American Indians In Film: How They Became Mythical Beings Of The Hollywood Western

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AMERICAN INDIANS IN FILM:
HOW THEY BECAME MYTHICAL BEINGS OF THE HOLLYWOOD WESTERN

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HONORS THESIS
APRIL 10, 2000
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DATED APRIL 10, 2000
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Murphy Fox, M.S.: Honors Thesis Director—Renaissance Man
For allowing me the freedom to either soar with the
eagles or fall flat on my face. Hopefully this
endeavor together with the majority of my other
efforts at Carroll have been of the former, not the
latter. Nevertheless, it has been a learning
experience.

Ron Stottlemyer, Ph.D.: Honors Thesis Committee—Reader
For access to your extensive film genre library,
your literary genius, and the sparkling
conversation generated therefrom.

Marilyn Grant, M.S., Writer and Editor: Honors Thesis
Committee—Reader
For your undivided support, patience, concern, and
friendship regarding my academic career as well as
other facets of my life.

Jerome Baggett, Ph.D: Honors Thesis Committee—Reader.
For believing students are sacred ground and that
you yourself can learn something from them. I hope
Carroll realizes its fortune in having you for the
two short years you were here.

Lois Fitzpatrick M.S., Director, Corette Library: Academic
Advisor
For being my guardian angel at Carroll. You went
beyond the call of "advisor" duty many times over
and your continual efforts, understanding, and love
smoothed the rough spots and soothed my way on more
than one occasion.

Valerie Gager, Ph.D.: Department Chair, Languages and
Literature
For championing the cause of the nontraditional
student—especially this nontraditional student.

For the Faculty and Staff who extended their hands in
friendship during my brief sojourn at Carroll.
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Certainly colorful, certainly romantic—the West has bred thousands of stories told via epic poem, novel, and film. These thousands of stories have captured the imagination of people since their inception. Who cannot identify with the pioneer spirit exemplified in the Western—the tough men, and women, who traveled thousands of miles across America to tame the Wild West—to civilize the wilderness—to the claim the vast frontier as their own. Will Wright claims that western myth "literally tells a story, for it recreates the settling of the American West, a time and history which, as someone said, if it did not really happen, it should have" (4).

There is a basis for reality in the Western, but as wild as the west was at the height of its glory, no way on God’s green earth could the actual events have included the many stories of glory and suffering, heroism and savagery, love and sacrifice, that the Western myth has produced in novel, poem, and film. Despite the disparity between the actual events and the stories, the historical reality of the West provided fertile ground for the growth and development of myth (Wright 4).

Western film has enthralled not only Americans but also millions of people around the world. The Western myth of taming the frontier has proved to be bigger than life in the American experience, and Hollywood has perpetuated the myth in historical, stereotypical, and national contexts. Found amongst these mythical contexts are American Indians—the
mythical beings of the Hollywood Western. William A. Haviland explains, "Myth, in popular usage, refers to something that is widely believed to be true, but probably is not," and this definition can be applied to the Hollywood treatment of American Indians in film (393).

Rather than depict American Indians as they historically were and now are—a people whose worldview encompasses social, cultural, political, religious, and economic systems that rival, influence, and often transcend the Euroamerican worldview, Hollywood recast them to fit the mold forged by European philosophy and literature and refired by American literary genres. "The Indian became a genuine American symbol," contends essayist Ted Jojola, "whose distorted origins are attributed to the folklore of Christopher Columbus when he 'discovered' the 'New World.' Since then the film industry, or Hollywood, has never allowed Native Americans to forget it. The Hollywood Indian is a mythological being who exists nowhere but within the fertile imagination of its movie actors, producers, and directors" (12).

The Western, from its earliest literary beginnings, has perpetuated the myth of American Indians and the Hollywood treatment has underscored the myth by reinforcing the savage stereotype, and ignoring, excluding, or distorting American Indian history and cultural identity. In understanding how American Indians became mythical beings of the Hollywood Western, we must first look at the origins of Western myth.
BIRTH OF WESTERN MYTHOLOGY

Since classical times, Europeans conceived the West as utopia. For the last two thousand years the idea of the utopian West has been deeply ingrained in western European culture and the West in its youth, its freshness, and its seemingly limitless opportunities seemed to symbolize another, and perhaps better, world that lacked many of the strains and stresses of an older Europe. It beckoned to people everywhere. Gerald D. Nash claims that no single individual inspired this millennialism tradition of looking to the future beckoning of utopia—the vision of a mythical West; rather, many minds shaped this perspective (4). Greek and Roman epic poems and stories contained the common thread of "yearning for a land of laughter, of peace, and of life" (Nash 5).

Throughout history people have yearned for this utopian land to the west as Jim Kitses writes, "Great empires developed ever westward: from Greece to Rome, from Rome to Britain, from Britain to America" (10). The concept of destiny of nations from ancient Troy to Greece to Elizabethan England wore the mantle of "ever westward" and themes of eternity, happiness, and millennialism were woven into one fabric in the western theme (Nash 5).

Consequently, the idea of the West took on a conceptional as well as a directional construction. Columbus' "discovery" of America (he sailed west to avoid hostilities in the Asiatic countries to the east) embellished the western myth and the
subsequent invasion by white Europeans further developed the concept. The concept of the west as utopia not only encompassed the millennialist tradition, but involved the primitivist tradition as well, notes Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., in *The White Man's Indian*:

> Primitivism dreams of a paradise on earth that does or did prove that an alternative to the present age could exist. By the time of the Renaissance, the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions of Eden and Arcadia, or Paradise and the Golden Age, had combined in a myth of lands lying far away to the west or long ago in the past whose citizens dwelt in an ideal(ized) landscape and gentle climate in harmony with nature and reason. In short, primitivism postulated people dwelling in nature according to nature, existing free of history's burdens and the social complexity felt by Europeans in the modern period, and offering hope to mankind at the same time that they constituted a powerful counter-example to existing European civilization (72; Emphasis added).

