

Indian Boarding School Gothic in *Older than America* and *The Only Good Indian*

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Abstract: *This article examines the appropriation and redirection of the Gothic in two contemporary, Native-centered feature films that concern a history that can be said to haunt many Native North American communities today: the history of Indian boarding schools. Georgina Lightning's Older than America (2008) and Kevin Willmott's The Only Good Indian (2009) make use of Gothic conventions and the figures of the ghost and the vampire to visually relate the history and horrors of Indian boarding schools. Each of these Native-centered films displays a cinematic desire to decenter Eurocentric histories and to counter mainstream American genres with histories and forms of importance to Native North American peoples. Willmott's film critiques mythologies of the West and frontier heroism, and Lightning attempts to sensitize non-Native viewers to contemporary Native North American concerns while also asserting visual sovereignty and affirming spiritual values.*

Keywords: *Indigenous film, visual sovereignty, Georgina Lightning, Kevin Willmott, gothic*

“When European Americans speak of Native Americans, they always use the language of ghostliness. They call Indians demons, apparitions, shapes, specters, phantoms, or ghosts. They insist that Indians are able to appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously, and also that they are ultimately doomed to vanish. Most often, they describe Indians as absent or dead.”

Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*

Even the most cursory look at US culture reveals a Native presence—from early captivity narratives and spectacular Wild West shows of the late 1800s to dime novels and Hollywood westerns throughout the twentieth century. From James Fenimore Cooper to Mark Twain and beyond, American literature has produced and circulated images of the vanishing Indian in order to justify the appropriation of indigenous resources. In popular culture, the image of the Indian became defined at least as early as the 1840s, and the development of photography and film contributed to simplified and stereotypical representations of Native peoples. Native Americans have been the “subjects” of photographs that chronicled their defeat in war, their assimilation in boarding schools, and their ways of life which early filmmakers such as Edward Curtis and Robert Flaherty sought to dramatize and document—each attempting to preserve a record of indigenous lifeways which he felt were fated to become extinct.¹ The trope of the vanishing Indian eventually became a stock feature of the Hollywood Western, in which Indians—usually played by non-Natives—appeared on screen as the barbaric enemies or noble allies of hardy pioneers who settled and civilized the West. Whether savage or noble, Hollywood Indians were doomed to die. Even in contemporary Westerns, such as the Coen brothers’ 2010 remake of *True Grit*, or Gore Verbinski’s 2013 *The Lone Ranger*, representations of Native people remain fraught with contradictions.

Though Native Americans had ways of subverting and resisting even early representational practices, as Michelle H. Raheja has argued, it is only in the last decades that Native North American artists have been able to gain substantial control over their self-images. In extensive work with documentaries, videos, short formats, and arts cinema, Native filmmakers (to borrow from the title of Kerstin Knopf’s important study) have sought to decolonize the lens of power; they have resisted the colonial gaze by deconstructing stereotypes and by producing counter narratives and counter images. Theories of indigenous film or fourth cinema, developed to account for these changing representational practices, emphasize the concept of self-representation and sovereignty. In one account of these developments, Lee Schwenger insists: “The significance of self-representation as a form of resistance and as fundamental to appreciating Indigenous North American film cannot be overstated” (3). Self-representation is crucial to feature film as well, though Native

1 In addition to his well-known photographs of indigenous North Americans, Curtis made the silent film, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* in 1914; Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* appeared in 1922.

filmmakers have encountered more difficulties in gaining what Raheja terms “visual sovereignty” over filmmaking that requires considerable sponsorship, large budgets, high production values, and wide distribution goals.² Chris Eyre’s 1998 *Smoke Signals* is widely credited with being the first full-length narrative feature to be written, directed, and acted by Native Americans. The feature films examined here, *Older than America*, directed by Canadian/Cree filmmaker Georgina Lightning, and *The Only Good Indian*, directed by African American filmmaker Kevin Willmott, feature Native actors in prominent roles, make some use of Native languages, and dramatize Indian captivity in boarding schools as well as the effects on Native peoples of colonial policies. Following the tacks taken by Houston Wood and Schweninger, whose inclusive definitions of Native film admit the complexity of feature filmmaking, I consider *Older than America* and *The Only Good Indian* to be Native or Native-centered films. Each film displays a cinematic desire to decenter Eurocentric histories and to counter mainstream American genres with histories and forms of importance to Native North American peoples.³ Each film uses Gothic conventions, appropriating the figures of the ghost and the vampire, to produce a counter narrative of the history and horrors of Indian boarding schools. I use the term “captivity” throughout this analysis, to suggest that these filmmakers are “talking back” to the genre of the captivity narrative, even as they appropriate the Gothic in order to subvert some aspects of this popular genre.⁴

At least since Leslie Fiedler’s 1960 *Love and Death in the American Novel*, the Gothic has been considered a distinctively important mode in

- 2 See Cummings for a concise historical overview of indigenous American cinema that includes a discussion of visual media and “the shifting place of film in the media landscape” (291); see also Schweninger for a sobering comparison of budgets and earnings for Native American and mainstream movies (12).
- 3 Classifications are notoriously problematic. Native North American cultures do not neatly coincide with the US/Canadian border. Lightning’s Canadian background could serve as reason to consider this film’s relation to Canadian literature. Howells observes that “the first Canadian Gothic was wilderness Gothic, ... refiguring the classic tropes of European Gothic in a New World context” (106). Hauzenberger specifies a First Nations response to this Canadian Gothic tradition. Similarities between boarding school and residential school experiences among Native Americans and First Nations people are notable. Equally complex are categorizations of indigenous film. Wood proposes a wide spectrum to account for the complex realities of Indigenous filmmaking, and Schweninger stresses the gains to be had from inclusiveness. In addition to using Native actors and Native histories, Willmott and writer-producer Tom Carmody consulted with Native Americans and the Kickapoo tribe of Kansas (Niccum).
- 4 See Holmgren Troy, Kella, and Wahlström (2014) for a discussion of the uses of captivity tropes in contemporary Native literary works, and see Strong (1999) for a compelling historical account of Indian captives and English captors.

