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# VISUALITIES


*Perspectives on Contemporary  
American Indian Film and Art*

Edited by Denise K. Cummings

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# Indians Watching Indians on TV: Native Spectatorship and the Politics of Recognition in *Skins* and *Smoke Signals*

JOANNA HEARNE

IN PREPARING FOR HIS ROLE AS THOMAS BUILDS-THE-FIRE IN THE 1998 film *Smoke Signals*, actor Evan Adams (Coast Salish) improvised what would become one of the film's signature lines: "You know, the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV, is Indians watching Indians on TV!" This joke—uttered while the camera tilts and pans away from the small television playing a black-and-white Western film to follow Builds-the-Fire—was recirculated ubiquitously in reviews as a sign of the film's break from Hollywood's representations of nineteenth-century stoic Indian warriors. Promoted as the first film written, directed, and acted by Native filmmakers, *Smoke Signals* was immediately recognized critically as signifying a paradigmatic shift in Native American film history.<sup>1</sup> This marketing locates the film's primary innovation in its relations of production without fully addressing the implications of an indigenous audience for the film. Yet the richly suggestive line "Indians watching Indians on TV," referring to the Indian characters in the Western and to the characters in *Smoke Signals*, also privately addresses *Smoke Signals's* indigenous audiences by reflexively positioning itself in their spectatorial field. And by simultaneously inviting *all* viewers to think about indigenous spectatorship, director Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho), writer Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), and Evan Adams draw our attention to the problematic relationship between the imagined mass audience targeted by television rebroadcasting and Native viewers' apprehension of mediated images of Indians in the context of home

viewing. By characterizing its indigenous audiences in this way, *Smoke Signals* distances itself from the Western—a genre dedicated to representing the erasure of Native nations—and from the idea of a homogeneous mass audience. At the same time, the line embeds *Smoke Signals* in ongoing relation to the larger history of Western-genre and documentary images.

Films in which popular media images of Indians recirculate within Native public and private spaces ask viewers to understand media history in terms of indigenous interpretive frames. Textually embedded, on-screen performances of Native spectatorship involve “retelling the image,” or visually reframing aging media through narrative. Visualizing this shift in perception highlights media production and consumption as acts of communication that are socially situated and inevitably engaged politically with relations of power. Staging Native spectatorship and reception on screen, then, distances viewers from Western and documentary fantasies of vanishing and anti-modern Indians, aligning audiences instead with indigenous perspectives through these embodied viewers. This chapter considers instances of this dramatization of spectatorship in Chris Eyre’s second feature film, the 2002 drama *Skins*, as well as examples from *Smoke Signals* and other contemporary Native feature films, in order to explore the pedagogical, genealogical, and possessory aspects of reclaiming and repurposing archival film footage.

In focusing on films spanning the turn of the twenty-first century, I am interested in filmmakers’ processes of retrieval in the historical context of a century of Western-genre media saturation. Traversing a media space structured by damaging representations has involved reappropriating, mocking, and taking political leverage from Hollywood representations through specific strategies: recognizing and “re-crediting” Native actors in Hollywood productions; embedding references to film production and reception processes in film texts while integrating oral storytelling and testimony as compatible modes of transmission and instruction; reworking genre conventions, including Western-genre icons and formulae of familial trauma and masculine vigilantism; and retrieving history by reinterpreting sites of media representation that memorialize the loss or separation of relatives. Since the independent feature films that first departed from Hollywood production of Indian images—Kent Mackenzie’s *The Exiles* in 1961, Richardson Morse’s *House Made of Dawn* in 1972, and Leslie Marmon Silko’s (Laguna) *Arrowboy and the Witches (Stolen Rain)* in 1980, among others—independent filmmaking practices have continued to present opportunities to speak about the impact of media production and reception on indigenous families, and to dramatize and sometimes actively mediate disrupted relations between family members and generations. Images of Native spectatorship—embedded scenes of critical



viewing—model ways of looking that are also forms of indigenous reclaiming. In reflexive scenes of viewing, Native films and coproductions negotiate and comment upon the intrusion of media images of Indians, especially news broadcasts and Westerns, into the homes, families, and childhood experiences of the indigenous focal characters. They employ a “streaming archive” of television rebroadcasting—a virtual repository of shared and continuously circulating representations—to render the past as a collection of mediated memories.<sup>2</sup>

Chris Eyre’s feature films mark a breakthrough for Native American filmmaking both in terms of control over an independent production and in their address of (and access to) a broad Native and non-Native viewership. *Skins* extends *Smoke Signals*’s self-conscious claim to indigenous ownership of cinematic practices and the site of film production as a Native place. Eyre allegorizes indigenous audiences in both films, demonstrating the potential for indigenous viewers to claim and resignify Western-genre and documentary images of anonymous and stereotyped Indian characters through politicized spectatorship. *Skins*’s models of viewing unravel the realism and assumed supremacy of older Hollywood representations by revealing them to be constructions. Though far less studied than *Smoke Signals*, *Skins* also engages the Western as a fluid and available sign system, while developing a different, more reparative way of viewing the function of images of Indians on TV.

Through both formal and thematic aspects of his feature filmmaking—including sound, editing, mise-en-scène, iconic Western-genre and nationalist images, and the emotional and realist modes of melodrama and documentary—Eyre’s films speak back to the tropes of victimization and narratives of Indian spectrality by envisioning Native consumption of commodity entertainment. The “*pathos*” in the line “the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV” refers to the Western’s period-based exclusion of Indian characters from the apparatus of modernity, and to the irony of indigenous consumption of the very genres that consistently exclude them. That modernity, signaled visually by on-screen technologies of media transmission and consumption, countermands the narratives of primitivism and “vanishing” Indians embedded in the Western’s images of savage warriors, and at the same time articulates a coherent integration of assimilation and traditionalism in the narrative.

I am less concerned here with television studies or reception studies per se, or in parsing the differences or similarities between television and film, than in the fluidity of interchange between media as an implicit backstory in representations of reception.<sup>3</sup> Westerns originally shot on film and screened in theaters are later rebroadcast on small television screens situated

in Native domestic spaces. This more intimate and relational setting facilitates the image of television reception as an imagined space of encounter and exchange in Eyre's films, which are themselves shown on both theatrical and, later, television screens playing DVDs. These small-screen versions of big-screen Westerns emphasize the context of viewing; Westerns that erase Indian families are screened in Native family homes that exemplify the very intergenerational future that the genre refused to envision for indigenous nations. Further, in this politicized aesthetic of reception, the location of the "screen" itself becomes malleable, as at the end of *Skins* when the outsized presidential portraits at Mount Rushmore are made to echo televised images and to exaggerate the cinematic technique of the close-up in a literal "interface" of viewer and screen. The film's play with recognition and disguise and with the scale and location of the face-to-screen encounter emphasizes the role of media screens in the identification and misidentification of indigenous identity. My understanding of the scene of reception as a relationship with composite media and with the semiotics of commodity culture not only involves the specificity of TV reception in domestic settings but also extends beyond TV reception to include other forms of technologically mediated dialectic in public space. This proliferation of screens, almost a form of *mise-en-abyme*, functions as a sign of indigenous modernity that further disrupts linear narratives of assimilation, situating Native viewers as contemporary consumers of mass culture.

Visual anthropologist Faye Ginsburg describes indigenous uses of media to access and recover historical events as "screen memories," inverting Freud's paradigm in which adults "screen out," repress, or make invisible the traumas from the past.<sup>4</sup> *Skins*'s attention to images of Indians in the movies targets Westerns as sites of systematic misrecognition that invasively dislocate and disarticulate both familial and political relationships. The film's Western-genre trajectories of masculine action based on the helpless witnessing of trauma followed by vigilantism prove to be self-destructive models of social action for the film's Indian communities.<sup>5</sup> Eyre retrieves, amplifies, and ultimately overturns representations of familial separation, dysfunction, and absence embedded in dominant filmmaking practices and in emblematic Western-genre constructions: the figure of John Wayne and the weeping face of Iron Eyes Cody. In their encounter with (and redeployment of) these commodity images of Indians originally produced for non-Native consumers, characters in Eyre's films redirect the meaning-making process of spectatorship to do the work of historical pedagogy as well as familial and community remembrance. In *Skins*, contemporary filmic scenes of viewing model and stage an intergenerational recognition across the screen, transforming that historical barrier

into a facilitation of familial continuity, even as they interrupt that continuity with images and situations of loss and mourning.