European minds and imaginations idealized the New World and its inhabitants because native peoples did dwell in nature according to the laws of nature, their survival demanded it, and they lived in virtual paradises according to European standards. However, they hardly existed free of history's
burdens or the social complexity felt by the Europeans and promoted by the primitivist tradition. All native peoples, especially Americans Indians had their own history long before European exploration of the New World. Their origin histories told their story.

As for social complexity, American Indian social institutions rivaled the degree of complexity of European social conventions, however, the approach differed substantially which the Europeans misconstrued as simplistic. American Indian social institutions followed an egalitarian model rather than the hierarchal model of the Europeans.

Concerning the "savage" image, American Indians lived in their environment according to nature and this environment was perceived by European worldview as alien, savage, uncivilized. Thus, the inhabitants of such an environment would be viewed as having the same characteristics—alien, savage, uncivilized.

Ignoring the real world of native peoples, European minds and imaginations refreshed the utopian west concept by coupling millennialism with primitivism, and as a result the inhabitants of the New World became the mythical beings of mythological lands.

Clearly, European minds and imaginations set the stage for the drama between these two ancient cultures. The two ancient cultures presented historical, cultural, and literary perspectives diametrically opposed to one another which
ultimately clashed in the real world and on the battlefield in the make-believe world of the Hollywood Western.
HISTORICAL MYTH

Western film has led us to believe that the white invasion of the vast western frontier encompassed a mere fifty years—from the 1840s to the 1890s. According to Hollywood Western myth, this is the time the "west was won" and the typical scenarios of fur trapping in the 1840s, gold discovery in 1860s and subsequent Indian wars, the massive land rush, and Indian extermination by the 1890s have played out time and time again on the big screen (Wright 5). By encapsulating this small slice of American history into timeless mythical history, the Hollywood Western transcends reality.

Taking the Western at face value, forsaking reality over fantasy, one does believe the events of the typical Hollywood scenarios that took place between the 1840s and 1890s compile the settling of the West. However, events that preceded the white settlement of the West present a different reality than the one portrayed on the silver screen.

The Western neglects to mention that early prehistoric peoples inhabited the west thousands of years prior to the white immigrants. Archaeological studies indicate that Asiatic peoples crossed the Bering land bridge into the New World nearly fifteen to twenty thousand years ago (Malone, Roeder and Lang 8). In fact, five hundred years prior to the European invasion of North America, more than five million native peoples thrived in a variety of cultural groups throughout what is now the United States, and these
civilizations rivaled those found in the most cosmopolitan areas of Europe (Malone, Roeder, and Lang 10).

One such civilization lived in Cahokia, the largest city in America north of ancient Mexico which lies in southern Illinois across the river from St. Louis. During its most prosperous period (circa AD 1250) Cahokia ranked as one of the great urban centers of the world argues Jack Weatherford (6). Settlement of Cahokia between AD 600 and 800, around the fall of Rome, grew to its greatest size of more than twenty thousand inhabitants before Columbus ever set foot on American soil. Weatherford claims that "the city started before the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire and persisted through the time of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe" (11).

Because of its location on the Mississippi River, Cahokia offered a transportation and trade center that united a trading empire larger than the combined area of France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, Austria, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Greece, Denmark, Romania, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Portugal, Luxembourg, and Bulgaria (Weatherford 14).

As a communication hub, Cahokia’s location also played an important part in that the three major North American language groups of southern Muskogean, eastern Iroquoian, and western Siouan which converged in this area and Cahokia may have channelled trade and information and regulated social or political relations among the three groups (Weatherford 14).
Although Cahokia was also one of the three primary cultural areas of the Americas; unfortunately, native peoples kept no written record. Spanish conquistadors recorded some information, but most actual knowledge has been lost "in the blood of conquest and the dust of colonization" (Weatherford 15).

Cahokia was not the only highly civilized cultural area in North America before white contact. Two other cultural areas in North America, Palenque in Mexico and Chaco Canyon in the American Southwest, also rivaled the best Western civilization had to offer.

Palenque, in the heart of the Mexican jungle, was the holy city of the Mayan leader Pacal who began building it when he ascended to the throne at the age of twelve. After his death ca. AD 673, Pacal's sons expanded Palenque erecting magnificent structures in addition to the ones Pacal had built and eventually "they ruled as living gods over some two hundred thousand Mayan people dwelling in regional communities of farmers, weavers, stonemasons, feather workers, and other specialists," states Alvin Josephy, Jr. (33). By AD 720 Palenque had reached its highest glory, but for reasons unknown warfare erupted and eventually Palenque laid in ruin.

Other Indian peoples, far off in the American Southwest, had developed other high cultures and civilizations totally unlike those of the Mound Builders (Cahokia) or the politically astute Iroquois in the Northeast (Josephy 53). By
AD 900, the Anasazi, the forefathers of the modern day tribes of Pueblos, Zunis and Hopis of New Mexico and Arizona, had arisen on the Colorado Plateau in the high Four Corners country of southern Utah and Colorado, northern Arizona and New Mexico.

The Anasazi society, eventually moving from subterranean pit houses into villages, joined together to harness water with earthen dams, reservoirs, and irrigation systems, turning parts of the high desert into gardens of corn and other crops. In the midst of their world, in this harsh environment that supported little habitation, they constructed a center for their civilization in Chaco Canyon (Josephy 56).

Chaco Canyon—a place where traders exchanged goods and spiritual pilgrimages ended—contained a road system of more than four hundred miles which linked different regions in their country. Twelve towns housing five thousand people, together with the beautiful kivas that rivaled the Gothic cathedrals in Europe, lined the roads and avenues along Chaco Canyon (Josephy 60).

Grand enough in their own right, none of these architectural wonders compared with the jewel of Chaco Canyon—Pueblo Bonita. Pueblo Bonita, the largest single building the Anasazi ever constructed, housed over a thousand residents in more than six hundred rooms—craftsmen, merchants, and government and religious leaders and their families. Chaco was the center of a sophisticated and creative
civilization, but a short-lived one. By the thirteenth century the Anasazi had deserted Chaco, but that did not mean the demise of Anasazi society. They migrated to the surrounding Four Corners regions, moved again to the Rio Grande Valley, and eventually ended up in present day New Mexico and Arizona (Josephy 61).

