"Going Indian"

Dances With Wolves (1990)

> *While lying there listening to the Indians, I amused myself with trying to guess at their subject by their gestures, or some proper name introduced. . . . It was a purely wild and primitive American sound, as much as the barking of a chickaree, and I could not understand a syllable of it. . . . I felt that I stood, or rather lay, as near to the primitive man of America, that night, as any of its discoverers ever did.*
>
> —*Henry David Thoreau,* The Maine Woods

> *As soon as possible after my arrival, I design to build myself a wigwham, after the same manner and size with the rest . . . and will endeavour that my wife, my children, and myself may be adopted soon after our arrival. Thus becoming truly inhabitants of their village, we shall immediately occupy that rank within the pale of their society, which will afford us all the amends we can possibly expect for the loss we have met with by the convulsions of our own. According to their customs we shall likewise receive names from them, by which we shall always be known. My youngest children shall learn to swim, and to shoot with the bow, that they may acquire such talents as will necessarily raise them into some degree of esteem among the Indian lads of their own age; the rest of us must hunt with the hunters.*
>
> —*J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur,* Letters from an American Farmer

> *With thanks to the Blackfoot tribe who adopted me.*
>
> —*Leslie A. Fiedler,* The Return of the Vanishing American

Taken together, the three quotes above are good examples of a very old—yet ongoing—process of the American imagination: the white discovery of and the renaming and adoption into the tribal society of the American Indian. In this essay[1] I describe a mythopoeic process that recurs often

enough in American history to merit more attention, especially after the apparent resurrection and further development of this gesture in Kevin Costner's tremendously popular *Dances With Wolves*, released too long since any other great, epic Western to be anything but a boondoggle—or so we thought until "Costner's folly" was seen by millions and had won seven Academy Awards.[2]

A traditional goal in American studies has been the search for *Americanness*. Crèvecoeur's third letter asked, "What is an American?" and his famous melting-pot response testified to the seriousness Crèvecoeur brought to the question. Tautologically, the defining American characteristic has been the continual redefinition of the American character. It is the question itself and its rhetorical immortality (a significant addition to Martin Lipset's "American exceptionalism") that mark this nation as unique. One answer to the question of national identity proposes that the original inhabitants of North America represent "True Americans," whose character deserves emulation. *Dances With Wolves* accepted this not-new proposal and sought to convince modern motion-picture audiences that only by going backward into history, back into tribalism, could the American hero hope to go forward.

D.H. Lawrence argued that Europeans "came to America for two reasons. . . . To slough the old European consciousness completely . . . [and] to grow a new skin underneath, a new form. This second is a hidden process" (53). Leslie Fiedler praised Lawrence's insight, suggesting that "he knew something . . . which we are born not knowing we know, being born on this soil . . . that the essential myth of the West and, therefore, of ourselves . . . [is] the myth of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook. Here is, for us—for better or for worse, and apparently forever—the heart of the matter: the confrontation in the wilderness of the White European refugee from civilization and the 'stern, imperturbable warrior'" (167).

This meeting, Fiedler noted, occasioned two possible outcomes: "a metamorphosis of the WASP into something neither White nor Red" or "the annihilation of the Indian" (24). The later option was the most frequently chosen path of storymakers for the "penny dreadfuls" and nickelodeons, but the metamorphosis of White into Red developed rapidly in the 1950s with the "sympathetic Western," reaching its mythical cinematic culmination in *Dances With Wolves*.

Three famous ideas help explain how a motion picture of the 1990s would attempt a big-budget dramatization of the going-Indian myth, and, secondly, reach an appreciative audience in the process. First is Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion that myths and narratives reconcile cultural contradictions and bring opposing forces and values together. With the going-

Indian myth, the contradiction is between Nature and Industry, hunting and agrarianism, innocence and decadence, Manifest Destiny and the Sacred Homeland. Thus, *Dances With Wolves* is a cinematic myth that addresses still unresolved traumas and contradictions of American history, as well as current contradictions between industrialism and environmentalism, tribal society and industrial society, the melting-pot (assimilation) and multiculturalism (racial/ethnic pride).

