructive notion that Indians are incompetent and incapable of taking care of themselves. The self-appointed role as guardian speaks metaphorically and legally to the relationship of the U.S. government to the Indian people. Broadly speaking, these actions broke down American Indian families, their culture, and weakened tribal sovereignty. Nizhoni responds, "I want to make my own decision!"

Her lack of acknowledgment of the Navajo spiritual beliefs compounds her exclusion. Her identification as "red apple" is a deliberate comment to Nizhoni's actions to pick up a dead owl found near a building. According to the Navajo belief, the owl is a bad omen symbolizing death. Copenhagen tells Nizhoni, "There's two thing you don't mess with, owls and coyotes." She minimizes their beliefs by stating "it's just superstition." As they drive away following the incident, the conversation about her belief is summed up in her identification as "Navajo and Christian." Mihesuah (2013), adding context to this interaction, describes:

The adoption of European cultural mores, especially religion, created a new form of prejudice between tribal members: "culturalism"—the idea that the cultural adherences of some are superior to those of others. Indians who converted to

Christianity became known as the “saved” Indians, and those who continued traditional practices as the “heathens.” (p. 45)

The identities of the American Indian women in *Drunktown's Finest* are formed by specific colonial histories and geographies that shape their experiences and provide insights into the hegemonies of race and class among women.

This analysis brings to light the different ways the filmmaker of *Drunktown's Finest* sought to counter stereotypical representation, while simultaneously examining ways the films reproduced reductive stereotypes. The film, in many ways, sought more authentic and meaningful portrayals and presented visual images of tribal specificities (language, customs, locations, etc.); in this way, the film provided a powerful tool to assert their voices. Other scenes could be read as reproducing and reinforcing stereotypes, when read at the manifest level.

CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this research work is encapsulated by two statements made by scholars Gretchen M. Bataille and May Louis Pratt. The first is a comment by Bataille (2001) about authorship: “whoever controls your definition, controls your sense of self... and the more audience we have, the more Native American people are going to be able to claim themselves and take it back from Hollywood” (p. 99). The second is an insight offered by Pratt (1992) on reshaping our way of thinking: “while a subjugated people cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they use for their own, and what they use it for” (p. 6). These two comments form the basis of the conclusion for this entire research. This chapter begins with a summary of the study and proceeds with recommendations for future scholarship.

Summary

Images of America’s “Indian” crystallized visually and disseminated globally, and more rapidly, with the advent of film. Their filmic representations, which have set the tone of how Indians are viewed, historically, have vacillated between two polar ends of a spectrum that render them as stockpile images variegated on a continuum of savagery and pose them under the guide of noble Indian, ecological Indian, or other reductive tropes that have, primarily, been created for allegorical purposes. No less a figment of Hollywood’s imagination are Native women whose portrayal fit on a continuum of Sexual Maiden to Celluloid Princess. Tracing the vacillating imagery on a timeline offered a view of the reshaping of the Indian to fit the social and political milieu. In many respects, the representations are part of a larger discourse that is tied to the establishment, the retention of the American identity, and the maintenance of a system of

hegemony. Chapter 2 expounded on ways Europeans have taken elements of the American Indian identity and appropriated it for their own use, in a form of playing Indian. Forming an American identity, in the filmic space, has meant placing American Indians in a colonialist trapping as spectral entities that are “vanishing” or rendered as “invisible”—two ways the patriarchal system of power, through the media, has served to maintain hegemonic superiority. The film industry has been the publicity industry for social norms; this is seen in the racial mixing and miscegenation.

The last 30 years have seen a shift in the film industry with a growing number of American Indians entering the gates of Hollywood to produce more films that present American Indians as contemporary, resilient, and complex subjects—a departure from the standard convention of one-dimensional, reductive, and malleable portrayals. A seminal project that can be catalogued in the counter-narrative library is *Smoke Signals*, a relatively recent film, produced in the late 1990s. *Smoke Signals*’ interweaving of symbolism, flashback, and voice-over narration modeled innovative counter-narrativizing (“speaking back”) against hegemonic conventions. The compilation of the *Smoke Signals* analysis in Chapter 3 brought to the fore ways in which American Indians are using filmic space to assert visual sovereignty and reclaim their identity. Released during this same decade is the film *Pocahontas*, which scholars have argued was a failed attempt at inclusivity as it offered a narrative that served the interest of the dominant culture and media giant capitalists. *Pocahontas*, powerfully influenced by a White society’s fantasy, not only appealed to children but also to Hollywood’s patriarchs. Analyses of these films served as the basis for understanding ways films can be used to reinforce conventional

narratives and ways filmmakers can use the space to speak back to the film industry and the audience who is consuming the products.

