Native Filmmakers and the Subversion of Imposed Categorization

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From the 16th into the 18th century, at a time of increased world trade and travel, the phenomenon of cabinets of curiosities became hugely popular. Such cabinets or cases enabled collectors to exhibit what were seen and displayed as exotic natural objects as diverse as insects, shells, feathers, stones and corals, as well as scientific instruments or "exotic artefacts," like feather headdresses or wampum belts. These cabinets sometimes could even include a human skull–reminding observers of their own mortality but, above all, signaling that human beings, too, could be submitted to the investigative approach of the collector and the scientist. Whether they consisted, for the wealthiest, in an entire room or, for less affluent amateurs, in a glass case fitted with shelves and devoted to the display of the owner's collection, these cabinets provide insight into the growing interest for categorization in the investigation of the natural world and its expanding horizons. This new interest for natural history[1] also questioned ancient representations of the world: "The fresh evidence (specimens and visual accounts) gathered by cabinet collectors challenged the tenets of ancient writers on the natural world (Aristotle, Theophrastus)" (Zytaruk 2).

In these cabinets, items in the categories of both *naturalia* and *artificialia* were present and often overlapped. Not necessarily clearly labelled, the specimens were frequently assembled regardless of any scientific method of categorization; visible similarities between the objects constituted guiding principle enough for the eclectic display. The disconcerting yet fascinating character of the curiosity cabinets thus often lay in "the sudden vicinity of things that have no relation to each other" (Foucault xvi). This "amateurish" approach would slowly evolve during the 17th century, and the publication and immediate success of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, first released in 1735, and *Species Plantarum* (1758), signal a shift towards a much more systematic investigation of the natural world. In this sense these curiosity cabinets became somewhat anachronistic. As stated by Michel Foucault,

> since it had proved possible, by means of experimentation and theory, to analyse the laws of movement or those governing the reflection of light beams, was it not normal to seek, by means of experiments, observations, or calculations, the laws that might govern the more complex but adjacent realm of living beings? (Foucault 125)

[1] Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the "facts relating to the natural objects, plants, or animals of a place."

An approach based on observation, description, and induction, furnished naturalists in general and in my context here the 18th and early-19th century explorers of the North American environment with the epistemic tools they needed to address the novelty of the fauna, flora, and Native inhabitants they were encountering. The knowledge they produced was, like scientific work in general, "based on the creation and use of categories. In turn, categorization is predicated on comparison: perceived similarities and differences lead to classifications into categories. Categories therefore combine the characteristics of objects, persons, and events to form classes" (Thiele 278). Categories were especially useful as they enabled these explorers to make their environment, and particularly the Native people, intelligible to a European audience as they "create order and perspective, facilitate systematization, and classify new information into already existing knowledge structures" (Thiele 278). Applying such notions of categorization and relying on empirical first-hand observations of the American environment and its Native inhabitants, these European explorers created the American-Indian types. And these types, based on such categorization, inevitably led to stereotypes.

As the basis of my study, I chose to focus on John Lawson's *A New Voyage to Carolina* (1709), on Bernard Romans' *Concise Natural History of East and West Florida* (1775), on William Bartram's *Travels*[2] (1790), and on Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's *Journal of a tour into the interior of Missouri and Arkansaw*[3] (1821). If, as argued by Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, early explorers "took back stories of wild savages that fit neatly into preconceived notions the Europeans had of what a savage would be" (Kilpatrick 1), I contend that the intellectual framework of natural history made later accounts more lastingly influential and, ultimately, dangerous. The types and categories they contributed to creating fixed Native Americans in certain roles that constitute the basis on which Hollywood built in the 20th century to create stereotyped representations of Native Americans.

Although long present and perverted in countless Hollywood films portraying American Indians, such long-standing stereotypes are subverted, reconfigured, and ultimately humorously debunked in two Native productions, Chris Eyre's 1998 film *Smoke Signals* and, more recently (2021-2022), in the first season of Sterlin Harjo and Taiko Waititi's Hulu TV series, *Reservation Dogs*.

