
Reel Indigenous Women's Lives: Female Protagonists in Films by Indigenous Women

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Native Americans have been involved in filmmaking from the beginning of the industry; among them: feature director James Young Deer (Nanticoke) and his wife, actor Lillian St. Cyr (Ho Chunk), in the early twentieth century, screenwriter Lynn Riggs (Cherokee) in the 1930s, and contemporary documentarian Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki). The presence of Native Americans in principal roles and positions is dwarfed, however, by the number of uncredited indigenous extras who played unnamed, stereotypical characters along with non-Native actors in redface who played the vast majority of credited Native roles with onscreen dialogue. In 2001, Beverly Singer argued that “until very recently, whites—to the exclusion of Native people—have been the only people given the necessary support and recognition by society to tell Native stories in the medium of film.” The same could be said today in regard to Native women telling Native stories as feature films (2).

In movies featuring indigenous women not created by indigenous women, stereotypes abound and, most frequently, these reductive images have constructed Native women as invisible drudges, sexualized “squaws,” or virtuous “maidens” or “princesses.” Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw) asserts that the “Indian princess” stereotype (36) is the most damaging of all the reductive images of Native peoples, although, as Tammi Jo Hanawalt notes, it was not until the late twentieth century that she was even recognized as a stereotype (72). Despite the prevalence of such images, none is rooted in indigenous women’s conceptions of themselves; rather, Hollywood stereotypes manifest white directors’ and audience’s fears and desires. Elise Marubbio reveals, in regard to the stereotype of Native women, that “no concrete relationship exists between the Celluloid Maiden and actual Native American women; rather, the figure works as a colonial rhetorical strategy to promote a national American identity defined against a raced and ‘savage’ Other” (5).

That Hollywood Westerns have typically stereotyped and misrepresented indigenous women is not unexpected. What is surprising is the relative lack of complex or well-developed females in feature films created and directed

by Native men in the last twenty years. Female characters in these films have tended to be much less stereotyped. However, most of them still lack rich details and are seldom fully-realized. Consider *Smoke Signals*, written by Sherman Alexie and directed by Chris Eyre. It includes Victor's mother, Arlene Joseph (Tantoo Cardinal), Suzy Song (Irene Bedard), and Thomas's grandmother (Monique Mojica), who appear in several scenes of importance to the film. Despite this inclusion, none has more than ten minutes of screen time, nor do they have lives or opinions outside the male characters.

Women are also peripheral to Eyre's other relatively expensive and widely-released film, *Skins*, which centers on two brothers, Rudy and Mogie Yellow-Lodge, played by Eric Schweig and Graham Greene respectively. Rudy's love interest is so minimal in the film that it is difficult to even call it a love interest; the object of his interest remains nameless and she is only seen twice. Likewise, Aunt Helen has very few lines and is only seen cooking for the men or standing by Mogie's bedside. Randy Redroad's 2002 film *The Doe Boy* has a mother character and a love interest as well, neither of whom has an appearance without male presence. Their interests are solely presented within the domestic sphere. Sherman Alexie's feature-length film *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002) mostly deals with Seymour's (Evan Adams) fractured relationship with Aristotle (Gene Tagaban), his former friend and one-time lover. Agnes (Michelle St. John), the single major female character, gets significant screen time, but her role is limited to that of Seymour's college girlfriend and Aristotle's current girlfriend. The female interviewer who questions Seymour in the interstitial scenes goes unnamed and only asks questions to accentuate Seymour's character.

What happens, therefore, when Native American women themselves wield the camera? Though Valerie Red-Horse (Cherokee) released *Naturally Native* in 1998, the same year that Eyre released *Smoke Signals*, her film remains less known because it lacked the support given to *Smoke Signals*, which boasted a much bigger budget and the cachet of well-known writer Sherman Alexie. As Lee Schweninger points out, *Naturally Native* "is indeed groundbreaking" and is "deserving of recognition as the groundbreaking film it is in several ways," despite the fact that commercial and scholarly attention have been and remain extremely unequal between the two films (144). After *Naturally Native*, it would be almost a decade before another feature-length film was produced by a Native woman.