#### RECOGNITION AND NATIVE SPECTATORSHIP

In the past, film footage and photographs taken by outsiders have signified cultural appropriation in service of salvage ethnography and Western frontier dramas, indexing the unequal relations of power during production, circulation, and reception. In documentary films such as Jeff Spitz and Bennie Klain's (Diné) *The Return of Navajo Boy* (2001), scenes of indigenous viewing de-exoticize Indians on screen through politicized recognition in the context of the history of tourist and ethnographic photography, museum screenings, and the repatriation of footage as a singular event. In film dramas set in contemporary contexts, however, a more mundane, subtle, and continuous recirculation of footage takes place. Fictional characters register the damage (or *pathos*) of generic images of Indians, or in a more optimistic move, resignify and recredit these images using a variety of popular-culture forms.

Examples of the former can be found in scenes from *Smoke Signals* and *The Exiles*, which reveal the way media images exacerbate social oppression and conditions of poverty. An early scene in *Smoke Signals* depicts the impact of pop-culture Indians on young Native viewers in a wrenching scene that is tonally very different from Thomas Builds-the-Fire's later flippant comment about Indians on TV. In one of the film's flashback sequences, the young Victor Joseph (Cody Lightning, Cree) watches a television Western while his mother and father fight over money and alcohol. After striking Victor's mother Arlene (Tantoo Cardinal, Métis), Victor's father Arnold Joseph (Gary Farmer, Cayuga) decides in anger to leave the family and the reservation; Victor will never see him again. Victor's parents, as they fight, share the frame with the television set, so that the young Victor witnesses both the mass-mediated images of the Western and the dissolution of his family at the same time. The film frame links these two scenes of conflict as a single traumatic spectacle, infusing the genocidal violence of the Western with the intimate psychic wounds of domestic violence and vice versa. In a strikingly similar scene from *The Exiles*, a film about members of a Native community in the Bunker Hill neighborhood of Los Angeles, Julia Escalanti (Delos Yellow Eagle) and her children and friends watch a Western on television as her husband Rico (Rico Rodriguez) drops in to get some gambling money to continue a night on the town. The family's bleak circumstances are evident

in the cramped apartment, illuminated by the television playing in the bedroom—which doubles as the family's living room—while the couple argue and Rico takes money from Julia's purse.

Television as a form of social disruption takes a different form in James Luna's (Luiseño) performance in *The History of the Luiseño People: La Jolla Reservation, Christmas 1990* (Luna and Artenstein, 1993), an experimental film documenting Luna's performance-art piece of the same title. In the performance, Luna drinks beers, chain smokes, and watches Bing Crosby's 1954 movie *White Christmas* while he calls members of his extended family—his brother, mother, nephew, son, and ex-girlfriend—on Christmas Eve. The racialized products of contemporary communicative technologies (*White Christmas*) mediate his isolation in the domestic space of his living room while he lies to his mother (“No, I’m not drinking”) and exchanges formulaic holiday platitudes with his children (“Santa got your Christmas list”) on the telephone. His consumption of beer, cigarettes, and television equate and indict these consumables as numbing agents that make social detachment a commonplace banality. Kathleen McHugh notes that Luna's film “uses the light from this composite of industry media (we are seeing a film on television that is recorded on video) as one of its primary illuminations,” for it suggests allegorically that “the primary illumination in the history of the Luiseño people, in the history of Native peoples in the Americas in general, has been ‘the light’ of commercial entertainment media and genres, particularly the ‘western,’ as a central part of domestic décor.”<sup>6</sup> The scene of spectatorship in *The History of the Luiseño People* attaches indigenous domestic life to mass media while signaling its divisive interruption of that same domestic life. Commercial media here is a colonizing, corrosive replacement for human interaction, and the whiteness of its representations have become part of indigenous collective memory. Jane Blocker writes that Luna's “infinite regress of quotation complicates native memory to show that it does not spring solely from pure origins in venerable ancestors, but that it is constructed in part out of its own representations in popular culture, out of what it inherits and redresses from whiteness.”<sup>7</sup>

How can we account for the simultaneous oppositionality and accommodation of these images, their ability to draw affective and political power from the same generic conventions they critique? The theorization of reception in cultural studies credits viewers with a complex range of spectatorial strategies including resistant spectatorship, amplifying local rather than universalized models of encounter with mass media. In Althusserian terms, the interpellative or “hailing” function of cinematic texts as ideological state apparatuses would impose a misrecognition upon indigenous viewers,

but as Hamid Naficy writes, “In addition to ‘hailing,’ there is much ‘hag-gling’ in cinematic spectatorship,” for “oral culture’s interaction with the screen is neither passive nor unidirectional.” The “various forms of spectator counter-hailing of the screen” can include both refusing or disengaging from Western forms and consuming or fetishizing them, thereby “resisting the West through its objectification.”<sup>8</sup> The latter strategy is politically oppositional but textually articulated to dominant representations.

Confrontations with popular images of Indians have been described by Native critics as formative experiences.<sup>9</sup> Acoma writer Simon Ortiz remembers his own awkward and uncomfortable feelings of “unreality as an Indian” that came from being forced to identify with popular images of Indians that were “from a different, unfamiliar, unknown Indian culture and place.”<sup>10</sup> Tom Grayson Colonnese (Santee Sioux) asserts that

asking Indians to watch a John Wayne western is like asking someone if they would like to go back and visit the schoolyard where they used to get beat up every day. No—that’s too unserious a comparison, though the connection to our childhoods and bad childhood memories is important. . . . for Indians, watching westerns would be like Jews watching films about the Holocaust in which the Jews themselves were presented as the violent, aggressive villains! We were the ones who were slaughtered and destroyed, but that’s not usually how we’ve been depicted.<sup>11</sup>

And in an article about the importance of *Smoke Signals* as an intervention in media images of Indians, N. Bird Runningwater (Cheyenne/Mescalero Apache) details a childhood encounter with the Western:

I remember the first time I had a connection with an Indian on television. I was eight years-old, and my cousin Cathy and I were watching a stereotypical cowboy and Indian western. The Native characters were dressed like nothing we had ever seen in our world. At one point, two warrior-type characters entered the scene, and when asked by the lead Anglo character how many enemies they had spied, they replied “na’kii.”

Cathy and I looked at one another in amazement and began jumping for joy. We ran to tell our family that we had just heard an Indian on television speaking our Apache language. We felt like the world had finally had a glimpse of our lives as they really were, and from that point on, everything would be different. We watched more and more Westerns after that, waiting and hoping that maybe we would see ourselves on television or hear our language one more time. We never did.

The stories recounted by these artists and intellectuals target what Ortiz describes as a painful “unreality.” Their memories of televised misrepresentation of indigenous languages, cultures, history, place, dress—the distance from “our lives as they really were”—constitute a collective story about the ways that impressionable early viewing experiences helped to catalyze an active critical voice and oppositional stance.

In his influential essay “Encoding, Decoding,” Stuart Hall argues that television reception involves strategies of audience decoding, including an “*oppositional code*” in which “it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally* contrary way.” While the form of the audiovisual text is fixed, the viewer’s consumption of the program represents an equally important “moment of the production process in the larger sense,” since the audience’s meaning-making interpretive work also “produces” the content of the programming. Hall locates the potential to resignify dominant discourses in these “active transformations” or appropriations of programmatic content into “meaningful discourse” that can then “influence, entertain, instruct or persuade.”<sup>12</sup> With Hall’s early theories of reception in mind, anthropologist Sam Pack asserts that for Fourth World viewers, television is the arena where identities are negotiated in the context of power relations: “the question of ‘who are they?’ directly shapes and informs the question ‘who are we?’”<sup>13</sup>

Film scholars working in the area of revisionary identification in cinema have explored oppositional viewing practices in great detail in terms of sexual disidentifications and fantasy. José Esteban Muñoz characterizes “disidentification” as neither assimilationist nor separatist, but rather an interpretive dynamic that works to “transform a cultural logic from within,” allowing artists to transform a “B-movie archive” into “antinormative treasure troves.”<sup>14</sup> Patricia White, in discussing “uninvited” readings of classical Hollywood films by lesbian viewers, describes film reception that is “transformed by unconscious and conscious past viewing experience,” a form of “retrospectatorship.”<sup>15</sup> I want to explore instantiations of indigenous viewing in Native cinema by retaining these scholars’ attention to oppositionality and the reworking of past cinematic images while moving away from the psychoanalytic models that have dominated film-studies paradigms of spectatorship.