The second theory was propounded by R.W.B. Lewis in *The American Adam*, where the author described the historical development of the idea of a new American "hero" who would be "emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (5). That the American continent triggered images of the Garden among European immigrants has been ably documented by many scholars. But the Garden was not empty, and for those uncomfortable with the demonization of native inhabitants of this continent, the American Indian provided a ready-made adamic figure. The American Adam and Garden myths were easily transposed into American westerns and musicals, including the mythic/cinematic forerunner of *Dances With Wolves*, Delmer Daves's *Broken Arrow* (1950), considered the first of the sympathetic westerns of the 1950s. This film traces the transformation of an Indian fighter (played by Jimmy Stewart) into a man who befriends Cochise, marries an Apache maiden, and fights to establish some truce between the land-hungry settlers and the Apache. The American Adam undercurrent is manifested in *Broken Arrow* during a pastoral "honeymoon" scene that takes place on the banks of a wild pond. Stewart and the Apache maiden Morning Star have just been married; Stewart rests beside the still waters as the camera follows Morning Star; she walks majestically toward her lover, and lies in his arms. She asks:

> MORNING STAR: "You are asleep?"
> STEWART: "No. . . . I'm quiet because I'm so happy. I'm afraid if I open my mouth my happiness will rush out in a funny noise like, Ya Hoo!"
> MORNING STAR: "What does that mean? It is an American word?"
> STEWART: "Uh huh. I think it was a word made by Adam when he opened his eyes and saw Eve."

The dream of Pocahontas cannot last too long, however, and, even in this first "sympathetic" Western, Morning Star dies before the last reel. In contrast to the deluge of conventional Westerns, *Broken Arrow* was, for its time, the most pointed liberal critique of Manifest Destiny and the sad history of relations between Indians and whites.

The third theory comes from Freud's limited work with the family romance, where he attempted to account for certain fantasies of young children who denied their literal parentage in favor of more noble, imaginary mothers and fathers (236–41). Freud claimed that all young people must break with their parents at some point, that each generation must break with the previous. A "family romance" might be created in response to various motivations: loss of parental love, fear of breaking the incest taboo, realization of parental fallibility. This theory suggests a psychological mechanism that can account for the success of those narratives wherein the white protagonist goes Indian. Working on the personal and collective psychological levels, the romance of Native American parentage would satisfy the wish for a return to the Garden, where strong and noble parents live in abundance and harmony, free of the decay, pollution, and anxiety of industrial society. Crèvecoeur's letters were written during the troubled context of the American Revolution, when the author found himself pulled between British allegiance and colonial rebellion. His "Romance" of living with the Indians was never enacted in reality, but was exactly the tale of the noble savage Europeans would find appealing.[3]

Elizabeth Stone provides evidence that many modern, adult Americans engage in family romances of Indian ancestry. In a study of the psychological dynamics of family stories, Stone interviewed black and white Americans who claimed Indian ancestry even against rather conclusive evidence to the contrary. In spite of the truth of a family's history and the Indian's oppression and negative stereotyping in our culture, Stone found a number of Americans who claimed Indian blood in the manner that others would pridefully recall European royalty or illustrious Puritan ancestry. It is "the idea of the Indian," "a powerful symbol, especially since World War II," that Stone finds in American literature from Hemingway to Kesey, an idea "suggestive of our mourning for our lost pre-industrial Eden" (131).

These three theories offer a rudimentary dynamic in which *Dances With Wolves* can be seen to function as mythical narrative (Lévi-Strauss) through collective wish-fulfillment patterns (Freud) and in the context of America's historical legacy (Lewis). As such, this dynamic helps contextualize historical and fictional prototypes of the going-Indian myth in *Dances With Wolves*.

Thoreau was, Leslie Fiedler believed, "at his mythological core an Indian himself, at home in the unexplored regions where women flinch," and Fiedler adds that Thoreau himself claimed that "all poets are Indians" (106). Thoreau's Walden adventure strikes me as a case study of the lim-

its of how far a Harvard man can "go Indian," and, although he does not ever entertain the notion of becoming a "squaw-man"—the "idea of the Indian" infuses every page of *Walden*. At one point in his masterpiece, Thoreau muses; "My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of the clock; for I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is said that 'for yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow they have only one word, and they express the variety of meaning by pointing backward for yesterday, forward for to-morrow, and overhead for the passing day" (112). Besides the explicit reference to living "like the Puri Indians," I also like here the notion of near timelessness, so central to any mythological state, as well as the privileging of the Indian lifestyle in contrast with the rush to keep European time. Although Thoreau draws no special attention to it when he mentions it, the story of the naming of Walden offers evidence, both literary and historic, of the claim the Indian holds not only on the American landscape, but on Thoreau's and our imaginations: "My townspeople have all heard it in their youth, that anciently the Indians were holding a pow-wow upon a hill here . . . and while they were thus engaged the hill shook and suddenly sank, and only one old squaw, named Walden, escaped, and from her the pond was named" (182).

Thoreau best shows where he has been and where he would like to go in *The Maine Woods*, where he admits, "One revelation has been made to the Indian, another to the white man. I have much to learn of the Indian, nothing of the missionary. I am not sure but all that would tempt me to teach the Indian my religion would be his promise to teach me his" (248).

