



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---

## **The Best of Both Worlds: Otherness, Appropriation, and Identity in Thunderheart**

Pack, Sam.

Wicazo Sa Review, Volume 16, Number 2, Fall 2001, pp. 97-114 (Article)

Published by University of Minnesota Press

DOI: 10.1353/wic.2001.0028



 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/wic/summary/v016/16.2pack.html>

## **The Best of Both Worlds**

### **Otherness, Appropriation, and Identity**

#### **in *Thunderheart***

*Sam Pack*

In many respects, *Thunderheart*<sup>1</sup> (1992) is a refreshing departure from its predecessors in the Native American film genre. While seemingly enlightened, I will argue that the film still relies upon too many Hollywood crutches in depicting Native Americans, which is particularly evident in its utilization of three tropes: the construction of the “other,” the appropriation of native spirituality, and the formation of identity. I will also analyze several film reviews to demonstrate how the critical reception of *Thunderheart* reflects mainstream America’s ambivalence toward Native Americans.

*Thunderheart* tells the story of a mixed-blood FBI agent (Ray Levoi) who ventures onto the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota to solve a murder but finds his Indian identity in the process. When he realizes that the government is involved in a murder and a plot to mine uranium on the reservation, Levoi teams with tribal policeman Walter Crow Horse and traditional elder Grandpa Sam Reaches to stop the plot and preserve the environment of the reservation. Although a work of fiction, the film begins with the following caption: “This story was inspired by events that took place on several American Indian reservations during the 1970s”—claiming, therefore, that the movie is *based* on a true story.

The film presents many positive depictions of Native Americans that are a radical departure from traditional film portrayals. First, the movie is set in contemporary times rather than in a timeless Indian past. Second, with the glaring exception of the starring role, all of the native

characters are played by native actors. Besides Crow Horse and Grandpa Reaches, the main Indian roles include schoolteacher Maggie Eagle Bear and fugitive Jimmy Looks Twice. All of these characters have substance and are even shown to have a sense of humor, in sharp contrast to the stoic, "cigar store" Indians commonly found in most films. *Thunderheart* succeeds in portraying native peoples as complex and dynamic entities.

However, although the native characters are presented more humanistically, they are still rooted in familiar stereotypes. The relationship between Ray Levoi and Walter Crow Horse, for example, is reminiscent of the Lone Ranger and Tonto relationship with the white hero as leader and the faithful Indian sidekick following in the background. The Lone Ranger and Tonto provide a media prototype of a domesticated imperialist relationship that demonstrates the superiority of the European vis-à-vis the Native American in the struggle between civilization and savagery.<sup>2</sup> When Third World people are not portrayed as heartless savages, they are usually cast as devoted subordinates who find fulfillment in selfless service to a white "superior."<sup>3</sup>

Granted, such a one-sided relationship does not exist between Levoi and Crow Horse. After all, Crow Horse is depicted as a very intelligent and capable investigator who turned the case around with his unorthodox law enforcement skills. But when Levoi and Crow Horse join forces, it is Ray who calls the shots and Walter who rides shotgun. According to film historian Donald L. Kaufman, "Whatever the Lone Ranger was, Tonto was less—less fast, less a sharpshooter, less domineering."<sup>4</sup> The same can be said of the dominant Levoi and the supportive Crow Horse.

Besides biracial male couples, there are also ubiquitous filmic accounts of frontiersmen who fall in love with Indian maidens. If the white hero falls in love with an Indian woman, she is usually socially upgraded by being a princess or at least the chief's daughter of the Pocahontas variety.<sup>5</sup> This convention is designed to render the female's status as an Indian more acceptable to white audiences. Thus, in *Thunderheart*, Maggie Eagle Bear is an Ivy League graduate with a social conscience. While she could have used her degree to fetch a lucrative job, instead she returned to the reservation to help her own people. In this way, she is not like the other women on the reservation and is worthy of a white man's affection.

There is an immediate and palpable sexual tension between Levoi and Eagle Bear, a tension that is sustained and developed in every scene the two characters share. But the relationship follows the Pocahontas mold. As is usually the case with Indian maidens in the movies, Eagle Bear meets a sudden and violent death before the two characters are able to violate the implicit rules of white-Indian apartheid.<sup>6</sup> In the movies, it appears that there is nothing wrong with a temporary infatuation with an Indian woman as long as the infatuation remains temporary.

In addition, Grandpa Sam Reaches plays the familiar wise elder character who disseminates knowledge after smoking the peace pipe. The old man is privy to sacred knowledge and holds the answers to the universe in his medicine pouch. Grandpa Sam provides the necessary mentor role to Levoi's role as disciple.

*Thunderheart* grapples with white-Indian relations in a unique way by making the main character of the film part white and part Indian. It depicts the story of a man who had lived his entire life in the white world coming to the land of his Indian ancestors, finding his native identity while managing to solve a crisis, and then returning to white America equipped with the wisdom of an Indian holy man. He thus enjoys the best of the white world and the Indian world, although the latter is defined by the former.

### CONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER

The essence of the Western image of the Indian has been the definition of Native Americans as a separate and quintessential other. Whether perceived as noble or savage, exotic or downgraded, the Indian as an image has always been alien to the Western mindset.<sup>7</sup>

*Thunderheart* is embedded with the construction of Native Americans as other. From the opening scenes of the film, the exoticizing of Indians is initiated. The movie begins with the sound of howling against an ominous landscape of the South Dakota Badlands. The first scenes depict various Indian males stereotypically adorned in buckskins and feathers engaging in ostensibly ritualistic behavior. One long-haired man holds a plant-like material, while another dances in a circular motion. All the while there is chanting and a rhythmic drumbeat in the background. The scene then shifts to a silhouette of a man running against the sunset. Suddenly, there are gunshots and he falls to his death. Needless to say, the viewer is clearly and immediately struck by the differences of the other.

The next scene quickly cuts to another world with a completely different kind of music (a country-and-western song appropriately called "Badlands") against an urban landscape. We are introduced to the star of the film, Val Kilmer as Ray Levoi, driving in a shiny, red convertible on a busy Washington, D.C., highway. The audience is presented with two diametrically opposed worlds, thereby establishing a self versus other dichotomy. Interestingly, and appropriate for the politically correct mentality of the film, the other is presented first.

The audience learns that Levoi is a part-Indian FBI agent who is assigned to investigate a murder on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. When the setting shifts to the reservation, the glaring differences between the two worlds become even more salient. The white world is represented by Frank "Cooch" Coutelle, the senior FBI agent and, for the time being, Levoi. The first representatives of the contemporary

Indian world are pro-government militants who engage in random and gratuitous violence. There is a huge gulf between the two worlds, which only becomes more pronounced as the film progresses.

As the FBI agents enter the reservation, the first thing they see is a crooked, hanging sign, suggesting ensuing dilapidation. The anticipation of squalor finds fruition as they drive by government housing structures, stray dogs, and stray people. Appropriately, Cooch observes that this is the "Third World right here in the middle of America." The omnipresent poverty is highlighted by the somber background music that reinforces the sense of tragedy and pathos.

Levoi and the audience are introduced to the Indians by the senior agent as impoverished, dirty, and violent ("the highest murder rate in the entire state of South Dakota"). Both the images and the commentary convey the impression that these people are not like us. Not only are they different from us, they are less than us. They are the other.

As the two FBI agents are investigating the murder scene, Walter Crow Horse approaches on his motorcycle. The threesome are a study in opposites: the two agents are dressed in the classic FBI attire of dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie, fashionably accessorized by short haircuts and fancy sunglasses, while Crow Horse, the long-haired tribal policeman, wears faded jeans, a denim jacket, a cowboy hat, and cheap sunglasses. More important, they investigate in totally different ways. While the agents utilize scientific methods, Crow Horse utilizes his senses. Crow Horse is violently thrown to the ground as the assumed murderer by Levoi. The agent pejoratively refers to him as "Geronimo," pulls his hair, and curses at him—only to discover that Crow Horse is a law enforcement officer like them but very *unlike* them in other ways.

Cooch's statement that they are "a long way from home" underlies the notion of the different worlds. The FBI agents are in another world inhabited by people who are different. This world operates according to a new set of rules as the old rules are inappropriate and ineffective.

Upon returning to the murder scene, Crow Horse claims to know exactly what happened and the details of the case: the make of the car, the type of tree used to hide the tracks, even how much change was in the victim's pockets. (Crow Horse's uncanny investigative abilities reinforce the stereotype of the Indian as a "tracker" having special metaphysical talents.) To this, Levoi skeptically responds, "I just came here from the twentieth century." Similarly, when Maggie Eagle Bear asks Ray what tribe he is from, he answers, "the United States of America." Levoi continually emphasizes the self/other dichotomy.

Levoi encounters a collision of knowledge bases: two ways of attaining knowledge and two ways of conveying knowledge. He is accustomed to the Western scientific paradigm, but in the Indian world, such a paradigm does not apply. So when Grandpa Sam advises Levoi to "listen to your heart," Ray is ill-equipped to heed such advice.

As a final demonstration of the Indian as other, the film presents both images of the “noble savage” and the “red devil.” This strategy addresses white historical fear and guilt within the same narrative, providing a way in which fiction can remain simultaneously true to the contradictory emotional responses to history.<sup>8</sup> The community is divided into two factions: traditionals (supported by ARM) and pro-government (Jack Wilton and his GOONS [Guardians of the Oglala Nation]). The former corresponds to the image of noble savages, as they still engage in traditional religious rituals such as the sweat lodge. The latter are identified with the red devil image and, as such, are prone to random acts of violence. Regardless of the differences, both are firmly embedded as the other.