The lens of a playful and politicized process of spectatorship-as-resistance illuminates the ways in which spectators make meaning, and the ways that viewer-driven interpretation constitutes a form of ownership that retrospectively reorganizes the original relations of media production. In the context

of indigenous filmmaking, this process often takes the particular form not of cross-racial/cross-gender identification, but rather of attribution or *recrediting* the primary identities of anonymous Native “extras” in cinematic landscapes. Thus, the politicized and familial meanings of recognition converge in acts of “reidentifying” as well as “disidentifying” with the images on screen. The recognition and naming that characterizes many indigenous cinematic representations of spectatorship and identification has special significance as oppositional work that corrects historical acts of renaming or withholding names from Native students in boarding schools, from Native actors in Westerns, and from “anonymous” Native storytellers in books published by non-Native authors.

To describe this way of looking that is also a form of reclamation, I interpret “recognition” and “misrecognition” here as having intersecting familial and political significance. A form of remembering, recognition accesses mediated stories about the past and acknowledges history’s persistent value. Recognition is a key aspect of pervasive cinematic modes such as melodrama, which employs the disguise and revelation of identity as standard plot elements. In the legal, political, and activist frameworks in indigenous studies, recognition refers to and is the basis for diplomatic relations between nations, and it is this recognition of nation-to-nation relationships, formalized in treaty documents, that Native tribes consistently insist that the U.S. government acknowledge (and which is implied in the federal recognition of individual tribes). My interpretation of recognition as a process of recrediting is also influenced by Chadwick Allen’s description of indigenous minority acts of “re-recognition” as strategic, politicized performances. This description of certain indigenous performances of identity as “re-recognition” develops the meaning of recognition as a tactical refocusing of colonizing frameworks, in which indigenous activists and artists reenergize and “revalue. . . rather than deconstruct, the authority of particular colonial discourses, such as treaties, for their own gain.”<sup>16</sup> Considering recognition as an artistic choice based in legal history returns us to Jolene Rickard’s (Tuscarora) definition of sovereignty, “the border that shifts indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one,”<sup>17</sup> as a fundamental premise of indigenous art. In cinematic representations, this “shift” is manifested visually in the embodied Native viewer on screen and in cinematic reflections upon the visual as a medium of repatriation. Further, political recognition is also intimately *familial* in film dramas and documentaries that chronicle relations between parents and children or between siblings who have been separated or alienated from one another. Westerns are watched by characters in Chris Eyre’s films, in which images

of Indians and family members are claimed and mediated through parallel, and sometimes simultaneous, acts of recognition. The characters' recrediting models a process of historical recovery and ownership of popular-culture production and meaning through a practice of reception involving recognition, identification, and naming. The problem posed for the characters in *Skins*, then, becomes the appropriate response to recognition.

#### CHRIS EYRE'S "HOME DRAMAS"

Adapted from Paiute author Adrian Louis's novel of the same title, *Skins* dramatizes the difficult love between two Lakota brothers, Mogie (Graham Greene, Onieda) and Rudy (Eric Schweig, Inuit). In frustration over his inability to help his alcoholic older brother and others in his community, Rudy, a Lakota police officer on the Pine Ridge Reservation, turns to vigilantism. In each case, however, he inadvertently victimizes his own relations—first a distant relation and then, devastatingly, his brother Mogie, who is already terminally ill. Fulfilling Mogie's dying wish—to deface the carved figure of George Washington at Mount Rushmore—becomes a way for Rudy to express his grief over his brother's death and the distress of the Pine Ridge community that he sees every day as a tribal cop. Like *Smoke Signals*, *Skins* dramatizes familial relations in a reservation context, and like *Smoke Signals*, the film ends with a memorial service and images of a troubled protagonist mourning the death of a family member (other members of the family include Aunt Helen [Lois Red Elk, Dakota/Lakota] and Mogie's son Herbie [Noah Watts, Crow]).<sup>18</sup>

Rudy's turn to vigilantism is a manifestation of illness—in fact, Rudy knows he needs help and seeks it from a young spiritual leader, Ed Little Bald Eagle (Myrton Running Wolf, Blackfeet).<sup>19</sup> By committing violence outside of his community's social constraints, Rudy acts out the Western's assaults on Indian families, including his own. The Western representational formula of masculine "regeneration through violence" on the frontier, as described by cultural historian Richard Slotkin, is invoked not only through images of Westerns on screen but also in casual references to the transposition of Western-genre vigilantism to racist urban law enforcement in films like *Death Wish* (Winner, 1974) and *Dirty Harry* (Siegel 1971). In *Smoke Signals*, Thomas suggests that Arnold Joseph looks like Charles Bronson in *Death Wish V*, and in *Skins*, Rondella Roubaix (Elaine Miles, Cayuse/Nez Perce) responds to Rudy's veiled threats with a derisive "Fuck you, Clint



Eastwood.” But Western-genre models of masculine regeneration don’t work for Rudy; rather, they lead him to victimize the Lakota people he wanted to help—his *oyate* (people) and *tiospaye* (clan, family).

Even more strongly than *Smoke Signals* does, *Skins* depicts the fracturing and reconfiguration of families as a product of the way the media tells stories about history, documents contemporary communities, and influences the actions of its audiences. *Smoke Signals* and *Skins* both combine a focus on specific tribes (Coeur d’Alene and Lakota, respectively) with pan-Indian production and casting to focus on issues shared politically across tribes. *Smoke Signals* had a stronger critical reception and was more financially successful, though some critics have argued that both films perpetuate stereotypes.<sup>20</sup> In measuring the distances between intended and decoded meanings for imagined Native viewers, the films explore the different ways that oppositional viewing might be translated to action. Eyre repeats several of his most successful cinematic techniques from *Smoke Signals* in this film, including flashbacks from the brothers’ youth, and references to popular media images of Indians through footage of televised Westerns playing in Native homes. Taking up the figure of the “Crying Indian” from a televised public service announcement in the 1970s, *Skins* both engages and parodies the act of mourning. The film’s exploration of grieving is importantly different from *Smoke Signals* in its mapping of the characters’ feelings of loss onto a monumental icon of American imperialism, and a televised performance in redface in the film’s closing images of Mount Rushmore. Further, the emotional funeral at the film’s end recalibrates both the melodramatic register of the early “Indian dramas” and the media saturation of romanticized representations in the 1970s to serve what director Chris Eyre describes as contemporary “home dramas.” Images of “Indians watching Indians on TV” and of televisions themselves are mediating forces that recur throughout the film, seemingly in the background but in fact acting as visual and aural transitions between scenes, sparking conversations between characters, and motivating Rudy’s final vigilante act of violence. Several crucial scenes in the film are bracketed by televisions and television screens, which structure and saturate the representation of the characters’ lives.

Mogie’s identifications have to do with history, and with testimony as a document of indigenous resistance as he invests the male melodrama of the Western with documentary content about Lakota history.<sup>21</sup> *Skins* itself invests its drama about Mogie as a victim with documentary footage (which Eyre, in the DVD commentary, characterizes as “sad stuff” but “all true”). Eyre’s imagined indigenous spectatorship involves viewers who engage in a

form of retrospection that deemphasizes the fantastic, using oral storytelling on-screen to realign Western melodramas with a testimonial realism.