US literature and culture. Claiming that the American literary tradition “is almost essentially a gothic one” (142), Fiedler distinguishes the European Gothic from the American Gothic. In the US, Fiedler argues, “certain special guilts awaited projection in gothic form,” these being “the slaughter of the Indians, who would not yield their lands to the carriers of utopia, and the abominations of the slave trade . . .” (143). Along with an Africanist presence, then, a Native presence has had a key role in shaping “classic” American literature by Euro-American writers, from Brockden Brown to Goodman Brown and beyond.⁵ In many canonical US literary works, knowledge of the effects of colonial aggression against North America’s indigenous populations is simultaneously relegated to the margins of consciousness and aesthetically transformed into Gothic narratives, in which Indians are associated with spectrality. As Renée L. Bergland puts it in her ground-breaking analysis of the ghosting of Native North Americans: “Native American ghosts function both as representations of national guilt and as triumphant agents of Americanization” (4). Native Americans take on spectral forms that haunt the US cultural imaginary. From early captivity narratives to Hollywood westerns and modern-day horror, such as Alan LeMay’s *The Searchers* (1954) and John Ford’s 1956 film adaptation, or Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1977) and *Pet Semetary* (1983) and their screen adaptations by Stanley Kubrick (1980) and Mary Lambert (1989), a Native presence takes Gothic forms in the main current of elite and popular culture.

Of growing import, however, is the appropriation of the Gothic mode for Native American and other artists “from the margins of the traditional canon, whose work expresses the experience of those who have been displaced” (Mogen, Sanders, and Karpinski 26). Teresa A. Goddu suggests that to counter dominant understandings of racial hierarchy and oppression in the US, African-American writers have long used the genre “to haunt back, reworking the gothic’s conventions to intervene in discourses that would demonize them” (“Vampire” 138). In the Civil Rights era and beyond, Native-American writers have appropriated the Gothic for similar reasons; critics have described, for instance, how Gerald Vizenor reverses “the values of the frontier gothic” (Velie 84) or “inverts the inherited para-

5 Toni Morrison traces the formative influence of an “Africanist presence” in US literature in *Playing in the Dark*. Sarah Rivett observes that Morrison’s formulation about this “dark and abiding presence” can be applied to the spectral presence of Native Americans. D.H. Lawrence wrote about Native Americans in his *Studies in Classic American Literatures*.

digms of the American gothic, substituting an ‘Indian’ perspective for that of the feared and fearful American Adam” (Owens 71). Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* (1996) has been analyzed as “indigenous gothic” (Burnham), and Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* (1988) and A. A. Carr’s *Eye Killers* (1995) are other novels in which Gothic tropes of ghosts and vampires are used to critique historical and contemporary manifestations of what Alexie has elsewhere referred to as “the white lightning of colonialism” (Alexie “Cry” 10). Among works by First Nations authors, Drew Hayden Taylor’s *The Night Wanderer* (2007) portrays contemporary life on a reserve, with a “Native vampire” providing a “first-hand account” of contact history for young readers. Taylor’s work, along with that of Eden Robinson and Tomson Highway, are the focus of Georg Hauzenberger’s study of “First Nations Gothic.” Creative works such as these appropriate the Gothic mode—in times in creative combination with specific indigenous forms—in order to haunt back, to narrate counter-histories and counter-realities, and to register past injustices as well as contemporary social, political, and spiritual concerns of Native North Americans.⁶

Indian boarding schools are one such concern. Boarding schools (or, as they are called in Canada, residential schools) were a late 19th century outgrowth of mission schools, which from early contact sought to “civilize” North America’s indigenous peoples through religious conversion.⁷ Assimilationist goals directed the establishment of federal off-reservation Indian boarding schools, the first of which was established in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, by Richard Henry Pratt. Boarding schools removed and isolated “Indian children from their families, cultures, and languages [so that] white teachers could indoctrinate them into nineteenth-century American

6 Outside of the North American context, postcolonial literatures, for example, may be understood as “inevitably Gothic” because they “are haunted by the ghosts of those who were hidden and silenced in the colonial and imperial past” (Wisker 402). See for example Tabish Khair’s and Johan Höglund’s 2012 collection, *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires: Dark Blood*, which shows the many uses of vampire figures, including for figurations of global migration terror/ism. Katrin Althans (2010) examines Gothic subversion in Aboriginal literature from Australia. Such scholarship testifies to the effects of colonial conquest and forced assimilation of indigenous peoples worldwide; these literary works also testify to the resistance and resilience of indigenous groups and individuals.

