

5-1-2014

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Preferred Citation

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Hollywood's Invention of the Native American, and the Myth of the Cowboy as a History

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Senior Thesis

Completed for the course 491: Integrative Essay
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Spring 2014

Introduction:

European colonial settlers founded the United States on a myth created long before the first colony of the New World was erected. Upon their arrival, European settlers brought with them an undeniable yet unrealistic hope and expectation of the New World. The symbolism and meaning of the new land was as important, if not more, to the settlers as its possible potential for economic yield. The New World was an arguably utopian conduit for a liberated and progressive future. From this unrealistic hope inevitably came the mythology of the nation. For the United States, the national myth, often described as national character, comes from the fundamental belief of progression. By ascribing themselves as agents of progress, the European settlers put themselves in direct opposition to the Native Americans occupying the land. The rising White majority quickly labeled Native Americans as the “other,” rather than see Native Americans as the occupants of the land.

With the label as the “other,” Native Americans were seen as natural objects that held no moral standing, and could therefore be conquered without moral repercussions. This conflict and portrayal of Native Americans as the “other” endured intensely throughout the development and expansion of the United States. The modern portrayal and social consciousness of Native Americans continues to be highly influenced by historic ideologies created in the years following the Western expansion in the U.S. A major institution in perpetuating these beliefs of Native Americans as the “other” during the Twentieth Century was the Hollywood Western. This highly popular genre perpetuated the myth of Native Americans as the “other,” an animal like savage that could be saved only with the intervention and assimilation of White ideals and society.

My research on the labeling of Native Americans as an “other” will focus on the following questions. Firstly, why and how has the Native American been continually labeled, invented, and accepted as the other both in American academia and the cultural consciousness? Lastly, how has the myth of the good, white, rugged pioneer cowboy versus the savage Native American been revisited, changed, or challenged in recent history? In order to answer these questions, I analyzed two popular Hollywood Westerns from the early to mid-Twentieth Century, John Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) and *The Searchers* (1956), and one Hollywood film from the 1990s featuring Native American culture, *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Both *Fort Apache* and *The Searchers* were chosen because of their vast popularity and critical acclaim in the Western genre. *The Searchers* (1956) is often regarded as the best Western film made,¹ while *Fort Apache* (1948) represented the start of Ford’s trilogy of films that offered a more sympathetic view of Native Americans.² *Dances with Wolves* (1990) was chosen, similarly to *The Searchers*, for its popularity, critical acclaim, and its continuing status as the most accurate film depiction of Native American culture.³

Along with my own analysis of the three films, previous theories by leading scholars, such as James Scott and Mahmood Mamdani have also been integrated into my investigation. Throughout this essay, I refer to Scott’s theory of the public transcript to explain how films are able to perpetuate beliefs that are created by dominating classes. In addition to Scott, I reference Mamdani work on Islam as an “other,” to show a comparison between two different and distinct cultures that have both been labeled as the “other” by the U.S. These modern theories establish a

¹ Seixas, Peter. "Popular Film and Young People's Understanding of the History of Native American-White Relations." *The History Teacher* 26.3 (1993): 351-70. *JSTOR*. Web.

² *Ibid.*, 353

³ *Ibid.*, 359

context and pattern for how power and control is gained by subversive and often disregarded acts of labeling and representation.

I will also show and examine how the myth of the United States as a land of progression, and the labeling and portrayal of Native Americans as the “other,” has resulted in the negative and stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans in new media, specifically Hollywood films during the Twentieth Century. I will show how these portrayals of Native Americans exist in the American cultural consciousness, and how they effectively control and degrade the Native American population. Furthermore, I will extend this analysis to explain how even the critically acclaimed sympathetic Native American films of the late Twentieth Century do not eradicate the negative and stereotypical portrayal of Native Americans, but rather redefines the Native cultural image in a continuingly negative and stereotypical light.

Native American and U.S. Historical Relations:

To fully understand the impact and contextual meaning of Hollywood’s Westerns in the early and mid-Twentieth Century, the historical relationship between Native Americans and the U.S. must be examined. This brief history will give context, and provide historical background for the U.S. and Native American relations of the Twentieth Century.

Although the relationship between the U.S. and Native Americans is often generalized as having tension and conflict, initial contact between the two groups was neither violent nor forewarning of the events to come. According to Vine Deloria, in the book *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, Western Europeans’ first contact with Native Americans led prominent European explorers, such as John Smith, to describe Native Americans as “...happy, gentle people, living as in a Garden of Eden, and as uncomplicated as man might

have been before the dawn of history.”⁴ The description of Native Americans as happy and non-threatening people in the early 1600s radically contrasts the later view of Native Americans as ruthless savages. The European and Native American relationship quickly soured however, when the European settlers’ plans for expansion displaced and disrupted Native American tribes and territory. When the colonists’ expansion of the New World had created an eruption of war between the Natives and the colonists in 1620, William Bradford, a Pilgrim father, provided the first rationale for why Native Americans should be seen as savages. Bradford argued that the New World was void of “...all civil inhabitants,” with only, “...savage and brutish men.”⁵ Once a group is no longer seen as human, Michael Green states in his article, “Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues,” the belief “...denies to them any moral standing and thus any claim to moral consideration and treatment.”⁶ By denying Native Americans the status of humans, neither legal nor moral ramifications could occur from their extermination. Although John Smith had initially described Native Americans positively, in the years following Bradford’s proclamation, Smith wrote of Native Americans as “beasts,” “hell-hounds,” and “miscreants.”⁷ It was not until the European settlers realized Native Americans were resistant to the settlers’ exploitation and expansion of the land that the portrayal of Native Americans as savages, rather than humans, arose.