The film's opening images of the Pine Ridge Reservation are almost purely in a documentary mode, comprised of found or stock news footage. This opening sequence powerfully frames the film's dramatic content and invests the family relationships with a larger significance in light of the tribe's historical and ongoing battles for land rights and self-determination. An example is the use of footage donated by Robert Redford from his film about the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, *Incident at Oglala* (Apted, 1992); the borrowed footage is especially significant because of its original place in a documentary about the American Indian Movement's confrontation with the FBI on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1973, a historical activist reoccupation of Lakota land. As images of barbed wire, trash, and weatherbeaten trailer homes and government housing flash on the screen, the soundtrack incorporates fragments from a speech by Bill Clinton promising resources "for your children and their future." Then, in voice-over accompanying shots of Mount Rushmore and the Wounded Knee Massacre site, Eyre's own voice outlines statistics and facts that again orient viewers to the political and historical contexts for the film, juxtaposing the popular tourist attraction of Mount Rushmore with the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation ("the poorest of all counties in the U.S."), and describing the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 as viewers see footage of the graveyard and signs. Finally, a news anchorwoman's voice reels off rates of unemployment, death from alcoholism, and other statistics over a montage of news footage depicting impoverished Native men being arrested and jailed. Periodically, tracking shots of Pine Ridge houses from the road both recollect this documentary opening and mimic what Rudy sees from his patrol car.

The film's forays into this documentary montage, with its authoritative narrator (the director himself, at one point), borrowed footage, persuasive political agenda, and verité techniques of location shooting on the reservation in actual homes (not dressed or built for the film), ask that viewers receive this drama differently than the historical fantasies of "Indian Westerns" such as *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990), tapping instead into the conventions of social realism. The opening sequence, interspersed with the credits, seems to be directed towards non-Native viewers who might know little about Native American history or politics, or about the particular history of Pine Ridge. But these sequences also represent a dual address: non-Native viewers receive a historical and political briefing, and an education in the key issues and motifs of the film, while insider viewers are offered

recognizable footage and landmarks that outline the parameters of the film as familiar territory.

The film returns midway to this documentary intertext to present a case against the liquor business in the reservation border town of White Clay, Nebraska. Rudy is beginning to pay attention to spiritual obligations by burning sweetgrass and making tobacco ties in his living room. Later, as he watches television there, he is the audience for the news report on White Clay, where a small number of white-owned stores profit enormously from Lakota customers from the reservation. Eyre intercuts shots of the film's characters and a reconstructed newscast production with fifteen-year-old stock footage from the NBC Nightly News with reporter Monica Red Bear. Mogie and his friend Verdell Weasel Tail (Gary Farmer) watch as the anchorwoman (here played by Jenny Cheng) delivers the story, filmed by her Native film crew. The self-referentiality of the filming as a metaphor for the Native production of *Skins* inserts the film's characters into actual historical footage, putting Mogie on both sides of the screen (as subject and as viewer) over the course of the film, and putting Rudy in a position to recognize his brother on television. From the production of the newscast, Eyre cuts to the outside of Rudy's house and the sound of a Western movie shootout—then inside, to Rudy's face illuminated by the television as he surfs channels, skipping past another Western before arriving at the newscast, which now includes an inebriated Mogie mocking the interviewer. The Western is sonically and metonymically linked to the newscast by Rudy's own editing using his remote. At the same time that the family drama in *Skins* becomes (hypothetically) subject to representation on the news, the segment relates what we see on news broadcasts to the film's "real" or recognizable families.

The final shot of this interior scene, after Rudy has turned off the TV, is his silhouetted reflection on the dark screen. This is a classically reflexive image, like the much-noted shot of Cary (Jane Wyman) entrapped by the "gift" of a television at Christmastime in the Douglas Sirk melodrama *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), and like the shot of Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) silhouetted in Llewelyn Moss's (Josh Brolin) trailer-home TV screen in Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), a shot that revisits the iconography of the Western, but signals its emptiness in the face of 1980s cross-border drug trade. These viewers' reflections, fixed within deactivated television screens, signal the alienating narrative confines of melodramas and Westerns, and the bankruptcy of their generic promises of emotional fulfillment and cathartic action. A small screen nested within a big screen, television is imagined here as a medium that fluidly extends the

reach of mass culture to the domestic spaces of the characters by mirroring their recognizable countenance in a virtual space. The visual image of the face on screen, then, signals, in these scenes, viewers' ambivalence towards their interpellation within the bounded frame and imposed sign system of television narratives. In *Skins*, the shot forecasts the film's shift in scale from intimate close-up to monumental visage, and from faces on screen to face-as-screen, in its closing images.

For Rudy, the problem of television is its content. He is trapped within the boundaries of vigilante narratives, in contrast to Mogie's ability to read such narratives from outside of their parameters in order to make their clichéd images express his own, specifically Lakota feelings of community, history, and kinship. Rudy's identification leads him to act out prewritten scenarios rather than taking control of television's imposed sign system, while the domestic placement of the television and the isolated conditions of his viewing facilitate his decision to act outside of the community's social constraints. The shot of his reflection in the screen functions as a pivot between Rudy's rising anger as he watches his brother on the news, and his ill-fated decision to take vigilante action by burning down the liquor store. Thus, the shot traverses the space between the passive anger of even oppositional media reception and viewers' actions in the world. Further, the shot "contains" Rudy's silhouette, surrounding his image while implicating television in the film's larger social critique by revealing it to be an organizing force behind Rudy's vigilantism.

This bad-mirror effect is immediately reinforced in the next shot of Rudy reflected in a bathroom mirror, putting on black makeup as part of his disguise. The image suggests the masking essential to the Western vigilante hero's evasion of identification under the law (e.g., *The Lone Ranger*, ABC 1949–1957)—a facial barrier to the kind of reparative recognition that *Skins* will later model for viewers.<sup>22</sup> The racialization of Rudy's impending violence as a performance of whiteness-in-disguise further implicates both Western-genre scenarios of action and news stories about Native victims in Rudy's own psychological imbalance and his alienation from his brother and community. The theatrical makeup, then, also alludes to the tradition of redface (and even blackface) performance that has characterized Westerns, and that *Skins* and other films counteract in their reevaluation of Native actors in the casting process. In this case, Rudy's recognition of his brother at this moment leads to wrong action when his anger spills over into vigilante violence: he burns down the liquor store in White Clay, inadvertently injuring Mogie. In a later scene, however, Mogie himself guides the other characters' strategies of reappropriation in viewing media images

towards political and genealogical recovery, using collective memory as well as humor and absurdity to reshape iconic images.<sup>23</sup> By moving between these examples of spectatorship, *Skins* models a range of nonconsenting responses to media images that become decentralized as they are broadcast into individual homes.

Eyre's mainstream film techniques are deployed to cast doubt on conventional film genres and histories. In this case, he uses the television as a sound bridge over the cut from the establishing shot of Rudy's house to its interior in the scene discussed above, framing the private familial space of the home with images from a nationalist cinematic genre. A structurally similar scene takes place later in the film at Aunt Helen's house, where the brothers have gathered for a family dinner with Aunt Helen and Herbie. After an establishing shot of the house, the film cuts directly to the television screen playing a Western: men on horseback are engaged in a shootout. The televised image fills the entire frame, becoming an encompassing "second screen" through which viewers transition into Helen's domestic space.<sup>24</sup> The televised Western is a pivotal reflexive turn both visually and verbally. That is, we enter the scene through Mogie's commentary about what is playing on the television screen, but he speaks only about the actor, not the film itself, as Mogie provides his son Herbie with his own take on the film. "See that retarded knobshiner? That's Joe Thunderboots. Me and him used to be drinkin' buddies, but I haven't seen him for a while. Now, he's supposed to be a direct descendant of American Horse. Least that's what he said after a couple of drinks."<sup>25</sup>

Among the Indians coded as enemies in the Western, Mogie sees friends. Significantly, Mogie recognizes and appreciates the Western on TV not for its myth-making fabrications of frontier history—the function the Western is said to have in much criticism of the genre—but rather in terms of his community networks. That is, the uncredited actor who, along with other anonymous extras, signals a generalized Indian threat in the Hollywood Western is, for Mogie, a named individual with a specific genealogy that links him to the events of this period of history (the second half of the nineteenth century) that the Western typically represents. The Lakota lineage embedded in the very same media that denies the presence of Native families becomes for certain audiences both a coded history and corroboration of survival, a reading that, in its historical specificity, repudiates the Western genre's construction of Indians as ahistorical and atemporal.