[2] The full title is *Travels Through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws; Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of Those Regions, Together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians.*

[3] The full title is *Journal of a tour into the interior of Missouri and Arkansaw, from Potosi, or Mine a Burton, in Missouri Territory, in a south-west direction, toward the Rocky Mountains performed in the years 1818 and 1819.*

Natural history accounts and the creation of a Native American 'type'

Whether the naturalists were commissioned by wealthy Europeans (Lawson and Bartram[4]), or embarked on self-financed missions (Romans and Schoolcraft), these young men traveled through a territory still largely unfamiliar to their European readers. And therefore, the accounts of their explorations of North America were a particularly popular genre. The published records of these travels mix detailed observations of flora, fauna with the narratives of their adventures, which include accounts of their encounters with the Native populations of the territories they travelled through. Natural history, with its emphasis on the need for observation, comparison, and classification/categorization, provided them with a reading grid through which all living beings—plants, non-human animals, and human beings—could be made visible, explained, and apprehended. As Foucault contends in *The Order of Things*,

> Natural history is nothing more than the nomination of the visible. [...] someone has at last taken on the task of stating something that had been visible from the beginning of time, but had remained mute before a sort of invincible distraction of men's eyes. In fact, it was not an age-old inattentiveness being suddenly dissipated, but a new field of visibility being constituted in all its density. (Foucault 132)

Trying to organize both the material specimens they were collecting under various labels and the immaterial knowledge they were gathering, these explorers adopted a systematic approach, observing, comparing and creating categories based on common characteristics, thus "conceptualizing the natural world" (Farber 1) and "taming the profusion of existing things" (Foucault xv). For instance, travelling through Georgia in 1776, William Bartram encounters a new plant and uses the Linnaean method and binomial system to determine that indeed, this plant belongs to a new category:

> I had the opportunity of observing the new flowering shrub, resembling the Gordonia. On first observing the fructification and habit of this tree, I was inclined to believe it a species of Gordonia, but afterwards, upon stricter examination, and comparing its flowers and fruit with those of the Gordonia lasianthus, I presently found striking characteristics abundantly sufficient to separate it from that genus, and to establish it the head of a new tribe... (Bartram 375)

In this extract, Bartram's perception of the plant is clearly predicated on the creation and use of categories. This categorization is itself based on comparison, perceived similitudes leading to classification within the same "genus," or in a different "tribe."

Bartram and his fellow naturalists can be seen to apply the same method when it comes to describing and accounting for the Native peoples they encounter, detailing and categorizing according to their physical characteristics and their customs. The naturalists' remarks are often

[4] John Lawson worked for London apothecary James Petiver, and William Bartram was sponsored by Dr John Fothergill.

interspersed throughout the narratives of their travels, but their books can also contain a final section, specifically devoted to a more systematic description of Native Americans and their customs.[5] These accounts and descriptions–legitimized as it were by the authors' "scientific" approaches–tended to be perceived as applying to Native people in general, even if they initially were not supposed to essentialize them. This in turn opened the path for the creation of an "Indian type."

The physical appearance of Natives is of prime interest to these writers and is systematically described in opposition to Europeans, reinforcing what Foucault names "the age-old distinction between the Same and the Other" (Foucault xv). Bartram is in general quite punctilious in naming the different Southeastern tribes whose physical appearances he describes, stating for example that "The males of the Cherokees, Muscogulges, Siminoles, Chicasaws, Chactaws and confederate tribes of the Creeks, are tall, erect, and moderately robust; [...] their [...] countenance open, dignified and placid; their hair long, lank, coarse and black as a raven" (Bartram 386). Lawson tends to be more vague,[6] asserting that "The Indians of North-Carolina are a well-shaped clean-made People; [...] Their Eyes are commonly full and manly, and their Gate sedate and majestic" (Lawson 174). Lawson also gives his readers certain details that he finds striking, for instance "the *Indians* are a People that commonly pull the Hair of their Faces, and other Parts, up by the Roots, and suffer none to grow" (Lawson 58). Like Lawson, Romans, in a sweeping judgement, says that "All savages with whom I have been acquainted are generally speaking well-made [...]" (Romans 112). What is interesting is that the three authors link their relatively similar observations of the Natives' physical appearances to their moral values, or the lack thereof.