Thoreau never wrote his planned work on the American Indian. His notebooks, though, were full of carefully collected details of Native dress and behavior. Most important, his greatest book may have captured more of the "idea of the Indian" than any scientific work he could have written.

Although he called himself an "illustrator" (*Trails Plowed Under*), Charles M. Russell is, along with Remington, the most famous of the Western artists. Russell, who began life as the son of a wealthy St. Louis family, eventually lit out for the territory of Montana (McCracken 13–36). As a painter, sculptor, and writer, Russell focused his attention on the lifestyles of cowboys, trappers, desperadoes, and Indians, all of which he captured in his seemingly simple, rough-hewn style. In a 1922 painting of a "squawman" titled, "When White Men Turn Red," Russell depicted a leather-clad, mounted white man descending into a river valley with his two Indian wives, three horses, and four dogs. Russell has poured a luminous golden sunlight over the distant mountain range and lower sky of

this painting, and this golden sidelight outlines his figures, the effect being boldly romantic and serene. In commentary accompanying this painting in his *Remington and Russell*, Brian W. Dippie notes that "Russell himself had felt the lure of Indian life and knew that he, like several of his cowboy friends, would have been quick to take an Indian wife had the right woman come along" (156). Dippie mentions a short story from Russell's *Trails Plowed Under*, "How Lindsay Turned Indian." In this tale, Russell relates how, as a young boy, Lindsay ran off from a mean stepfather (a fictional "literalization" of Freud's family romance?) to find himself eventually following a tribe of Piegan Indians with no where else to turn. After meeting the rear-guard of the traveling Piegans, the young Lindsay uses his magnifying glass to light the pipe of the Piegan chief. Of course, for a people who worship the sun, this is no small feat, and the chief intones, "The grass has grown twice since my two sons were killed by the Sioux. . . . My heart is on the ground; I am lonesome, but since the sun has sent you, it is good. I will adopt you as my boy. . . . Child of the Sun, it is good" (139). Much like Lt. John Dunbar, Lindsay's important transition comes with his first buffalo hunt. In both cases the adopted whites get their first kill, eat the fresh liver of their killed animal, and consider that moment as the important point of no return in their going Indian: "My boy . . . that's been sixty-five years ago as near as I can figure. I run buffalo till the whites cleaned 'em out, but that's the day I turned Injun, an' I ain't cut my hair since" (144).

The hunt has long been an initiation ritual for many different groups, and the buffalo-hunt scene and subsequent feast in *Dances With Wolves* mark Dunbar's almost complete assimilation into the tribe, shown by his trading of pieces of his cavalry blues for Indian gear; his winning over of Wind In His Hair (earlier, a strong doubter of Dunbar's intentions toward the tribe); and his participation in the culturally important role of storyteller, where Dunbar recounts his own hunting feat over and over to the tribe's great enjoyment. In short, the buffalo hunt's central position in plains tribe culture would have made it the perfect path, both fictionally and historically, for any non-Indian to follow if he sought access to the flesh-and-bone existence of a tribe.

Since the *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), any white seeking to go Indian has had to confront The Massacre. The historical and mythic power of The Massacre is so pervasive that it seems all Westerns that deal with the confrontation of white and red people must address this issue in some manner.

An interesting negotiation of The Massacre occurs in *Broken Arrow*, where Jimmy Stewart's character saves his life by aiding a wounded Chey-

enne boy. When Stewart and the young boy are eventually surrounded by a group of warriors, the grateful Indian successfully pleads for Stewart's life with the menacing warriors. But when a group of unsuspecting whites interrupt the Cheyenne just as they are about to release Stewart, he is bound and gagged and forced to watch the resulting massacre. He must "witness" as well the torture of three white survivors of the battle—two are "crucified" and one is buried up to his neck, smeared with cactus pulp, and eaten by ants. Later in the film Stewart must pass through the "civilized," industrial equivalent of the Indian massacre nightmare—the lynching—when his own society tries to string him up for his defense of the Indian, only to be saved at the last minute with the rope already around his neck. Stewart's near-lynching by the townspeople, like Dunbar's beating at the hands of his fellow cavalrymen in *Dances*, signifies the one side of the cultural dialectic the hero must pass through in order to "prove" his commitment to the synthesis of cultural contradiction. The binding and gagging of Stewart is evocative of the deep psychological chasm the modern viewer must negotiate between the archetypal Massacre and the Noble Indian; that is, atrocities of history cannot be erased, but must be witnessed, and then passed through. Although sometimes suppressed, historical atrocities will, when they eventually force their way into cultural narratives, be dichotomized into the poles of evil aggressors and innocent victims; sometimes this dichotomy is inverted, as when the "good" (morally/historically justified) Indians attack the U.S. cavalry in *Dances With Wolves* and in the made-for-television *Son of The Morning Star* (1991).