7 Mission schools, often day schools, were usually located near Native communities, and run under the auspices of the church or, after the Indian Civilization Act of 1819, with the support of annuities paid by the federal government, often to compensate for land and resources (Trafzer, Keller, and Sisquoc 10). After Indian Removal, day schools were also established on reservations. In some treaties signed after the Civil War, mandatory schooling for Indian children was included in the provisions.

society and the English language” (Trafzer, Keller, and Sisquoc 14). Under this system, children could be forcibly removed from home and family, forbidden to speak their languages or practice their religions, forced into labor or learning of tasks useful to the non-Native majority, and physically whitened by European style clothing and haircuts, all in an effort to “Kill the Indian, Save the Man,” as Pratt infamously put it. Personal testimony and historical scholarship over the last decades have uncovered some positive effects of Indian boarding schools, such as the development of pan-Indian identities and solidarities, but they have also documented oppressive practices, extending from malnutrition and illness to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and death. In the last decades, scholars have characterized the system as forced assimilation at best (Adams *Education, Child, Lomawaima*) or, worse, as deliberate genocide (Churchill, Jacobs).⁸

Native American and First Nation films about boarding/residential schools, sometimes autobiographical, sometimes documentary, have tended to emphasize realism, Grace Chaillier suggests. From the 1990s, however, they “have striven to do more than correct errors and distortions. They force light on the dark subject of the many forms of child abuse perpetrated on Indian students in government- and church-run schools across North America. And, in doing so, slowly, greater segments of American culture are coming to know this previously buried field of study” (Chaillier 118). The language of this passage is suggestive; with its imagery of light and dark, taboos and secrecy, even the notion of burial, the passage evokes a Gothic tone, indirectly suggesting that the Gothic mode, far from being incongruous with Native experience, may in fact lend itself to the relation of the history of colonial conquest, forced assimilation, and the horrors of Indian boarding school. In the analysis which follows, I examine first Lightning’s, then Willmott’s, use of the feature film and the Gothic mode,

8 Scholarship has also examined oral testimony and personal letters attesting to the many ways that boarding schools affected the lives of the individuals who grew up in them. Boarding school memoirs and first-person accounts attest to the cruelty of the system, though some also attest to positive experiences. See the memoir of Adam Fortunate Eagle (Ojibway/Crow) for a positive account of ten years at Pipestone Industrial School for Indians in Minnesota, and Tim Giago’s (Oglala Lakota) for a scathing one of the Holy Rosary Indian Mission School on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Exposing the cruelty, oppression, and sexual abuse he and his peers experienced, Giago writes that “For all intents and purposes, we were captives and subject to the whims of our captors” (136), and he insists that “the damage done to the Indian people by the boarding schools was so severe that it is a part of our problems even today” (4). David Wallace Adams, best known for his groundbreaking history, *Education for Extinction*, has also studied “the brighter side of Indian boarding schools” (“Beyond”).

particularly the figures of ghost and vampire, to critique colonial practices, to educate Native and non-Native audiences about silenced histories, and to sensitize non-Native audiences to contemporary Native realities—realities that remain conditioned, though not determined, by the past.

Older than America:

From Gothic to Documentary, from Holocaust to a Way of Good Life

Canadian/Cree filmmaker Georgina Lightning wrote, produced, directed, and played the lead in the award-winning feature, *Older than America*. Critical of Hollywood's limited roles for Native actors, particularly Native women, Lightning claims to have filmed *Older than America* in resistance to dominant representational practices and casting decisions.⁹ Dramatizing the impact of Indian boarding school history on today's Native North Americans, the film is dedicated to Lightning's father who was "a boarding school survivor" up until his death by suicide when she was 18 (Lightning "Maverick" np). Lightning, attuned to how widespread such experiences are among Native Americans and First Nations people, recounted in a Fox 21 News interview with Melissa Gange the words of the Tribal Chairman at Fond du Lac reservation in Cloquet, Minnesota, where the film was shot, that "There's not one Native American here that hasn't felt the impact of boarding school" (Lightning np).

The impact of the boarding school on the contemporary lives of Native North Americans and non-Natives on and around the reservation drives the plot of *Older than America*. Together with her fiancé, tribal officer Johnny Goodfeather (Adam Beach), Rain Many Lightnings (Georgina Lightning) delves into her family past, seeking an explanation for the dreams and ghostly visions that beset her. She comes to connect these visions to her mother's (Rose Berens) apparent mental health problems, her Aunt Apple's (Tantoo Cardinal) suspect relation to the Catholic priest, Father Bartoli (Steve Yoakum), and gradually to past events at the now-closed Indian boarding school. Her quest is paralleled by that of an out-of-town geologist, Luke Peterson (Bradley Cooper), who comes to investigate the unusual occurrence of an earthquake emanating from the abandoned school. Native and

9 Lightning states that she respects actors who seek Native American roles in order to populate film space with a Native presence, but she sees herself as belonging to a younger generation who wants to be able to play any film role (Lightning, with Grant np). Kilpatrick, in *Celluloid Indians*, and especially Marrubio, in *Killing the Indian Maiden*, analyze the limited range of roles for Native women in Hollywood film.

non-Native townspeople have different relations to the school site, and the preservation or exploitation of the school property becomes a key issue in the election campaigns of the incumbent mayoral candidate, Paul Gunderson (Chris Mulkey), who wants to develop a money-making spa and resort, and to the Native contender, Steve Klamath (Glen Gould), who wants Indian lands held in trust to be returned to tribal control, and the boarding school cemetery to be preserved. Reporting on these developments is the tribal radio host, Richard Two Rivers (Wes Studi), who gradually transfers his support from Gunderson to Klamath, as the truth comes to light about the abuse and deaths of Indian children at the school, which Rain's mother, Irene, and Rain's uncle, Walter Many Lightnings (Don Harrison), had tried to expose, resulting in Rain's mother being forcibly committed to an insane asylum and her uncle being murdered by Gunderson. By the end of the film, the truth is uncovered, crime is exposed, spirits come to rest, families are reunited, and the members of the tribal community have undergone a healing process.