They indeed use the physical features they observe as indicative of an Indian "character" which is going to form the basis of an "Indian type." For Lawson, the Indians' "sedate and majestic" gate is linked to fortitude in adversity as "(T)hey never walk backward and forward as we do, nor contemplate on the Affairs of Loss and Gain;" (Lawson 175) and for Bartram, the men's "forehead and brow [...] strike you instantly with heroism and bravery," they are "brave and valiant in war" and "Their countenance and actions exhibit an air of magnanimity, superiority and independence" (Bartram 386; 389; 386). According to these naturalists, heroism, bravery, fortitude, are noble qualities that good warriors possess. In Lawson and Bartram's two accounts, we can see how the naturalists' early efforts at describing and categorizing end up creating types, which in turn impose stereotypes: the Indians' physique conflates with these qualities to create the Noble Indian/ Noble Warrior type. In his seminal study *The White Man's*

[5] These manners and customs account predate ethnographic accounts and were very popular.
[6] Lawson is actually not very consistent and oscillates between a globalizing approach (in his customs and manners account), and the minute naming of some tribes (in his journal).

Indian, Robert Berkhofer argues that the leap from physical posture to moral dignity has shaped centuries of European perceptions of Native Americans:

> Along with handsomeness of physique and physiognomy went great stamina and endurance. Modest in attitude, if not always in dress, the noble Indian exhibited great calm and dignity in bearing, conversation, and even under torture. Brave in combat, he was tender in love for family and children. [...] According to this version, the Indian, in short, lived a life of liberty, simplicity and innocence. (Berkhofer 28)

In fact, both Lawson and Bartram use the portrait of manners and customs which, according to Mary-Louise Pratt, is a normalizing discourse "whose work is to codify difference, to fix the Other in a timeless present where all 'his' actions and reactions are repetitions of 'his' normal habits" (Pratt 120). Thus, in spite of Lawson's and Bartram's rather sympathetic portrayal of Natives, their descriptions "normalize, codify and reify" their subjects (Pratt 121).

Like Lawson and Bartram, Romans, on the other end of the spectrum of representation, also refers to customs and manners, but creates a derogatory stereotype and, in keeping with his use of the globalizing and derogatory term "savage," chooses to stress how fearless, cruel and cunning the Natives are: "the torments they put the wretched victims to, are too horrid to relate, and the account thereof can only serve to make human nature shudder" (Romans 147). He describes their behavior as so evil that it makes "human nature shudder;" Romans' Indians thus lose any trace of humanity and become evil, malevolent Others, irretrievably falling into the Ignoble Savage category. Whether noble warriors or ignoble savages, the Indians described by these explorers lose their individuality and these essentialist perceptions will form the basis of later discursive practices, resulting in and contributing to stereotypes that persist into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Another recurrent element in these accounts is the "absent" presence of Natives. Writing at the beginning of the 18th century, Lawson is in close contact with several Native tribes[7] of Carolina. However, he cannot help but notice their decreasing numbers, and he explicitly links this decline with the presence of settlers and the diseases that the Indians seem to be catching from them:

> These *Sewees* have been formerly a large Nation, though now very much decreas'd since the *English* hath seated their Land, and all other Nations of *Indians* are observ'd to partake of the same Fate, where the *Europeans* come, the *Indians* being a People very apt to catch any Distemper they are afflicted withal. (Lawson 17)

By the time Bartram explores the South-eastern colonies, almost seventy years later (1773-1777), whole villages have been abandoned, and his text is full of references to "ancient" Indian towns, or "traces" of Indian presence. In Georgia, for instance,

[7] He was eventually captured and killed by the Tuscaroras in 1711.

> many very magnificent monuments of the power and industry of the ancient inhabitants of these lands are visible. I observed a stupendous conical pyramid, or artificial mount of earth, vast tetragon terraces, and a large sunken area, of a cubical form, encompassed with banks of earth; and certain traces of a large Indian town, the work of a powerful nation, whose period of grandeur perhaps long preceded the discovery of this continent. (Bartram 55-56)

Lawson's and Bartram's texts do recount many encounters and exchanges with Indians who are very much present and alive, of course. But the naturalists' accounts also quite systematically contrast a grandiose bygone era when Native Americans reigned on the continent with a much more meager present. And by means of this contrast they construct an "absent" presence. Such a construction is further emphasized by a major difference between Bartram's and Lawson's texts: the connection between European presence and Indian absence totally disappears in Bartram's narrative, erasing this part of recent history and making the traces of Indian presence seem much more ancient than they really were. Both Lawson and Bartram thus depict landscapes where the Indians *used to* live, but which they seem to have abandoned. In a different context,[8] but applicable to North America, Pratt argues that this discursive practice "is a configuration which, in (mis)recognition of what was materially underway or in anticipation of what was to come, verbally depopulates landscapes" (Pratt 126-27).