Recently, more indigenous women have begun making feature-length

films with, as might be expected, increasingly more fully realized female characters. While acknowledging the truth of Houston Wood's caution that "indigenous feature films exhibit so much diversity that it is impossible to generalize about them," I believe that, so far at least, it is true that feature films made by indigenous women have more numerous and more complex female characters (35). In spite of Schweningen's inclusion of a chapter dedicated specifically to women in indigenous films, he omits two recent feature films produced by indigenous women: Shelley Niro's *Kissed by Lightning* (2009) and Georgina Lightning's *Older than America* (2008). Both not only feature women with complex and interesting lives, but also show how these characters are enmeshed in a wider culture, society, and history. These films offer a range of female characters who are, or become, aware of history and politics. Schweningen goes on to note that "when contemporary American Indian filmmakers move in this arena, they confront an unusual kind of double consciousness. On one hand, they are expected to do their part to erase the negative memories of past celluloid transgressions, and on the other, there is pressure to do right by Indians in the here and now" (145).

Such demands are undoubtedly increased by the dearth of indigenous women's involvement at both ends of the camera but, regardless, Niro and Lightning engage in matters of past representations while directly addressing issues facing contemporary Native communities. In addition, as Joanna Hearne argues, insisting that Native-made films must be oppositional to Hollywood as they simultaneously maintain "mainstream appeal and potential for national distribution" creates yet another source of tension. Non-Native movie audiences, so used to being presented with familiar stereotypes and storylines, may not be aware of a continued Native presence in contemporary America, let alone be interested in seeing depictions that may contradict comfortable American historical myths (158). As Hearne argues concerning *Smoke Signals*, Niro and Lightning use "established cinematic languages and genres to access a wide audience" and work within "an interplay of resistance and accommodation to dominant film production and forms" in order to negotiate the tensions and double consciousness involved in being an indigenous filmmaker (159).

Niro and Lightning participate in what Dean Rader calls "engaged resistance" by creating representations of indigenous women that demolish stereotypes while addressing Native and non-Native viewers' interests (1). Niro and Lightning address these audiences by, in part, calling on mainstream

genre conventions that invite into the narrative non-Native viewers by providing familiar frameworks and plotlines. These films also resist the amnesia about Native dispossession, so prevalent in Hollywood cinema, by creating complex female protagonists who have not only a full emotional life, but who also engage with the continuing trauma of history in their communities. These films successfully address multiple audiences by layering tribally specific cultural and historical information into familiar forms in a way that some layers of meaning are only accessible to viewers who can recognize the cultural and historical markers. Nevertheless, each film still presents a coherent and engaging story to those viewers who do not recognize the submerged narrative and thus meets traditional mainstream audience expectations.

Moreover, in the films discussed, protagonists have romantic relationships and domestic issues; the filmmakers also give female protagonists entry into a larger world. In Niro's and Lightning's hands, the domestic and romantic spheres become complex sites of negotiation. For instance, Niro's protagonist, Mavis Dogblood, is emphatically involved in both spheres throughout *Kissed by Lightning*, inasmuch as she is an artist working through her grief at losing her husband Jessie (Michael Greyeyes) and tentatively explores the possibility of forging a new love interest with Bug, her long-time friend (Eric Schweig). Rather than the anemically virtuous "Indian princess" or the sexualized degradation of the "squaw," two familiar stereotypes, the depth of Mavis's love for Jessie is seen in the length and intensity of her mourning and in her reluctance to truly begin a romance with Bug. Mavis is unable to accept Bug's careful advances until she unexpectedly meets Jessie's grandmother, Josephine, who sings Bug's praises to Mavis and implicitly signals her approval.