### **APPROPRIATION OF NATIVE SPIRITUALITY**

The appropriation of the image of Native Americans is nothing new. In fact, “playing Indian” has become a national pastime. National organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America, for example, have appropriated Indian folklore for many of their activities.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Smoki People—white men and women from Prescott, Arizona—reenact the Hopi Snake Dance as well as other rites and ceremonies of Southwestern Indians every year.<sup>10</sup>

More commonly, many athletic organizations (amateur and professional alike) have appropriated the image of Indians for their team mascots. Monikers like “Redskins,” “Chiefs,” “Seminoles,” “Braves,” and “Blackhawks” prominently decorate football, basketball, baseball, and hockey jerseys. Far from benign, some of these team mascots are personified through idiotic characters such as Willie Wampus (Marquette University) and Chief Wahoo (Cleveland Indians). These in turn give way to demeaning gestures such as the “tomahawk chop” and the war chant of the Atlanta Braves fans. Collectively, these appropriations perpetuate negative stereotypes. Those who believe naming sports teams after Native Americans is a complimentary gesture would not likely feel flattered seeing their own ethnic identity caricatured on a football helmet.

Far more serious, however, is the increasing appropriation of Native American spirituality. This is exacerbated by Hollywood’s tendency to promote native religiosity as a commodity in recent films. There is no respect for boundaries, as sacred religious ceremonies that were not intended to be shared by outsiders are openly portrayed in popular media. What was intended as worship among a select group of people has been transformed into a novelty for mass consumption. *Thunderheart* provides a prominent example as the movie openly presents native religious rituals such as the Ghost Dance, the sweat lodge ceremony, and the smoking of the peace pipe.

The opening scenes of *Thunderheart* depict the Ghost Dance, a revivalistic movement that swept the Plains Nations during the late 1800s. Because of the seriousness of the ceremony, it should not be treated lightly or portrayed in film at all. An Indian man who worked as a carpenter on the set of *Dances with Wolves* describes his feelings regarding the presentation of the Ghost Dance in popular cinema:

No matter how they do it, it still isn't right. Because doing a Ghost Dance in a movie . . . That was a pretty spiritual thing back in Wounded Knee, and those people gave their lives up. . . . I felt so low, I felt so bad watching them practice the Ghost Dance. . . . It's not even right. Even if they have the right song, the right dance, the right tree, the right everything . . . It still doesn't make it right, still doesn't make it right.<sup>11</sup>

This individual's sense of being violated is similar to how anyone must feel at having their religious rituals trivialized on film.

The second religious ritual depicted in *Thunderheart* is the sweat lodge ceremony. FBI agents storm a sweat lodge in search of Jimmy Looks Twice (played by real-life AIM activist and spokesman John Trudell), the main suspect in the murder. The agents point automatic weapons at people engaged in a spiritual cleansing, which is akin to storming the Vatican with AK-47s. In fact, Looks Twice walks out of the sweat lodge stating, "This is a spiritual ceremony you're desecrating. . . . This is our church. Would you drag people out of your church when they're praying?" These words, intended for the FBI agents, really should have been directed at the writer and director for including the ceremony in the film.

The third ritual is the smoking of the peace pipe. This is done after the practice of trading between Levoi and Grandpa Sam. This bartering is significant for how it commodifies spirituality. In essence, the message conveyed is that one can purchase native wisdom by giving something of material value in exchange. At the end of the movie, Ray trades his Rolex watch—perhaps the personification of Western indulgence—for Grandpa Sam's peace pipe, perhaps the personification of native spirituality. This legitimates the exchange of the material for the spiritual.

Ever since films like *Thunderheart* have commodified (and glorified) native spirituality, many people in the audience have expressed the desire to experiment with Indian ways. This has provided the opportunity for some unscrupulous natives and pseudo-natives to capitalize on the demand. Since 1970, there has been a concomitant increase in the number of individuals purporting to sell "Indian wisdom" for a fee.<sup>12</sup> Churchill describes this process as "spiritual hucksterism" and the people who participate in it as "plastic medicine men"—

individuals of both genders trading in the commercialization of indigenous spirituality.<sup>13</sup>

One of the more prominent (and prosperous) plastic medicine men is the recently deceased Sun Bear (aka Vincent La Duke, a Chippewa) who formed the Bear Tribe Medicine Society, which engages in the sale of Indian ceremonies and sacred objects. Rates for a sweat lodge are \$50 per session and vision quests begin at \$150.<sup>14</sup> Janet McCloud, an elder of the Tulapip Nation, expresses her dismay at these practices:

It's not only wrong, it's obscene. Indians don't sell their spirituality to anybody, for any price. This is just another in a very long series of thefts from Indian people and, in some ways, this is the worst one yet.<sup>15</sup>

In this capacity, Native American spirituality becomes little more than a product to be bought and sold in the New Age marketplace.

Once again, all of this may appear to be perfectly innocuous. After all, what is wrong with non-Native Americans incorporating indigenous spirituality into their own beliefs? If anything, it should be viewed as flattery and admiration for native rituals. However, this process of outsiders experimenting with Indian spirituality has dangerous repercussions. Pam Colorado, an Oneida Indian, speculates the inevitable result:

The process is ultimately intended to supplant Indians, even in areas of their own customs and spirituality. In the end, non-Indians will have complete power to define what is and is not Indian, even for Indians. We are talking here about an absolute ideological/conceptual subordination of Indian people in addition to the total physical subordination they already experience. When this happens, the last vestiges of real Indian society and Indian rights will disappear. Non-Indians will then "own" our heritage and ideas as thoroughly as they now claim to own our land and resources.<sup>16</sup>

Spirituality is the basis of Native American culture. If it disappears or is stolen, the culture itself will dissolve. If the culture dissolves, Indian people *as such* will cease to exist.<sup>17</sup> That is the big deal.