Despite an initial appreciation and dependence on Native Americans during the Europeans’ first winter in the New World, the relationship between the two groups quickly grew violent with the onset of the Colonists’ military prowess and desires for land expansion and exploitation. Conflict and war continued to erupt between Natives and settlers throughout the

⁴ Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "The American Indian Image in North America." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 49. Print.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 50

⁶ Green, Michael K. "Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues." *Journal of Business Ethics* 12.4 (1993): 323-30. *JSTOR*. Web.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 50

end of the Seventeenth Century, as well as the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century. King Phillip's War in 1675 was the first organized Native American resistance to European settlers. However, the war resulted in heavy losses for Native Americans, both in population, and land reclamation. Although conflicts between Native Americans and European settlers continued, the appointment of a royal governor for the New England colonies by Britain reaffirmed the stability and power of the European colonies.⁸

As European land expansion grew in the decades following King Phillip's War, the U.S. continued to push now autonomous Native American tribes further towards the West. The Indian Removal Act passed by Congress in 1830 authorized the removal of Native American tribes to federal territory west of the Mississippi River. From 1831 to 1838, Native American tribes were relocated in an event now referred to as the Trail of Tears. The relocation of Native Americans by the U.S. resulted in another significant population loss for Native Americans, due to death from starvation and dehydration during the Trail of Tears. Although legally autonomous from the U.S., Native American tribes were still under a significant amount of control by the U.S. government. By the late Nineteenth Century, Native American attacks against settlers were sporadic and less organized.⁹

Though major military engagements between Native Americans and the U.S. had primarily ceased with the onset of the Twentieth Century, Native Americans were continually seen as savages that could be saved only through assimilation of White culture and ideals. The establishment of boarding schools off Native American reservations attempted to rid Native American students of their tribal culture, and assimilate them with White culture. Often, Native American children were forcibly taken from their families, and placed either in boarding schools

⁸ Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken past of the American West*. New York: Norton, 1987. Print.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 170

or with White families. It was not until the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 that the U.S. legally addressed the forcible removal of Native American children. Whether through exploitation, violence, or assimilation, the U.S. has historically oppressed and dominated Native Americans.¹⁰

Theories:

With the onset of the early Twentieth Century, a new media, Hollywood Westerns, soon depicted the violent and oppressive relationship between Native Americans and the U.S. The Hollywood Western was produced by a multi-national film industry, but was quickly seen as the new American literature. Through this new media, the myth of the U.S. was able to reach a more expansive and diverse audience than ever before. Previous to the arrival of the Western genre, the national myth of the U.S. was defined and explored in American literature. The U.S. Constitution itself provided the New World its first “American epic,” as described by Richard Slotkin in the book *The Pretend Indians*. For Slotkin, American literature that perpetuated the national myth of the U.S. “...would reflect the most progressive ideas of American man, emphasizing the rule of reason in nature and in human affairs, casting aside all inherited traditions, superstitions and spurious values of the past.”¹¹ The U.S. Constitution was the first publication in the U.S. to confirm the European settlers’ belief of progression. The Constitution established the New World as a land that would be inhabited only by citizens of progression and modernity. By ridding the New World from previous ideologies and cultures, the early settlers

¹⁰ Sink, David. "Making the Indian Child Welfare Act Work: Missing Social and Governmental Linkages." *Phylon* (1960-) 43.4 (1982): 360-67. JSTOR. Web. 16 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/274758?ref=search-gateway:ac64fa78873bfaf9c16dc693d3596a40>>.

¹¹ Slotkin, Richard. "Myth and Literature in a New World." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 7. Print.

of the U.S. were establishing themselves as agents of progress, and thus confirming and perpetuating the national myth of progress and modernity.

The national myth presented in early American literature reemerged as the popularity and power of Hollywood and films grew in the Twentieth Century. The Hollywood Western became the new conduit for the American myth, and the public transcript. In his book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, political theorist James Scott argues that language can often be divided into two categories: the hidden transcript and the public transcript. Scott's public transcript describes the public behavior of a subordinated class, as well as the information produced by those in power. As Scott explains, "with rare, but significant, exceptions of the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful."¹² In public, the subordinate class will display a public transcript, which conforms to the wants and desires of the power holding elite class. However, when away from the elite class, the subordinate class will participate in the hidden transcript. The hidden transcript "...takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation of power holders"¹³ For Scott, the hidden transcript can be seen as the true desires and beliefs of the subordinate class. The hidden transcript however, can be expressed only in the absence of the elite class. It is therefore the elites who are generating and distributing the knowledge widely accepted as true. Although it is not the topic of this essay, Native Americans' participation in the hidden transcript has occurred throughout the U.S.'s history. Even with Natives' participation in the hidden transcript however, the dominating Whites have been able to consistently produce a public transcript that exerts control and power over Native Americans.

¹² Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. Print.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4

Hollywood Westerns used new media that was widely available and popular, to perpetuate the public transcript of the American national myth. Westerns, however, adhered to a specific aspect of the national myth, referred to as the “myth of the frontier.” Unlike the myth of the U.S., which focused on general progression and modernity, the myth of the frontier focused specifically on “...the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top.”¹⁴ Not only did the myth of the frontier represent progression and modernity like the national myth, it also allowed all individuals, regardless of economic or social class, to believe that personal hard work could yield success in the U.S.

Western films sought to capitalize off of the myth of the frontier, and the subsequent domination and extermination of Native Americans, a culture deemed as anti-modern, and a hindrance to the expansion of progress in the U.S. As Leslie Fielder explains in the book, *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, “The heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape... but the encounter with the Indian, an utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home.”¹⁵ The myth of the frontier, as perpetuated by the public transcript in Western films, depends on the confrontation between the cowboy and the Native Americans. The cowboy represents progress, expansion, and the ability to achieve the American Dream, while Native Americans represent the “other,” the greatest threat to the cowboy’s progress, expansion, and achievement of the American Dream. By labeling Native Americans as the “other,” Natives are portrayed as an anti-modern culture that actively attacks progression and modernity.