Although the film opens with the claim to be "inspired by true events," Lightning eschews the documentary form in favor of a feature film which makes recognizable invocations of popular film genres containing gothic elements: ghosts or spirits, a dark forest, a haunted boarding school, a heroine frightened by the threat of madness, unable to distinguish the real from the supernatural, even an evil priest. This directorial choice, involving a move away from the documentary genre associated with Indian activism (Leuthold), appears to be increasingly common among Native filmmakers, themselves consumers of mainstream culture. Freja Schiwy observes that indigenous filmmakers in Latin America incorporate visual styles from television programming and "opt for Hollywood genres such as the horror movie and the melodrama" (164-65). M. Elise Marrubio and Eric L. Buffalohead also discuss the tendency of Native film to weave "multiple generic conventions (such as the horror film) to evoke mood and visceral reactions to historical and cultural material" (14), and they specifically mention *Older than America* as an example of how horror may "evoke the feelings of fear and trauma that accompany memories of the boarding school eras for generations of Indigenous people" (26 fn 24). The film may indeed evoke strong emotions, at the same time as it revises the Gothic and redirects horror in ways that are significant to both Native and non-Native viewers.

The film's opening sequence and transition to the story line accomplishes two important moves. First, it skillfully places viewers in a position of ini-

tial identification with the protagonist, for the opening credits roll over images of a modern sun dance performed to powerful drumming and song that gain in intensity until one of the dancers (Dan Harrison) falls back into the sand, and Rain starts from her sleep, disturbed by this dream, which is visually shared with the audience in a cinematic corollary to free indirect narration.¹⁰ Significant for a non-Native audience appeal, Rain appears unaware of tribal traditions, for she does not recognize the medicine wheel which appears in her dream and which immediately recurs both in the Fond du Lac reservation flag and more obviously, and ominously, in a drawing presented to Rain by a child at the school where she teaches. Second, through its careful camera work, the film generates the uncanny effects and uncertainty that are hallmarks of the Gothic mode. The as-yet-unidentified Native American man (Harrison) from Rain's dream appears to be following her, and the camera work takes on what must be his perspective as Rain is observed from behind a tree or across the street, in the style of thrillers involving evil psychopaths and female victims.¹¹ However, since he appears to be invisible to other characters and, except in her dreams and visions, to Rain as well, viewers are invited to interpret this figure as a ghost, spirit, or shapeshifter. This interpretation is encouraged early in the film, when the audience, but not Rain, sees this character morph on screen.

Older than America appears at first to adhere to a conventional pattern of Gothic characterization. Its female protagonist is an emotionally stable and capable young woman—loved by her young pupils, her husband-to-be, and her good friend, caring for her mother and honoring other family relations—whose self-confidence is shaken by the interpenetration of her dreamlife and reality, by the visions of wounded children and of fragments of past events she cannot decipher. These visions contribute to the decidedly Gothic atmosphere surrounding the site of the boarding school, routinely referred to as the “old” boarding school, “old” here meaning “former,” but also implying the dark, secret, and possibly primitive past alluded to in the title. The site of a freakish natural disturbance, the woods surrounding the school and the cemetery figure ominously in Rain's visions, and they eventually become the site of the murder and grotesque crucifixion of one of the mayor's lackeys. The school building, though

10 Milbank associates free indirect discourse with the female gothic's focus on women's subjectivity and the privileging of the heroine's perspective (157).

11 Cf Burnham's discussion of stalking in *Indian Killer* (4-5).

modern in design, is haunted by ghostly figures of solemn children, whose voices are indistinctly heard particularly in the basement, the door of which opens and closes inexplicably. The psychiatric hospital where Irene, Rain's mother, stays is also a modern building, but in the dreams and visions Rain experiences it signifies as a Gothic locale, a site of madness, incarceration, and violation. In line with generic conventions, Rain begins to fear the onset of a heritable mental illness such as that responsible for her mother's catatonic state, but the audience is not only able to view Rain's dreams and visions from the inside, sharing quite literally her angle of vision, but also from the outside, as viewers observe ghostly figures independent of Rain's perspective.

"American Gothic," Goddu insists, "like Gothic more generally, is haunted by history" (*American* 63). Lightning's Gothic may be said to bear out this view in bringing a specifically Native perspective to the history of boarding school captivity and abuse. This Native perspective strengthens the link between the past and the present, since boarding school abuse is understood as having continued effects in the present. The figure of the ghost can provide that link because, as Bliss Cua Lim puts it, "The ghost narrative opens the possibility of a radicalized concept of noncontemporaneity; haunting as ghostly return precisely refuses the idea that things are just 'left behind,' that the past is inert and the present uniform" (quoted in Raheja 147). The notion of history as relentlessly progressing toward modernity, leaving the past behind, is one which underwrote the ideology of manifest destiny in the 1800s and the assimilationist rationale of boarding schools. Additionally, in Lightning's film, the perpetrators of murder and abuse have a vested interest in leaving the past—past crimes—behind. Certainly, the ability of the ghost to disrupt temporal boundaries is important for *Older than America's* engagement with the injustices of the boarding school system, as well as with contemporary social and political issues on the reservation. In the logic of the film, audiences who reject the relevance of boarding school histories for today's Native Americans and for Native/non-Native relations become complicit in injustice, just as Father Bartoli does.