### **FORMATION OF IDENTITY**

In this section, I will employ Victor Turner's understanding of a rite of passage<sup>18</sup> as involving three distinct stages to describe Ray Levoi's emerging Indian identity: old self, liminal self, and new self.



When we are first introduced to Ray Levoi, he is the All-American male: blond crew cut, white tennis outfit, Ray-Ban sunglasses. But the audience soon learns that he is not *all* American (at least in the sense of all white) as he is part Indian. Levoi's biological father was a half-breed Sioux, which he initially denies—thereby staging the plot line of his denial and shame of his Indian blood.

As an FBI agent, Levoi is accustomed to going undercover by assuming another identity. But this assignment requires no cover: "You're going in as who you are," his superior blandly informs him. Just who that is—and how he can reconcile his part-Sioux heritage with his own perceptions of himself as a modern (white) American citizen—is the essence of Levoi's identity crisis.

After leaving the white world of Washington, D.C., for the Indian world of the reservation, Levoi voices disgust at the squalor and poverty surrounding him. He makes a derisive comment to Cooch about the prevalent garbage, to which his partner responds that he should not be ashamed since "they [the Indians] are his people." Levoi adamantly claims that he is *not* one of "them." At this stage in the movie and in his development, Levoi clearly aligns himself with the white world, even going to great extremes to disparage the Indians. As evidence of this, he variously and contemptuously refers to the native characters in the film as "Chief," "Tonto," "Geronimo," and "Crazy Horse."

Hitherto, ever since he arrived on the reservation and in all his dealings with native people, Ray has worn his Ray-Ban sunglasses. He is purposely avoiding eye contact. Levoi is hiding behind his Ray-Bans to maintain an ideological distance between himself and the native people. The fancy spectacles serve as a pacifier as well as a barrier between him and the Indian world. Whether the writer or director intended the pun or not, this is an effective play on "Ray-Ban."

The first stirrings of an identity metamorphosis are indicated by Levoi's vision of the Ghost Dance. Gradually, and especially through his dealings with the native characters, he is becoming receptive to new ways of looking at the world and, more important, new ways of looking at himself.

The turning point is when Levoi engages in a bartering with Grandpa Sam, trading his highly prized sunglasses for a rock. Although Levoi does not consider it to be an equitable exchange, he complies in order to gain information from the old man. But by surrendering possession of the sunglasses, he no longer has a shield or pacifier to protect him from the ways of the Indian world. From now on, Levoi is vulnerable and is forced to look at the world and himself as he truly is.

Levoi is increasingly torn between two worlds. One world is represented by Cooch, who advises him to stick to the case, arrest the criminal, and return home, while the other world, represented by Grandpa Sam, advises him to "listen to [his] heart." Levoi is being pulled

in different directions in an emotional and spiritual tug-of-war for identity. He is stuck "betwixt and between" two stages of himself. Levoi is in a stage of liminality as the old self progresses toward the new self. He is presently between the two selves where he has no identity.

An interesting example of this liminality occurs at the powwow. There, an Indian man refers to himself as the *real* FBI—Full Blooded Indian—which Levoi is not. Thus, he is no longer the same FBI agent of the white world nor is he an FBI of the Indian world. At this point, Levoi belongs to neither world.

Levoi progresses toward his new self as he finds solidarity with the native characters in the film. Crow Horse traded the old man for Levoi's sunglasses, and now there is a symbolic connection between the two former adversaries. Crow Horse shares his own identity issues as he relates a childhood in which he too was ashamed of his heritage: "When we played cowboys and Indians, I was always Gary Cooper." The former adversaries are no longer a study in opposites. They have not only the sunglasses in common, but life experiences as well.

Similarly, Levoi shares his repressed feelings with Maggie Eagle Bear. For the first time, he verbalizes his anger and shame for his father who drank himself to death. (The emotion of the scene is reinforced by the somber background music.) As in the case with Crow Horse earlier, Ray forms a bond with Maggie. He no longer perceives of Indians as the other to his self, but in the nominative plural "we."

Ray's sense of solidarity with the Indians is emphasized in another one of his visions in which Indian men, women, and children are brutally massacred by white soldiers at the Wounded Knee site. In this vision, Levoi is running *with* the Indians *from* the white calvary (which can be considered to be the nineteenth-century version of the FBI).

Levoi's emerging Indian identity finds full expression in the scene between him and Grandpa Sam in the car. The old man provides the history behind Levoi's visions. He recounts the massacre when three hundred people were killed at Wounded Knee, one of whom was a medicine man named Thunderheart whose lineage Grandpa Sam traces to Levoi. In essence, Levoi is the reincarnation of Thunderheart. Levoi entered the reservation as a white stranger trying to solve a crime on Indian land. After this scene, he assumes the role of a historical Indian who is there to help his own people—the Indian people—overcome the white enemy. From this changing of perspectives, rules, and knowledge bases emerges Levoi's new self.

