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TELLING THEIR OWN STORIES:

INDIGENOUS FILM AS CRITICAL IDENTITY DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Over the past century, anthropologists have claimed primary authority regarding authentic filmic representations of indigenous peoples. The emergence of indigenous films since the 1980s—as well as changes within the discipline—have challenged the ethical grounding of such ethnographic representations of the “other.” Unlike the emphasis of ethnographic filmmakers on cultural explanation, many indigenous filmmakers currently engage a critical identity discourse that effectively addresses the complex historical and contemporary contexts of indigenous peoples. This paper contrasts Dustinn Craig’s (*White Mountain Apache*) experimental film, *4 Wheel War Pony*, with anthropologist Jerry Leach’s *Trobriand Cricket* in order to demonstrate how indigenous and ethnographic films can differ strikingly in their treatment of similar subject matter. With complex hybrid subject positions, indigenous filmmakers are often well positioned to critically engage the most challenging issues facing native communities today. These films also highlight limitations of disciplinary notions of the insider–outsider distinction, ethnographic holism, and objectivity in visual anthropology.

KEY WORDS: indigenous film, ethnographic film, critical identity discourse, visual anthropology

If someone is interested in the subject of indigenous peoples, then why not get it firsthand? Because that is the truth, and it is from their *experience*, instead of someone else looking in at them. There are a lot of dangerous things that happen when someone is not telling their own story. In a sense, Indians just become props in the films (Sterlin Harjo [*Seminole/Creek*]).¹

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists have historically claimed primary control over “authentic” visual representations of indigenous peoples through ethnographic film. However, disciplinary changes, as well as the proliferation of films made by indigenous peoples since the 1980s, have challenged this ethnographic authority. In response, many anthropologists have incorporated increasingly reflexive and collaborative methods. As ethnographers expanded the involvement of interlocutors within the film process, some began to hand the camera over to indigenous peoples to make films of their own.

Sol Worth and John Adair’s *Through Navajo Eyes* (1972) project was an early attempt at engaging with indigenous-produced film. These anthropologists were interested in whether the Navajo had a recognizable visual grammar, and if so, intended to discover it through the analysis of their films (Heider 2006:47–48). The Navajo films were subsequently analyzed as a window into the insider’s perspective—essentially emic data—used to support anthropological arguments. In the decades since, hundreds of indigenous films have been produced, both independently and in association

with anthropologists. Unlike ethnographers—trained to analyze distinct cultural groups from an outsider’s perspective—indigenous filmmakers, with personal experiences and complex relationships to home communities, are well positioned to engage in a critical indigenous identity discourse, such as is developed in Sandy Grande’s *Red Pedagogy* (2004) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999).

Indigenous identities—especially when framed through binary conceptions of purity and authenticity—are deeply enmeshed within the most serious challenges to native communities today, including youth risk behavior, community membership, and intergenerational trauma. The subject position of indigenous filmmakers within liminal identity spaces that transgress and challenge insider-outsider distinctions, have been able to engage these contemporary issues, while ethnographic filmmakers (generally speaking) remain biased toward outsider analyses of distinct categories within bounded groups. Indigenous films implicitly challenge the relevance of these disciplinary film traditions in their ability to address relevant indigenous issues. It is imperative that anthropologists engage indigenous films *not* merely as insider perspectives, but rather as critical works that often present valid and valuable complementary perspectives to ethnographic films (Ginsburg 1995).

Through a comparative analysis of Dustinn Craig’s (*White Mountain Apache*) *4 Wheel War Pony* and anthropologist Jerry Leach’s ethnographic film *Trobriand Cricket*, I argue that the subject positions of these filmmakers have resulted in radically different interpretations of relatively similar subject matter. I posit that indigenous filmmakers are gener-

The Applied Anthropologist

WILLIAM LEMPERT

Telling Their Own Stories...

ally better positioned to address issues of identity, which reside at the heart of many of the most critical contemporary issues for native communities. Finally, I offer suggestions for further critical anthropological engagement with indigenous film.

A HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS FILM

Worth and Adair's Navajo project was innovative in that, for the first time in anthropology, films created by indigenous peoples were seen as having academic value. Unlike the work of early ethnographic filmmakers, Worth and Adair were interested in what the Navajos themselves would visually document and imagine, rather than outsiders. This project emerged within a time of great change in ethnographic film history. Beginning in the 1950s with Jean Rouch, the role of the ethnographic filmmaker in objectively documenting and analyzing cultures was being challenged. He was particularly influenced by Robert Flaherty, the early documentary filmmaker known for his Inuit film, *Nanook of the North* (1922)—with his controversial penchant for blurring the borders between fact and fiction in cinema.²

Rouch's *cinéma vérité* style—displaying and interrogating the role of the filmmaker and the editing process—contrasted with the majority of earlier films, in which a seemingly omnipotent and omnipresent narrator commented on a culture, such as in the work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, John Marshall, and Robert Gardner (Rouch and Feld 2003). By the 1970s, prominent ethnographic filmmakers, including Tim Asch, Barbara Myerhoff, and Sarah Elder were experimenting with interactive and reflexive techniques that broke the illusion of the ethnographic present (Lutkehaus and Cool 1999:120). In addition, filmmakers including Leach began acknowledging issues of colonization and cultural hybridity.