In addition to the sophisticated worlds of Cahokia, Chaco Canyon and Palenque, other groups of native peoples throughout America thrived in culturally rich, politically strong socio-economic systems that promoted harmony between the people and nature and offered religious belief systems still paramount for American Indians today. The Iroquois Nation, or the People of the Longhouse, in northeastern America implemented the Great Law of Peace (Hodenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois Constitution), long before our founding fathers wrote the United States Constitution. Josephy insists that "The new United States did not go as far as the Hodenosaunees, for, unlike the Indians, it did not accord equality to all men and both genders among its people. While the United States and other nations of the world struggled during later generations to rectify such inequities, the Great Law of the Hodenosaunee remained unchanged and still guides the Grand Council of the People of the Longhouse—one of the world’s oldest continuing democracies—to this day" (53).

Regardless of the "before" history of American Indians, in the settling of the West the white historical perspective
took precedence over the Indian historical perspective because the narratives, chronicles, sermons, tracts, novels, poetry—all "grounded" in history—comprised the written word and the written word reached an audience throughout America and into Europe.

Indian history, on the other hand, relied on the spoken word. The spoken word, or oral tradition, the most important vehicle to teach and pass on the sacred knowledge and practices of the tribe, lacked the books, libraries, movies, film strips, tape recorders, radios, and televisions that comprised white mass media. Thus, the human voice, hand movements, and facial expressions served as "mass media" and reached a relatively small audience compared to the white audience (Beck, Walters and Francisco 57).

Despite the small size of the audience, oral tradition, through storytelling, has preserved the origin histories (stories that told of where the people came from, how the stars were created, the discovery of fire, how light became divided from darkness, and how death originated (Beck, Walters and Francisco 57). Luther Standing Bear of the Lakota speaks of how important the stories were to his people:

These stories were the libraries of our people. In each story, there was recorded some event of interest or importance, some happening that affected the lives of the people. There were calamities, discoveries, achievement, and victories
to be kept. The seasons and the years were named for principal events that took place. There was the year of the "moving star" when these bright bodies left their places in the sky and seemed to fall to earth or vanished altogether; the year of the great prairie fire when the buffalo became scarce; and the year that Long Hair (Custer) was killed. But not all our stories were historical. Some taught the virtues—kindness, obedience, thrift, and the rewards of right living. Then there were stories of pure fancy in which I can see no meaning. Maybe they are so old that their meaning has been lost in the countless years, for our people are old. But even so, a people enrich their minds who keep their history on the leaves of memory. Countless leaves in countless books have robbed a people of both history and memory (58).

Contrary to the impression the Western imparts to the viewing public, American Indians did not pop up from behind sagebrush or a saguaro cactus to harass and kill the white settlers. American Indians had already "settled their West" and recounted their own historical accounts through oral tradition. American Indians had been living in accordance with their political, social, economic, and religious systems firmly in place before white people ever set foot on American soil. After white contact, they strived to live in accordance
with their precepts despite dubious American Indian policy that disrupted the Indian way of life.

Since the Indian historical perspective has been ignored or discounted, revisionists, especially white apologists, attempt to rewrite history, but many of these attempts do as much injustice to the American Indian as the white perspective. Revisionism attempts to modify the conventional views or established school of thought. In the case of Indian historical perspective, revisionism modifies the intrinsically evil savage Indian to the glorified Indian and slings mud at the white man (Sarf 204).

Many pro-Indian authors, such as Dee Brown who is best known for his mammoth bestseller *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, perpetuate historical myth with an artful mixture of half-truth, omission, and outright fiction. Brown, among others, reasons Sarf, served up this fantastical dish of historical myth because "Brown's public had a hard time accepting the Indians as they were, so he handed them scrubbed-up Noble Savages whose morals and customs would meet with instant approval (Number One Bestseller!) in white suburbia" (204). Concurring with Sarf's opinion that the public had difficulty accepting the Indians as they really were, essayist Roger L. Nichols maintains:

Historians, and others as well, often considered Indians a part of the natural landscape. At best they were seen as connected to the environment, at
worst as dangerous obstacles to frontier settlement. When not studying Native Americans in that mode, scholars concentrated on what white writers, politicians, or the general public thought about tribal people or on Indians as literary figures in essays and fiction. Rarely did this sort of writing involve any real Indians. Such literary musings included no more rational individuals than did depictions by authors who chose to describe Indians as part of the environment. Neither variety of writing considered tribal people having well-considered motivations or a culture worth serious study: whites acted while Indians reacted. The latter stood at the fringes of the action as mere bit players in the undeniable drama of the conquest of North America (73-4).

In essence, the revisionists have put a different historical spin on the same old yarn of the idealized savage rhapsodized by the primitivist authors in their literary efforts. But it still comes down to the white history perspective.

In the end, the victor writes history and in the case of American history, the white perspective prevails over Indian perspective despite the revisionists' sterling efforts to rewrite history. The white Euroamericans came out the winners with the concerted effort of superior weapons, disease decimating the Indian tribes, intertribal warfare, and
American Indian policy that chanted a death knell on many tribes and the tribal way of life.

In recent years, however, native voices have raised the hue and cry through the conventional methods employed by whites—the written word and film—and American history is being rewritten by American Indians according to American Indians. These voices speak of a "before" and "after" white contact for the Indian in American history—not just that small slice of history and not just the white people's story of how it happened forever captured in the Hollywood Western.
NATIONAL MYTH

Historical myth encourages the belief that American Indians had little or no involvement in American history and national myth exacerbates that belief. National myth evolved from the proposition that the emigrants looked at the West and saw two broad and opposing sets of possibilities or narratives: changing it to "here" or keeping it "there" which Elliot West describes as follows:

In the first, the country's difference invited new arrivals to change it, to transform the West so that it would become like the places they had left in body but which continued to be the measure of what was normal and proper. Because the West was "there," in other words, they felt compelled to change it into "here." In the second case, the West had promise only if it remained different and fundamentally apart. It was "there," and it ought to keep on being "there" (West 67).