Arthur Penn's "progressive" Western, *Little Big Man*, begins with (what else?) a massacre of the family of the young Jack Crabb. The film, and Berger's book, however, cannot exhaust the psychic energy and mythic trauma of The Massacre with this single blood-letting; and so, following the general reversal of the Western tale we find throughout *Little Big Man*, Penn gives us another "slaughter" by inverting the conventions of The Massacre by presenting Custer's infamous "battle" with the Cheyenne beside the Washita River. This time the cavalry does the massacring.

Almost twenty years after the sympathetic Western *Little Big Man*, the even more "sympathetic" *Dances With Wolves* cannot circumvent The Massacre, and, in fact, includes three massacres, one of which is told as a flashback of Stands With A Fist (Dunbar's future wife and herself a white adopted by the Lakota). The flashback is as distilled and powerful an embodiment of the Massacre trauma as has ever been presented by Hollywood. Shot in soft focus and at sunset, the scene begins, slow-motion, as an idyllic view of a rustic farm and cabin; two frontier families are eating outdoors on a large table when ominous-looking Pawnee warriors

ride slowly in on horseback, their faces painted in bilious blues and bloody reds. At first it seems a peaceful meeting of the two cultures, but then a tomahawk flies through the air, and the scene takes on added poignancy as the next image is that of the horrified gaze of the young witness, which then dissolves into the still haunted Stands With A Fist.[4]

The third massacre in *Dances* transforms the horror associated with that depiction into the Hollywood sanctioned celebration of dispatching the badmen—the U.S. cavalry. Dunbar has been captured by the cavalry as a renegade and is being taken by wagon in shackles to a frontier prison. When the Lakota attack and kill Dunbar's tormentors, one realizes that even with ninety years of Hollywood history turned on its head—we have here the same cheer for the good guys; the skillful and precise application of violence in order to right the world; the promise of "regeneration through violence," which Richard Slotkin has so eloquently elaborated.

Another strategy for resolving the historical trauma and contradiction of The Massacre is, through sleight of hand, to present viewers a tribe of "Noble Savages" (The Sioux in *Dances* and the Cheyenne in *Little Big Man*), and then a tribe of just plain old fashioned savages (the Pawnee in both films). This strategy has the function of addressing white historical fear and guilt within the same narrative, providing a way in which a fiction can remain simultaneously true to contradictory emotional responses to history.

In *A Man Called Horse* Lord Morgan (Richard Harris) is captured by a band of Sioux in 1825. Yellow Hand decides to save this strange white man to be a slave of some sort and, after tying a rope around his neck, proceeds to ride Morgan like a horse before the other laughing warriors of the raiding party. Taken back to the Sioux camp, Morgan is mistreated until he eventually earns the Sioux's respect through his endurance, slaying of attacking Shoshone braves, and his successful completion of the Sun Dance ritual. Although never expressed in the film, Morgan's Indian name itself is transformed from the beast-of-burden connotations of that word, to the more noble connotations for "horse" one would expect from a horse culture. *Little Big Man's* young Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffman) gets his name from old Chief Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George) who gives Jack his name—Little Big Man—by way of a story the old chief tells the short young man to inspire his confidence. Later, Jack kills a Pawnee during a war party and strengthens his bond to the tribe, eventually becoming a "squawman" in more ways than one.

In *Dances With Wolves*, Lt. John Dunbar is named, at first without his knowledge, by his Sioux brothers who have seen him "dancing" with his "pet" wolf, Two Socks. Dunbar had been trying to get Two Socks to

return to his fort as he rode out to the Indian's camp, but the wolf would playfully snap at his heals as Dunbar tried to chase him back. The Indians watched in the foreground of the shot, incredulous that a white man could have such a relationship with a wild animal. This scene in the film is presented with no fanfare, narration, or dialog with which to signify its tremendous importance to the film's mythopoeic task; thus, viewers take Dunbar's frolic with Two Socks as just another day in the life of John Dunbar—that is, as natural and spontaneous. Because viewers do not hear the Lakota warriors name Dunbar, and because they already know the title of the film, the scene achieves two brilliant effects. First, the renaming scene is one of the most calculated moments of the film, yet it comes off as an utterly natural occurrence (accentuated by being filmed in long shot, soft-focus, and a PBS nature-documentary style). Second, Costner, in effect, lets every viewer rename Dunbar with his Lakota name, since the scene plays without dialog or even gesture from the Lakota. This has the effect of making filmgoers active participants in the sacred ritual of renaming a man into Nature and the tribe.