For Rain and the Native community, the manifestation of the past in the present is complex and double-edged. On the one hand, it refers to the continued effects of past trauma—her mother's near catatonic state, her own fears about having children, the continued corruption of Church and government. On the other hand, dreams and spirits constitute a potential source of strength by making possible the understanding required for healing. The

film presents symbols of circles and cyclic, non-linear time, particularly the medicine wheel, to symbolize the circularity and continuity of life. At the end of the film Richard Two-Rivers explains the importance of circularity on his radio show: “For us Indians, everything comes in circles,” and coming full circle “allows us to see not only the past, but also the future,” including hope for a good future. Circularity is what allows Irene, in the final scenes, to return home, and it is what allows Rain to return to traditional ways and her tribe’s good way of life.

Lightning’s film “naturalizes” non-Western spiritual realities, explaining “supernatural” elements by way of history, but also by way of Native spirituality.¹² Analyzing another Native-centered film that revises the Gothic, Michael Linn’s 2007 *Imprint*, Michelle H. Raheja argues for representing “core principles” (148) of Native spirituality in ways that resist the colonial gaze. Lightning portrays Rain as attentive to her spiritual visions—filmed primarily in black and white or in muted tones—in a way that differs from but parallels Luke’s archival investigations. As a white, sympathetic character, Luke offers a site of identification for non-Native filmgoers who might otherwise feel threatened by the film’s representation of racism and its treatment of genocidal practices. His openness to cultural difference combined with his lack of insider knowledge also facilitates the film’s pedagogical thrust, informing both Native and non-Native audiences about the history and legacy of boarding schools. As Schwenger observes, “Indigenous films often include several educational or pedagogical moments for the non-Indian, the nontribal, or the uninitiated viewer as a part of that corrective [to Hollywood stereotypes]” (13). Both Luke and Rain uncover the crimes that led to the deaths and covert burials of boarding school children and the subsequent crimes of silencing Irene and Walter through incarceration and murder. Through the use of documentary photographic conventions, and through the characterization of spirit visitations as everyday reality for Rain, Lightning’s film validates Rain’s visions as historical knowledge and affirms a world view, associated with “many Native Americans,” in which “interactions with spirits and ghosts are viewed ... as a normal component of life” (Landrum 258). Rain and viewers of the film come to understand the ghosts as spiritual guardians,

12 Fiedler discusses “the explained supernatural” (139), and feminist scholarship has engaged with the double role of female Gothic protagonists: they are innocent, vulnerable, and persecuted, but also strong and rational, causing “the downfall of the patriarchal figures or institutions that seek to entrap them” (Milbank 155).

and to associate the real Gothic horror with the historical realities of boarding schools.¹³

Though the ghosts in *Older than America* “haunt back,” directing their energies at the perpetrators of crimes and injustice, the spirits lead Rain and the others toward community healing and reconciliation. This pattern accords well with the trend Schweninger identifies in Native film, of dealing with the deaths of Native individuals in a way which calls attention to their individuality, the context of their death, and above all the effect of their death on the Native people and community who survive (16-17). The tribal elders arrange a sweat lodge ceremony to heal Rain by bringing her back to her tribal ways, in accordance with Native prophecy about the restoration of peace and Native power. Walter tells Rain, “We have to learn to forgive these people for what they do not understand about our good way of life. We cannot expect them to understand. Continue to dream of healing and unity among our people and one day it will come to pass.” After the crimes are exposed and the bodies of the children and Walter are properly laid to rest, this wholeness is visually figured in the wide-angle takes, shot from above, of Irene’s return home with her daughter, the crowd of predominantly Native people literally encircling them, taking them into an embrace, moving in circles around the drum in an inclusive community healing event in which Aunt Apple and some non-Natives such as Luke take part. The spirits of Walter and the children circulate, exchange looks of recognition with Irene, and then walk into the woods.¹⁴

Indigenous reality is not defined solely by spirituality, however. As Raheja reminds us, “contemporary Native American filmmakers produce narratives about spirituality that contest national discourses of Native people as primarily concerned and vested with spiritual matters” (148). Contemporary politics and economics are central to *Older than America*. The mayoral election campaigns of the rivals—the corrupt incumbent Gunderson, in partial collusion with the Catholic Church, and the Native candidate Klamath—is represented as a struggle over land trusts, land development, and indigenous rights. Klamath is a lawyer, returned from the big city, and through him viewers are introduced to important legislation concerning Na-

13 The film’s treatment of secrecy and disclosure resonates with Julie McGonegal’s discussion of the “open secret” of the abuse of First Nations people in Canadian residential schools, where “the ‘secret’ of colonial genocide” (71) is protected.