Henry Rowe Schoolcraft also contributes to the conception of this absent presence. Exploring the frontier territory of Arkansas in 1818-19, he insists on the numerous signs of previous Indian occupancy. In his *Journal of a tour into the interior of Missouri and Arkansaw*, Indians in general, and the Osages in particular, are frightening, even if this fear is based on what Schoolcraft hears about them rather than on actual encounters: "Numerous other instances were related, all tending to prove that the Osage Indians felt hostile to the white settlements along that river, and that they were habitual robbers and plunderers, not only of them, but of every person who happened to fall defenceless into their hands" (Schoolcraft 37-38). In fact, on his journey, Schoolcraft only comes across their deserted camps: "we fell into the Osage trace, a horse-path beaten by the Osages in their hunting excursions along this river, and passed successively three of their camps, now deserted [...]" (Schoolcraft 52). Constructed as dangerous and threatening even though not really present, Schoolcraft's Indians remain a phantasmic presence, and never acquire flesh and blood status.

What is also worth noticing is the shift in responsibility in his perception of the disappearance of Indians. Unlike Lawson and Bartram, Schoolcraft attributes their disappearance to inter-

[8] The colonization of the African continent by European powers.

tribal wars and he mentions the extinction of Indian title to the land–and thus, implicitly, Euro-American responsibility–only as an afterthought:

> We passed several Indian camps, but all in a state of decay, and bearing the appearance of having been deserted three or four years. These are the first traces of savage life which we have seen since leaving the Fourche à Courtois. Several causes have induced the Indians to relinquish hunting in this quarter, and principally their wars among themselves, which have kept them in mutual fear of each other. Lately, the Indian title has been extinguished by purchase by the United States, and this stream will no longer be included in their hunting-grounds. (Schoolcraft 25)

This movement towards a negation of Euro-American responsibility is noted in Philip J. Deloria's analysis of the imagery of the Vanishing Indian which, he writes, "began to play on earlier symbolic linkages between Indians and the past, and these images eventually produced the full-blown ideology of the Vanishing Indian, which proclaimed it foreordained that less advanced societies should disappear in the presence of those more advanced" (Deloria 64). When the naturalists describe the Indians as having disappeared and having left only traces of their existence in their environment, the writers categorize the different tribal peoples as having simply fulfilled a prophecy. Similar remarks and attitudes concerning the disappearance of "the Indian race" can be found in innumerable other accounts and resonate with a form of nostalgia for an allegedly lost culture and way of life, what Renato Rosaldo names "imperialist nostalgia" (Rosaldo 107). These accounts base their legitimacy on first-hand observations by supposedly neutral travelers whose agenda was–again, supposedly–scientific, not political. Observing Native Americans through the lens of Euro-American "natural history," these explorers created convenient categories, and this discursive construction of "Indianness" ultimately became an instrument of political oppression. As Pierre Bourdieu suggests, power comes from the capacity

> to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and thereby to make and unmake groups. What is at stake here is the power of imposing a vision of the social world through principles of division which, when they are imposed on a whole group, establish meaning and a consensus about meaning, and in particular about the identity and unity of the group, which creates the reality of the unity and the identity of the group. (Bourdieu 223)

The creation of a type, the Vanishing Indian very conveniently disappearing and leaving the land open for Euro-American settlement—just like the creation of types of the Noble (or Ignoble) warrior—find their roots in these early accounts which contributed to the creation of the White Man's Indian, to use Berkhofer's term.