In the scene, the Lakota story of Wounded Knee is embedded in a Western story of frontier violence through the physical genealogy of the Lakota extras and the ability of a contemporary Lakota audience to recognize them

on screen as individuals rather than generic “Hollywood Indians.” As the characters move to the kitchen table for dinner, Herbie asks, “So, who’s American Horse?” and Mogie’s reading of the Western on television then becomes a trigger for a recounting of the events of Wounded Knee and the testimony of Lakota witnesses. Uncharacteristically tense and bitter, Mogie tells Herbie to “listen up” while his uncle Rudy begins the story of Wounded Knee. But Mogie is unable to restrain his need to tell the story, and interrupts Rudy to clarify that the troopers designated to disarm Big Foot’s band at Wounded Knee in 1890 were from “Custer’s old command.” He goes on: “The Seventh Cavalry was called in to escort them to the reservation. Then the soldiers disarmed them. Wounded Knee was nothing but a damned massacre of women and children.” “American Horse,” he explains, “testified before Congress.” The U.S. disavowal of historical moments of Lakota testimony becomes part of Mogie’s story as well, when Herbie asks, “What happened after American Horse testified?” and Mogie replies, rigid with barely restrained rage, “They [the Cavalry soldiers] were all given a Congressional Medal of Honor.” Aunt Helen tries to break the tension by talking about Herbie’s football-game scores, to which Mogie replies, “I don’t give a rat’s ass!” Mogie’s belittling of his son’s accomplishments stems directly from his overwhelming feelings of anger when remembering Wounded Knee; the story that brings the family together in this scene also furthers their estrangement. Significantly, this estrangement is revealed through close-ups, a cinematic technique designed to elicit audience identification with a focal character’s nuanced emotions (usually withheld from “stoic” Indian characters in Westerns, who were more often seen in long shot). While Mogie has the ability to identify Indian “extras” in long shot (as opposed to the closer framing given to white stars in studio-era Westerns), Rudy is forced to recognize his own violence in his brother’s disfigured face through the use of the close-up on Mogie during his retelling of American Horse’s testimony about Wounded Knee. Later in the scene, when Rudy reveals his vigilante work to Mogie and confesses that he set the fire that burned his brother, Mogie accuses him of being crazy, and Rudy responds, “Don’t you think I know that? All I have to do is look at your face.” Rudy and Mogie’s exchange, and Rudy’s final act of vandalism (defacing the George Washington sculpture at Mount Rushmore) intensify the visual discourse of faces and recognition in *Skins* as a form of mediated memory.

For Mogie, the cinematic erasure of Indians, as they’re defeated over and over again in the Western, retraces a broader historical and geographical violence: specifically, here, the congressional disregard of American Horse’s testimony in 1891, and the public effort to de/face and re-signify Lakota

sacred land (Paha Sapa/Black Hills) as a white American tourist destination and U.S. national monument (the presidential sculptures at Mount Rushmore). Mogie's recognition of Joe Thunderboots as a descendant of American Horse introduces Mogie's own history lesson in which Indians don't "vanish" from the Western landscape. Instead, the Western on TV offers evidence of Native survival through the genealogy of the actors. The "extras" or "remainders" of Hollywood's frontier equations serve as reminders of stories exchanged between generations; Mogie insists that Indians are present even in films that try to erase them.

Eyre's voice-over commentary on the DVD of *Skins* is especially significant in this regard because of his choice to focus on directing viewers' attention to specific people (actors, nonactors, and community members) who participated in the production. His narrative recognizes, identifies, and thanks people for contributing their houses, land, and faces to the production, presenting an off-screen parallel to the presentation of Mogie's "Indigenizing" viewing practices by linking actors' roles to audiences' worlds and narrating the film's political meaning.<sup>26</sup> Connecting the act of viewing with the act of speaking both acknowledges the damage and silencing of older and contemporary media images, and makes those media histories available as resources for recognizing media imperialism and the counter-project of speech.

Mogie's appropriation of the Western movie as a pedagogical prompt or mnemonic device for an oral history lesson also forces a non-Native audience, an audience targeted by some of the film's earlier didactic, documentary-style footage and voice-over, to acknowledge the copresence of an indigenous audience. The citation of American Horse's testimony also further dramatizes the "passionate research" (to quote Frantz Fanon) that can take place in the revisiting or recuperation of the aged products of popular culture, archived not in libraries and special collections but in the process of circulation in television and rebroadcasting. This "streaming archive" facilitates the restaging of encounters between indigenous viewers and the Indians on screen as they negotiate the meaning of a media past, through an oral performative reframing of analog transmission. Stuart Hall assesses retrospection in the context of colonialism by drawing on Fanon's concept of the postcolonial "rediscovery" of identity, and the concomitant process of "passionate research" into Native pasts that have been distorted or disfigured by colonial oppression. Hall argues that identity resides not in "archaeology" but rather "in the re-telling of the past": "Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity,

identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”<sup>27</sup> While keeping in mind the important distinctions between Fanon’s “postcolonial” theory and Native American and global indigenous circumstances—including the circumstances of ongoing colonization for many indigenous minority communities—Hall’s description of an identity based on active retellings of the past usefully emphasizes the continuous but changeable nature of “recovered texts,” as well as the processes of recovery in and through acts of representation.

Eyre envisions an indigenous audience’s ability (and even obligation) to view film in a distinctive way, finding the Native presence that was already there, detecting political and historical legacies embedded but disguised in the documentation of victimhood on the nightly news and in Hollywood’s attempts at Indian erasure through the Western’s acculturating chronicles of settlement. The interdependence of oral and electronic discourses in this scene deconstructs binary oppositions between low-tech and high-tech modes of transmission, but those modes are not conflated. Instead, the scene of storytelling moves from the media storytelling in the living room to oral storytelling at the kitchen table, modeling a strategy for the reeducation of youth through the intertextual relations between two narrative forms.

Only as the scene ends and Rudy leaves the house do we see that the small black television, still playing the Western, is stacked on top of an older, larger model that either isn’t working or isn’t turned on. This is in fact a long-delayed reverse shot, since we have been viewing much of the action in this scene from the general position or POV of the two television sets. The doubled televisions remind us of the nested screens earlier in the film; the plurality and intensification suggested by the reduplication of the TV as a media vehicle imply the multiple versions of history that reside in the intertextual relationships between Hollywood and independent media, and between media makers and the viewers who make their own meanings from the signals broadcast to their homes. The very composite nature of television rebroadcasting and the tools of its streaming archive seem to facilitate the characters’ oppositional readings.

In *Skins*, the scenes of indigenous viewing work to de-exoticize screen Indians, as both viewers and subjects, through the power of politicized recognition—Rudy *recognizes* his brother Mogie on the news, and Mogie *recognizes* his friend Joe Thunderboots in the Western. Far from stereotyped presentations on screen as threatening or victimized Indians, *Skins* presents Native viewers who can generate documentary content from within generic media fantasies of Indians by recognizing the Native actors as part



of their families and communities, and by recognizing the historical and contemporary events behind the stories purveyed by Westerns and by the nightly news. Rather than focusing on the recognizable qualities of white stars (playing cowboy heroes, or in redface playing Indian villains), the cinematic viewers in *Skins* take the “anonymous” extras as primary figures of community identification.

In imagining Native reception, Eyre stages his own interaction with his viewers, shaping relations to families and lands through film production while simultaneously making such private negotiations visible and accessible to a mixed audience in the broader public. In an interview about making *Skins*, Eyre asserts that the act of filmmaking itself incorporates a particular agenda in its address to viewers, and calls the film a “home drama” and “a women’s movie for men,” referring to the emotional relationship between Rudy and Mogie.<sup>28</sup> “In my movies I’m trying to convince my audiences to . . . go home.”<sup>29</sup> “My movie is like me,” he says. Adopted by a white family as an infant, Eyre said that seeking out his biological family was “something I just knew I was going to do. . . . I had love out there but I didn’t know where it was and I think in my movies what’s happening is these characters are yearning for each other—they’re home dramas, and ultimately I want my audience not to miss each other.”<sup>30</sup> Eyre’s desire to film a familial “near miss” is manifested in *Skins*’s rendering of screens as both sites of rupture and sites of reunion.