Conclusion

With 20 years since the dissemination of these two films, I began this study to examine the contemporary media landscape to understand ways, at this point in history, American Indian filmmakers are unmasking, critiquing, confronting, and/or reinforcing the deeply-embedded repressive dominant narratives. My genuine curiosity about our current state drove the study; the significance of this study lies in the belief that mass media serves as a cultural force that indirectly and directly shapes reality and, thereby, serves as an agent that enforces hegemony.

Confrontation, Reinforcing, or a Sovereignist Approach

A close cultural analysis of *Drunktown's Finest* was the focal point of this research. Having met the criteria of being directed by an American Indian, employing primarily a cast of Native actors/actresses, and released within the last 5 years, I watched the film on multiple occasions and utilized Critical Thematic Analysis to analyze the manifest and to dig up the latent content. My approach was to use film as an analytic tool to understand American Indians' contributions to a more humanizing and meaningful portrayal of American Indians, while simultaneously examining the film for reproduction of the stereotypes codified throughout the last century. In a majority of films created in the last century, the customs and identity displayed were the White man's construction—Indians as Plains Indians, living in teepees, greeting White people by raising their hand and uttering monosyllabic words. Having established the ways the film industry has constructed the Indian identity, I searched through the filmic text for tribal specificities

(language, customs, locations, etc.), which was vitally important to finding ways the filmmaker disrupted the complex web of power. Further, with TribalCrit as the lens from which I approached the film, I continually returned to the tenet that American Indians are situated in a long history of colonization that has formed the identity of American Indians as simultaneously political and racial. I searched for scenes that showed the impacts of colonization, such as the loss of cultural identity, restriction or limitation of rights (cultural expression, etc.), the presence of colonization in contemporary struggles, such as the poverty, dependencies (alcohol), and consciousness associated with the marginalization that are consequences of colonization. Unpacking the effects of colonization provides insights into ways American Indians remain economically, politically, and socially under the power of the colonizer.

Through the process of Critical Thematic Analysis, I illuminated ways the film simultaneously subverted and reinforced the dominant narrative. This next section unveils the conclusions of my study.

Confronting the Dominant Narrative

From a bird's-eye view, *Drunktown's Finest* resisted clichéd and formulaic renderings—fictitious, temporary set constructions and “Plain Indian” attire—and drew upon the experience of the filmmaker to “Indigenize” the filmic spaces and the characters. Indigenizing came through in the film's context, with the application of specificities (Navajo clothing), location shooting (sheep crossing the road, etc.), textual references (“Is it a treaty?”) and the contradictions and tensions of daily life on the reservation. In the colonizing history of American Indians, these elements that are central to the American Indian life and identity have been oft-elided. The weaving of

these aesthetic details brings a recognition and relatability for the cultural Insider (such as I) and serves as a didactic tool for the Outsiders, who have been educated, far too long, with the White man's reductive repositories. Indigenizing the space undercut the coloniality of power and gave the film a quality that indicated an American Indian was asserting sovereignty.

Drunktown's Finest resisted the conventional narrative by steering away from the dominant conformities of gender and social structures that are built on structures of difference and inequality. Weaving the story of Nadleehi (Two-spirited) into the film's narrative fused the gulf created by the White man's camera. The Outsider (viewer) is given permission to enter a private conversation to hear a story sacred to the Navajo people. The willingness to bring the White man to the table demonstrates the Navajo peoples' acceptance of the Outsider, and that, despite their differences, they are equals and interdependent.

The story of Nadleehi was also intended as a plea to younger generations of American Indians who have shed much of their Indigenous identity. Nizhoni's grandfather Harmon's plea to this generation is to retain their cultural mores and values, for within the mythology is wisdom that can liberate. This invitation into learning about the cultural mythology, and the message of acceptance, is a stark contrast to the White-constructed films that revolved around canopies of difference and division and had the White man emerge as the dominant power—a counter to the intention of the story told by Harmon.

Many earlier films *about* American Indians, including films as recent as *Dances with Wolves* in 1990, locked Natives as spectral entities in history—in loincloths and

riding into the sunset. Freeland overturned this nostalgic and romanticized discourse by situating her film in the present. She situated the characters outside of the conventional understanding of “Indians”’ destiny, a “construction focus[ed] on a temporally and geographically limited idea of culture, to the exclusion of contemporary and heterogeneous political, economic, and aesthetic elements of Native American life” (Hearne, 2012, p. xxiii) and brought to them into the contemporary.

Her positioning of the American Indians in the present, coupled with her incorporation of a cultural mythology that was part of the deracination agenda, is a statement of triumph (the Native plunges the Indigenous flag into the ground) and speaks of Indigenous people’s resilience to the pressures to “vanish,” by genocide or through a whole assimilation. Simply put, their presence in the film are substantive embodiments of what Vizenor (1999) refers to as “survivance.” Their ability to be resilient is part of the American Indian history and identity; in Freeland’s film, the way the people have “adapt[ed] and adjust[ed] to changing landscapes, times, ideas, circumstances, and situations” (Brayboy, 2005, p. 453) is a testimony to their survival as resistance. Their adaptability is in the hands of the American Indian subject, not outside their control. In this regard, the American Indian has applied the CRT tradition of “naming one’s own reality” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The filmmaker cultivates this notion through his or her presence and decisions in the film and uses it as “a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression” (Ladson-Billing, 1998, p. 14), more specifically, for the American Indian, a healing resulting from colonization.