Over time, indeed, the various descriptions that 18th and early 19th-century explorers gave of Indians provided perfect material for the ideological construction of "the Indian" as the ultimate "Other:"

> The colonized subject is characterized as 'other' through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. (Ashcroft et al 154-55)

These different "Indian types" acted as touchstones for the definition of Euro-American society, particularly in the wake of the War for Independence, when the need for national cohesion was paramount. The reiteration of these types in narratives, particularly in 19th century dime novels and in the 20th-century Hollywood Westerns based upon them, contributed to oversimplification and dissemination (see Kilpatrick 9) and, ultimately, to their becoming stereotypes which are, according to Media Studies Professor Martina Thiele,

> the verbal expression of a conviction directed at social groups or individuals as their members. It has the logical form of a judgement which, in an unjustifiably simplistic and generalizing way, with an emotional-valuing tendency, assigns or denies certain characteristics or behaviours to a class of persons. Linguistically, it can be described as a sentence. (Thiele 283)

In the specific context of the stereotypes established by the early naturalists, as we have seen, and perpetuated since, these judgments are of either noble or ignoble savages and an absent presence. Two Native American filmic productions—the 1998 film *Smoke Signals,*[9] directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne-Arapaho) from a screenplay by Sherman Alexie (Spokane), and season 1 of *Reservation Dogs* (or *Rez Dogs*), an Indigenous TV series created by Sterlin Harjo (Seminole) and Taika Waititi (Māori)—address these by presenting and challenging both the Warrior and the Vanishing Indian stereotypes.

Challenging the stereotypes

The warrior stereotype

One particular scene in *Smoke Signals* plays on the simplistic and generalizing way the warrior stereotype can work, but at the same time demonstrates its complexity. In this way Eyre shows the extent to which such a stereotype is ingrained in the culture, both exposing and subverting it. The two leads travel together on a bus: Victor Joseph (Anishinaabe actor Adam Beach) and Thomas (Evan Adams - Tla'amin First nation). They are on their way from their Idaho reservation to Phoenix, Arizona, to retrieve Victor's dad's ashes. Victor's dad, Arnold Joseph, has died there, years after disappearing from the Coeur d'Alene reservation where he lived with his family. After realizing that Thomas, whom Victor accuses of "speaking like a damn medicine

[9] *Smoke Signals* has deservedly garnered considerable academic attention. The title of the movie itself plays on the stereotypical image of Indians using smoke signals to communicate, and may also refer to the 1955 western film *Smoke Signal*. I'm trying to present it here as a springboard for other productions to use humor in the debunking of stereotypes.

man" has actually seen the 1990 Hollywood Western *Dances with Wolves* hundreds of times, Victor proceeds to teach him how to be, as he says, a "real" Indian.

> Victor: I mean, you just go on and on talking about nothing. Why can't you have a normal conversation? You're always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances with Wolves*? A hundred, two hundred times?
>
> Oh, jeez, you have seen it that many times, haven't you?
>
> Don't you even know how to be a real Indian? First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic. You got to look mean or people won't respect you. White people will run over you if you don't look mean. You got to look like a warrior, you got to look like you came back from killing a buffalo.
>
> Thomas: But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen.
>
> Victor: You want to look like you came back from catching a fish? This ain't *Dances with Salmon*, you know. You got to look like a warrior. And second, you got to know how to use your hair. You got to free it. An Indian man ain't nothing without his hair.

In this scene Victor, who is able to identify the stereotypical image of the Medicine Man in Thomas, seems to be unaware that he is in fact trying to convince his friend to replace one stereotype with another. He thus gives Thomas a "recipe" for being a real "Indian," playing into the stoic warrior stock image stereotype, complete with mean look and long hair. This portrayal scene recalls the very images European or Euro-American naturalists created some two or three centuries before the movie was made. They are images we, as contemporary audience members, still perceive as the "real" Indian image. In *Picturing Indians, Native American in Films, 1941-1960*, Liza Black states that "Those who played Indians succumbed entirely to the studios' Indian stereotypes, and such stereotypes centered on physical appearance" (Black 136), that "Hairstylists [...] imagined Indian hair was not only dark and long but also thick" (Black 148), adding that the dark thick hair had to be on the head only, not on the body (Black 148)[10]. In fact, the stereotypical and fictional image that echoes 18th -century descriptions ends up being more real than contemporary reality. This new reality, as it were, fits Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, which leads Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor to declare that the "real" Indian is an "absolute fake" (quoted in Owens 13). As Berkhofer explains, "For most Whites throughout the past five centuries, the Indian of the imagination and ideology has been as real, perhaps more real, than the Native American of actual existence and contact" (Berkhofer 71). The scene in *Smoke Signals* does not merely confront the white audience with its preconceptions about what it is to be Indian; it also manages to show that this imagery is so pervasive that the two characters themselves, both Natives, are contaminated by it. As Victor points out, Thomas has seen *Dances with Wolves* any number of times, but he too has probably seen it. The reference to the movie *Dances with Wolves* acts as a touchstone