Both propositions cried out for the right kind of people to change and transform the West from the Great Plains grasslands into pasture land or into farm fields waiting to be laid out, plowed, planted, cultivated, weeded, and cropped. The physical expanse was unshaped social potential waiting to be molded to the familial communities that newcomers had left in body but not in spirit. Consequently, the West was an economic and social order asking to happen (West 67).
Changing, transforming this great Western expanse—conquering the frontier—has been the cornerstone of American identity. Conquering the frontier bears the stamp of American nationalism and becomes its own myth as Garry Wills argues:

The disappearing frontier is the most powerful and persistent myth in American history. It is not a sectional myth but a national one. We do not have "Easterns" or "Southerns"—which would be sectional. We have Westerns—since America was, at the outset, all frontier (14).

The Western exemplifies the taking of the West. European settlers met an alien natural environment and social system in America. As the frontier moved from the east to west, Americans experienced, over and over again, the excitement of the "birth moment" when the new world was broken into, tamed, absorbed (Wills 14). This birth moment spawned the mythic West and provided a place for a national identity to flourish. The mythic West provided an escape from contemporary problems, it satisfied the yearnings of American and Europeans, it reflected a reaction against conformity and against controls exercised by governments in the Old World and the New World, and the utopian West provided role models for heroes and heroines (Nash 16).

In the second half of the twentieth century an army of mythmakers—writers, artists, filmmakers, television
producers, and advertising specialists—fashioned the mythic West in an ever widening variety of forms which reflected the characteristic traits of national myth: individualism, freedom, heroism, and optimism. This utopian Western vision has permeated American culture to the point that these character traits are the myth of American identity (Nash 16). Individualism, more specifically rugged individualism, reigns supreme among these mythical identity traits.

And what a myth it is. We would like to believe that rugged individualism brought the West to its knees, but a closer look at the truth tells another story. Wallace Stegner, when asked about rugged individualism in the West, commented as follows:

You know Benny DeVoto’s remark that the only true individualists in the West generally wound up at the end of a rope whose other end was in the hands of a bunch of cooperating citizens... but all of the people who settled ranching country had to be cooperators... Some of the ranchers that I know in Wyoming and Montana may think they’re rugged individualists, but they’re probably as helpful neighbors as you can find. That’s really more to the point than rugged individualism. That’s an illusion. We like to feel that way, but it isn’t necessarily the way we act (150).
From the onset of New World exploration and eventual settlement of the American West, cooperative relations between the Europeans themselves and with the native inhabitants ensured their success. The Spanish, British and French had different objectives in coming to the New World. The Spanish primarily sought wealth and secondly sought to convert souls to Christianity while the French and British sought trade relations with the Indians in the fur trade; moreover, the British pursuing land settlement and the French pursuing missionary activity.

Nevertheless, cooperative relations between the two distinct cultural groups ensured success for the Europeans' objectives. During the fur trading era in the seventeenth century, the French and British objective was trading with the Indians, and friendly relations with the Indians were the norm (Farley 124). The fur trade would not have reached its mammoth proportions without the aid of the Indians.

Not only was the fur trade dependent upon the Indians, but who can forget the Pilgrims at Plymouth starving to death in the winter of 1621-1622? Without the help of the Indians they would have been just a horrific memory, rather than the archetype of pioneering spirit to which Americans have aspired and the Western has perpetuated to mythic proportions.

Regardless of the cooperative relations between the Europeans and the Indians, the pilgrims' progress forged ahead and the relationship dynamics shifted to "one of conflict and
led to the conquest of the native people by the Europeans, especially the British" (Farley 125). European ethnocentrism—particularly British white ethnocentrism—provided the momentum behind the conquest which held the highly ethnocentric view that Natives Americans were ungodly heathens worthy neither of conversion nor of human association (Farley 125). As interest in the wealth "held" by the Indians mounted, all three groups, moreover the British, flung aside cooperative relations and the taking of America and subsequent subordination of Indian people began in earnest. European ethnocentrism melded the mythic character traits of freedom, optimism, and heroism into an American identity that justified using any means possible to "civilize" America.

Numerous European philosophers promoted and justified the taking of America with John Locke first and foremost vigorously advancing this view:

For I ask whether in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America, left to nature, without any improvement, tillage, or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire, where they are well cultivated (23).

The colonists in America took Locke to heart and took to the land. David Rich Lewis maintains that "[i]n revolutionary
America the independent yeoman farmer and landowner became symbols of egalitarian American democracy, blessed by God and a 'virgin' American environment" (8). Thomas Jefferson voiced the moral virtues of small freeholding farmers and viewed the self-sufficient farm and farm family as an idealized model for a open and democratic American society, expanding in a seemingly uninhabited and limitless environment (Lewis 8). Jefferson's democratic model set the standard by which American nationalists judged themselves: self-sufficient, patriotic, sons and daughters of liberty living free in a country of unlimited land and opportunity.

Jefferson's democratic model and all those millions of acres of land, lying uncultivated, unused, unclaimed—the wilderness waiting to be conquered—provided the impetus for Manifest Destiny. In 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville also expressed this common European view when he wrote "North America was inhabited only by wandering tribes, who had no thought of profiting by the natural riches of the soil; that vast country was still, properly speaking, an empty continent, a desert land awaiting its inhabitants" (Weatherford 17).

The concept of Manifest Destiny, the form of ethnocentrism used to justify annexation of Mexican territory and to displace both Mexican Americans and Indians from their lands, according to Farley is the view that "the white man's supernaturally willed destiny was to rule and 'civilize' all of North America, from coast to coast. Thus, the conquest of
As Manifest Destiny gained momentum, the vast American frontier transformed into a nation state with the Jeffersonian democratic model and its conquering heroes and heroines as the heart and soul. American government, seeing unlimited land and opportunity, justified its Manifest Destiny policy of conquest and subordination of native peoples by drawing heavily on the natural law models developed by European social theorists. These natural law models stressed a natural progression in society of three or four distinct and consecutive stages, each corresponding roughly to a different subsistence mode--hunting (savage), herding (barbarian), agriculture, and commerce. American leaders believed that American Indians must advance toward civilization through these stages or face extinction.