Although this renaming fits nicely with the standard Hollywood story convention of depicting an *evolving* character, this infrequent, but telling tendency says more about American romantic concepts of the Indian and the natural than it does about Hollywood storytelling. This renaming of a white man with a "natural name" and the shedding of his European name is the quintessential American myth—the self-made man rediscovering both America, and, most importantly, his own true self in the process. Freed from the oppressive yoke of European tradition, self-made even to his name (founder of his self—the task of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*), this character of literature and film has, after two hundred years, become only more solidified in our consciousness: from a string of names with no "direct relation to the universe"—Natty Bumppo, Lewis Henry Morgan, Lord Morgan, Jack Crabb, and John Dunbar—emerge Indian names, true names—Leather Stocking/Deerslayer/Hawkeye, Tayadaowuhkuh, Horse, Little Big Man, Dances With Wolves. European interest in Indian names did not develop solely from fictional romances of the noble savage; the real contrast between Indian naming and European naming sparked the imaginations of many explorers, trappers, and immigrants who sought to communicate and understand that first task of language, naming.

> *As I heard my Sioux name being called over and over, I knew for the first time who I really was.*
>
> —*from the Diary of John J. Dunbar*

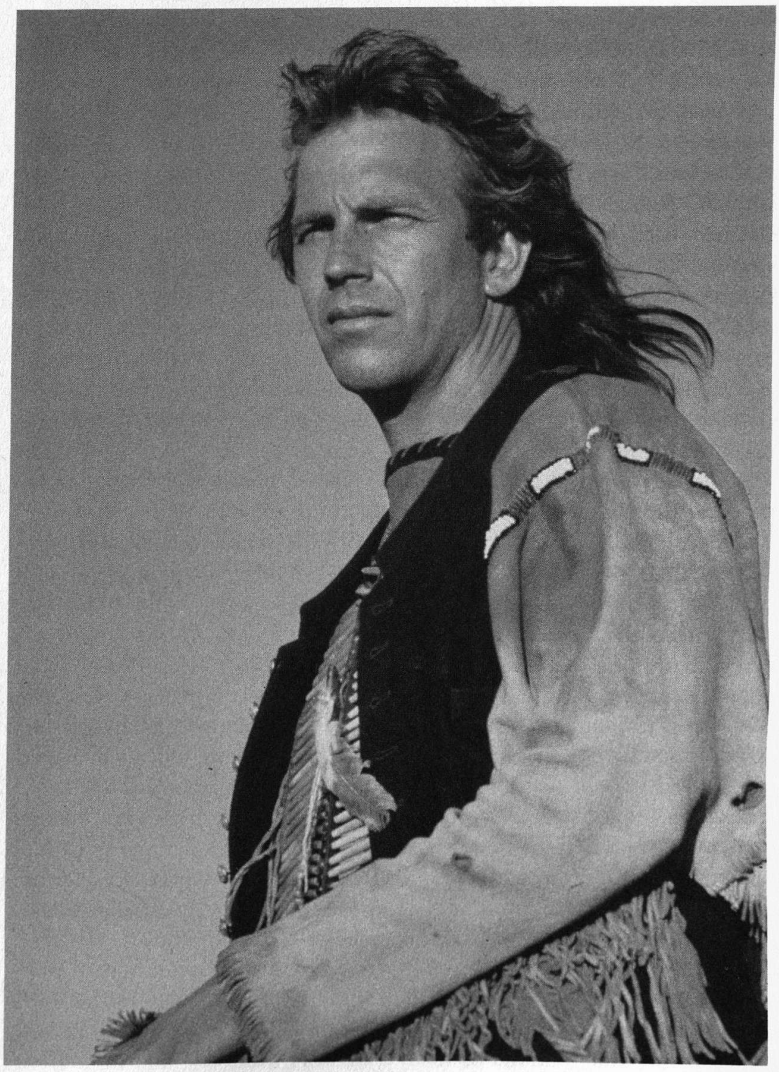

Figure 10.1. After shedding much of his uniform, Dunbar affects a renegade look familiar from Wild West shows, Hollywood Westerns, and the 1960s counterculture. The look is still evoked, an emblem of American outlaw heroism.