14 David L. Moore comments on the Christian and colonial rendering of Native terms for “spirit” into “ghost.”

tive life in the US, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990, jurisdictional constraints on tribal police officers, as well as issues such as gambling and casinos. Land use and resource management, so crucial to Native North American politics, are highlighted in the controversy over the site of the “Indian school,” alternatively viewed as prime real estate or as sacred land. Lightning’s film thus emphasizes both the stakes involved in land ownership and other contemporary economic and political realities such as lawsuits against the Catholic Church in the wake of scandals about pedophilic priests.¹⁵ In this way, *Older than America* conforms to Raheja’s ideas about Native American filmic representations of ghosts and ghostly images both to “remind the nation of its brutal past, but also give lie to the concerted national effort to render Native American communities extinct” (146).

The film ends with stills, black and white photos of boarding schools with three texts, the first noting, in an educational tone, that “As recently as 1975, the U.S. and Canadian governments made it mandatory for Native American children to attend boarding schools where native languages and cultural traditions were forbidden.” The second still underscores the idea of captivity: “Virtually imprisoned, children experienced humiliation, grueling labor, widespread sexual and physical abuse, and medical experimentation, often resulting in murder or suicide.” Finally, the film attempts to provide a global, comparative perspective that emphasizes the continued effects of boarding school histories: “According to Amnesty International the death rate of the Native American population is over six times that of any other ethnic group.” Thus, although the film imagines forms of atonement, reconciliation, and healing for boarding school atrocities, the contemporary social and political issues of Native American welfare, land use, and tribal trusts remain ongoing and unresolved—as does the murder of the lackey perpetrated by a man seeking vengeance for boarding school atrocities. This “loose end” in the film serves as a harsh reminder of one alternative to recognition and reconciliation. The reassertion of a documen-

15 In 2009 the Vatican issued a statement of sorrow over the treatment of First Nations individuals in church-run residential schools, and the Canadian government has issued an apology and established an Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Jennifer Henderson notes the critique that the state seeks closure to on-going demands for reparation (198; fn 4), i.e., that it relegates past injustices to the past, denying present manifestations and effects. For an interesting discussion of Catholicism, the Gothic, sexuality, and residential schools, see Henderson on Tomson Highway.

tary mode through the black and white stills can be seen as a manifestation of “the explained supernatural,” but the rational explanation offers no final consolation, since the conviction of cultural and religious superiority that underpinned the abuse of children at the school, and the greed and lust for power that compelled Gundersson to murder Walter Many Lightnings and silence Irene are clearly forces with which Native communities remain forced to contend.

Older than America thus appropriates and redirects the American Gothic, by bringing the past into the lives of contemporary characters, affirming a generalized sense of Native American spiritual beliefs. It also brings the past into the realm of contemporary Native North American politics, where it offers positions for Native and non-Native viewers to learn from the horrors of history.

The Only Good Indian: Nostalgia with Boarding School Gothic

Kevin Willmott’s 2009 movie, *The Only Good Indian*, also returns to the American Gothic, repopulating the frontier not with spectral Indians, but with vampire-like Indian killers. Willmott, an African-American filmmaker and professor of film studies, uses a large cast of Native American and African American actors to tell an alternative history of the West, one that centers around the experience of boarding school captivity. Individual experiences in individual boarding schools were diverse, as noted, but the educational system was clearly directed toward eradicating Indian identities and cultures by undermining parental authority and discrediting indigenous knowledge and educational methods. As one historian puts it: “Ultimately, assimilation and its requirement of indigenous child removal were designed to render indigenous people more dependent and compliant” (Jacobs 214). For Willmott, an important aspect of the film was to counter that legacy by dramatizing Native American agency with “the story behind the resistance to the boarding school” (Willmott “Real Faces” np). In emphasizing resistance, Willmott emphasizes Native survivance.

This film is set in the early twentieth century. It opens with a reversal of the familiar western plot involving an Indian attack upon white settler domesticity, in which a teenaged Kickapoo boy (Winter Fox Frank) is taken captive by soldiers who abduct him from his parents and transport him to a boarding school, the Haskell Institute in Kansas. There, the teachers try unsuccessfully to make him submit to the boarding school’s cultural

and religious standards. Though Nachwihata refuses to speak anything but his own language, he already reads English, and a copy of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* accompanies him throughout the movie, through his time at the boarding school, through his escape and short-lived respite in the all-Black pioneer town of Harkin, to his recapture by the assimilated Cherokee Indian Scout, Sam Franklin (Wes Studi), who intends to return Nachwihata to Haskell and collect a bounty. On their way, Nachwihata and Sam become reluctant allies when they kill three drunk, aggressive cowboys deputized by the "Indian killer," Sheriff Henry McCoy (J. Kenneth Campbell). McCoy, a "hero" of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre in which Sam served as a scout, pursues the still-captive boy and Sam, and later even Sally Lonewalk (Thirza Defoe), a young Native woman valuable to Sam because of the bounty on her head: she is wanted for the murder of an orderly who, viewers learn, had repeatedly raped her at the government-run asylum where she had been incarcerated. The fates of these four become entwined. Nachwihata seeks freedom—first from the school, then from Sam—and reunion with his parents. Sally seeks refuge in dance. Sam seeks, in his words, "to out-white the god-damned white man" by becoming the first Native Pinkerton detective and amassing both money and consumer goods. However, Sam eventually renounces his white identity, resumes his Cherokee name, Black Fox, and becomes a father figure to Nachwihata and Sally, finally returning both to safe places. As Sam moves towards acceptance of his Cherokee identity, and Nachwihata moves toward home, McCoy becomes increasingly unstable and undergoes psychic disintegration. He becomes more and more strongly associated with the vampire, and in the show-down with Sam/Black Fox, McCoy is beaten by a wooden cross and finally killed at sunrise, among the crumbling ruins of an ancient castle, when the knife that has remained lodged in his body since Sand Creek becomes violently dislodged and impales him from within.¹⁶