As Mavis's need for Josephine's approval indicates, love is not just a matter of individual taste; Mavis must engage with ancestors and community before feeling comfortable moving on with her love life. She also discusses Bug, his extended family, and tribal connections. In her book, *Creating the Couple*, Virginia Wright Wexman notes that "Luhmann sees contemporary culture as having fostered an ideology of romantic love centered on the ideal of sexual fulfillment and characterized primarily by notions of freedom and individuality" (8). This is not so with Bug and Mavis, whose love is enmeshed within their community. Wexman goes on to point out that "as a form of modern popular ritual, movies define and demonstrate socially sanctioned ways of falling in love" (ix). Bug never pressures Mavis, but makes his love for her clear. However, his support and friendship are not contingent on her

returning his love in the same romantic manner. Even before their road trip, Bug's ancestors appear to Mavis in her home after Bug is injured by falling on ice, indicating the spirits' involvement in their lives. When Bug is injured and unconscious, his ancestors feel welcomed into Mavis's home and look on approvingly as she tends to his injuries, even as she cannot bring herself to promising Bug's mother that she will always take care of him. It is thus that *Kissed by Lightning* offers a specifically Haudenosaunee example of a couple being responsive to each other's needs as well as to their community. Not only does Niro's film reject the standard Hollywood notion of love as a matter between two individuals but, likewise, it undoes the stereotype of Native women being tragically (usually fatally) attracted to white men.

Furthermore, communal support is necessary for a functioning, multi-generational extended family and Niro prominently includes Mavis's extended family, not just her husband. Over the years, Jessie's grandmother has become isolated from her family; she lives by herself in a remote area and believes that everyone has "forgotten about her." Mavis's overture leads to Josephine's reincorporation into the extended family. Niro has indicated that the continuing relevance of and need for Peacemaker's teachings and the importance of family and community lifeways, especially in times of grief, were on her mind as she worked on the script for *Kissed by Lightning*. These concerns are essential to her creation.

Niro makes the domestic realm, in which Mavis is deeply involved throughout the film, complex and one of the settings where Mavis can be an active agent. In her interview in a special issue of *Postscript* on Native filmmakers, Niro says that "my mission in life is to write and create female characters because they're so limited . . . I just feel like the potential is there and you can do anything with these characters, you don't have to keep them in the wigwam or whatever. You don't have to keep them stirring the soup!" (Beadling and Niro 54). So, rather than simply placing Mavis within the domestic sphere, Niro's film shows how, for Mavis as an artist, the home is also her work space where she explores her own familial and tribal history by painting images of the stories Jessie would tell her from Haudenosaunee history. In fact, after Jessie's death, his first wife, Kateri, has invited herself and her son as indefinite guests in Mavis's home; their presence forces her to relocate to her small studio and, in this intimate expressive space, Mavis is forced into an even closer examination of her own individual and cultural history. Her artwork becomes an expression of her grief and her past; it is also a cultural work that

explores the continuing vitality of Haudenosaunee culture.

In this respect, *Kissed by Lightning* is a film of “engaged resistance,” and Niro crafts a multi-layered text that addresses multiple audiences and offers Native viewers culturally specific visions of Haudenosaunee history and contemporary life that go well beyond typical tropes of Hollywood westerns. Other than just these issues, though, Niro uses her film to show Mavis’s embroilment within her own family and her awakening spirituality. As Salma Monani argues, “Interlayering the political contexts of the Peacemaker legend [sic] in Mavis’s everyday experiences situates the individual in a larger socio-ecological system” (140). Underneath the story of Mavis and her possibly blooming romance with Bug, accessible to all audiences, the film is simultaneously an allegorical meditation on Haudenosaunee history and the continuing relevance of the message of unity and peace first delivered by the Peacemaker and Hiawatha at the founding of the league of the Haudenosaunee. Christopher Vecsey points out that the story of the founding of the League “establishes patterns of activity to regulate and inspire contemporary Iroquois behavior” and that it also shows how ritual can “transform individuals and societies”; this is what Niro shows in her movie as well, that is, the power of Haudenosaunee culture, history, and beliefs to inspire and transform contemporary Native peoples (91-92). To deal with her grief, Mavis paints scenes from stories that her husband recounted about Haudenosaunee history, especially about Hiawatha and the Peacemaker and the founding of the League. This level of narrative is embedded in the story and is fully discernible only to those who are aware of Haudenosaunee history and the relevance of the Consolation Ceremony, first introduced by the Peacemaker and Hiawatha and depicted in the film in several ways.