Like *Smoke Signals*, *Skins* was made with multiple audiences in mind. Eyre brought *Skins* back “home”—to its site of production—in a physical way by showing it to the communities where it was set on the Pine Ridge Reservation. His “Rolling Rez Tour” debuted the film in reservation communities across the country using a semitrailer equipped with a 100-seat theater, air conditioning, and a 35 mm projector. As a metaphor for the Western’s performance of social relations and Hollywood’s exclusion of Native voices, the bus as a modern stagecoach and dramatic “stage” that Eyre developed so evocatively in *Smoke Signals* is materialized here quite differently, as a Native space, a physical but mobile location where indigenous films and indigenous viewing answer back to the history of cinematic misrecognition.<sup>31</sup> In the content of the film, as well as in its exhibition in the Rolling Rez Tour bus, *Skins* explores what it means to resituate media images onto Native lands.

## ACTING OUT (OF) LOSS: TWO MODES OF MOURNING

Both *Smoke Signals* and *Skins* end with scenes of mourning, as Victor (Adam Beach, Salteaux) mourns the death of his alcoholic father, Arnold Joseph, and Rudy mourns for his brother Mogie. Rudy's signature act of vandalism at the end of *Skins* is the defacement of the Mount Rushmore National Monument. As a private commemoration of his brother, he tosses a bucket of red paint over the carved cliff, inadvertently creating a red tear down George Washington's face that echoes the widely circulated image of Iron Eyes Cody (the Italian American actor Espera or "Oscar" DeCorti) in his role as the "Crying Indian" from the 1971 public service announcement. Rudy enacts two mourning rituals for his brother—a formal wake attended by family and community, and a private act when he defaces the Mount Rushmore monument in honor of his brother's request and his own relationship with the Lakota trickster spirit Iktomi. (Iktomi, the spider, is linked with rocks throughout the film, and in Lakota belief is the son of the rock spirit Inyan.)<sup>32</sup>

If Eyre's films ask viewers to mourn lost relatives and damaged families, they also mimic and ridicule other popular-culture representations of weeping Indian victims. The "Crying Indian" and other appropriations of Indian witnessing and mourning in popular-culture imagery make it difficult for indigenous cinematic expressions of loss to avoid the taxidermic significations of vanishing. Eyre engages with issues of tragedy and its mediation by insisting that his audience join him in mocking, as well as in crying, as the physical manifestation of loss. Rudy tosses the red paint over the side of the excessive, monumental face of George Washington in an act of mourning that doubles as an activist prank; George Washington is made to weep for humble Mogie. Like the image of "Indians watching Indians on TV" in *Smoke Signals*, images of weeping signal both pathos and parody in *Skins*, registered on intimate and monumental scales.

In carrying out two different trajectories for memorializing the familial past, Eyre insists on the interdependence of emotion and its mediation in the presence of popular representations. In particular, Mogie's death brings up the power of reenactment as a meaningful revisiting of traumatic events for actors who share their characters' affiliation and heritage. The actor Graham Greene was initially reluctant to "play dead" for the shot of Mogie in his coffin, and the day after the scene was shot, the crew burned the coffin and prayed together. In the DVD director's commentary, Eyre describes the day that the crew shot the scene of Mogie's wake as "a heavy day on the set": "The mood in this room was real. The mood in this room was too close, I

think, for a lot of people. You see this guy crying in the back—he's crying, he's actually really crying. It just brings back memories for so many people, I think. It was a difficult, difficult scene to do." In the same commentary, Eyre declares his wish that *Skins* will be "a place hopefully for healing, and to share family experience . . . and family love." In his focus on the memorial scene as both a traumatic moment in film production and a mode of familial healing for the film's characters, Eyre revisits scenarios of mourning from the media past—a past that is integral to Mogie's character. He reinstates the moral efficacy and urgency of mourning in the act of crying, taking back the work of memorializing as both familial and political recognition and a way to reinterpret mediated images of Indians.

The scenarios and melodramatic tableaux of the silent Indian dramas reemerge here as "disidentifications" that are also reidentifications, projected back upon the nationalist, iconic faces of settler culture. The narrative interruption and emotional intensity amplified by the stasis of the monument is similar to that of the close-up. Mary Ann Doane describes the close-up's contradictory functions in film history and criticism as a problem of magnification. The close-up is "inescapably hyperbolic. . . . the vehicle of the star, the privileged receptacle of affect" that "underwrites a crisis in the opposition between subject and object" and between the identifiable face and its effacement.<sup>33</sup> In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari imagine this face-as-screen to be the very construction of whiteness: "Concrete faces cannot be assumed to come ready-made. They are engendered by an abstract machine of faciality (*visagéité*), which produces them at the same time as it gives the signifier its white wall and subjectivity its black hole."<sup>34</sup> Doane writes of Deleuze's theory of faciality that "the face becomes the screen upon which the signifier is inscribed, reaffirming the role of the face as text, accessible to a reading that fixes meaning."<sup>35</sup> For Cherokee scholar Ellen Cushman, the skin color of the face often forms the premise for racial legibility and the surface of closest public scrutiny, since "the primary text of authenticity is the face."<sup>36</sup>

In Westerns, the system of facial recognition signaled by close-ups of white stars—such as the famous tracking shot that reintroduces John Wayne to the viewing public in *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939)—suppresses audience recognition of the Native extras seen in long shot, while condensing the genre's national history into a few iconic facial images. In *Smoke Signals*, during Victor and Thomas's bus ride to Arizona, they teach one another the codes of this cinematic regime of Indian authenticity by discussing its facial sign system. Using *Dances with Wolves* as their authoritative text, they practice an Indian "warrior look," the Indian version of the white vigilante, by monitoring and suppressing facial expressivity ("Quit grinning like an idiot—get

stoic!") and managing their hair ("You gotta free it! An Indian man ain't nothing without his hair"). When this carefully cultivated "warrior look" fails to prevent racist treatment in the real world, Victor and Thomas begin to dismantle the cinematic "machine of faciality" and the face as the site of speech by singing a song, "John Wayne's Teeth," that questions the authenticity of the white face (and mouth) that has most often spoken for the Western: "John Wayne's teeth, John Wayne's Teeth, are they false, are they real, are they plastic, are they steel?"

In *Skins*, the close-up of Mogie following Rudy's comment that "All I have to do is look at your face," in order to recognize his own mistaken action, positions the face in close-up—and the monuments later in the film—not as a disguise or mask, but rather as a legible site of rebuke. Damage and illness are literally written on the faces of the characters in the masking, scarring, and painting, the defacement and effacement that seems to disguise but in fact reveals. These close-ups, along with the monumental rock face of the American presidents at Mount Rushmore, infuse intimate family recognition with nationalist discourses. The "white wall" of George Washington's face is the screen upon which triumphalist American history is written; by scarring or "tearing" it with red paint, Rudy reveals the white face to be a mask, the history it memorializes to be in fact a cover for deliberate acts of forgetting.

This movement between small- and large-scale faces and screens welds affect to its commodification within a sign system structured by the history of popular-culture images. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart writes that the "larger than life" quality of movie stars is a "matter of their medium of presentation. . . . and that formation, that generation of sign by means of sign, provides the aesthetic corollary for the generative capacity of commodity relations."<sup>37</sup> Mogie's immersion in, and appreciation of, popular-culture images of all kinds—not just televised Westerns—signals his status as a contemporary consumer rather than a vanishing primitive. Hence his and later Rudy's ability to transpose the specular sign system of commercial culture to Lakota relations of kinship and love is even more radical. Early in the film, Mogie expresses his love for Madonna by wearing his Madonna T-shirt, and Rudy manifests his affection for his brother in specifically commodity terms at key moments in the film. While Mogie is dying in the hospital, Rudy is at the gas station buying a T-shirt with an image that replaces the four presidents carved into the rock of the Paha Sapa/Black Hills with the faces of historical chiefs Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph, Geronimo, and Dull Knife. The shirts themselves update a resignaling of the land from the AIM movement of the 1970s, and Eyre characterizes Rudy's purchase as an "act of self-love."

In identifying with and consuming commodity images of Indians, Rudy reshapes their meaning-making to do the work of family reunification while also modeling an indigenous market for material products carrying Native portraits, much like the modeling of indigenous viewership earlier in the film. By purchasing the T-shirt, Rudy repositions himself as the driver of cultural products rather than as a product himself. The renegotiation of power at the heart of Rudy's recirculation of images is in line with the idea (but not always the practice) of repatriation as a political transfer of ownership. Like the image of the four chiefs on the T-shirt, the PSA image of the Crying Indian is highly context-dependent, functioning in its production, circulation, and reception rather than in isolation.