¹⁴ Slotkin, Richard. "Myth and Literature in a New World." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 7. Print.

¹⁵ Fielder, Leslie. "The Demon of the Continent." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 9-14. Print.

Although varying in certain themes, both John Ford's films, *Fort Apache* (1948) and *The Searchers* (1956), label Native Americans as the "other," an animal like enemy that stands in the way of progression, and achieving the myth of the frontier. The Western genre's portrayal of Native Americans as the "other" becomes the most powerful device in perpetuating the myth of the frontier, and subsequent national myth. By depicting and degrading Native American culture as nothing more than the "other," Westerns perpetuate the historic belief that Native Americans are not human, but rather a savage enemy. The belief of Native Americans as inhuman is evidenced by William Bradford's previously discussed declaration in 1620, which stated the New World had no previous inhabitants other than animals and savages.

The portrayal of Native Americans as the "other" in early to mid-Twentieth Century Western films is indicative of continuous cultural behavior in the U.S. during the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century. Native Americans have never been the sole owners of the U.S.'s label of the "other." The label of the "other" exists in a relationship with the national myth. Any group or people perceived as a potential threat to the U.S.'s progression and modernity is labeled as the "other." With the onset of the Vietnam War in the late 1950s, the Western genre and its Native American foes were soon replaced by the more present threat of Communism. Like Native Americans, the U.S. labeled Communism, specifically the Vietnamese, as the "other." This shift is evidenced by John Wayne's 1968 film, *The Green Berets* (1968). The myth of the frontier transported itself from the Western U.S., to the forests of Vietnam. Communism replaced Native Americans as the U.S.'s primary threat to expansion and modernity. In present day, our "other" is neither Native Americans nor Communism, but rather Islam. Although theorist Mahmood Mamdani focused his work specifically on the labeling of Islam as the "other," his work and

theories create a theoretical framework to help analyze the U.S.'s labeling as the "other" on any group.

Similarities between the portrayals of Native Americans in the mid-Twentieth Century are indicative of the modern portrayals of Muslims in the U.S. As Mamdani discusses in his book, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, like the Native Americans during Western expansion, modern Islam is viewed as anti-modern. The analysis of Islam as an anti-modern culture categorizes our view of Muslims as either good Muslims or bad Muslims. The U.S. forces the Muslim community to work off the title of bad Muslim by supporting the U.S. in a war against all other Muslims.¹⁶ Similarly, the U.S. categorized Native Americans into three distinct categories. These categories consist of the Noble Savage, the Civilizable Savage, and the Bloodthirsty Savage.¹⁷ Much like Muslims being forced into war against labeled bad Muslims in order to redeem their status as good, Native Americans either had to assimilate with white culture, or be supportive of U.S. expansion, exploitation, and trade. If Native Americans showed signs of resistance against U.S. expansion, they were quickly deemed as the Bloodthirsty Savage. All three images of Native Americans are heavily portrayed throughout the Western genre, specifically in Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948), and *The Searchers* (1956).

For Mamdani, the organizing of cultures and its people into categories of good or evil holds no validity. In fact, Mamdani refers to this type of behavior as "culture talk," a commonly used manipulation of the public transcript by elites to generalize and distort the true history of a society and culture. Hollywood Westerns relied heavily on "culture talk" to frame their movies, and thus categorized Native Americans accordingly. For Mamdani, understanding cultures is

¹⁶ Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon, 2004. Print.

¹⁷ Green, Michael K. "Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues." *Journal of Business Ethics* 12.4 (1993): 323-30. JSTOR. Web.

closely tied with political and historical events that have occurred in a culture or society.

Mamdani critiques this type of understanding as highly influenced by political actors, such as the dominant elites. Mamdani writes, “Unlike the culture studied by anthropologists—face-to-face, intimate, local, and lived—the talk of culture is highly politicized and comes in large geo-packages.”¹⁸ The portrayal of minority culture, argues Mamdani, is closely bound with politics. It is politics that the U.S. uses in their public transcript to define and often vilify a culture. “Culture talk,” writes Mamdani, “assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence.”¹⁹ Rather than understanding a culture based off of previous political events or histories, culture talk assigns each culture with a singular attribute that rules their culture or society’s political actions. Culture talk is a modern form of Scott’s public transcript, and heavily used in Hollywood Westerns.

The violence between Native Americans and the U.S. from the late Seventeenth to late Nineteenth Century is the tangible essence described by Mamdani in culture talk that the U.S. uses to define Native Americans as the “other.” For the U.S., it was Native Americans’ resistance towards Western expansion and exploitation that the U.S. used to justify the label of anti-modern, and therefore the “other.” The violent relationship between the U.S. and Native Americans was the essence described by Mamdani in creating Native Americans’ culture talk. Westerns perpetuated this culture talk in their portrayal of Native Americans as a savage, regardless if the savage was noble, civilizable, or bloodthirsty. As Michael Green explains, “Instead of recognizing that indigenous peoples have a different culture, the assumption was made [by white settlers] that [Native Americans] had no culture and thus were living no better

¹⁸ Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon, 2004. Print.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9

than animals.”²⁰ Native Americans, as perpetuated by Westerns’ culture talk, were portrayed as savages that lacked and feared modernity. This portrayal of aggression towards modernity reestablished the Native Americans as the “other,” and once again put them in direct opposition of the U.S.’s myth of the frontier.