Simultaneously, much of *Kissed by Lightning* partakes of a rich and beloved American film genre: the road trip. Niro’s use of the road trip allows her to take over and redeploy the genre to Native purposes and, by so doing, engages in resistance to dominant media forms. Like many road trip films, the journey undertaken by Mavis and Bug is metaphorical and spiritual as well as literal. Mavis and Bug go on a trip to New York City to take some of her paintings to a gallery where they will be shown and, hopefully, sold. On this journey, Mavis and Bug travel through traditional Mohawk lands where, as Niro says, everything is named after the Mohawk people but where few Mohawks live anymore. To make the point, they stop at the shrine to Kateri, the “lily of the Mohawks” and a Roman Catholic saint, where Mavis poses irreverently with

the Kateri statue as Bug takes pictures. Niro notes that Mavis's behavior here "shows she doesn't really have respect for religion or even spirit," but that, as her journey proceeds, she "realizes that she's been disenchanting from her own culture and her own heritage" (Beadling and Niro 55). A good part of the remaining trip finds Mavis and Bug encountering ancestors, living and spiritual, who help them bind together.

Wood argues that many Native filmmakers call upon landscape in striking ways, some of which might be missed or misunderstood by non-indigenous viewers (46). He also notes that "panning across a particular landscape in an Indigenous feature film, for instance, may seem to mainstream audiences as yet another stereotypical establishment shot or an attempt to show the beauties or harshness of nature," but indigenous viewers may view such shots "as images of their ancestors, or as invocations of spirits or gods, or as a wordless retelling of historical events" (45). Mavis's reconnection with the landscape through which she travels also reconnects her to Mohawk culture and history; as Bug points out, their journey echoes that of the Peacemaker and Hiawatha, who also travelled together through the same area when they were spreading the Great Law of Peace that brought the warring tribes together in a unified and cooperative league. The film is filled with recurring shots of snow-covered landscapes, riverbanks, and various outdoor settings; these show Mavis's rootedness with her own land and her growing connection with the ancient homelands through which she and Bug travel. Niro repeatedly foregrounds each landscape travelled by her characters.

Mavis's paintings (painted by Niro) depict the Peacemaker's life and work which focus on issues that echo within Mavis's own life. There is, for instance, a painting of the Peacemaker consoling Hiawatha in his time of great grief after several of his family members are killed; consolation is, of course, something that Mavis longs for in her own life. There is no voice-over narrative explaining the images and their significance because, if a viewer recognizes the historical figures being represented and the stories being referenced, then a whole separate level of meaning becomes legible. If, on the other hand, the viewer simply sees the images as paintings without larger cultural or historical meanings, the uppermost level of meaning remains coherent, and the viewer can enjoy the love story despite the fact that the implicit and allegorical story level goes unnoticed and unmissed.

Although, as Niro notes in an interview, the Mohawk have largely been forced out of the Mohawk Valley, the film pays homage to the ancestors and

the spirits left behind after the tribes departed (Beadling and Niro 55-56). These spirits populate the film as Mavis and Bug travel through their ancestral lands, and the film foregrounds the presence of spirits even before the story proper begins. Specifically, one of the earliest shots of the film is that of an ancestral spirit standing on an urban street corner—this same spirit is pictured on the same street corner later in the film when Mavis and Bug are in the city. Finally, after the credits, the shot of the spirit reappears for the last time along with a quote from Hiawatha: “Peace will be when you accept it in your heart.” The use of this repeated image of the ancestor on the urban street corner punctuates the film and serves to remind viewers of the Mohawk’s homelands and history of dispossession. Many spirits appear throughout, but the film makes it clear that the spirits are independent of the couple; Mavis and Bug need not be present for the manifestation of Mohawk history to present itself.

There are several moments, though, when the couple does encounter spirits. For instance, getting lost in the wilderness on their way to New York City, Bug and Mavis are talking in the car when suddenly a group of Mohawk warriors, dressed in traditional garb, stride out onto the road before them. Bug and Mavis can only stare at the headlight-illuminated figures. After the warriors step into the bush across the road, Mavis asks Bug whether he “saw them too.” Later, while driving in New York City, the couple sees the mentioned street-corner spirit. However, when spirits come into the art gallery to view Mavis’s paintings, they seem approving as they move through the gallery, looking at her art and talking with each other. The spirits appear pleased that their lessons and values have not been forgotten and seem at home in the gallery. Niro clearly focuses on contemporary characters and issues, but she simultaneously ties in multiple complex ways the film’s present-day events and characters to the past and to enduring cultural values.