The imageries in the closing scenes are imbued with Indigenous relationship worldviews “that focus on people and entities coming together to help and support one

another in their relationships” (Hart, 2010, p. 3). Felixia returns home to help her mother make fry bread for the guest, Nizhoni is drawn back to her extended family even as she leaves for college, and Sickboy returns to support his sister. Their convergence at a centralized location highlights the importance of relationships and community, a counter perspective to the European value of individualism. One image that sums up the importance of community is seen as they run together into the sunrise (not disappearing into the sunset), a strategic speaking back in visual form to the European notion of “vanishing Indian.”

The audiences’ relationship to the American Indian is further deepened through the introduction of Indigenous principles weaved into the film: acceptance, community, and relationships. These counter-perspectives decentralize the dominant narrative and work to change the grand narrative that Hollywood has coveted for centuries. Further, the inclusion of people who were traditionally excluded—transgender, a child (Max), or the elderly couple—offers a transformational vision that works toward social justice. Pulling the marginalized voices from the sidelines into the center dismantles the structures and barriers that make up hegemony.

The effect of countering the dominant narrative through a visual imagery is that the audience problematizes the previously held beliefs of American Indians. By Indigenizing the visual space and bringing an understanding to the American Indian culture, the filmmaker in *Drunktown’s Finest* shifted the (rhetorical) pendulum of power. These renderings, however, did not detract from the typification of American Indians as victims who are dependent on the White man and incapable of solving their own problems, a reflection of earlier narratives and imagery.

Reinforcing Stereotypes or a Sovereignist Approach

The most notable scenes that could be read as contributing to dominant narratives are the absence of accomplished American Indians and the reinforcement of the stereotype of American Indians as incapable.

One important element to be considered in light of the criticism that there are no “accomplished American Indians” is the context and lens from which it is viewed. If seen through the Western lens, with accomplishments attained through the earning of a college degree, then the filmmaker fails to incorporate a critical element that could counter the conventional ways of knowing; however, her inclusion of the Medicine Man is a subject that disrupts this concept of accomplishment. From an Indigenous perspective, the Medicine Man has the power to cure diseases of the mind and body and no man, even with a college degree, can attain the sufficient knowledge to master the intricacies of healing. Freeland’s incorporation of this character in the film counters this belief that an accomplished American Indian is not present.

Framing the film around elements that Indigenize or challenge the conventional was only part of the intent of the study; highlighting ways the film reinforces the dominant narratives was the counterpart. The most noticeable way the film reinforces earlier narratives is through the representation of American Indians as incapable. This is seen in the scene of Felixia’s acceptance of the White lawyers’ monetary offer and Nizhoni’s help from her White adoptive parents. These narratives send the message that American Indians cannot accomplish anything without the help of a “White Savior.” Place this in juxtaposition to the White man who is accomplished and confident, and it could be read as reinforcing hegemony, which is, arguably, reliant on “Otherizing” to

maintain its structure. In line with this analysis, Sellnow (2017) describes how hegemony is created through Othering, “[o]thering is the devaluing consequence of hegemony that those perceived as not belonging to the empowered group are both different and less desirable... disempowered people and groups essentially participate in perpetuating their own oppression” (p. 910). Essentially, Nizhoni and Felixia are interpellated into this process through their willingness to accept the goods offered by those perceived as empowered. The inclusion of American Indians as “incapable” occludes the goal of liberating them from earlier reductive representations; however, in the process it portrays the complex web of power relations.

The scolding by Nizhoni’s adoptive mother of American Indians as “drunks,” coupled with images of Felixia and Sickboy drinking and absent fathers, is another distracting and detracting element in the film that could place the film in a contested terrain if read at the manifest level. These images could be argued to contribute to hegemony. However, I propose that it does not, because if an American Indian is behind the camera, it obfuscates the interpretation that discursive images contribute to hegemony and repositions the artistic incorporation as a sovereignist action. Furthering, hegemony engenders a discourse of “Othering” to establish differences; most often, the differences serve to vilify or idealize a particular group. These differences justify the creation of a hierarchy and the ruling of particular group. The filmmaker, Sydney Freeland, specifically made an endeavor to change the image that gave Gallup the name Drunktown, U.S.A. By this very acknowledgement, I argue that she is not contributing to hegemony. This begs the question of whether the seemingly reductive images in *Drunktown’s Finest* reinforce hegemony. If hegemony is established by comparison to

the “Other” and the social formation is based on creating a hierarchy to establish dominance and not to equalize, American Indians, by their very effort to counter the dominant narrative, are not reinforcing hegemony by showing discordant depictions.