Now the age-old European ideological debate of the "native problem" (noble savage-red menace) resurfaces in America with an agrarian twist and takes an active role in American Indian policy. Because Western civilization had been founded and thrived on the agrarian model, the American government believed it a great idea for Indian policy to reflect the same (Lewis 9). As conquest and subordination of the Indian tribes progressed, treaty negotiations and institution of the reservation system forced American Indians
into an agrarian lifestyle. However noble the intentions of American Indian policy, it failed miserably according to the Jeffersonian democratic model. American Indians held onto their tribal way of life despite the following hardships: relinquishing their tribal lands and living reservation life; changing from a hunting and gathering lifestyle to an agrarian lifestyle; attempting to farm land unadaptable to farming; forcing their assimilation into the dominant Euroamerican culture; outlawing of native religions, languages, and customs.

American Indians resisted assimilating into the American nation state, not because of their inability to be "civilized" as advocated from the British ethnocentric perspective, but because of a more rational thesis according to D'Arcy McNickle. American Indians retained their own nation states—their own ethnic boundaries—because of inherent aboriginal personality characteristics universal in quality described as follows:

Restrained and non-demonstrative emotional bearings coupled with a high degree of control over aggressive acts within the group and a concern for the safety of the group; generosity expressed in varying patterns of formalized giving or sharing; autonomy of the individual in societies that were largely free of classes or hierarchies; acceptance of pain, hardship, hunger and frustration without
voicing complaint; high regard for courage and bravery, often patterned as aggressive acts against the out-group; fear of the world as a dangerous place, sometimes expressed as fear of witchcraft; joking relationships with certain kinsmen as a device for relieving pressures within the group; detailed, practical, and immediate concern in problem situations, rather than advance planning to avoid difficulties; dependence upon supernatural power, invoked through dreams or ritual, as a means to the good life (McNickle 11).

In comparing the American identity model of self-sufficiency (the Jeffersonian democratic model) with the Indian identity model of tribalism, one can see the diametric opposition of the two models. One can see why the two cultures clashed and one can understand how the Indians’ retention of their ethnic boundaries produced "an oppositional identity" (Farley 141). John F. Farley alleges that this oppositional identity rejects the dominant group's values and cultural traits, and allows them "to maintain a positive self-identity in the face of harsh assimilation treatment and the attacks on their culture. Whites, in turn, use the oppositional identity as a rationalization for rejecting minorities and keeping them in a low status" (142). Thus the oppositional identity of American Indians reinforces the characterization as "The Other"—aliens in an alien
environment. As "The Other," American Indians stood in the way of the great god of progress—Manifest Destiny.

Accordingly, the mythic Manifest Destiny heroes and heroines gloriously celebrated in literature and film who exemplify the pioneer spirit of Jeffersonian democratic agrarian model, had justification to conquer and subordinate the Indians in order to colonize America and settle the West. No one, least of all the American Indian, would stand in the way of the self-sufficient rugged individualist reaching the promised land and fulfilling the predetermined destiny of conquering the wilderness and civilizing its inhabitants.

The American national myth of rugged individualism and self-sufficiency is just myth. From the onset of the first exploration of the New World, cooperative relations between everyone—whites and Indians alike—ensured success and even, in many cases, survival. But the rugged individualist makes a great hero and the continual clash between American and Indian identity provides cannon fodder for the big guns of the Hollywood Western.
LITERARY MYTH AND STEREOTYPES

We can go back to the Renaissance to find the mythical beings gloriously celebrated in literature and film, especially postulated in the Hollywood Western. Berkhofer notes that "the primitivist tradition influenced Renaissance explorers' perceptions of the native peoples they encountered" (72). Writing in true primitivist fashion, Columbus describes the eden-like quality of the island he had "discovered" and renamed La Spanola:

La Spanola is marvelous, the sierras and the mountains and the plains and the champaigns and the lands are so beautiful and fat for planting and sowing, and for livestock of every sort, and for building towns and cities. The harbors of the sea heare are such as you could not believe without seeing them, and so the rivers, many and great, and good streams, the most of which bear gold. And the trees and fruits and plants have great differences from those of La Juana; in this there are many spices and great mines of gold and of other metals (Early American Writing 27).

In the same primitivist vein, Columbus also describes the natives in an idealized manner as he did the island:

The people of this island and of all the other islands which I have found and seen, or have not seen, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers
bore them, except that some women cover one place only with the leaf of a plant or with a net of cotton which they make for that. They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they capable of using them, although they are well-built people of handsome stature, because they are wonderfully timorous (Early American Writing 27-8).

Reports of "eden-like" islands and "idealized" inhabitants from Columbus and other Renaissance explorers filtered back from the New World and captured the imagination of European philosophers and writers. Accordingly, the Indian became the object of great debate up until the nineteenth century as Julian Crandall Hollick states: "If he was human, he could be converted to Christianity... Of course, if the Indian was animal, he could be exterminated and his land and property stolen with a clear conscience" (17).

William Shakespeare, his imagination stirred by the colonization of Virginia (Island of Magic xi), presents one of European literature's earliest examples of this debate in his play The Tempest written in 1611. In this play, Caliban, the native inhabitant living on an eden paradise, is colonized by Prospero and his daughter, Miranda. That is to say, they take over the island and teach Caliban their language and attempt to "Christianize" him. Caliban's resistance to colonization proves he is an animal which reveals the English view of natives in the New World laments Jack Weatherford:
"Shakespeare portrays Caliban as stinking, immoral, deformed, alcoholic, violent, and superstitious, without redeeming moral qualities and ready to rape a white woman whenever chance provides an opportunity" (220-1).