The theories of culture talk and the public transcript aid in organizing, and subsequently dominating, cultures as either modern or anti-modern. Anti-modern cultures are seen as undeveloped cultures that have yet to embrace the practices and beliefs of current day. These cultures are depicted as unwilling to conform to modern ideals and roles. Anti-modern cultures are often regarded as barbaric societies that promote intolerance and violence. Rather than investigate all aspects of a state, such as the history or culture, a population is judged on whether or not it is analyzed as modern or anti-modern by the public transcript, and dominating elites. This judgment arises often from the tangible essence discussed previously in culture talk. Hollywood Westerns used culture talk and the public transcript to perpetuate the idea of Native Americans as savages.

The Early Westerns:

Hollywood Westerns cannot be seen as merely entertainment, void of any real power or control in the U.S. Westerns are actively portraying the public transcript of the myth of the frontier. Hollywood’s popularity allowed for the revision of a disconnected past, that created the continued domination over Native Americans. Westerns also reconfirmed the myth of the frontier, which relief heavily on the belief of the U.S. as a country of progress and modernity. The Western genre re-solidified and re-articulated the myth of the frontier during a time when

²⁰ Green, Michael K. "Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues." *Journal of Business Ethics* 12.4 (1993): 323-30. *JSTOR*. Web.

violent confrontations between the U.S. and Native Americans had generally subsided. As Ward Churchill, Mary Anne Hill, and Norbert Hill discuss in *Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, “The history of conquest needed popular revision if it were to be utilized as a matter of national pride; the Native had to be universally and negatively dealt with if such a pattern were to be actualized, and consistent stereotyping was the most effective means to this end.”²¹ Hollywood Westerns allowed the public transcript to redefine the image of Native Americans as anti-modern to help strengthen the myth of the frontier, and subsequently the national myth. Films became an easy and effective way to reestablish Native Americans as apart of an anti-modern culture that was often prone to violence, and posed the greatest threat to the U.S.’s modernity and progress.

As mentioned previously, both Ford’s films *Fort Apache* (1948) and *The Searchers* (1956) provided ample and significant examples of Native American stereotypes, and the public transcript’s use of these stereotypical portrayals to reestablish the myth of the frontier. Ford’s earlier film of the two, *Fort Apache* (1948), was reviewed as showing a sympathetic view towards Native Americans. Although Ford’s film does not completely depict the bloodthirsty savage, the film still shows the stereotype of the ignorant and violent savage, as well as keeping Native American characters as nothing more than enemies or extras, with John Wayne, the White cowboy, as the hero.

Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) takes place in the years following the American Civil War, a commonly depicted, completely saturated, time frame for Western films. The film focuses on Captain Kirby York, a respected and likable veteran, played by John Wayne, and Lieutenant Colonel Owen Thursday, portrayed by Henry Fonda. Thursday is appointed to command Fort

²¹ Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "Examination of Stereotyping." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 35-47. Print.

Apache, an isolated U.S. Calvary Post bordering Native American territory. Unlike York, Thursday is disliked by those at the fort, and is portrayed as incompetent with Native American relations, and is overall aggressive. Wayne's York, the protagonist of the film, acts in the role as the white savior. York is not only calm in his military strategy, but he is apparently a near expert on Native American culture.²²

The film depicts a Native American plain tribe of Apaches, who are not initially violent, but become increasingly throughout the film. Conflict between the Apaches and the U.S. Calvary occurs only because of Thursday's persistent disrespect towards the tribe, and his desire to receive military recognition from the U.S. government. Although York maintains amicable relations with the Apaches, and continuously warns Thursday of the consequences of his actions, warfare between the two groups begins. York refuses to engage in battle, and all but a few of Thursday's men perish, including Thursday himself. The film ends with the promotion of York to Lieutenant Colonel, and an altered retelling of Thursday's battle to portray the deceased Lieutenant Colonel positively.²³

Like the majority of Western films, the Native American tribe depicted in *Fort Apache* is that of a Plains tribe, with no distinct culture that would indicate them as actually Apache. The use of Plains tribes is a distinct characteristic of Hollywood's Western films. Although original contact with European settlers was experienced predominantly with Eastern tribes, such as the Iroquois, Churchill et al explain, "...the image selected by white America for its stereotype of the Native American was a superficial visual likeness of the Plains Sioux, the last indigenous group capable of offering serious military resistance."²⁴ Rather than depicting actual and

²² *Fort Apache*. Dir. John Ford. RKO Radio Pictures, 1948. DVD.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "Examination of Stereotyping." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 35-47. Print.

specific characteristics of tribes, the majority of Hollywood Native American tribes resemble that of the Plains Sioux.

The significance of the Plains Sioux selection is critical to the myth of the frontier that Westerns are so desperately portraying in their public transcript. As Churchill et al write, “It was the defeat of this people [Plains Sioux] that most dramatically symbolized the final conquest of North America by the United States.”²⁵ The Plains Sioux offer Westerns the perfect enemy, as they were capable of participating in military resistance, and their tribal heraldry was the most distinct and different from the European fashions.²⁶ It was the Plains Sioux that posed the greatest military threat to the U.S. In addition, the Plains Sioux were the last Native American tribe to be conquered by the U.S. By constantly depicting the conquest over Plains Sioux, Hollywood Westerns are reestablishing the military prowess of the U.S., as well as the inherent power of progression and modernity over anti-modern cultures.

In addition to Ford’s portrayal of Apaches as a vaguely Plains Sioux tribe, several other significant Native American stereotypes exist throughout the film. Churchill et al established three major themes on how Native American stereotyping has occurred, all of which are evidenced in Ford’s film. As mentioned previously, Native Americans in films have been assigned to a particular time period, that of the mid to late-Nineteenth Century, specifically after the American Civil War.