The metamorphosis is now complete. In juxtaposition with the earlier scene involving Cooch, Crow Horse refers to "your people," meaning whites. Levoi responds that they are not his people. As part Indian and part white, he enjoys the best of both worlds. Having gone back to his roots and discovered his Indian identity, Levoi has the spiritual knowledge of a native elder with all the opportunities of a white man.

The next section of this article will explore some common themes as well as highlight important discrepancies culled from over a dozen film reviews of *Thunderheart* in order to demonstrate how the critical reception of the film reflects mainstream America's ambivalent feelings toward Native Americans.

Many of the reviewers draw the connection between *Thunderheart* and *Incident at Oglala*, which was released a year earlier. Both movies share a director, Michael Apted, who Richard Schickel of *Time* says is the "first filmmaker ever to bring out such closely related works at roughly the same moment."<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* proclaims that these films provide "two variations on the same story, one factual, the other fiction."<sup>20</sup> Apted is skilled in both formats as the director of such documentaries as *7Up*, *23Up*, and *35Up*, as well as feature films such as *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Gorillas in the Mist*.

Caryn James dedicated an entire article to Apted's unique feat in her review, titled "One Director, Two Routes to American Indian Travail," in the *New York Times Film Review*. James declares that the fictional version speaks to the heart while the documentary appeals to the mind. In this way, one should serve as a prerequisite companion piece for the other: "'Oglala' affirms the truth behind 'Thunderheart,' just as 'Thunderheart' enhances the emotional power of 'Oglala.'"<sup>21</sup>

Other reviewers refer to one of the film's producers, who happens to be actor Robert De Niro. Amy Dawes of *Variety* reveals that *Thunderheart* is the first film in which De Niro has been involved solely as a producer.<sup>22</sup> The famous thespian's choice of this particular film for his first as a producer reflects, according to Keith Edwards of *Films in Review*, De Niro's "long standing commitment to the cause of justice for Native Americans."<sup>23</sup> I would venture to add that the film also reflects De Niro's long standing commitment to making money as well.

Many reviewers also pointed to *Thunderheart* as a product of Hollywood's growing fascination toward filling the screen with Native Americans, which was ushered in by the critical and box office success of *Dances with Wolves*. Manohla Dargis of *Village Voice* calls Kevin Costner's film the "spark" for a handful of Indian-themed films that include *The Last of the Mobicans*, *Dark Wind*, and *A Thief of Time*.<sup>24</sup> So pervasive is the bloodline between *Thunderheart* and Costner's movie that Dawes begins her review in *Variety* with the phrase "Dances with the Evidence."<sup>25</sup>

Very few reviewers expressed enthusiastic support for or fierce antagonism against the film. One who did get his motor running in support of the film was Joseph Gelmis of *Newsday* who called *Thunderheart* an "exciting, high-velocity action adventure with a social conscience."<sup>26</sup> The only real negative review in my collection came from Edwards of *Films in Review* who blasted the film as "your standard Cowboy and

Indian yarn updated to the nuclear nineties . . . I suspect it will have taken its place on the video shelf by the time this piece is published."<sup>27</sup>

In most cases, the reviewers seemed to have issues with *Thunderheart*'s story line, but applauded the film's content. The politically correct treatment of the subject matter appeared to override any cinematic objections. David Ansen of *Newsweek*, for example, states that the film's "passion and power . . . compensates for its sometimes murky plotting."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, "despite its overburdened plot," claims Dawes of *Variety*, "*Thunderheart* succeeds most in its captivating portrayal of mystical Native American ways."<sup>29</sup> Audrey Farolino's review in the *New York Post* exemplified this phenomenon best. She criticizes the film for "never really developing the tension and suspense of a good mystery thriller." But the movie is vindicated in her eyes because "ironically, [*Thunderheart*] speaks volumes when it's saying the least."<sup>30</sup> Thus, by virtue of being a film that addresses the plight of Native American life, *Thunderheart* has a de facto "Get Out of Jail Free" card at its disposal.

For the reviewers, as for the general population, Native American people are perceived in a dichotomy. On the one hand, they are to be admired for their ancient customs and traditions; but on the other hand, they should be pitied for their present socioeconomic woes. This is evident in the way practically all of the reviewers champion the native spirituality but bemoan the impoverished living conditions presented (and perpetuated) in *Thunderheart*.

Most reviews begin with some reference to native spirituality. Turan introduces his review in the *Los Angeles Times* by calling *Thunderheart* a "spiritual thriller" in which "a predictable shoot-'em-up plot is slickly intertwined with American Indian religious customs and beliefs."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Dawes opens her review in *Variety* by suggesting that younger audiences will be drawn to the "pic's beads 'n' feathers spirituality."<sup>32</sup> Needless to say, such a statement totally trivializes Native American religions. Even the *New York Times*, a well-respected periodical, places emphasis on Indian religiosity. According to Janet Maslin, the film's murder investigation is secondary; its real focus is on "Indian customs, ceremonies and beliefs." She continues:

the film depicts a large ceremonial powwow, a sweat lodge ceremony, and other *authentic* aspects of Indian life, including the rusted-out trailers and appalling medical facilities that are present-day features.<sup>33</sup>

This one sentence captures the perceived beauty and tragedy of Native American life.