Not only were popular literary works of the day addressing the great debate of the "native problem," but European philosophers waved the banner as well. The noble savage-red menace debate gain ideological significance in eighteenth-century Europe. Liberals held that the Indian was a throwback to the Golden Age, living in a society unblemished by all the vices and decadence a weary Europe called civilization. Rousseau, the philosopher and writer, called him a Noble Savage; European writers used the Red Indian for the critical purpose of questioning social and political conventions in Europe. Conservatives countered that Indians were half-naked savages, lacking all moral and social virtue" (Hollick 17-8).

Obviously, the mythical beings in Hollywood Westerns, i.e., the stereotypes of noble savage, red menace, and child of nature have their roots in the philosophical and literary traditions of Europe. The philosophical and literary traditions depicting American Indians in stereotypical terms gave way to popular European literature.

Many European writers wrote "Westerns" in the nineteenth century and these dime novels contained the familiar plot line of an European adventurer coming to America experiencing
adventure, rescue the girl, and kiss his horse. Of course, these novels had to have an antagonist and who better than the American Indian, who were depicted as "savages and intrinsically evil, [and] still viewed as obstacles to the great god of progress." Germany's Karl May in his series of Winnetou and Old Shatterhand novels, published in Dresden over a hundred years ago, took the tragic fate of the American Indian and dressed him up to wear the romantic glad rags of German culture (Hollick 18).

Early American literature took a cue from the ideological debates and popular literary traditions of Europe and characterized American Indians in symbolic and mythological terms. New England excelled other regions in the production of many journals, chronicles, promotional tracts, sermons, and histories penned in the colonies upon which history is grounded. There, during the colonial period of American cultural history, the American Indian was imaginatively transformed from the Indian of contact into the Indian of symbol and myth (Berkhofer 80). The Puritan beliefs of the region's writers can be held accountable for this outpouring of published works and the mythologizing of the Indian. Berkhofer explains the role of the Puritan as well as the Indian in the "cosmic drama willed by God to reveal His sovereignty and His grace:"

In this drama the Puritans saw themselves as the chosen of the Lord for the special purpose of
bringing forth a New Zion, and those who fled from England to the shores of North America believed they had founded just such a holy commonwealth as God wished. The Native Americans, therefore, held meaning for Puritans in terms of the larger drama and the vision of their own place in it. Under these premises "the Indian" was but another tool of the Lord to help or hinder the future salvation as well as the earthly life of the Puritan. When the Indian helped the early settlers in New England, he became an agent of the Lord sent to succor the Puritan devout; when he fought or frightened the Puritans, he assumed the aspect of his master Satan and became one of his agents (81).

Consequently, as the colonization of America began, the "nonfictional" historical accounts of Captain John Smith, Alexander Whitaker and Thomas Morton, among others, during the Colonial period offered observations on native peoples that served a twofold purpose. First, American Indians became a hot topic English-language writing originating in the Americas and secondly, Indian stereotypes gained increasing prominence in American literature (Churchill 22).

The persistent images reinforced by such writings regurgitated the ideological debate of noble savage-red menace: "the Indian as a sort of subhuman, animal-like creature who was a danger to hardy Anglo frontiersmen, or the
already pervasive European notion of the Indian as godless heathen subject to redemption through the 'civilizing' ministrations of Christian missionaries" (Churchill 22). Not only were these stereotypical images contained in the "nonfiction" historical accounts of the day, but captive narratives (narratives written by people captured by Indians) generated a most heatedly emotional and decidedly anti-Indian sentiment from their audience (Churchill 22).

Premier among captive narratives is A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson published in 1682 which graphically portrays Indians as savage, barbarous creatures:

Now away we must go with those barbarous creatures, with our bodies wounded and bleeding, and our hearts no less than our bodies . . . this was the dolefullest night that ever my eyes saw. Oh, the roaring and singing and dancing and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell (Early American Writing 219).

Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, and other Early American writers, whom Churchill describes as "white supremacists," cited captive narratives as evidence that American Indians were savagely cruel, barbarous creatures and subsequently their writings largely impacted the creation of stereotypes and emotionalism in later literary efforts (Churchill 24).
The later literary efforts of James Fenimore Cooper (The Pioneers, The Last of the Mohicans, the Deerslayer, the Prairie and the Pathfinder), John Greenleaf Whittier (Mogg Megone) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (The Song of Hiawatha, to the Driving Cloud, and The Burial of Minnisink) celebrated the literary version of Manifest Destiny and firmly established the noble savage-red menace stereotypes within the popular consciousness (Churchill 25). These imaginative literary efforts were just that—imaginative. These writers had no inkling of the actualities of the native cultures they portrayed or of the oral tradition of which they presumed to write.

Hence, distorting non-European cultural realities through literature opened the door for Europe to fabricate whole aspects of its own socio-cultural existence. This fabrication of a unique socio-cultural existence simultaneously fabricated the historical myth of how the west was won which evolved into the American concept of cultural identity, or better yet, American nationalism. By relying on nonfictive works, and ignoring indigenous oral accounts of the people and events portrayed, these literary "Manifest Destiny" figures could stake a claim to the "authenticity" of a firm grounding in the "historical record" (Churchill 26). Their heroes would "walk the walk" and "talk the talk" of the conquering hero of the Hollywood Western.
"The Western is without question the richest and most enduring genre of Hollywood’s repertoire," claims Thomas Schatz in *Hollywood Genres, Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (45). Any Hollywood Western worth its salt contains the "concise heroic story and elemental visual appeal" essential to Western formula (Schatz 45). The essential Western must contain the vast panoramic vistas of endless tracts of virgin land—untouched, unused, uninhabited—showcasing a land free of history and free of society’s conventions: a land waiting for those to make their mark—to imprint their own history. The essential Western must have those making their mark—the rugged individualist—usually in the form of the cowboy or pioneer family which exemplifies the pioneer spirit of the Jeffersonian Democratic model. These self-sufficient, freedom-seeking, liberty-loving men and women were tough enough to conquer the savagery of the wilderness and strong enough to subdue any impediments to civilization.

Nature often proved to be an impediment to progress; however, the dread enemies—the archrivals to civilization—the ultimate impediments were American Indians. The essential Western often deemed Indians as worthy opponents, but
ultimately Manifest Destiny determined their fate and in time they would be conquered along with the land.