Ford’s *Fort Apache* (1948) takes place in the immediate years following the American Civil War, with many of the Calvary characters veterans of said war. Although Native American history began well before European contact, Hollywood films often do not depict this time period. By 1967, over 2,300 feature-length Western films had been produced, with the vast

²⁵ Ibid., 36

²⁶ Ibid., 36

majority set in the Nineteenth Century.²⁷ Only occasional dissents from this time period occurred, however even the dissenting films continued to deal with other geographical or temporal aspects of the U.S. and Native American relationship. As Churchill et al explain, by focusing merely on the Twentieth Century, "...a 15,000-25,000 year history of race is compressed into a period spanning four centuries at best and, more usually, less than a single century."²⁸ In films, Native Americans' history, as well as their culture, are condensed to aid in the storytelling of the cowboy as a hero. This time period also allows the characters, many of whom are veterans of the Confederacy, to reaffirm their power and dominance after being disgraced and defeated by the Union Army.

In addition to condensing Native American history and culture through the depiction of only specific time periods, a second major Native stereotype in Hollywood films is the interpretation of Native cultures through White values. As discussed earlier, the Hollywood Native American does not depict a true tribal identity, but rather all Hollywood Native Americans, regardless of assigned tribe, resemble a vaguely Plains Sioux tribe. This occurs when Native cultures and histories are viewed from a White perspective, and inevitable White bias. Churchill et al believe that this perspective accomplishes two goals: "...a) The real Native identity is destroyed in favor of a more palatable (to whites) fictitious one, and b) the fictitious identity (white in nature) is the same regardless of the tribe or culture theoretically portrayed."²⁹ The Native American portrayals in Westerns are created from a white bias and perspective that generalizes a culture. This perspective is detached from the actual experiences of Native Americans, and thus cannot be seen as historically or culturally accurate. The White perspective

²⁷ Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. N. pag. Print.

²⁸ Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "Examination of Stereotyping." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 35-47. Print.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37

is another form of Mamdani's culture talk, which generalizes and misrepresents any group labeled as the "other."

Throughout *Fort Apache* (1948), this White perspective is evidenced by the portrayal of the Apache tribe. As mentioned previously, the portrayed Apache tribe had no distinct culture, and was only seen onscreen when interacting with white characters. In fact, the Apaches are relatively absent from the film until the movie's climactic fight scene, which erupted from a verbal misunderstanding. This depiction of Native Americans perpetuates the stereotype of Native Americans as incompetent aggressive savages who easily engage in violence. Ford's film, according to John Price in the book, *The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures*, "...usually attempted rationalization of Indian behavior, although as people they often came across as simple, childlike creatures, who spoke in short, ungrammatical sentences."³⁰ By attempting to rationalize Native Americans' actions in their relationship with the U.S., Ford was portraying an inaccurate view of Native American history and culture, distorted by his White perspective and bias. Rather than creating an accurate representation of the Apache culture and history, Ford chooses to never rely upon an actual Apache cultural perspective.

In combination with subjecting Native Americans in films to a specific time period, and creating portrayals from a White perspective, a third theme of stereotyping discussed by Churchill et al is the idea that one Native American is indicative of all Native Americans. This theme, like the preceding two, deals with the generalization and culture talk of Native Americans. As Churchill et al explain, "...visual cultural characteristics that tend to individuate tribal groupings begin to blend into an all-encompassing haze."³¹ Rather than portraying Native

³⁰ Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. N. pag. Print.

³¹ Ibid., 38

Americans as belonging to distinctly different tribes with their own history and culture, Native Americans are portrayed as a generalized culture that share an innate essence.

Because *Fort Apache* (1948) does not deal with the distinct culture of the Apaches, and portrays the tribe in the stereotype of the incompetent violent savage, the Apache tribe loses its individuality, and becomes a part of the Native American collective. For Churchill et al, the generalization and culture talk of Native Americans has created a situation where "...Native individuals and cultures have been reduced to a degrading parody of themselves within the public consciousness."³² The stereotypes used in Western films, and *Fort Apache* (1948) specifically, have added to the idea of Native Americans as characters or mascots, not a real minority group that exists in modern society. Churchill et al explain this point further, stating, "Worse, the lampooned peoples have been systematically credited with no contemporary significance whatsoever; they are creatures of a false nostalgia, feathered cousins to bygone buffalo."³³ The inaccurate and negative portrayals of Native Americans have forced the U.S. consciousness to dismiss the modern identity of Native Americans, and focus on a reworked and distorted portrayal of Western expansion, often regarded as a true history of Native American and U.S. relations.

All three stereotyping themes discussed allow Westerns to reinforce the myth of the frontier. As explained previously, the myth of the frontier is a form of the national myth that focuses on progression and modernity, specifically in Western territorial expansion. The extreme stereotyping of Native Americans creates a justification for the exploitation of Natives and the land, thus continuously solidifying the myth of the frontier, and subsequently the national myth of progress and modernity. Although Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948) attempts to justify the

³² Ibid., 38

³³ Ibid., 38

Apache's actions, the film just continues to add to the stereotyping of Native Americans as incompetent and violent savages, with no distinct culture, specifically explored through a non-white perspective.