After his spirited introduction, Turan ends his review on a somber note: "*Thunderheart* will no doubt raise some consciousness about the dire poverty many American Indians live in."<sup>34</sup> In the *New York Post*,

Farolino concludes her review by lingering on the images of the "reservation's squalor."<sup>35</sup> Schickel echoes Farolino's "squalor" remark and adds his commentary on the "shameful living conditions" on the reservation.<sup>36</sup> Gelmis of *Newsday* cuts to the heart of the matter by calling the Pine Ridge Reservation (where the film was actually shot) a "God-forsaken place of shacks and junked cars in the middle of nowhere."<sup>37</sup>

The question inevitably emerges: do any of these people know what they are talking about? Have any of these reviewers even been to a reservation or met an Indian except on the screen or in books? When Maslin speaks of "authentic" aspects of Indian life, she indicates that she knows enough about Indian life to deem what is and what is not authentic. But I highly doubt that Maslin has ever left her cozy apartment in the Big Apple and seen any of the "rusted-out trailers and appalling medical facilities" for which she claims to be such an authority. On that note, when Amy Dawes claims that *Thunderheart* succeeds in its "captivating portrayal of mystical Native American ways," is she informed enough (or at all) of what constitutes Native American ways (much less mystical ones) to make such a statement? (Before you answer, keep in mind that she is the one who coined the "beads 'n' feathers spirituality" remark.) I think that it is safe to conclude that the reviewers of films, as well as the great majority of the viewing audience, are almost totally ignorant of Native Americans except on a superficial (and inaccurate) level.

While there are mixed reviews for Val Kilmer's performance, as well as for the other white cast members, there is unilateral praise for the Native American actors. Reviews for Kilmer's performance range from the (nearly) sublime to the ridiculous to the critical to the just plain mean. Ansen of *Newsweek* hails Kilmer's Ray Levoi as "full of subtle, internal details."<sup>38</sup> Dargis of the *Village Voice* finds Kilmer memorable for "his pretty pouts and switchblade hips."<sup>39</sup> Despite an earnest effort, Dawes believes Kilmer just "doesn't quite fit the moccasins."<sup>40</sup> Tom Charity of *Sight and Sound* is not as charitable in his assessment: "Val Kilmer's goofy grin doesn't do the trick."<sup>41</sup>

Kilmer's fair-complexioned costar, Sam Shepard, is also not spared his share of barbs from the critics. Both *Newsday* and the *New York Times* employ the word "hard-boiled" to refer to Shepard. Dargis states that Shepard excels in a role he is born to play—"an FBI scumbag."<sup>42</sup> It is not clear whether that is intended to be a compliment. On the whole, it seems Shepard's performance is given a nod of approval due more to his natural acerbic personality than good acting.

The reviews for the native characters, in contrast, resound in a chorus of cheers. Usually, the evaluations are separated for each actor, but in the case of *The Motion Picture Guide*, the unnamed author reviews the actors in the same paragraph. But the manner in which he or she does so is quite revealing:

Val Kilmer's transition from conservative bullheadedness to caring sensitivity comes a little too easily to be quite believable. Shepard does his usual ornery routine and Greene is superb as the laconic Native American cop. Newcomer Tousey strikes just the right chords, neither too strident nor too soft, as the schoolteacher.<sup>43</sup>

The transition from somewhat negative reviews for the white actors to very positive ones for the Native American actors is not even prefaced by a "but" or "however."<sup>44</sup> Turan states that "some appealing acting . . . saves *Thunderheart* from the abyss."<sup>45</sup> Significantly, he only gives positive evaluations for the Native American actors. So, essentially, what he really means is some appealing *Indian* acting.

Turan is not the only one disseminating compliments for the native cast of *Thunderheart*. Graham Greene, as Walter Crow Horse, is the chief beneficiary of these verbal accolades. His performance is hailed as "wonderful,"<sup>46</sup> "outstanding,"<sup>47</sup> "terrific,"<sup>48</sup> "sensational,"<sup>49</sup> "delightful,"<sup>50</sup> and "excellent."<sup>51</sup> Ansen of *Newsweek* proclaims that Greene "practically walks off with the movie."<sup>52</sup>

Chief Ted Thin Elk's performance as Grandpa Sam Reaches is described as "endearing" by both *Newsday*<sup>53</sup> and *Variety*<sup>54</sup> and "remarkable" by the *New York Post*.<sup>55</sup> *Variety* says Sheila Tousey makes a "striking" film debut,<sup>56</sup> which Maslin of the *New York Times* says conveys "a quiet, stirring integrity."<sup>57</sup> John Trudell is also not spared the love fest as his cameo performance is called "charismatic" by *Newsday*.<sup>58</sup>

Farolino of the *New York Post* criticizes the makers of *Thunderheart* for making everyone in the movie too good or too bad.<sup>59</sup> However, that is exactly what she and the other reviewers are doing in their evaluations of the cast. This good/bad (or noble savage/red devil) dichotomy both reflects and is reflected in the reviewers' own attitudes. The tendency to portray Native Americans as too good is revealed in the politically correct mindset of Charity: "*Thunderheart* is concerned primarily with Indians, or Native Americans if you will."<sup>60</sup> Sometimes, though, true perceptions peek out as in the following comment by Dawes: "To the young FBI man, Indians are Third World refugees with drinking problems and too many junk cars in their yards."<sup>61</sup> This impression seems to belong to Dawes and not to the fictional character whom she attributes it to. Ironically, in all likelihood Dawes received that impression from watching too many movies.