Kissed by Lightning is presented as belonging to a familiar genre—that of a road movie—but it nevertheless defies some of the conventions of the familiar and beloved genre and, in so doing, undoes familiar stereotypes and again foregrounds Native issues and identities. Road movies, according to Michael Atkinson, “are cowled in lurking menace, spontaneous mayhem and dead-end fatalism, never more than few roadstops away from abject lawlessness and haphazard bloodletting . . . road movies have always been songs of the doomed, warning that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you’re on your own” (16). Nothing could be further from the truth in

Kissed by Lightning, once Mavis and Bug cross the border into the U.S. (after dealing with over-zealous border guards who do not appreciate Bug's humorous remarks), Mavis and Bug find not only themselves, as would be typical for a road movie, but also their history, their homeland, and their left-behind ancestors when the Mohawks were pushed off their lands. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark assert that road movies "project American Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation's highways" (1). There is indeed mythology imbued in the landscape through which Mavis and Bug travel, although it is decidedly not American Western mythology. Even more pointedly, their road trip allows them to return home to a happy life together with their extended family. They are not alienated outsiders; Niro shows how Mavis and Bug need to be reconnected with their homelands and culture, including the ways and lessons of Peacemaker, which is a major theme of the film.

Additionally, the film emphasizes the continuing importance of the lessons and lifeways taught by the Peacemaker and Hiawatha, who also undertook a long journey to establish connections and build alliances. The text that introduces the film notes that "Haudenosaunee means 'People of the Longhouse' or, more accurately, 'They are Building a Longhouse'" and points out that the term was introduced by the Peacemaker and it means that the nations should live together like families in the longhouse. By emphasizing *building*, Niro indicates that these lessons are relevant to the contemporary world as well. The final sentence of the opening text ("It implies that the Nations should live together as families in the same longhouse.") lingers as Niro dissolves from the opening text into the opening shot of the film, which is of Mavis's house and her adjacent studio building. By super-imposing the sentences about living together as family on the shot of Mavis's home, Niro emphasizes the continuing importance of the cultural value of openness and alliance. In fact, throughout the film, Mavis is building a longhouse with room for all those she loves and takes care of: Bug, Josephine, Kateri, her son, and their ancestors. By foregrounding Mavis's painting, politically engaged art viewed by the spirits of her ancestors, Niro shows the continuing connections between the past and the present.

Finally, the traditionally open Haudenosaunee that took in several tribes, including the Tuscaroras and the Tutelo, when they were forced from their respective homelands, finds an echo in the film when Mavis takes in Jessie's first wife and her son, both of whom would be homeless without Mavis's hu-

manity. The flag of the League of the Haudenosaunee, which celebrates the interconnections between the nations that make up the league, is prominently framed by Niro in almost all of the exterior shots of Mavis's home; she thus again links her private, domestic life with the political life and history of her ancestor's tribe. Concurrently, Mavis begins the film irritated by the presence of Jesse's first wife, Kateri, and their son, Zeus, and tells Bug that she feels hateful towards Kateri. In this case, Mavis must learn to establish connections and alliances throughout the film to honor the spirit of coalition-building urged by the Peacemaker, whose image she paints and whose story she tells visually through her paintings. By the end, Niro includes another Haudenosaunee flag, this one *within* Mavis's living room, which symbolizes a change in Mavis's character: she no longer grudgingly takes in her extended family, but she has learned to take joy in her connections.