Offering a more complex imagery of Americans, through seemingly reductive imagery, thereby is a form of sovereignty.

Reading through a Lens of Resistance

John Purdy exclaims, in 2001, that the Hollywood-constructed stereotypes “may be problematized, possibly even shaken, but not dislodged by critical studies” (p. 101). And, the debate about misrepresentations has not resulted in any “appreciable degree in the popular consciousness of people around the world” (p. 101). In considering this comment, I agree that the popular consciousness of people has changed very little. However, this does not mean that the American Indian cannot exert sovereignty in their own creations, and this can occur through the notion of “resistance,” a concept proposed by Michelle Raheja (2010).

Imagery in *Drunktown’s Finest*, from a non-critical reading and only approaching from a manifest level, could be interpreted as reinforcing dominant narratives; this form of reading would take away from the possibility that *Drunktown’s Finest* was masterfully created as a form of “resistance” to address the dichotomies and imagery that have been the markers of dominance. Raheja (2007) writes about this notion of resistance as “not created equal in all situations, but is located along a spectrum of political and social efficacy” (p. 1160). Social efficacy is crucial in resistance in that it refers to an individual’s belief in his or her capacity and reflects in the ability to exert control. This is especially pertinent for the American Indian filmmaker who is no longer confined to

creating visual stories and imagery to counter the dominant narrative but can use the same narrative and imagery controlled by the White creators by situating it in an Indigenous context as a way to assert sovereignty. This notion of resistance is not only applicable to the filmmaker but is also relevant to the American Indian viewer.

For the viewer, the social efficacy drives the interpretation, meaning the control is in the American Indian to form their own interpretations and “read” for cultural nuances in films produced by American Indians. Reading by reframing through an Indigenous lens is a form of sovereignty in that it places the American Indian as participant and holder of power. Resistance, as a form of reading films, is no longer predicated on the positive rendering by the White man but relies on the American Indian viewer to interpret the meanings from a lens that offers a possibility for liberation and agency.

Scholars may argue that deconstructing or reading in this regard may be an awakening for the Native reader, but it does not displace or shift the conventions and the system that have served as a convenient excuse to marginalize and see American Indians as wards who are justly controlled. I argue that, in fact, it does address the issue. I return to the statement by Pratt (1992) who posits that “a subjugated people cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture [however] they do determine to varying extents what they use for their own, and what they use it for” (p. 6). From this perspective, the discordant images are avenues through which conversations can emerge, which is at the heart of dehierarchizing hegemony.

A Community Effort

Singer (2001) writes about her experience and the attitude of funding organizations toward film proposals submitted by American Indians: “the underlying

attitude is that we as Native filmmakers are unconventional in our approach to filmmaking and too often personally invested to a fault in wanting to make films about our people” (p. 9). I posit that this “personal investment” is needed to redress the misrepresentations that have become embedded in the psyches of people across the world, and the state of the American Indian communities (and the people within) depend on how we rectify the images. The question then becomes, does the filmmaker have a role in changing the representations? As American Indians, we all have an important role of helping to change people’s perspectives, whether we be filmmakers, academics, or elders living on reservation.

Future Recommendations

Considering the focus of this future and the depth of understanding we can gain from unearthing the conventions in films that circulate ideologies, it is my recommendation that scholars continue analyzing films about American Indians to gain understanding on ways American Indians are being represented in the visual space. Heavy focus has been on analyzing such films as *Pocahontas*; I encourage a departure from these films to analyzing products by *Native scholars* to gain insights into ways American Indians are exerting sovereignty. This is not to say *all* researchers should not engage in this conversation; however, “Outsiders” knowledge about American Indians have, historically, been gained from and limited to textbooks and films. For this reason, I implore American Indians to use their lived experience to offer insights into ways filmmakers are Indigenizing space and using the representational field to speak back to the dominant narratives. I believe that this research is beneficial to the Native communities; however, this study only scratches the surface of the work that needs to be

done. If American Indians are to make more than an “appreciable degree” of change, then it will need to come with forming a relational accountability around film, a concept used by Shawn Wilson (2008) to refer to research, however no less applicable to the visual space. I use this term to mean that both filmmaker and researcher are accountable to all their relations and engender a process of cultural and identity self-scrutiny. To engage in this dialogue will, I believe, advance agency and sovereignty and change the imagery of American Indians. I strongly believe that fostering and sustaining discourses around misrepresentations, cultural appropriation, and the many “isms” surrounding this subject, through an interrogation of the pedagogies disseminated to the larger public, is vital to reshaping the American Indian representation. This is my recommendation for future scholarship.

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