## CONCLUSION

As films such as *Thunderheart* attest, popular American culture is showing an increasing affection for all things Indian. Consequently, there is an overwhelming abundance of films, shows, books, seminars, etc.,

which purport to represent Native American life. In a market so vast, it is difficult to distinguish the genuine from the spurious.

To some degree, it can be argued that all representational accounts of Native Americans by non-Native Americans is rooted in paternalism. Underlying this practice are two distinct but related principles: first, the unquestioned assumption that Westerners are able to discover and report the truth about native cultures, and second, that native people are not capable of speaking for themselves.

In many cases, the paternalism exists unconsciously. But it is evident in the general language used to describe Indian affairs. Even the most liberal employ the word "plight" to describe the conditions of Native Americans. As Vine Deloria argues, the word denotes a status and situation rather than an inadequacy or temporary handicap.<sup>62</sup> To describe the Indian's "plight" is to say that so long as there are Indians, it will be the white man's responsibility to direct them into avenues of cultural and religious civilization until they finally achieve equality—which, in this context, can only mean the extinction of all those characteristics that make an Indian an Indian.<sup>63</sup>

This ethos of paternalism underlaid the making of *Thunderheart*. The TriStar Pictures information released before the film describes it as

a union of John Fusco's [the screenwriter's] own experience as an adopted relative of the Oglala Nation and Robert De Niro and Jan Rosenthal's [the producers'] long-standing commitment to the cause of justice for Native Americans.<sup>64</sup>

These rich and powerful outsiders are speaking *for* the Indians because they perceive the Indians as being in desperate need of help and unable to speak for themselves.

Such a sentiment is expressed in the film through the character of Frank Coutelle, who states: "Rightly or wrongly, it's our responsibility because they [the Indians] are incapable of taking care of themselves." The statement personifies a master/servant relationship. Left alone to his own devices, the servant will self-destruct. Only the master can save the servant from himself.

This argument is not limited to altruistic outsiders. Rodney Grant, a prominent Indian actor who portrayed Wind in His Hair in *Dances with Wolves*, borrowed the paternalistic ideology to rationalize his participation in Kevin Costner's film: "If a white man didn't tell the story, then the story wouldn't have been made."<sup>65</sup>

Recent years, however, have witnessed increasing numbers of indigenous people seizing a greater role in their own representation. Theodore S. Jojola illustrates this from a personal experience. As a Native American artist, he was chosen to collaborate on the develop-

ment of a new animated cartoon series. The initial image of one of the characters represented a depiction of an Indian from a non-native perspective, and was driven by popular non-native ideals of Native American life and customs.<sup>66</sup> After Jojola's contributions, however, the character was adapted to present a more accurate image. Jojola contends that if native people are to make a significant impact on their own representation, they have to reappropriate and revise their own roles based on their own understanding of their traditions.<sup>67</sup>

Beyond collaboration, the highest form of participation is when indigenous peoples seize control of their own representation. No longer (if ever) just passive objects and no longer content to remain in front of the camera, native filmmakers are turning behind the camera to produce and control their own images. Some have even suggested that the misrepresentation is so entrenched that only members of the group can properly represent themselves.

Victor Masayesva Jr. is a prominent example of a native individual attempting to wrestle control of the representation of his people from outsiders. As a trained filmmaker and as a Hopi, Masayesva is extremely conscious of his own tenuous position as an artist using the media most closely associated with Euro-American appropriation and exploitation.<sup>68</sup> One of his more recent films, *Imagining Indians* (1992), presents a native perspective on the misrepresentation of Native Americans in feature films by exploring the ways in which native people react to, attempt to work with, or overtly resist their representation by the dominant culture.

The native filmmaker is in a unique predicament. For many outsiders, the native filmmaker comes with an automatic stamp of approval as he or she is viewed as a legitimate and authentic representative of his or her society. But this is precisely the problem: no single individual can possibly represent an entire society.

A discussion about how to demarcate legitimacy invariably raises more questions than answers. If a white filmmaker is deemed unqualified to depict a Native American cultural tradition, would a Cheyenne filmmaker also be considered unqualified to depict a Navajo or Inuit cultural tradition? Moreover, how can this view be reconciled with other separatist perspectives, such as the radical feminist argument that men are unqualified to depict female characters? It becomes increasingly problematic to set the parameters so that, ultimately, only brown-haired, blue-eyed Polish lesbians can acceptably represent or even comment upon other brown-haired, blue-eyed Polish lesbians. Obviously, the ludicrousness of this statement should demonstrate that the act of representation cannot degenerate into psychoanalysis.

The truth has to lie somewhere between total Indian domination of production and that of the mainstream culture. Both need to contribute their strengths in the creative process. Neither nostalgia nor



sympathy is a substitute for knowledge. Only accurate appreciation of cultural diversity combined with firsthand experience constitutes a true basis for the realistic understanding of Indian life.