Traditionally, in the Hollywood Western the white ethnocentric model plays out time and time again: the white hero comes out West, conquers the land and the Indian, and rides off into the sunset. John Ford, one of Hollywood’s foremost maker of Westerns, dished up the traditional Western with relish argues essayist Ken Nolley:

Not only was John Ford canonized by the first wave of auteurist critics, but his own stubborn attachment to the central myths of Western culture in general and American culture specifically also made his work seem for decades to be commercial Hollywood’s principal representation of the American experience. And because Ford worked so thoroughly within the system rather than in opposition to it, one may be hard pressed to save his oeuvre from one of the most pervasive and damning charges made against the Hollywood tradition—that it was racist and sexist at the core (73).

The Searchers, released in 1956 with John Wayne in the starring role, presents Indian stereotypes, historical and national myth amid the splendor of the West. Ford, the king of the western panoramas, filmed The Searchers in Monument Valley, Utah, a place where the endless vistas make the viewer
believe this is a land free of history—that no one came before the white settlers. The film, based on a "true Indian captive narrative" takes place a few years after the Civil War—that small slice of American History firmly encapsulated in the Western.

The national myth of rugged individualism is encompassed in two ways: first, the Edwards family exemplifies the pioneering spirit by becoming Texicans, settling the land, and fighting off the Indians; secondly, Ethan Edwards, according to the Wallace Stegner comment of a man outside the bounds of community, forsakes the help of others in his obsessional quest to recapture his niece Debbie from Scar, the bloodthirsty savage who stole her after murdering his brother's family.

Stereotypically, the Indians portray the bloodthirsty savage and are referred to as such all the way through the film. In fact, Debbie's capture by Scar and his band is considered the fate worse than death and the only viable solution is a bullet through her brain—not a return to the white community after being tainted by the Indians. However, the bloodthirsty savage is not the only stereotype employed. Rather, the scene showing the trading between Edwards and Martin Pauley and the Indians portray them as the childlike savages who are seduced by the cheap goods the white man uses in trade relations. Another childlike savage is the Indian squaw Look whom Martin Pauley takes to wife, whom Martin
abuses (he kicks her down a hill) and who is murdered by the bloodthirsty savage Scar for consorting with the enemy.

Ethan Edwards, as the white hero, rules supreme—he out "injuns the injun," one of the characteristics of the Manifest Destiny figures invented by Cooper, Longfellow and the like. By explaining cultural motivations behind Scar's actions throughout the film, Edwards keeps the Indian firmly ensconced as his cultural inferior and ultimately defeated, adversary. Of course, what better adversary for the white hero than an Indian warrior—how entertaining would it be to have a peaceful tribe such as the Navajo fight to the death? That would be like pulling wings off of a fly, right? So the filmmaker must use a worthy adversary that puts the white hero to the test and warrior societies, especially the romanticized Plains Indians who look good, fight good, and die good, are the filmmakers' first choice. The Searchers romanticized the Comanches as warriors on horseback and wearing feather headdresses; once again the "Plains" variety which are generally lumped together as Sarf points out:

Badly handled in Westerns generally, physical detail becomes especially suspect where real or alleged Indians are concerned. The usual attitude taken, consciously or not, has it that all Indians are pretty much the same despite whatever vast tribal differences may exist. The Hollywood concept of the well-dressed redskin, like the
popular stereotype, resembles in the case the man a painted warrior from one of the nomadic, buffalo-hunting Plains tribes such as the Sioux, Cheyenne, or Crow—beaded, buckskinned, and befeathered (194).

In *The Searchers*, Indian cultural identity assumes the guise of "The Other"—especially in the scene where Ethan Edwards and Scar meet face to face, size each other up as worthy adversaries, and trade insults about their identity. Once again the white hero distorts American Indian culture in the Western.

Indian identity, delegated the dubious honor of "Pan-Indian" identity, has no delineation made between tribes, or explanation of cultural motivations behind the actions taken by Indians. Casting whites or other racial minorities such as Hispanics proved to be a reliable method for the Hollywood Western to obliterate Indian identity. As for saying more than "how" in the movies, Indians did not win the major Indian speaking roles and in the case of *The Searchers*, Ford cast Henry Brandon, a blue-eyed white man, to play Scar. Some filmmakers did use Indians in Indian roles and Ford often bragged of using real Indians in his films. Actually, in *The Searchers* he did hire Navajos to play the Comanches, one of the premier warrior societies of the Southwest; but that bit of back patting has an ironic twist: Ford cast Navajos, a peaceful tribe, to play the stereotypical bloodthirsty savage. Sadly enough, this was not the only way filmmakers blurred the
boundaries of Indian identity and culture to fit the criteria of the Hollywood Western.

In typical Hollywood fashion, even full-blooded Indians when cast in movies, usually as extras and stuntmen, played something other than themselves. The makeup artists went to great lengths to make full-bloods "look Indian," says Archie Fire Lame Deer, a Lakota medicine man and former Hollywood stuntman as he describes some of the techniques of the makeup people:

For a start, we were all sprayed with coffee-colored body paint to make us look "authentic" in Technicolor. . . . then we got flesh-colored jockstraps, breechcloths, and leggings. . . . We next had to have our faces painted. The makeup artists were told to make us look "real mean and savage, like olden-day braves." As a result, we looked more like circus clowns than Lakota warriors. The Hollywood folks did not know that face painting always had a spiritual meaning and was done according to a warrior’s vision. . . . Our lady designer knew nothing of such things. The cubistic designs she had them put on our faces could have been thought up by Picasso (93).

Not only is the physical appearance of the Indian warrior badly handled but filmmakers misused and desecrated Indian customs, traditions, and ceremonies (Sarf 195). Regardless of
Indian cultural identity, the Hollywood producers wanted the Indians to be "colorful" (Lame Deer 93), and Hollywood's traditional Westerns have proved time and time again that they had lots of those "Technicolor" Indians.