[10] This echoes Lawson's remark on hair plucking.

for the definition of what a real Indian is according to Hollywood, Lieutenant Dunbar (Kevin Costner) becoming, according to Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "more Indian than the Lakotas who adopt him" (Kilpatrick 126).

The scene in Eyre's film is also a reminder of the global influence of popular culture on Natives and non-Natives alike. After all, Victor seems to imply that Thomas wrongly relies on that film's definition of Indianness. As Amanda J. Cobb contends in "This Is What It Means to Say Smoke Signals. Native American Cultural Sovereignty," "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" (Cobb 216). By addressing the crucial problem of Native identity in such a way, director Chris Eyre is not only debunking the stereotype by making the audience laugh about their misconceptions. He also, through the use of humor, manages to show that Native Americans themselves have internalized the need to conform to an identity constructed by non-Indians. He even goes further and offers an alternative image and thus creates a new definition of what it is to be "Indian." At a rest stop, we see a new version of Thomas about to board the bus after Victor has taught him how to be a real Indian. He is not the stoic warrior of years gone by. He is rather a revamped, Indianized version of Superman, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Frybread Power." The contemporary Coeur d'Alene Indian we see here seems to embrace his Native heritage and past. He is wearing his hair long and free and his T-shirt refers humorously (and somewhat stereotypically) to the Indian staple food which is, in Sherman Alexie's words, "the story of our survival" (*Smithsonian Magazine*). This staple is described as "not only 'traditional' Native American food but as an ethnic marker of Indian identity" (Pack 67). But Thomas with free hair and T-shirt is also definitely a young 20th-century American, a real AND contemporary Indian. What Eva Gruber writes about the use of humor in Native American literature seems to definitely apply to what Eyre and Alexie are doing in that scene: "humor [...] frequently works *with* familiar, symbolically charged, stereotypical images and representations of Native people and Native-White history—in order to subversively reencode or reimagine them" (Gruber 2).

Humor is also at work to challenge and undermine stereotypes in the first season of *Reservation Dogs*. The series follows four Indigenous teenagers, Bear, Elora, Cheese and Willie Jack,[11] who live in the fictional town of Okern, Oklahoma. Very early in season 1, we learn that their friend and/or cousin, Daniel, who was dreaming of moving to California, has died. "This place killed him," according to Elora. The friends decide to get money by selling whatever they

[11] Whose nickname may be a reference to Tom Laughlin's 1971 movie *Billy Jack*. It is also the name of the main character, of Navajo descent, who played in the first movie of the series, *The Born Losers*, a film about a gang terrorizing a small community. The Rez Dogs are gang members, too, but violence is not one of their methods.

can steal in order to get out of that place before it kills them too[12] and go to California. Despite this somber and dramatic premise, the episodes are full of humorous moments. In the first episode of season 1, for example, a new gang, the NDN Mafia, has just arrived in town. The rival group attacks the four Rez Dogs with paintballs, and Bear, who has "died" histrionically, is lying on the ground, as if unconscious. While on the ground, he has a vision. A man on horseback, emerging from the mist and humming a song, calls out to Bear. The audience will recognize this rider, bare-chested except for a bone breastplate, buckskin, flanged trousers, long black hair, as the stereotypical Warrior. His image has been set as such since the early naturalists and perpetuated throughout the 20th century.