Although Ford's film, *The Searchers* (1956), was made later in his career than 1948's *Fort Apache*, the film does not continue to offer an arguably sympathetic view of Native Americans. Rather, *The Searchers* (1956) depicts a violent stereotype of Native Americans as the Bloodthirsty Savage. Ford's film revolves around the murder of a Texan family by Native Americans, and the subsequent abduction of the youngest female child. John Wayne's character, Uncle Ethan, devotes the next several years of his life to searching and recovering his captured niece. Often regarded as the best Western ever made, as well as the most viciously anti-Native American film ever made,³⁴ *The Searchers* (1956) depicts a hateful and inaccurate portrayal of a Comanche tribe.³⁵

Throughout Ford's film, the Comanche tribe is considered and labeled as bloodthirsty savages. Topics such as miscegenation are also discussed throughout the film, with Wayne's character adamant that he would kill his captured niece if she were to become a wife, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, of the Comanche leader, Scar. The execution, abduction, and rape of the Texan family align with the stereotype of the Comanche tribe as the Bloodthirsty Savage. Michael Green suggests in his article, *Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues*, that the bloodthirsty savage arises when "...two cultures come to exist in a state of prolonged war, the image of 'the other' can become transformed so as to take on demonic and satanic attributes."³⁶ No longer does the label of the "other" indicate uncultured savages that

³⁴ Seixas, Peter. "Popular Film and Young People's Understanding of the History of Native American-White Relations." *The History Teacher* 26.3 (1993): 351-70. *JSTOR*. Web.

³⁵ *The Searchers*. Dir. John Ford. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1956. DVD.

³⁶ Green, Michael K. "Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues." *Journal of Business Ethics* 12.4 (1993): 323-30. *JSTOR*. Web.

threaten the path of progression and modernity, they now become an extreme and violent form of the savage, and essentially the perfect enemy to fear and hate. The Bloodthirsty Savage, Green explains further, becomes characterized as a "...predatory animal that kills aimlessly and wantonly, that probably practices cannibalism, and that rapes, pillages, and plunders for no other reason than the pure joy of destruction."³⁷ Ford depicts the Comanche tribe throughout the film as having these characteristics.

The Comanche's actions throughout the film are depicted as extremely violent, with no true meaning other than seeking revenge against White settlers. During the murder of the family, and the abduction of the niece, the Comanches slaughter the family's cattle, not for food, but as a continuing act of destruction. The film also shows that the Comanches planned the attack on the family, but there was no specific reason why it was that family. From these assigned attributes in Hollywood films, the caricature of the Native American forces the group to be seen as "... the ultimate killing machine. He comes decorated with war paint, he carries a tomahawk, and he is always ready to scalp, torture, murder, and menace innocent individuals."³⁸ The Comanches and their leader Scar, portrayed by a white actor, are depicted as a viable military competitor, which only strengthens their image as violent, and a direct opposition of progress.

While the Comanches were portrayed as bloodthirsty savages, other passing Native American tribes and characters were labeled with other common stereotypes. In Ethan's search for his niece, his adopted half-Cherokee nephew Martin joins him. Ethan refuses to refer to Martin as his nephew, and forces Martin to work off his Native American label by continuously proving his loyalty to finding Ethan's niece. This act is indicative of Mamdani's claim in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* that cultures labeled as the "other" are forced to prove themselves as good,

³⁷ Ibid., 327

³⁸ Ibid., 328

rather than bad. Throughout the film, Martin represents the Civilizable Savage. Although his mother was Native American, Martin has been able to assimilate and pass within the White culture. By the end of the film, Martin himself detests the Comanche tribe, and subsequently further distances himself from his already distanced heritage. Thus, Martin's character is the physical representation of the idea that "...the only bad Indian is a real Indian."³⁹ Because Martin assimilated and identified with White culture, he was not seen as a true Native American by any character other than Ethan in the film. Similarly, during their search for Ethan's abducted niece, Ethan and Martin trade with another ambiguous Native American tribe. This tribe is not portrayed as aggressive or unfair, because they are assimilating with the White culture by trading, and helping Ethan and Martin find the Comanches.

Throughout Ford's film, the only Native Americans not depicted as bloodthirsty savages are those that have assimilated or aided with white culture. In addition to adhering to the oversaturated time period of the Nineteenth Century, and perpetuating the image of the savage, the film explains Comanche culture and history through the White perspective. The Comanches are being defined by White characters, and are rarely seen onscreen without the addition of a White character. Although an extremely popular Western, *The Searchers* (1956) is aggressively racist and demeaning towards Native American, thus perpetuating the idea of Native Americans as savages, rather than human beings, which subsequently denies them any moral consideration and treatment. From these stereotypes came the reinforcement of Native Americans as the anti-modern "other," and the re-solidification of the myth of the frontier, with the cowboy as an agent of progress.

³⁹ Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "Examination of Stereotyping." *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. 35-47. Print.

The popularity of Westerns allowed the public transcript to effectively dominate Native Americans, while also convincing the U.S. consciousness that the portrayal of Native Americans in Hollywood films were a true and accurate depiction of the violent and anti-modern “other.” As explained by Gregory Bateson, in the article *Native American Women in Westerns: Reality and Myth*, Hollywood films have “...themes built into the structure of the plot in such a way that the audience, while enjoying the plot, will necessarily accept the underlying themes as basic premises ...need never be articulately stated.”⁴⁰ The public transcript functions so exceptionally well in Western films, that often audiences believe the movies portray a true depiction of Native Americans.

The negative of portrayal of Native Americans created a caricature of Native Americans that existed both in Hollywood Westerns and the U.S. consciousness. Maryann Oshana discusses the depiction of Natives in Westerns, stating, “Westerns have been very effective in creating a ‘Hollywood Indian,’ so much so that many people fail to recognize real Native Americans unless they fit the Hollywood stereotype.”⁴¹ Not only has the depiction of Native Americans as the “other” degraded and dominated the Native American population, but it has also convinced the U.S. consciousness of its negative and inaccurate portrayals as a true history of the U.S. “The cinematic images of Native Americans are so negative,” writes Oshana, “that even some Indians will root for the U.S. cavalry as they watch Westerns.”⁴² The power of Hollywood Westerns in perpetuating the label of Native Americans as the “other” is undeniable. Through Westerns, the public transcript was able to demonize Native Americans as an anti-modern enemy that proved the greatest threat to the cowboy of progress and modernity.