In this regard, the film also highlights a ceremony central to the Haudenosaunee, the Condolence Ceremony, in order to emphasize the connection not only between past and present, but between individual and community as well. Throughout the film, a painting that is repeatedly included depicts the Peacemaker consoling Hiawatha after the loss of his family. In addition, Niro includes flashbacks or visions where the characters literally become the legends from history: Michael Greyeyes, who plays Jesse, also plays the Peacemaker, and Eric Schweig, who plays Bug, plays Hiawatha. These visions are seen several times throughout the film, usually in conjunction with Mavis's art and Jesse's stories. Thus, by film's end, Niro has emphasized the importance of the Condolence Ceremony. She has moreover represented it throughout the film: in Mavis's art, Jesse's stories, and in various visions. Once Bug and Mavis return to their home in Ontario, they participate in what appears to be a Condolence Ceremony, an act that helps bind a community together in peace and power, as it did at the founding of the League; it also helps mourners work through their grief. LeAnne Howe notes that this ceremony is "designed to heal the community and make it a peaceful whole" (37). This ritual involves the whole extended family: Josephine and Mavis as well as Jesse's first wife and child. By engaging in this ceremony, Mavis is able to achieve balance in her own mind, family, and community and is able to move forward joyfully.

Whereas Niro has already had a long career in film and the arts, *Older than America* is Georgina Lightning's directorial debut though she has worked in the business as an actor, acting coach, and producer. Her acting credits

include *The West Wing* and *Walker, Texas Ranger* as well as voice work for *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World*. She has said that, when she first received the script for *Geronimo: An American Legend*, there were two female roles that were fairly substantial, including Geronimo's wife, but that by the time the revisions of the script were finished, there were no female roles at all: "they had wiped out the women," Lightning says (Wise). It was these and other experiences that lead her to create her own production company, Tribal Alliance Production, in order to create a space for indigenous voices behind and in front of the camera.

Rain, the protagonist of Lightning's *Older than America*, like Mavis from *Kissed by Lightning*, has a complex inner life that is entwined with history and politics in a way that is rarely seen in Hollywood productions. Unlike most "Indian princess" stereotypical characters, who frequently have disastrous relationships with white men, Rain, again like Mavis, has a long-term relationship with a Native man, Johnny, a tribal police officer. Furthermore, Lightning's film makes history and politics even more overt and central than does Niro's, which submerges much of the history; in *Older than America*, there is a political race between a Native candidate and a non-Native incumbent that structures much of the plot. Gunderson, the incumbent, has inherited a legacy of exploitation of Native peoples and lands from his father, who was the local mayor before him, and he plans to continue this legacy by building a resort on tribal lands that hold an abandoned boarding school where Catholic priests and nuns inflicted abuse on Native children. Steve Klamath, the Native challenger, on the other hand, runs on an anti-development platform and instead tries to find other ways to heal people who at times seem more interested in the jobs Gunderson's resort will bring than in the less-tangible goals of Klamath.

Like Niro, Lightning revises familiar genre trappings in telling the story of Rain, the film's protagonist, who explores the continuing effects of historical catastrophe—the boarding school experience, in this case—on contemporary indigenous peoples. Lightning's version of "engaged resistance" uses the Gothic thriller to create a familiar generic setting in order to appeal to audiences who might not otherwise be interested in a straight treatment of the history of Native peoples in America and the continuing effects of colonial and contemporary oppression. Once audiences are brought into the familiar Gothic setting and tropes, Lightning then revises the genre to address past oppression and its continuing effects.

Rain's historical engagement calls for an accounting of her own family history and a condemnation of those who continue to profit from the damage brought upon the Native community; this is also true of Niro's characters. In Lightning's film, Rain is a young Native woman living on the Fond du Lac Reservation, where Irene, her mother, is institutionalized for schizophrenia and has not spoken for years. Unspeakable secrets, of course, are a staple of the Gothic genre, and Irene is the mute repository of the living memory of the atrocities committed upon Native children at the nearby boarding school. Although the boarding school is now abandoned (an appropriate Gothic setting), the head priest, Father Bartoli, remains active in the town and is close with Rain's appropriately named aunt, Auntie Apple.

Another familiar feature of Gothic narratives is ghostly apparitions and visions, several of which are included in *Older than America*, although they appear quite differently in Lightning's film than they do in Gothic tales. Early in the film, the audience sees that a Native man is either stalking or watching over Rain. He suddenly steps from behind a tree in her backyard, follows her along the street, and also appears in other places, though Rain remains oblivious to his presence as she begins to investigate the secrets pervading her family and community. In addition, she believes that she is "seeing things" and might be "going crazy," like her mother, when she starts seeing visions of ghost children. The first time she sees them, they appear on the road in front of her truck. She swerves to avoid them, crashes, and ends up in the hospital, where Father Bartoli finds out that Rain is investigating him, his staff, and their doings at the boarding school. As he did before with Irene, Bartoli convinces Auntie Apple that Rain would be better off being "treated" for the schizophrenia that he says she inherited from her mother. Although madness has long been a Gothic trope, in this case, neither Rain nor her mother are insane; they are unjustly accused of being so by those nuns and priests that they have denounced. Neither woman, however, is insane. Bartoli and the others at the school mistreated, abused, and killed children and would do anything to keep the secret. This secret must be and is revealed.