John Ford attempted to right some of the cultural wrongs dealt by traditional Westerns with his apology to the Indian, Cheyenne Autumn. While it contained many of the traditional elements intrinsic to the Hollywood Western (vast panoramas, stereotypical Indians, white nationalism), Cheyenne Autumn has a revisionist twist. It made the Cheyenne the hero of the piece; there was no "white hero" per se. The basic premise of the film, the Cheyenne making a break for their tribal lands in the North after being forced onto a reservation in Oklahoma, has a basis in historical reality, but the accuracy is suspect due to Ford's own dictate: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend" (The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, 1962).

Although Ford strived to make the Cheyenne tribe, as a whole, the hero and no one person in the tribe was greater than the whole (a vital aspect of Indian cultural identity); in actuality he portrayed them as the Noble Savage, stoically enduring the injustices meted out by the white man. One scene in particular blatantly exploits this theme: the Cheyenne stand in the hot sun for hours upon hours, without complaint, waiting for a Federal government official to show up and negotiate a treaty. As for casting real Indians in the
speaking roles, this did not happen. Ford cast Hispanics to play Dull Knife, Red Feather, and the other "major" Indian roles.

Revisionist Westerns attempt to change the traditional aspects of the Hollywood Western and two films, *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990), won critical acclaim and at the box office by portraying Indians as "real." Margo Kasdan and Susan Tavernetti contend that "whereas most traditional Westerns do not develop individual Indian characters or their customs, *Little Big Man* presents the Cheyenne as living together in harmony, a flourishing tribe with a defined culture" (121).

Both of these films convey the revisionist view by implementing a narrative structure which combines elements from two literary traditions: the picaresque [the roguish hero encounters a series of adventures] and the initiation archetype [the hero attains mature insight through experiences that shape him] (Kasdan and Tavernetti 121).

The two films in this structure of initiation and transformation differ in their renditions: "[W]hereas *Dances with Wolves* is a serious and dramatic rendition, *Little Big Man* is a comic and ironic narrative that demythologizes famous legendary figures, the Western hero, and the Indians" (Kasdan and Tavernetti, p. 122).

Both films portray whites in a stereotypical manner—especially the United States Army as the murdering savages—and
both films do a creditable job of presenting authentic Indian culture. Kevin Costner, the producer and director of *Dances with Wolves*, took great pains to present Lakota dress, customs and language in an authentic manner. Both films cast real Indians to play Indians—in speaking roles no less. In fact, Chief Dan George who plays Old Lodge Skins in *Little Big Man* won critical acclaim and the Academy Award for best supporting actor that year.

Despite these revisionist efforts to present the Indian perspective, *Cheyenne Autumn, Little Big Man*, and *Dances with Wolves* employ the white voiceover throughout the entire film. In these films, the white voiceover consists of the white hero giving voiceover narration that clarifies and explains the relationship between him and the Indians.

In effect, the white voiceover speaks on behalf of the Indian which creates a new form of dependence contends essayist Armando Jose Prats: "The Indian that Hollywood presents as counterimage to its own popular images of a despised savage produces not a new Indian, but a new form of Indian dependence on the white man’s discourse" (15). The revisionist or pro-Indian Westerns try to atone for the past sins of Hollywood against American Indians and speak on behalf of American Indians. These white apologist efforts abound with revisionist ethos which creates the new Indian.

The new Indian created by these revisionist Westerns supersedes the "Savage Reactionary" of old who detested the
proper and manifest advancement of a white culture clearly superior to his own (Marsden and Nachbar 609). The new Indian's ideal qualities became, as had his degradation, the invention of the white man (Prats 2).

*Little Big Man* and *Dances with Wolves* clearly promote the new Indian to the point the white heroes in each of these movie assimilate into Indian society. Both heroes turn their back on the avaricious white society and immerse themselves into Indian culture. Their "back to nature" movements to cleanse themselves of the white man's scourge must be explained to the audience and thus the white voiceover.

The white voiceover, a vital component of revisionist Westerns, tells the new Indians' story, but alas, it still tells the story from the white perspective. The white voiceover of the revisionist western silences the new Indian just as the traditional western silenced the Indian of old. The new Indian invented by the revisionists is just as much an invention of the imagination as the old Indian. The myth goes on...
CONCLUSION

Myth in the Western still exists regardless of the spate of sympathetic Indian films of enlightened filmmakers. Jojola, espousing this view, notes "all in all, it appears that another cycle of Indian sympathy films will have to wane before Native America can claim its "own" Hollywood imagery" (21). But as long as white filmmakers make Hollywood westerns according to the dictates of the studios, and as long as the traditional Western formula sells tickets, American Indians will remain the "mythical beings of the Hollywood Western." Only until American Indian filmmakers using American Indians in the production and acting roles will the mythology be dispelled and "real Indians" will emerge in film. Such an event has been long in coming, but eventuality has become reality.

The age-old maxim of "if you want your story told the right way, then tell it yourself" can be applied to bona fide Native American film productions that have sprung from the birth of the Native American Producer's Alliance in 1992 (Jojola 21). Smoke Signals released in 1998, a product of the Native American Producer's Alliance touting "real Indians playing real Indians," can be considered a miracle in itself by Hollywood Western standards. Even more miraculous, it has won critical acclaim as well as commercial success. Smoke Signals frees American Indians from the prison of mythology and brings them up to speed as real people living in the real
world, not the make-believe world of historical, national, and literary myth.

Besides dispelling the mythology of American Indians in commercial films, educational films produced through the auspices of several "native voices" groups have done wonders to relegate the mythical beings postulated in Hollywood Westerns to the netherworld of the utopian West and replaced them with living, breathing American Indians who have persevered to celebrate Indian life in spite of nefarious American Indian policy, poverty-stricken reservation life, harsh assimilation tactics, and racist stereotyping.

Film packs a powerful punch and, from their inception, Hollywood Westerns gave American Indians a knockout punch regarding reality. Now, with American Indians coming into their own in film, the cinema world can be their oyster. Their own cinematic endeavors proclaiming American Indian historical, literary, and cultural reality can be their great pearls of wisdom.