Dances With Wolves seems to me to be the latest, most important development in this mythopoeic founding of the "only real American."[5] It is a different myth from what Fiedler called the "anti-feminist" myth of the runaway male who flees from the white woman to his native, dark-skinned companion, for Lt. John Dunbar marries Stands With A Fist, a white survivor of The Massacre, who has nearly forgotten her first family and language. *Dances With Wolves* accomplishes, I think for the first time in our American imagination, the transmigration of the white family unit into the mythical hunting ground of The Indian. By the end of the film Dances With Wolves and Stands With A Fist have already transfigured into buckskins, the Sioux language, the Sioux way. Edward D. Castillo, a Native American academic, has written an excellent review of *Dances With Wolves* that explores many of the same issues analyzed here. Castillo asserts that *Dances* is "really about the transformation of the white soldier Lt. John Dunbar into the Lakota warrior Dances With Wolves" (16). Recalling Dunbar's hope to "see the frontier . . . before it's gone," Castillo notes, "That simple childlike desire touches an unspoken yearning in many Americans, young and old" (19). His words "childlike desire" recall Freud's family romance as well as the wish-fulfillment aspect of *Dances*. Even more interesting is this passage in Castillo's essay: "While exchanging parting gifts, Dances With Wolves tells Kicking Bird, 'You were the first man I ever wanted to be like. I will not forget you.' Indians know that no white man or woman can become Indian, but many of us hope those who have learned of our cultures and appreciate their unique humanity will be our friends and allies in protecting the earth and all of her children" (20).

Because *Dances With Wolves* starts with Lt. John J. Dunbar near death on a Civil War operating table, and never once flashes back to any fictional family or past, Dunbar's line to Kicking Bird—"You were the first man I ever wanted to be like"—becomes illustrative of a close adherence to the imaginative logic of the family romance, embossed with the American Adam myth and the historical legacy of Native American cultures. In retrospect, one should not be surprised at *Dances With Wolves*' enthusiastic reception, nor at the many modern Americans who found going Indian a still viable trail to follow through the American imagination.

During the November 1993 ratings sweeps, ABC broadcast a new, expanded version of *Dances With Wolves*. At fifty minutes longer than the original, the new *Dances* exploited the TV Western miniseries formula that worked so well with *Lonesome Dove*. The new *Dances* was originally composed by Costner and producer Jim Wilson for foreign distribution and simply reintegrated footage originally trimmed for the American theatrical release. As can be expected, much of the footage

simply expanded on plot, characters, and themes in the original American version. A few additions bridge minor gaps in the narrative and flesh out issues that might have puzzled some original viewers. The crazy Major Fambrough, who sends Dunbar on his "knight's errand" is shown, through added footage, to be certifiably insane. The environmental destruction theme is pushed even further in a number of additions and in one wholly new scene. One addition has the slothful mule driver Timmons littering as he crosses the prairie, tossing a tin can to the ground as Dunbar registers the appropriately modern reaction of indignation. The horror of Fort Sedgewick's polluted pond grows through the addition of animal carcasses and by witnessing Dunbar having to swim into the pond, bandanna over nose, to struggle with the wet dead weight of the animals before he burns them. The wholly new scene of environmental devastation occurs when Kicking Bird and Dunbar journey alone to the sacred Sioux mountains (Kicking Bird: "The animals were born here") but find instead an ominous silence and the remnants of a hunting camp strewn with animal corpses and empty whisky bottles. The mystery surrounding the prior inhabitants of Fort Sedgewick is also settled. Before Dunbar reaches the deserted fort, the last of the fort's troops are shown cowering in their caves until their officer assembles them, commends them for staying after the others deserted, and suggests they mount an orderly mass desertion, saying, "The Army can go to Hell!" The new version also fleshes out a few of the minor characters. Two Socks, Dunbar's friendly wolf, gets much more onscreen time and the trio of young Sioux boys that includes Smiles A Lot turn up in a number of scenes of teenage drama and hijinks: last-minute jitters before the unsanctioned raid on Dunbar's horse, a vigorous but denied attempt to join the men during the buffalo hunt, and a foiled prank to close the smoke flap on the teepee of the honeymooning Dances With Wolves and Stands With A Fist. The inversions of cultural prejudice occasionally seen in the original film are seconded with one more quite pointed jibe that takes place during the massacre of Timmons. A Pawnee brave starts to take Timmons's quilt for a trophy until he sniffs it suspiciously, throws it on the ground in disgust, and cleans his hands with dirt. On a more romantic note, the new film elaborates on the courtship between Dances With Wolves and Stands With A Fist, including Dunbar's need to rely on tribal gifts of horses and clothing in order to purchase his new bride, in the traditional Sioux way, from her father/guardian, Kicking Bird.