> Spirit: Oh oh, young warrior. Looks like you've tasted the white man's lead.
>
> Bear: It's only paintballs.
>
> Spirit: I've had many brothers and sisters meet the same fate in my time.
>
> Bear: Are you Crazy Horse or Sitting…?
>
> Spirit: No, no, no, I'm not one of those awesome guys. No, I'm more of, I'm more of your Unknown Warrior. You know my name? William Knifeman. I was at the Battle of Little Big Horn. That's right. I didn't kill anybody. But I fought bravely. Well, I didn't actually fight, I didn't actually even get into the fight itself. But I came over the hill real rugged like. I saw Custer like that. That yellow hair. He was sitting there. Son of the Morning Star like that, right there. Fuck, I really hated him. So I went after him. But then the damn horse hit a gopher hole. Rolled over and squashed me. I died there. This horse, actually, full of shit. And now, I'm meant to travel the spirit world to find lost souls like you. The spirit world, it's cold. My nipples are always hard. I'm always hungry.

This scene clearly presents and then undercuts the Noble Warrior stereotype, but in a different and multi-layered way. The man on horseback does indeed look like a warrior, with his typical feathered headdress, buckskin and breastplate (Black 136) and the young, 21st-century Bear immediately thinks he has encountered Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull, both of whom fought at Little Big Horn in 1876. However, when the Warrior (Mdewakanton Dakota & Diṅe actor Dallas Goldtooth) narrates his actual role on the battlefield, we learn that he died before even being able to fight; his horse stepped in a gopher hole, tripped, and fell on its rider, killing him. So, he is a warrior, but a warrior who never fought, just died. That, and the fact that he is supposedly an unknown warrior, recalls the role devolved to Indians by numerous Western movies in the 20th century: nameless, faceless, and dying at the hands of the whites. Lee Schweninger argues that their individual deaths act as a metaphor for the demise of their culture: "[…] as Indians in so many of these Westerns are used as the representation of conflict

[12] This notion of the place (the reservation) killing the main protagonist(s) is also present in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely true Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Explaining to his best friend Rowdy his decision to leave the rez school to go to Reardan, the main character, Arnold Spirit, says "I have to go. I'm going to die if I stay here" (Alexie 52). Departure as a strategy for survival is a recurrent theme of Native films or literature.

that must be overcome by the Euro Americans in the West, their individual deaths and general defeat signifies the erasure of the entire culture. In these films, the Indians are vanished" (Schweninger 16). Here, however, the unknown warrior actually has a name, William Knifeman. He does not die at the hands of Custer or his army, but is killed accidentally by his own horse hole. Not the most glorious death. The stereotype of the Noble Warrior is further undercut by Knifeman's status as a spirit. However, the filmmakers challenge even his status as a spirit; he has bodily needs: he gets cold, he is always hungry, and, in another scene, we see him urinating. It is in fact not only the Warrior stereotype which is addressed here: the whole notion of Indigenous people dialoguing with ghosts is made light of. In a 2021 interview with the *New York Times*, Waititi, one of the show directors, noted: "We're tired of seeing ourselves out there wandering through forests talking to ghosts, putting our hands on trees and talking to the wind as if we have all the answers because of our relationship with nature. And there's always flute music" (*NYT*, 15 October 2021). In that same interview, Sterlin Harjo explains that *Reservation Dogs* plays with the signifiers usually associated with "the Indians:" "We are making fun of non-Native audiences' expectations while acknowledging aspects of that part of Native culture [...]. We're teasing the audience using the history of cinema. Native Americans grow up on pop culture—it's how we learn what the rest of the world is up to" (*ibid.*).

Harjo and Waititi thus use humor to deconstruct a double stereotype, the Indian as noble warrior and the Indian as a deeply spiritual being. They make the audience, whether Native or non-Native, laugh and laughter, according to Mikhail Bakhtin,

> has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. (Bakhtin 23)

The Vanishing Indian stereotype

The character of the Spirit has still another function in the series: he brings together and combines the Warrior and the Vanishing Indian stereotypes. In the following scene, Bear has just been beaten up by members of the rival gang and, again lying on the ground, he sees the Spirit again.

> Spirit (urinating behind a trashcan): Oh, oh young warrior, Crazy Hair. Got beat up again, hmmm... Me, back in my day, I would have gone at them like that you know. Throw a spear in that little kid's head, the little white one. You probably should have run.
>
> Bear: I got some good ones in.