Oshana, Maryann. "Native American Women in Westerns: Reality and Myth." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 6.3 (1981): 46-50. JSTOR. Web. 16 Apr. 2014.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 47

⁴² *Ibid.*, 47

Later Westerns:

Unlike the Westerns of the mid-Twentieth Century, Hollywood films depicting Native Americans during the 1990s were applauded for their historical accuracy and sympathetic views of Native Americans. With the release of the film *Dancing with Wolves* (1990) in 1990, a new era of post civil rights, pro-Native American films was seemingly ushered in. No longer were the portrayals of Native Americans as overtly violent animals prominent in Hollywood films. This absence convinced the U.S. consciousness that Native American stereotypes were dwindling in films, and subsequently in society. However, the stereotyping of Native Americans as the “other” did not disappear, rather it was redefined in correlation with the changing national myth.

The 1960s marked a period of feverous social activism, which forced the U.S. to reevaluate the social status and historical discrimination of minority groups. Many racial minorities and social groups found success during this period in the U.S. However, Native Americans appeared relatively absent from the U.S.’s media coverage of the most prominent protests during this time. The Civil Rights movement initially found success from small groups of Blacks and White supporters.⁴³ From these organizations came similar parallel groups engaging in social activism that represented, according to Churchill et al, “...a systematic and coherent demand for change in the status of American nonwhites.”⁴⁴ Although the protests and organizations were meant to include all nonwhites in the U.S., Native American protest groups were smaller, and reported on more inconsistently by the media in comparison to other prominent racial minority organizations.

⁴³ Ibid., 41

⁴⁴ Ibid., 41

The size and lack of media coverage of Native American protests were caused by several important factors. Unlike the organization of the Black population, Native Americans were a considerably smaller racial group. In fact, Blacks exceeded the Native American population by over 1,000%.⁴⁵ Another disadvantage for the Native population was that unlike the Black population, which had high participation in the urban labor force, Native Americans were spread throughout remote areas of the U.S.⁴⁶ Although instances like the Wounded Knee incident in 1973 brought awareness and media coverage to the previously underreported Native American social protests, the coverage over the later part of the Twentieth Century of Native American rights continued to be inconsistent and minimal compared to other racial minority groups. However, Native Americans did benefit slightly from the success of larger racial minority groups. The shift in the U.S.'s social consciousness regarding overt discrimination is evidenced in the portrayal of Native Americans in the late Twentieth Century Hollywood films.

Although *Dances with Wolves* (1990) is the most popular example of the transition from the portrayal of Native Americans in the mid-Twentieth Century Western films to seemingly “pro-Indian” films of the 1990s, the portrayal of Native Americans in the film continues to be problematic, and dangerous towards the U.S.'s consciousness of Native Americans. The film, directed and starring Kevin Costner, won the Academy Award for Best Film in 1990, and was critically acclaimed, as well as procured a high grossing income.⁴⁷ The film is set, like the previously discussed films, in the immediate years following the American Civil War. The main character, John Dunbar, portrayed by Kevin Costner, is a Civil War hero, and elects to maintain Fort Sedgwick, a secluded and abandoned Calvary post on the Western frontier. Despite his

⁴⁵ Ibid., 41

⁴⁶ Ibid., 41

⁴⁷ Seixas, Peter. "Popular Film and Young People's Understanding of the History of Native American-White Relations." *The History Teacher* 26.3 (1993): 351-70. JSTOR. Web.

initial fear, Dunbar soon befriends and aligns himself with the local Lakota tribe. After somewhat assimilating with the Lakota tribe, the U.S. Calvary now stationed at Fort Sedgwick, arrest Dunbar, believing he is a traitor. The Lakota attack the Calvary at Fort Sedgwick, and successfully free Dunbar. However, Dunbar separates himself from the tribe, believing that his presence will further endanger the tribe. Dunbar leaves the tribe with his romantic interest, Stands With a Fist, a White woman adopted by the Lakota as a child.⁴⁸

Although the film depicts the U.S. military as the apparent enemy, the film is not void of the stereotype of Native Americans as aggressive savages. The film primarily portrays the Lakota Sioux tribe, another of the overly depicted Plains tribe; however, the film shows another enemy of the Lakota to be the Pawnee tribe. The Pawnee tribe is portrayed as the stereotype of the Bloodthirsty Savage. Not only does the Pawnee attack the Lakota, but they also attack an innocent guide that led Dunbar to Fort Sedgwick. The guide is beaten and scalped by the Pawnees for no explicit or apparent reason.⁴⁹

By portraying the Pawnee tribe as bloodthirsty savages, the Lakota tribe is thus established under the stereotype of the Noble Savage. The image of the Noble Savage develops, explains Michael Green in his article, *Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues*, from "...an idealized image that reflects more the yearnings and dissatisfactions of those who created the image than the real life situation of the individuals upon whom the image is projected."⁵⁰ The Noble Savage is a romanticized view of purported and generalized Native American culture. It is unrealistic, stereotypical, and dismissive of the true Native American culture. Green continues, stating, "In this vein, the Native Americans became children of nature

⁴⁸ *Dances with Wolves*. Dir. Kevin Costner. Prod. Kevin Costner. By Michael Blake. Orion Pictures, 1990. Videocassette.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Green, Michael K. "Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues." *Journal of Business Ethics* 12.4 (1993): 323-30. JSTOR. Web.

living simple, innocent lives.”⁵¹ Dunbar’s assimilation into the Lakota tribe is heavily due to his infatuation with Lakota customs and lifestyle. Throughout the film, the Lakotas are depicted as a tribe tied closely with nature and spiritualism. These characteristics serve as a contrast from Dunbar’s experience in the American Civil War, as well as the U.S. Calvary that later becomes the primary enemy.