The film immediately invokes the Gothic by employing black-letter "gothic" forms of type for its title, intertitles, and credits, and it ostentatiously develops the Gothic theme through its unambiguous use of *Dracula* as an intertext and structuring device. Bram Stoker's 1897 novel appears

16 Willmott's playful allusiveness extends to his film locales. Part of the film features Kansas's Monument Rocks, a quip to John Ford's Monument Valley. The final scene is filmed at Ha Ha Tonka State Park in Missouri, which, according to its website (<http://mostateparks.com>) contains the ruins of a European-style castle.

on a shelf with other Gothic texts (*The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolfo*, *Frankenstein*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Invisible Man*) at the boarding school, attracting Nachwihata's interest. Excerpts from the novel—read in voice-over by Winter Fox Frank—are strategically selected for their relevance to Nachwihata's situation. For example, the first quotation from chapter one, "For the dead travel fast," is read as Nachwihata is transported by train to Lawrence in eastern Kansas, apparently replicating the direction of Jonathan Harker's journey to Budapest, from the civilized west to the barbaric east. Similarly, Nachwihata's "adventurous" journey to the boarding school becomes ominous and uncanny when it is implicitly compared to the "grim adventure" in *Dracula*'s castle which Harker considers in chapter two, and his feeling of imprisonment in chapter 3. When Nachwihata reads, "It all seemed like a horrible nightmare to me," his disorienting experience of boarding school horrors parallels Harker's disjunctive experience of pure evil. This disorientation—or reorientation—is signalled early in the scene of capture, when Nachwihata is knocked unconscious and slung over the neck of his abductor's horse; the camera films his world—his desperate mother, crying his name, receding into the distance—from his perspective, upside down. Ironically, *Dracula* then helps Nachwihata make sense of the senselessness of his boarding school experiences—to understand it as irrational evil, and thus as necessary to resist.

Willmott's mobilization of a classic tale of vampirism to dramatize the history of colonial expansion and Indian boarding school has important thematic and formal effects. The vampire has been popularized in Hollywood film productions from the early *Nosferatu* (1922) to today's blockbuster *Twilight* movies and *Trueblood* series, making it a familiar figure to Anglophone consumers of popular culture. In this familiar terrain, Stoker's *Dracula* continues to function as an ur-text. Because the vampire retains strong associations with "Old World" decadence, the Gothic references reinforce an understanding of the European presence in the New World as foreign, and of colonial settlement and Western expansion as invasive. In other words, in *The Only Good Indian*, the vampire draws attention to the exploitative nature of colonial relations on the frontier, as settlers feed on Native lands and seize Native children. This figure also becomes a metaphor for white persecution of Native identity. Part of the horror of the vampire lies in its relation to possession, involuntary transformation, and contagion: vampires transform living humans into their own kind.

This characteristic becomes an apt metaphor for the assimilation policy of boarding schools, reflected in the common practices of cutting hair, changing dress, forbidding Native languages and customs, enforcing non-Native temporalities and religious observances, all represented in the film. These aspects of vampirism also inform Wes Studi's assimilationist Cherokee character, who figuratively feeds on his own people and becomes more and more like the Western settlers, deadened to Native lifeways and consumed by capitalist culture. The film employs the trope of vampirism to make visible the exploitative and self-destructive effects of colonial practices and ideologies of assimilation.

Vampires, like ghosts, represent the past and bring it into the critical light of the present. Observing that the Gothic novel preceded the historical novel, Fiedler argues that "behind the gothic lies a theory of history, a particular sense of the past" (136). This sense, he argues, was "bitterly critical," and Gothic writers "evoked the olden days not to sentimentalize but to condemn them" (137). In a similar vein, Eric Savoy concludes that "gothic narrative emphatically refuses nostalgia" (8), if nostalgia is understood as "a will to sustained cultural coherence, a desire for the seamless authenticity of national narrative" (7). *The Only Good Indian* relies on the anti-nostalgic aspect of the Gothic mode in order to critique national myths about the American frontier, exposing the violence and injustice that bolstered Euro-American dominance in the early 1900s.

But Willmott also seeks to expose the complicity of popular film culture in reinforcing oppressive national mythologies. *The Only Good Indian* opens and closes with unmistakable visual allusions to John Ford's classic western, *The Searchers* (1956). Willmott's film, however, self-consciously replaces a colonial perspective with an indigenous one; indeed, in an interview Willmott has described his movie as "anti-Searchers" ("Kevin Willmott" np). Ford's movie opens with a view from the dark interior of a settler ranch into the sublime but desolate expanse of Monument Valley. This perspective reveals itself as that of Martha Edwards (Dorothy Jordan), married to Aaron Edwards (Walter Coy), brother of Ethan (John Wayne), who returns home several years after the end of the Civil War. The unspoken love between Martha and Ethan charges the opening scenes with tension. Martha's later anxious attempts to decipher the landscape fail to reveal the presence of hostile Comanches until it is too late, and the Indians slaughter her and her family, except for her daughters, one of whom is instead taken captive, thus instigating Ethan's obsessive, seven-year-long search, in the

company of Martha's adopted, mixed-blood son, Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter). *The Only Good Indian* similarly opens with a view from the dark interior of a simple cabin, but onto the green sweep of Kansas prairie. A simple handpump in the yard to the right marks the domesticity of the scene. To the left hang four bundles of dried herbs, difficult to identify but possibly indicative of the tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweetgrass important to Native healing and spirituality. The perspective is that of Nachwihiata's mother. As she and her husband smuggle Nachwihiata into the grasslands for a covert game of lacrosse, they are attacked by soldiers and Nachwihiata is bound and abducted. The kidnapping and subsequent attempt to return home comments ironically on the theme song for *The Searchers*, Stan Jones's "Sons of the Pioneers," which emphasizes the restless searching that causes men to leave home. Thus, Willmott's opening self-consciously reverses the lines of civilization and barbarity, domesticity and violence established in Ford's tale of frontier horror.¹⁷