> Spirit: Custer – Custer wished he would have run. Like that. Took off on his little legs. But he didn't. He died.
>
> Bear: I'm not going to be here forever, so…
>
> Spirit: The moment we're born, we're gonna die.
>
> Bear: No, I mean, California.
>
> Spirit: California… Oh, oh, yeah, that's where you're gonna go. Run away. Head off west, dreaming big. They all just want to run away. We're all just running away.
>
> Bear: I'm not running away.

Spirit addresses Bear as "Young Warrior-Crazy Hair," incorporating him in a long line of noble warriors even though Bear did not "get any good ones in," contrary to what he claims. So, just like the Spirit Warrior, Bear is a warrior who is actually unable to fight. This reversal of expectations is further complicated, however, by the misunderstanding between Bear and Spirit. From the beginning of their dialogue, each of the protagonists follows his own train of thought; they speak past each other. When Spirit suggests that Bear should have run away, Bear, misunderstanding the "running away" idea, answers that he won't be here forever. Hearing this, Spirit in turn misinterprets these words and thinks that Bear is aware of his own mortality, when he in fact is simply referring to moving to California. Thus, we as an audience realize that for Spirit, being gone equates being dead. Bear makes it clear that this is not what he means, and Spirit seizes on this to state that heading west *is* running away. Because of the previous exchange between Bear and Spirit that played on the Vanishing Indian stereotype, this conjures up the image of Native Americans literally running away from white people.

The continuance of the stereotype of running away, of an absent presence, identified by the early naturalists, can be seen in paintings, in John Gast's 1872 *American Progress* or in Matteson's *The Last of their Race* (1847),[13] paintings which supposedly bear witness to the extinction of Native Americans. But to Spirit's sweeping statement "They all just want to run away, we're all just running away," Bear retorts "I'm not running away." I argue here that what Bear is saying is that, to a young contemporary Native American, leaving the reservation for California is not running away; it is not disappearing forever, and it is not a treason. In other words, Bear is not running away from his identity as a young Native, which is not defined purely by his sense of place. Here, *Reservation Dogs* deconstructs the Vanishing Indian trope by addressing both the external discourse of disappearance and its internalization as a betrayal by Native Americans.[14] In that sense, the series adopts a more optimistic outlook than *Smoke*

[13] The same theme was taken up by John Mix Stanley in his 1857 painting bearing the same title. Remington also seizes on the same topic in his 1908 *The Last of His Race*, the portrait of a lonely Indian.
[14] Again, a theme that forms the backbone of Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. For instance, after suffering a series of losses, Arnold Spirit feels that he is being punished

Signals. In *Smoke Signals*, Victor's dad does indeed run away to Phoenix and ultimately dies there, even though (via flashbacks) he is very much present and alive throughout the movie. What *Reservation Dogs* suggests, in contrast, is that leaving the reservation is neither a flight, nor a betrayal, nor does it mean the loss of your Native identity. It is just starting a new chapter in your life, something that one may want to do whether one is Native American or not. In this sense, then, Harjo and Waititi undercut the naturalists' conception of an absent presence of Native Americans in that they are present wherever they are.

Immensely popular in the 18th and early-19th centuries, travel reports gave their authors ample opportunity to distill remarks on Native Americans. They also often contained a specific ethnographic section devoted to more precise descriptions of the different Indian tribes the travelers encountered. By assigning them specific characteristics, these writers "aspire[d] to a stable fixing of subjects and systems of differences" (Pratt 121) and established convenient categories based on observed similarities. Constructed through their perceptions, Indians came to be recognized thanks to external signifiers like their hair or the way they dressed, or by the virtues or vices attached to them. This discourse of Indianness, reinforced by 19th-century literature and 20th-century Hollywood movies, remains an instrument of oppression, imposing preconceptions over individuals and communities. Contemporary Native productions, however, are deconstructing these categories by resorting to humor to make both Native Americans and Euro-Americans aware of their existence and, more importantly, by offering an alternative reading of reality. The success of *Smoke Signals* and *Reservation Dogs* testifies to the importance of humor in opening a space for renewed interactions between Native and non-Native people.

for leaving the reservation: "I blamed myself for all the deaths. I had cursed my family. I had left the tribe and broken something inside all of us, and I was now being punished for that" (Alexie 173).

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