But the most substantial difference between the new and original versions of *Dances* involves the night scene just before the buffalo hunt. In the original film, this night scene is one long take of twenty-eight sec-

onds. The Sioux camp appears in the background, ponies in the middle ground, and Dunbar, resting on his bedroll, stretched out in the foreground, his voice over narration intoning: "As they celebrated into the night, the coming hunt, it was hard to know where to be. I don't know if they understood, but I could not sleep among them. There had been no looks, and there was no blame. There was only the confusion of a people not able to predict the future." One assumes simply that Dunbar is finding some time alone before the next day's big hunt. In the expanded version, however, one witnesses two minutes of footage and twenty-five shots that change not only the meaning of this one scene, but imbue the entire film with a greater moral complexity. The scene begins with Dunbar riding into camp with a small band of warriors. A large fire is burning in the center of camp as the Sioux dance around it. Dunbar holds back and sizes up the situation. He notices a wagon, filled with buffalo hides. His voice-over narration explains things: "It was suddenly clear now what had happened, and my heart sank as I tried to convince myself that the white men who had been killed were bad people and deserved to die, but it was no use. I tried to believe that Wind in His Hair and Kicking Bird and all the other people who shared in the killing were not so happy for having done it, but they were. As I looked at the familiar faces I realized that the gap between us was greater than I could ever have imagined."

The narration accompanies a building intimacy of shot scales, growing closer to the dancing Sioux as well as Dunbar's reaction shots. Two crucial insert shots provide gory emphasis: a severed white man's hand tied in rope and hanging over the flames of the campfire; a long blonde scalp at the end of a pole, reflecting the reddish glow. This unexpurgated scene then ends with the same thirty-second shot and voice-over found in the original; but now Dunbar's comment about not being able "to sleep among them" takes on a pointed meaning. The scene in the original *Dances*, then, is literally a repression of the novel and the shooting script, a repression of The Massacre.[6]

The other material in the film merely expands and explains themes already extant in the first release, but this new (old) material marks a radical addition, I should say a return, to the film. While trimming *Dances* to a tight (!) 181 minutes kept the film distributable and positioned for Oscar contention, Costner might have deflected a great deal of subsequent criticism that his Sioux were too wholesome by keeping just this one moment of unbridgeable cultural difference in the original film (or including, as the new film does, another moral complication of the Sioux: a brief scene early in the narrative makes it clear that Stands With A Fist's husband died not while defending the tribe from the marauding Pawnee,

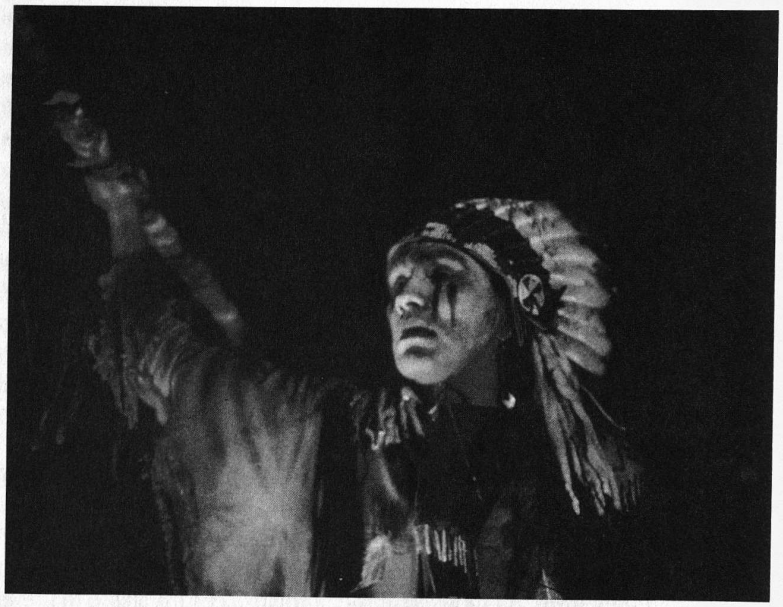

Figure 10.2. In *Dances With Wolves,* a number of nighttime campfire scenes serve to summon the primitive, the animistic, the predatory. Both releases contain a scene in which Dunbar, alone, dances around a campfire in a type of wild-man epiphany. But only the television release includes the Sioux's post-massacre campfire celebration, a ceremony from which Dunbar excuses himself.

but during a raid on the Utes, explicitly undercutting the assumption the first film may have given that these Sioux practice only defensive tribal warfare).

This is not to deny *Dances'* radical inversion of the Western. Where *The Searchers* turns on a white man's obsessive attempts to find and retrieve a white woman from her tribal life, *Dances* at midpoint gives us a white cavalry officer who returns a white woman to her tribal life as a simple matter of course. But what I find so interesting is how the latest word in the progressive Western cannot live by genre inversion alone, but ends up negotiating, deflecting, and ultimately retrieving The Massacre. Neither film, I think, is the definitive, authoritative edition, the "director's cut." Multiple versions of narratives, sometimes, betray tensions not so easily written off as just more of the same. Thus, I think we have two films now, *Dances With Wolves* and *(The Return of) Dances With Wolves.*

Notes

1. This essay was previously published in the *Michigan Academician* 25:2, (Winter 1993): 133–146; in *Film & History* 23 (1993): 91–102; and in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996): 195–209.