When Rain too is threatened with electroshock therapy by Bartoli, the audience at last learns the identity of the man who has been following Rain. It is her Uncle Walter, who was killed at the school and is watching over her as she learns the truth. When Rain is locked in the psychiatric ward, Uncle Walter appears as she sleeps and releases her restraints, allowing her to escape. Even though Rain remains unaware of Uncle Walter's role, she nonetheless

makes good on the opportunity and flees. Eventually, the priest is killed in the basement of the abandoned boarding school by the spirits of the children he helped kill.

Lightning's choice of genre is crucial to her ability to bring Native issues to Native and non-Native audiences, and her revisions of the genre aid her in telling a specifically indigenous story. Clearly, Gothic elements permeate the structuring of *Older than America*, but several other story lines are also included that do not overtly participate in the typical tropes and images of the Gothic, including the relationship between Rain and her fiancé, the mayoral election between a white incumbent who wants to build a resort at the boarding school site and a Native challenger, and the story of a white geologist who arrives on the reservation to investigate a mysterious earthquake. The Gothic, however, is the predominant narrative structure and it is not a neutral choice for depicting indigenous history; as Amy Elizabeth Gore notes in her unpublished thesis, as a genre, "the Gothic distinctively synthesizes with the themes of indigenous literature. As a site of subversion, of a past that haunts the present, of a society in transition, and of cultural anxiety, these characteristics explain the current merger of the Gothic and the Indigenous" (1). Indeed, the Gothic is a provocative and apt form to explore Lightning's subject matter (the boarding school experience) that has, until recently, been mostly ignored in American and Canadian historical accounts, though these boarding schools operated until the 1970s.

Gothic scholar Fred Botting maintains that "the pleasures of horror and terror came from the reappearance of figures long gone,"; this is untrue in Native redeployments of the Gothic where past atrocities are both ancient and modern (3). Botting further notes that "Gothic narratives never escaped the concerns of their own times, despite the heavy historical trappings." This entanglement with contemporary issues is quite overt in *Older than America*, which depicts historical and current suffering (3). Cultural anxieties of the present, Botting argues, are projected onto the past (156). Again, however, this does not describe how the Gothic works in Native film, where past traumatic happenings have not been acknowledged by the dominant culture and thus, despite the fact that the boarding schools were never secret, there is little awareness outside a Native community that continues to experience trauma.

The film does portray a variety of physical and emotional abuses suffered by the Native children, but it excludes overt sexual abuse. In spite of this

omission, the film brings to mind cases in which not only were individual Native children sexually abused by Catholic priests, but that also many reservations were used as dumping grounds for pedophile priests, such as those of the Oregon Province of the Society of Jesus. It was ordered to pay 166.1 million dollars to hundreds of Native Americans and Alaska Natives abused at schools run by the order throughout the Pacific Northwest (Blankinship).

In the face of such historical and ongoing trauma, Niro depicts the healing possibilities rooted in ritual. Lightning likewise depicts tribally-specific ceremonies in her film, although she does so in a markedly different manner that has caused controversy concerning taboos surrounding the filming of culturally sensitive rituals. Lightning opens *Older than America* with a depiction of a Sundance ceremony, the filming of which is forbidden by many Sundance cultures. This scene is several minutes long and includes long shots as well as medium shots and close ups. Lightning's camera lingers over the details. Lightning, as a member of the Cree, a major Sundance culture, felt that, despite what she calls the "taboo" of publicly showing ceremonies, explicitly depicting the Sundance ceremony was necessary to tell her story. She has said, "At the end of the day, it's about who we are: our ceremonies, our dances, our songs. All of those things that existed before boarding schools. All of those things that are older than America" (Wise). This idea is voiced almost verbatim in the film when the community decides that Rain needs to have a ceremony to help her heal. Healing in Lightning's film is rooted in a return to ceremony and culture and thus she bookends the film by closing with a ceremony to help Rain heal from her familial and tribal past. As she did in the beginning of the film, Lightning is not coy about filming this final ceremony; the camera takes us inside the sweat lodge where the viewers see and hear in close detail what happens. It is here that Uncle Walter is able to speak directly to Rain and help her understand her past, her family, and her place. By including these ceremonies, Lightning, like Niro, grounds her characters in a specific history and culture, and these choices allow her to foreground the idea of sacrifice for the common good, balance, and healing, all of which find resonance in the film.