The "Crying Indian" PSA that first aired on Earth Day 1971 became one of the most successful television commercials ever produced. A second PSA was developed in which Cody rode into modernity on horseback, and a "Keep America Beautiful" poster circulated with the image of Iron Eyes Cody's tear-stained face. The Crying Indian weeps in a mode of sentiment and romanticized nostalgia. Iron Eyes Cody is an Indian in costume—including fringed buckskin, braids, and feathers—paddling a traditional birch-bark canoe through a natural setting shot in soft focus in a pictorialist style. As he paddles, he enters a modernity signaled by an industrialized landscape, where through silhouette and superimposition he becomes a spectral anomaly, a figure out of time, moving—visible and yet unacknowledged—through a contemporary dystopia marked by factories, cars, highways, and litter. The close-up of Cody's face with its single tear reactivates the melodramatic mode of the sympathetic Indian drama both in its silence and in its *melos*. The music that accompanies the ad, dominated by drums and low, rhythmic string music, recalls the "Indian music" from early Westerns. The image also recalls Edward S. Curtis's photography, with its pictorialist use of silhouette, nostalgic narratives of vanishing Indians, and somber portraiture of often anonymous subjects labeled as types rather than identified as individuals. The close-up of the Crying Indian on "Keep America Beautiful" posters draws on the traditional stasis of portraiture and the melodramatic tableaux, in which the emotional distress of the character(s) models and triggers an audience's own emotional reactions, reactions intended to "move" the audience to action.

Later, in 1998 (the same year that *Smoke Signals* was released), the PSA was updated, with Iron Eyes Cody's image followed by the slogan "back by popular neglect." In keeping with the reflexivity of contemporary advertising, images of people littering as they board a city bus is followed by an image of the Crying Indian poster at the bus stop; we see the tear falling

on the poster, suggesting a magically conscious portrait, truly an Indian removed from time, suffering in the act of helpless witnessing, a frozen face with a tear that has continued to fall for twenty-five years. His weeping denotes a powerlessness that suggests political dependency (or wardship). He is a supplicant, and the ad entreats viewers by shaming them through the moral power of melodrama. In codifying television Indians as land stewards, the PSA's producers returned to historical constructions of Indians as figures for ethical responsibility (the original slogan was "People start pollution. People can stop it."). While the Crying Indian is associated with land in terms of environmental stewardship, he also mystifies land ownership and the transfer of land that is at the heart of his moral efficacy by substituting a generalized emotional appeal for universal good behavior (not littering) for concrete policy analysis and specification of indigenous land rights.

In returning to the image of the Crying Indian, and in mapping that image onto the monumental visage of George Washington, Chris Eyre repoliticizes the mystified television Indian, overlaying the PSA rebuke of U.S. land stewardship upon the celebration of manifest destiny, and reinserting issues of sovereignty and political autonomy that had been disassociated from images of Indians in the media, especially through Western-genre representational displacement. Further, the epic scale of these national symbols is harnessed to do the intimate work of mourning for a single family. At the same time that Eyre repudiates imposed melodramatic sympathy by making a national symbol take back the tears of the televised Indian, he also wields the accumulated power of that figure by claiming this and other televised images as part of a virtual "media past" that is part of a Native experience and thus available for Native use in resisting the very imperialism that it represents. Through the signage of these superimposed portraits, Eyre stages an encounter between symbolic, mediated icons—the Crying Indian and the first president—fusing their visages in a fabrication of nation-to-nation interchange. Further, in this complex exchange, Eyre's image hybridizes the white face of George Washington, which is then made to embody an iconic and representational encounter rather than a purified nationalism.

As a closing image, this "close-up" also materializes the disfigurement of colonialism on the face of the nation as it parallels Mogie's scarred face, seen in close-ups earlier in the film. The recognizable tear/scar/paint imposed upon the recognizable face of Washington (in turn imposed upon the cliff face) registers and parodies the history of white actors "playing Indian" in redface. By painting the cliff face red, Rudy attempts to re-indigenize the rock/screen into which the face is carved, inscribing a complex political history of geographical remapping onto the treaty land of the Black Hills and making the rock of

the (resurfaced) cliff into a visual palimpsest onto which disputed boundaries are projected—boundaries that are figured as recognizable faces. To return to Doane: “As simultaneously microcosm and macrocosm, the miniature and the gigantic, the close-up acts as a nodal point linking the ideologies of intimacy and interiority to public space and the authority of the monumental.”<sup>38</sup> In producing images of crying that move audiences, Eyre seems to assert that cinema itself can be a site of mourning; displaced and replaced icons stand not only for nations and land rights but also for neighbors and relatives. Yet at the same time, he playfully appropriates iconic images of U.S. national collective memory as a malleable semiotic system of mediated commodities. The rock-as-screen in this sequence—a space or “place” of encounter akin to what Mary Louise Pratt describes as a “contact zone”—recognizes a Lakota spiritual order in both contested land and the apparatus or materially “contested ground” of popular culture.<sup>39</sup>

Graham Green and Eric Schweig are actors who have worked on Hollywood productions that insist upon an acting-out of the historically suspended, culturally marked Indian in dramas of settlement. In order to make a living as actors, Green, Schweig, and others have had to embody film and television Indians in roles that represent endless variants on the image of the crying Indian. Graham Green’s long career has included playing a Lakota medicine man in Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and Eric Schweig played Uncas in Michael Mann’s 1992 adaptation of that classic of U.S. imperialist frontier adventure literature, *The Last of the Mohicans*. If *Smoke Signals* speaks back to *Dances with Wolves* in the media-saturated banter between Victor and Thomas (“This ain’t *Dances with Salmon*, you know”), *Skins* answers *The Last of the Mohicans*’s powerful nostalgia by projecting back a similarly romanticized, silenced witness in the figure of the weeping buckskinned Indian. Schweig says of his role as Rudy that “I was so happy to get up in the morning and put on a pair of pants and put on a shirt, instead of a loincloth and buckskin and all that nonsense, because all it does is perpetuate all the ignorance that we’ve had to put up with for 500 years” (*Skins* DVD commentary). Eyre’s productions were among the first to offer contemporary speaking roles for Native actors, yet these films simultaneously look back upon the violence of mapping televised Indians onto Native people, of recognizing one’s self or relatives in the face and genealogy but not the costumed role of the televised Indian, and of the staged encounter between viewers and the Indians on screen as they negotiate the meaning of a media past.

Filmmakers who once watched old Westerns on TV are challenging Hollywood’s assumptions of an all-white viewing audience’s unified beliefs about the history of U.S. settlement. They retrospectively revise the way

those films have been interpreted, offering oppositional readings of Westerns from an indigenous perspective manifested in acts of speaking and listening. In reflexive instances in the film texts, Native filmmakers and their non-Native collaborators negotiate the intrusion of media images of Indians, especially news broadcasts and Westerns, into the homes, families, and childhood experiences of the indigenous focal characters. They employ mediated memories—a past marked by the circulation of cinematic and broadcast representations, a virtual archive of shared viewing—and imagine indigenous spectatorship in a familial context. Film footage, as both a material object and a representational symbol, is recirculated and returned to indigenous provenance, and through these complex exchanges, the films persuasively intervene in the politics of public memory.

#### NOTES

1. For more extensive discussions of *Smoke Signals*, see Alexie, *Smoke Signals: A Screenplay*; Hearne, “John Wayne’s Teeth”; Cummings, “Accessible Poetry?”; and Gilroy, “Another Fine Example of the Oral Tradition?” and “A Conversation with Evan Adams.” See Cox, *Muting White Noise*, for further discussion of popular media images in Native American literature, and in Sherman Alexie’s writing in particular.
2. By “media archives” I mean not physical libraries or collections, but rather a common heritage of popular images, accumulated memories of images circulated and transmitted through photographs as well as television, advertising, movies, and other modes of broadcasting. The wide availability of images for indigenous repurposing results from cultural saturation through commodification.
3. Theories of new media may best describe this intersection—Henry Jenkins’s replacement of models of passive spectatorship with one of active “participatory culture,” and Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s theorization of new media as “remediation.” Bolter and Grusin use this term to argue that the defining characteristic of new media is the enfolding of one medium within another—a “formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms”; *Remediation*, 273. While Bolter and Grusin reject the other connotation of remediation—that new media “remedy” inadequacies of older media—in my analysis of *Skins* and *Smoke Signals*, intimate domestic space provides indigenous audiences with opportunities to remedy, append, or amend the *content* of Hollywood’s misrepresentations even when deploying its conventional forms.