2. Wry, populist cartoonist Gary Larson hints at the success of *Dances With Wolves* in one of his famous *Far Side* pieces. Three odd-looking characters stand around a punch bowl in a massive, vacant ballroom. Above them hangs a cryptic banner: "DLDWWS." One man complains about the "insensitive" portrayal of the cavalry. A woman intones, "Those buffaloes weren't really killed. . . . That was all faked!" Thus goes another meeting of the "international" "Didn't Like Dances With Wolves Society." The film's widespread success had, I argue, much to do with its updating of the going-Indian myth; in this light, it is not at all innocent that Kevin Costner just happened to be the star who went Indian. Costner was, at the time and perhaps even after *Waterworld*, Hollywood's leading icon of masculine Americana, a descendant of the mantle passed down from Gary Cooper and Jimmy Stewart. But not everyone believed in Costner's Dunbar or fell in love with *Dances*. Pauline Kael called the film "childishly naive." Others complained the film was anachronistic, an allegory of Hollywood liberalism (historical guilt, environmentalism, middle-class feminism, and the New Age Indian wannabe syndrome) rather than an accurate history of the meeting of white and Sioux cultures during the 1860s. Not incidentally, *Dances*' most direct ancestor was *Little Big Man*, itself a product of the counterculture, which borrowed, Thodore Roszak has held, a "garish motley" of ideas from "depth psychiatry . . . mellowed remnants of left-wing ideology . . . the oriental religions . . . Romantic Weltschmerz . . . anarchist social theory . . . Dada and American Indian lore" (xiii). Nonetheless, millions of viewers embraced *Dances* in spite of its historical liberties and long running time (over three hours). Nominated for twelve Academy Awards, *Dances* won seven: Best Picture, Best Director (Kevin Costner), Best Adapted Screenplay (Michael Blake), Best Cinematography (Dean Semler), Best Film Editing (Neil Travis), Best Original Score (John Barry), and Best Sound (Russell Williams II, Jeffrey Perkins, Bill W. Benton, and Greg Watkins).

3. For an exhaustive, scholarly, but unrelentingly cynical examination of American mythology, including what he calls "Indianization," see Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973) as well as his *Gunfighter Nation* (1992).

4. Men are not the only ones to gain an Indian name. The historical figure Virginia Dare, who was the first European child born in the New World and disappeared in 1587 with the rest of Sir Walter Ralegh's colony, has presented a puzzling mystery to historians ever since her disappearance. In the children's book *Virginia Dare: Mystery Girl*, part of a series called Childhood of Famous Americans, Augusta Stevenson creates a fictionalized conclusion to Virginia's story. Given the problems of presenting a children's story that must deal with The Massacre, Stevenson seems to have followed the mythical tradition, and given Virginia an adoptive tribe and an Indian name: White Flower.

5. Charles M. Russell left a number of comments concerning his vote for the "true American." In a 1914 letter to Judge Pray, Russell used pen, ink, and watercolor to depict a rather forlorn, mounted Indian. Beside the brave Russell inked, "This is the onley [sic] real American. He fought and died for his country. Today he has no vote, no country, and is not a citizen, but history will not forget him" (Broderick 84). Russell expressed much the same sentiment in another letter to Joe Scheurle, possibly around 1916: "The Red man was the true American. They have almost gon [sic]. But will never be forgotten. The history of how they fought for their country is written in blood, a stain that time cannot grind out" (Russell, *Good Medicine*, 127).

6. Michael Blake's novel makes Dunbar's cultural anxiety even more apparent than the expanded film. Some relevant passages:

> Suddenly it was clear as a cloudless day. The skins belonged to the murdered buffalo and the scalps belonged to the men who had killed them, men who had been alive that very afternoon. White men. The lieutenant was numb with confusion. He couldn't participate in this, not even as a watcher. He had to leave (167).

The scene concludes with Dunbar wracked with existential anxiety over his indeterminate place in the world:

> More than anything he wanted to believe that he was not in this position. He wanted to believe he was floating toward the stars. But he wasn't. He heard Cisco lie down in the grass with a heavy sigh. It was quiet then and Dunbar's thought turned inward, toward himself. Or rather his lack of self. He did not belong to the Indians. He did not belong to the whites. And it was not time for him to belong to the stars. He belonged right where he was now. He belonged nowhere. A sob rose in his throat. He had to gag to stiffle it. But the sobs kept coming up and it was not long before he ceased to see the sense in trying to keep them down (167–68).

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