The herbs displayed in the opening images of *The Only Good Indian* might suggest an effort to cleanse the images and perspectives that characterize Ford's film. These images are of Indian barbarism and savagery, though Ethan eventually "out-savages" his enemy, the Comanche leader Scar (Henry Brandon). The extent to which *The Searchers* condemns or affirms the racial hatred that comes to consume John Wayne's character remains an open question, but as Richard Slotkin observes, Wayne's strong appeal to film audiences incites generous interpretations of this role, and the character of Ethan becomes "re-absorbed into the on-going life of John Wayne-as-movie-star and becomes part of an ever-growing heroic persona that would finally make Wayne a 'living legend' ..." (473). In *The Only Good Indian*, the exploits of the Indian fighter, McCoy, become "immortalized" in pulp fiction and popular film; he is joined in his search for Nachwihiata and Sam by a hero-worshipper who has devoured the published tales of McCoy's heroics in the Indian wars. But it is precisely this heroism, and its stubborn endurance, that Willmott's film mocks. In one scene, a doctor injects McCoy with heroin, finding it an appropriate medicine since McCoy is a hero (of the notorious Sand Creek Massacre) and "The name of this drug comes from the German word for hero." A poster for a movie dramatizing his life advertises "the legend that wouldn't die," one of the

17 See Slotkin's analysis of elements of horror in *The Searchers*. Associated first with Indians, it becomes associated with Ethan's rage and repressed desires (465-67).

many film utterances overlaid with irony from the vampire analogy. In an elaborately cross-cut scene, McCoy watches the movie (composed of silent movie clips including D.W. Griffith's 1913 *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch*) and becomes horrified and re-traumatized by the moving images of violence, in contrast to his sidekick who relishes the screen version of Indian wars and the killing of Indians. Just as Ford's film can be seen to critique Wayne's "one-man pantheon of heroic types—gunfighter, outlaw, cavalryman, sergeant, rebel, Indian-fighter, rancher" (Slotkin 473), *The Only Good Indian* attempts to expose the racial hatred and violent underpinnings of Western heroism and to deflate nostalgia for Hollywood representations of "American" history through its fusion of Western and Gothic tropes.

Like *Older than America*, *The Only Good Indian* adapts a documentary mode at the end of the film. Three end titles appear in white print on a plain, black background, and they read: "Forcible removal of Native American, Alaskan Native and First Nation children from their families to distant boarding school continued well into the 20th century in the United States and Canada. In 2006, the Canadian government reached a settlement of nearly \$2billion in compensation paid to survivors of the Canadian schools and in 2008 issued a formal apology. The United States has not offered reparations or an apology for their involvement in the U.S. schools." This information draws the issues of captivity, assimilation, and exploitation—including representational exploitation—into the present of the film audience. Though Willmott has stressed a Native perspective on boarding school and frontier history, and has been unafraid to challenge non-Native viewers by avoiding "a white surrogate in the film to make the story 'OK'" (Niccum), the end titles make clear that this film, like *Lightning's*, has a pedagogical thrust, but it uses different strategies. By setting the film firmly in the past and by filling it with allusions to mainstream cultural productions, it may be that *The Only Good Indian* creates comfortable positions for non-Native viewers. Nevertheless, its critical, revisionary agenda is clear; Willmott's film draws on and revises conventions of the Gothic vampire in order to impart a Native perspective on popular representations of history.

The Gothic, Popular Culture, and Visual Sovereignty

As the above discussion has shown, the deployment of the Gothic mode clearly carries risks. Ghostly Indian figures may inadvertently confirm notions of vanishing Indians; Native spirituality risks being misread as a

Western literary trope or dismissed as an instance of the supernatural that requires rational explanation. Similarly, the parameters of the feature film might compromise visual sovereignty and impede the development of Native-centered artistic forms. In spite of these dangers, filmmakers such as Lightning and Willmott appropriate and revise the Gothic in their accounts of Indian boarding school captivity. In doing so, they expose “the racial, historical, and affective investments of the American tradition of the gothic—thus turning this tradition, too, against its creators” (Burnham 6). *The Only Good Indian* deploys the figure of the vampire to critique national mythologies and Hollywood representations of white heroism and Western conquest. Combining Gothic and Western modes, Willmott gives an alternative history of Indian boarding school captivity. *Older than America* combines the Gothic with a documentary and activist impulse to critique the history and contemporary effects of Indian boarding schools. The film appeals to non-Native and Native viewers through its use of Gothic conventions and its treatment of white characters. Most importantly, Lightning’s film invests spectrality with spiritual presence and significance, at the same time as it validates the social and political realities of contemporary Native North America.

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