4. Ginsburg, "Screen Memories," 40.
5. *Stagecoach* offers an example of this classic Western narrative in the backstory of Ringo Kid (John Wayne). Having witnessed his brother's murder by the Plummer gang, Ringo seeks revenge outside of the law.
6. McHugh, "Profane Illuminations," 447. As Jane Blocker argues, Luna's performances illustrate the way that "the consumption of whiteness is toxic . . . it is devitalizing the native population." In targeting white fantasies about Indians, she writes, Luna "disillusions their fantasy by showing just what native memory now includes: the remembrance of whiteness remembering native-ness"; Blocker, "Failures of Self-Seeing," 24.
7. Blocker, "Failures of Self-Seeing," 28.
8. Naficy, "Theorizing," 9, 21.
9. In exploring the figure of the indigenous spectator, I am referring neither to psychic spectatorship—the spectator as a subject of cinematic apparatus—nor to empirical studies of the spectator-as-viewer, but rather to an imagined spectator, an embodied viewer modeled in the audiovisual text itself. Studies of actual indigenous reception and of general audience perceptions of screen Indians have generally involved focus groups. JoEllen Shively (Chippewa), for example, compared Native and Anglo perceptions of *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956), finding that while Native audiences appreciated "the fantasy of being free and independent like the cowboy" and "the familiarity of the setting," Anglos responded to the film as an affirmative history, as "a story about their past and their ancestors"; "Cowboys and Indians," 357. S. Elizabeth Bird's useful study *The Audience in Everyday Life* moves away from text-based studies to consider the ways that audiences take up media scenarios, while anthropologist Sam Pack's "Watching Navajos Watch Themselves" describes one Diné family's appreciation for representations that accurately reflect cultural details and language use.
10. Ortiz, "History Is Right Now," 6.
11. Colonnese, "Native American Reactions," 335–36. Colonnese goes on to describe his and his colleagues' reactions to viewing *The Searchers*, in which he notes the historical and economic conditions of the Diné "extras" working in movies "about their own subjugation by whites," as well as the unacknowledged Native prior ownership of the land that makes the Comanche attack on the white ranch in *The Searchers*, in fact, a counterattack (336–37).
12. Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," 517, 509.
13. Pack, "Reception," 4.
14. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 26, 11. Muñoz's theorization of disidentification, like Judith Butler's politicization of "the experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong,"

is also engaged (though more distantly) with revisions of Lacanian models (12). By using the term “misrecognition” in this essay, I do not refer to (and am not attempting to revise) Lacan’s model of *méconnaissance*—an infant’s misrecognition of itself in the mirror—which has been so powerfully taken up in film studies to theorize a spectator’s gendered identification with the gaze of the cinematic apparatus and with the star on screen. Emerging from ideas about the formation of individual identity and the (Western) child’s psychosexual development, Freudian and Lacanian paradigms generally exclude non-European kinship, economic and social relations, and the ways that indigenous relational systems have been disrupted or reorganized in the wake of colonization.

15. White, *UnInvited*, 197.
16. Allen, *Blood Narrative*, 18.
17. Rickard, “Sovereignty,” 51. Rickard’s emphasis on sovereignty in visual arts has been taken up by scholars of Native cinema. Michelle Raheja (Seneca) uses the term “visual sovereignty” to indicate a “reading practice for thinking about the space between resistance and compliance”; 1161. Randolph Lewis describes the documentary work of Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki) as a “cinema of sovereignty”; 175.
18. See Wood, *Native Features*, 27–40, for a discussion of *Skins* in the context of Chris Eyre’s career and his other film and television work.
19. In the novel, Rudy’s problems are even more closely connected with his masculinity—his initial impotence and his wife’s abandonment of him is transformed by his interaction with the Lakota trickster Iktomi; his temporary derangement after hitting his head on a rock is manifested not only by vigilantism but also by lustiness.
20. Edison Cassadore (Western Apache) describes a screening of *Skins* on a college campus in which, “in a racially mixed audience, young Indian college students found this film unsettling. They deplored the stereotype of the drunken Indian and the impoverished economic conditions. These spectators also felt” that the film “should only be viewed by other Indian people”; *Re-Imagining Indians*, 155. Cassadore also asserts that “the conditions represented in *Skins* . . . on reservations are ‘real’ though the film’s limitations are that it lapses and fixates too long on the theme of angry revenge and regret” (155).
21. See David Lusted’s *The Western*, especially pages 181–184, for a discussion of the Western as male melodrama.
22. The specific use of blackface to signal both disguise and masquerade also expands the film’s racial discourses to stereotypical African American representations, a visual reference amplified by the film’s young criminals, Teddy Yellow Lodge/Mr. Green Laces (Michael Spears, Lakota) and Black Lodge Boy (Gerald Tokala Clifford, Lakota), who identify the vigilante (Rudy in

- disguise) as a “ghost” or *wanase* with “mud on his face, like part nigger, *hasapa* guy.” The derogatory racial epithet alongside the Lakota words *hasapa* (black skin) and *wanase* (ghost) suggest the young men’s confusion about the identity of their attacker (they don’t recognize Rudy), while also framing Rudy’s vigilantism as a racialized performance.
23. As George Lipsitz describes the work of collective memory in American popular culture, “the very forms most responsible for the erosion of historical and local knowledge can sometimes be the sources of reconnection in the hands of ingenious artists and audiences”; *Time Passages* 261.
  24. Director Chris Eyre commented that “I like to show the difference in houses” on the reservation, to counter non-Native viewers’ assumptions and stereotypes about how Indians live (*Skins*, DVD, director’s commentary). Locations for the film were all actual residences, with the exception of the liquor store, which was built and then burned down for the scenes shot in White Clay, Nebraska.
  25. Joe American Horse (Lakota) is cast in a bit part in the film as a panhandler standing outside of a liquor store in White Clay; Rudy hands him a cigarette in a scene near the end of the film. Other important appearances in the film are activists Winona LaDuke (Anishinabe) as Rose Two Buffalo, and Milo Yellow Hair (Lakota) as “Drunk #1.” Chris Eyre makes an appearance early in the film as an unnamed tribal cop in the scene after Rudy is knocked unconscious by a rock (in its incarnation as Iktomi). For some audiences, recognizing these activists in their parts as “extras” in the film mimics Mogie’s on-screen model of film viewing as recognition.
  26. The capitalized term “Indigenizing” comes from Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori), who lists “Indigenizing” as one of twenty-five “Indigenous Projects” in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*. She describes the “Indigenizing” project as one that “centres a politics of indigenous identity and indigenous cultural action” (146).
  27. Hall, “Cultural Identity,” 705–6. Hall calls identity a production “which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (704).
  28. Eyre, *Skins*, DVD, director’s commentary.
  29. Chaw, Interview with Chris Eyre, n.p.
  30. Chaw, Interview with Chris Eyre, n.p.
  31. For a more extended discussion of the bus (the “Evergreen Stage”) as a revised stagecoach and a theatrical stage in *Smoke Signals*, see Hearne, “John Wayne’s Teeth.”
  32. Zitkala-sa (Lakota), *American Indian Stories*, 13. Iktomi is a Lakota trickster spirit, a shapeshifter associated with spiders and with language and

innovation. His elaborate attempts to trick others often fail or backfire, making him appear foolish even as he sets powerful forces in motion.

33. Doane, "The Close-Up," 91, 94.
34. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 168.
35. Doane, "The Close-Up," 105.
36. Cushman, "Faces," 390.
37. Stewart, *On Longing*, 91. Also quoted in Doane, "The Close-Up," 109.
38. Doane, "The Close-Up," 109.
39. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 4; Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular,'" 239.

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