N O T E S

- 1 *Thunderheart* is a TriStar Pictures release of a Tribeca/Waterhorse production. Produced by Robert De Niro, Jane Rosenthal, and John Fusco (who also wrote the screenplay), the film is directed by Michael Apted, who addressed similar issues in the documentary *Incident at Oglala* one year earlier. The film stars Val Kilmer as Ray Levoi, Sam Shepard as Frank Coutelle, and Graham Greene as Walter Crow Horse. *Thunderheart* was released in the spring of 1992, which, significantly, marked the quincentennial of the landing of Columbus (there are two distinct references to Columbus and the quincentennial in the film).
- 2 Hartmut Lutz, "'Indians' and Native Americans in the Movies: A History of Stereotypes, Distortions, and Displacements," *Visual Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1990): 34.
- 3 Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 17.
- 4 Cited in Laurence M. Hauptman, *Tribes and Tribulations: Misconceptions about American Indians and Their Histories* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 90.
- 5 Lutz, "'Indians' and Native Americans in the Movies," 34.
- 6 Michael Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Film* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 238. *Run of the Arrow* and *Little Big Man* are additional examples of films that sacrifice the native heroine for the benefit of the white hero.
- 7 Robert F. Berkhofer, *White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978), xv.
- 8 Robert Baird, "Going Indian: Discovery, Adoption, and Renaming toward a 'True American,'" from *Deerslayer to Dances with Wolves*, in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in Popular Culture*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 202.
- 9 Theodore S. Jojola, "Moo Mesa: Some Thoughts on Stereotypes and Image Appropriation," in Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*, 263.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 264.
- 11 Cited in Fatimah Tobing Rony, "Victor Masayesva Jr. and the Politics of Imagining Indians," *Film Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1994): 29.
- 12 Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1992), 217.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 220.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 217.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 17 Vine Deloria, *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 236.
- 18 Victor W. Turner, "Symbols in African Ritual," in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*, ed. Arthur C. Lehmann and James E. Myers (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing, 1985), 55–63.

- 19 Richard Schickel, *Time* (4 May 1992), 77.
- 20 Kenneth Turan, *Los Angeles Times* (3 April 1992), C1.
- 21 Caryn James, "One Director, Two Routes to American Indian Travail," *New York Times Film Review* (10 May 1992), 22.
- 22 Amy Dawes, *Variety* (30 March 1992), 77.
- 23 Keith Edwards, *Films in Review* (June 1992), 186.
- 24 Manohla Dargis, *Village Voice* (7 April 1992), 66.
- 25 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 26 Joseph Gelmis, *Newsday* (3 April 1992), 58.
- 27 Edwards, *Films in Review*, 186.
- 28 David Ansen, *Newsweek* (13 April 1992), 68.
- 29 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 30 Audrey Farolino, *New York Post* (3 April 1992), 27.
- 31 Turan, *Los Angeles Times*, C1.
- 32 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 33 Janet Maslin, "Val Kilmer as an F.B.I. Agent among the Sioux," *New York Times* (3 April 1992), C12; emphasis mine.
- 34 Turan, *Los Angeles Times*, C1.
- 35 Farolino, *New York Post*, 27.
- 36 Schickel, *Time*, 77.
- 37 Gelmis, *Newsday*, 58.
- 38 Ansen, *Newsweek*, 68.
- 39 Dargis, *Village Voice*, 66.
- 40 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 41 Tom Charity, *Sight and Sound* (2 October 1992), 57.
- 42 Dargis, *Village Voice*, 66.
- 43 *The Motion Picture Guide* (1993), 330–31.
- 44 I am not accusing the reviewers of employing reverse discrimination, nor am I implying that the positive reviews for the native actors are not warranted. I simply find this apparent double standard interesting and worth speculating about.
- 45 Turan, *Los Angeles Times*, C1.
- 46 Farolino, *New York Post*, 27.
- 47 Maslin, *New York Times Film Review*, C12.
- 48 John Anderson, *Newsday* (8 May 1992), 63.
- 49 Dargis, *Village Voice*, 66.
- 50 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 51 James Jaquith, "Thunderheart: A Review," *Teaching Anthropology Newsletter* (fall 1992): 3.
- 52 Ansen, *Newsweek*, 68.
- 53 Anderson, *Newsday*, 63.
- 54 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 55 Farolino, *New York Post*, 27.
- 56 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 57 Maslin, *New York Times*, 22.
- 58 Anderson, *Newsday*, 63.
- 59 Farolino, *New York Post*, 27.
- 60 Charity, *Sight and Sound*, 57.
- 61 Dawes, *Variety*, 77.
- 62 Vine Deloria, "The American Indian Image in North America," in *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, ed. Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980), 50.

- 63 Ibid., 50–51.
- 64 Cited in *Imagining Indians*, prod. and dir. Victor Masayesva, 60 min., Documentary Education Resources, 1992, videocassette.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 Jojola, "Moo Mesa," 275.
- 67 Ibid., 278.
- 68 Rony, "Victor Masayesva," 26.