Although the image of the Noble Savage appears to promote Native Americans in a positive light, it is still problematic, and continues to label Native Americans as an “other.” The stereotypes assigned to Native Americans do not reflect any aspect of true Native American culture, rather it is more indicative of the culture that assigned the stereotypes. In addition to the Civil Rights, social movements, and Native protests of the 1960s came the environmental awareness movement sparked by Rachel Carson’s 1962 publication *Silent Spring*. A shift in the U.S. consciousness no longer assigned progression primarily to industrial development and exploitation, but rather long-term environmental sustainability. The apparent national disenchantment with industrialization redefined what was considered modernity and progress in the U.S., thus changing the national myth. No longer was the national myth based in progression through industrialization, but rather progression and modernity was seen as establishing a relationship with the environment.⁵² During the later half of the Twentieth Century, the national myth, and subsequent myth of the frontier, was redefined to meet modern ideals of progression and modernity. However, Native American stereotypes were not lost in the recreation of the national myth, but rather redefined to once again resume their role as a nonhuman and generalized “other” in the U.S. consciousness.

⁵¹ Ibid., 328

⁵² Bataille, Gretchen M., and Charles L. P. Silet. "American Fantasy." Foreword. *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1980. Xxvii. Print.

Native Americans were now seen as entwined with nature, and become synonymous with environmental protection, and spiritualism discovered through nature. Although the new stereotype assumes that Native Americans' relationship with nature is positive, it is still a stereotype that is inaccurate and generalizing to the true culture and history of Native Americans. Green explains the problem with this stereotype, stating, "...to think that Native Americans are closer to nature, i.e., more natural, is to deny to them the achievements of culture upon which the realization of humanness depends. It is still to attribute to them an animal and sub-human sort of existence."⁵³ Regardless of whether or not a stereotype is positive or negative, it still dehumanizes and generalizes a group already labeled as the "other." This stereotype of the Noble Savage is the basis of *Dances with Wolves* (1990). The Lakota tribe is portrayed as having a culture that is more connected with nature, and thus is more meaningful. This stereotype, like all other stereotypes, only aids in creating a parody and generalization of already marginalized Native Americans.

In addition to setting the film in the already saturated period after the American Civil War, and portraying Native Americans as either Noble or Bloodthirsty Savages, the film continues to focus on a White character, and the White perspective of Native American culture. Throughout the film John Dunbar is established as the White savior, who helps the Lakotas more than the Lakotas help him. The Lakotas are rarely featured in the film without the presence of Dunbar. Rather than depicting the Lakotas' culture through the perspective of the Lakotas, the viewer is taught the culture through Dunbar's experience and White perspective. Even Dunbar's romantic lead in the film is not actually Lakota, she is a White woman adopted by the Lakotas.

⁵³ Green, Michael K. "Images of Native Americans in Advertising: Some Moral Issues." *Journal of Business Ethics* 12.4 (1993): 323-30. JSTOR. Web.

These types of generalizations, stereotypes and discrimination in modern films are harder to identify than the overt racism in classic Western films like *The Searchers* (1956).

The problems that arise from “pro-Indian” films are the difficulties to identify stereotype themes, the White bias and perspective, and discerning whether or not the films can be used as an accurate history of Native Americans. As Peter Seixas discovered in his work, *Popular Film and Young People's Understanding of the History of Native American-White Relations*, the historical and cultural accuracy of a film is often times overshadowed by the cinematic realism of the film.⁵⁴ By lacking any overt or commonly expected forms of discrimination, modern films, like *Dances with Wolves* (1990), are often hailed as “pro-Indian,” or culturally and historically accurate. However, as explained earlier, the portrayal of Native Americans has not become more accurate or void of discrimination. Rather, Native American portrayals in Hollywood films have been recreated to meet the redefined national myth, which emphasizes progress and modernity through environmental sustainability.

Conclusion:

As the national myth transformed to meet the new definition of progression and modernity through environmental consciousness, so did the stereotypes of Native Americans. The change in the portrayal of Native Americans has not been the direct result of a successful social rights campaign; it has been the result of a changing national myth. Native Americans are still perceived as inhuman in U.S. culture, although they are no longer seen as a violent savage. Rather than seeing Native American culture as an anti-modern culture that poses a threat to U.S. industrialization, Native Americans are now seen as spirit like entities. However by

⁵⁴ Seixas, Peter. "Popular Film and Young People's Understanding of the History of Native American-White Relations." *The History Teacher* 26.3 (1993): 351-70. JSTOR. Web.

romanticizing Native American culture, Native Americans are continually denied the status and moral consideration of human beings. The label of the “other” continues to marginalize, generalize, and dehumanize Native Americans, while perpetuating Mamdani’s culture talk. The true history, culture, and perspective of Native Americans continue to be overlooked in Hollywood films.

The depictions of Native Americans in films continue to be a parody of the true culture and history of Native Americans. Only by eliminating the national myth that the U.S. is an agent of progress and modernity will the labeling of groups perceived as the “other,” and consequently anti-modern, end. Native Americans are still denied humanity due to the national myth, and their label as the “other,” even after the myth’s redefining in the late Twentieth Century. This fact is evidenced by the lack of Native only films that are void of any White savior or even main character. Until the national myth of the U.S. is widely identified and challenged, the portrayal of Native Americans in films will continue to be a generalization and parody of the true culture and history of Native Americans. The consequences of continued dehumanization and generalization through the label of the “other” in new media, like Hollywood films, will only further degrade and marginalize Native Americans in the U.S.