Both filmmakers use differing filmic choices to depict the ceremonial scenes with divergent effects on viewers. While Niro films her Condolence Ceremony very briefly and mostly from afar with few words and no narration on the soundtrack, Lightning uses many medium and close shots, thus giving the audience ideal and lengthy views of the various ceremonies. These dif-

ferences may reflect a variance in audience focus for each director. Lightning wants to explicitly exhort Native audience members to value those cultural practices that are, in fact, “older than America,”; Niro’s strategies prevent any unintended transmission of private cultural knowledge to outsiders while still depicting the Condolence Ceremony’s centrality to Haudenosaunee culture.

Community is important in Lightning’s film, and Rain cannot achieve healing without acknowledging her ties to the past and her community. Nor is it only Rain and her family who are in need of healing and a return to balance; Lightning shows the community as benefitting from reconnecting to ancient ceremonies, which is also true of the reservation community where the movie was filmed. In interviews, Lightning has stated that the community of the Fond du Lac Reservation in Minnesota, although initially distrustful, embraced the story of the healing from the boarding schools as necessary and hopeful, saying “there isn’t one person on the reservation who hasn’t felt the effects in a very deep way” (Wise). Lightning also reports that, at the wrap party, one of the council members said “It’s been the greatest experience for the spirit of the people and our tribe. It has brought good energy to the rez, and it has also started to help bridge some of our relationships with the white community. There is already healing that has started from this” (Wise). The final shots of the film are community shots, with Native people crowding the frame. Lightning is careful to prominently include Luke, the visiting white geologist, in these shots because he has shown an interest to learn about the tribe’s history and is invested in helping Rain and Johnny. Except for the sweat lodge scene, he thereby earns his inclusion in the final communal shots. Lightning also indicated that she wanted to tell this particular story because she too lives with the continuing trauma of the boarding school experience—a similar boarding-school experience, unknown to her at the time, led to her father’s suicide when she was young girl.

By entwining her suspenseful story within a very real and pressing context—the continuing legacy of the boarding school experience—Lightning shows how one woman’s life is affected by romantic and domestic concerns as well as by political and historical events. In fact, both Niro and Lightning explode the “Indian Princess” stereotype with not only their main female protagonists, but also with the many rich secondary female characters. Both films add a much-needed perspective on indigenous women’s lives and issues as well as on contemporary North American independent cinema, which too often still relies on stereotypes, particularly so in the few roles offered to

indigenous women.

Both *Kissed by Lightning* and *Older than America* use familiar and popular genres, the road movie/romance hybrid, and the Gothic ghost story to invite Native and non-Native viewers into narratives that deal with difficult and damaging past and present issues, the dispossession of the Mohawks from their homelands, and the boarding school experience. By exploring tribally specific cultural and historical materials, each film works to dispel the familiar stereotype of the “Hollywood Indian” that have characterized many Hollywood westerns from their onset to the present. Furthermore, by focusing on contemporary Native women’s experiences, inside and outside the domestic sphere, these films also work to erase the stereotype of the “Indian Princess” who is typically depicted as exotic and sexually pure even in her relationships with white men. Mavis and Rain have romances with Native men and each engages with her tribally-specific culture through ceremony, though each films ceremonies in very different ways. As Native filmmakers, Niro and Lightning deploy and revise genres in order to speak to multiple audiences and center contemporary Native people within their films, working to undo decades of Hollywood stereotypes and to rectify the familiar distortions of American history.

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