Many early indigenous films grew out of ethnographic film projects. For example, later in their careers, Tim Asch and Terence Turner both encouraged and trained their previously filmed subjects to produce their own films (Asch et al. 1991; Turner 1995). The availability of inexpensive video equipment in the 1980s made indigenous film production feasible without the involvement of anthropologists. Regional organizations, including Native American Public Telecommunications, were formed with the explicit goal of spreading and supporting local indigenous media productions. The increased quantity and production value of these films led to a rise in independent and indigenous film festivals in the 1990s, which have been instrumental in the process of disseminating and promoting native films, helping many to achieve commercial success, including *Smoke Signals* (1998), *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), and *Whale Rider* (2002) (Wood 2008).

However, despite the diversity of indigenous films to date, anthropological discussions of these works have primari-

ly focused on “the social relations of image production and consumption (as well as) the cultural idioms through which indigenous producers and artists appropriate filmic mediums” (Poole 2005:170). In the present context in which many indigenous filmmakers have attended film school and lived betwixt and between a variety of communities, the focus on indigenous aesthetics and the filmmaking process has limited discourse to the cultural practices of distinctly defined groups. Faye Ginsburg has suggested that this:

lack of analysis of (indigenous) media as both cultural product and social process may also be due to our own culture's enduring positivist belief that the camera provides a ‘window’ on reality, a simple expansion of our powers of observation, as opposed to a creative tool in the service of a new signifying practice (Ginsburg 1995: 258).

The paucity of critical engagement with indigenous film relates to a larger pattern of holding native peoples to a double standard regarding their personal and academic works. This is partly a result of “the whitestream notion of Indian as romantic figure, not Indian as scholar and social critic—a predisposition that works to favor cultural/literary forms of indigenous writing over critical forms” (Grande 2004:102). Grande notes that:

Bookstore shelves are brimming with Native legends, poems, novels, and short stories, but are relatively barren of critical studies of contemporary American Indian life. In short, the obsession with identity politics has pressured American Indian intellectuals to succumb to the vision of who they are supposed to be instead of who they are (2004:104).

Both Grande and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn have discussed their own experiences of simultaneously receiving eager requests for their life stories along with skepticism of their critical works’ “objectivity” (Cook-Lynn 2008:336). For indigenous peoples, Grande maintains that “the game is rigged” in that the left-essentialism rampant in many sectors of academia and the arts has valued their cultural experiences while negating their ability to produce credible critical works (Grande 2004:103).

Debates around the postmodern crisis of representation in anthropology have addressed how ethnographic attempts at objectivity have proven problematic, both ethically and methodologically (Lyotard 1984; Marcus 1990).³ However, maintaining distance from one's subject has at times been productive for anthropologists in reducing their research bias. Harris stresses the importance of using scientific methods in order to “get it right” (1999:60). He maintains that the deconstructive and imaginative methodologies used by many postmodernists have led to biased and obfuscated conclusions (1999:157).

The Applied Anthropologist

WILLIAM LEMPERT

Telling Their Own Stories...

Charged with these criticisms, postmodern scholars have conversely criticized previous ethnographic traditions, and the larger culturally situated project of science itself, as being fundamentally colonial itself (Foucault 1984; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Thornton 1988). In an ironic Catch 22, the more an ethnographer engages intimately with their subjects in order to decolonize methodologies, the more they seem to risk projecting their own (possibly essentializing) fantasies onto their work.

To avoid such a paradox, ethnographic filmmakers have historically tended toward addressing topics that lend themselves to less subjective topics. Analyses of the structure and function of cultural practices—and more recently studies of power and the effects of colonialism—have worked particularly well within an insider-outsider model. As “outsiders,” ethnographers are in some ways better positioned to consider cultural practices within a larger context than individual actors. However, this has biased ethnographic descriptions toward focusing on cultural features that can be studied through this distanced methodology—generally omitting groups and topics that deal with complex subjectivities.⁴ Asch describes this shortcoming specifically in relation to ethnographic film:

Anthropologists have a special advantage, being outsiders to a culture. The distance from their subjects as well as the comparative framework of the discipline afford anthropologists a privileged understanding that insiders to a culture rarely seem to have. Moreover, the discipline in *methodically* studying culture yields insights that are different from the more intuitive insights that insiders have. At the same time a goal of anthropology has been to understand and represent, as much as possible, the insider's point of view. Yet in reflecting upon the accomplishments of the field of ethnographic filmmaking, I cannot avoid the *conclusion that we have, by and large, fallen short of the goal of making visual records that convey aspects of culture at once from the insider's point of view and with the privileged understanding of cross-cultural knowledge...* The reasons for our lack of success, I think, have to do mainly with the facts that *our own biases and preconceptions ultimately cloud our ability to see and say anything about another culture from an insider's point of view, and our relative outsider status means that we can never really know enough to be able to represent aspects of another culture the way they are experienced by members of that culture* (Asch 1991:103, *italics mine*).

As the issues relating to complex identities are among the most subjective aspects of culture, they do not lend themselves readily to anthropological methods. However, they do address a long-term disciplinary mission, described by Bronislaw Malinowski as grasping the “native's point of view, his relation

to life, [and] his vision of the world” (1922:290). While it is difficult for ethnographers to address issues of identity in isolated groups, it is even more challenging to engage hybridized indigenous identities.

If these aspects of culture were methodologically inaccessible, then this discussion would be a moot point. However, contemporary indigenous films are positioned particularly well to critically engage with liminal and hybrid identities. In the past, anthropologists such as Worth and Adair considered indigenous films as *emic* data: treating the selected Navajos as a representative sample of a distinct group (Ginsburg 1995:67). The connection of contemporary indigenous filmmakers to a multiplicity of communities and traditions positions them neither as members of a homogeneous group, nor as pure insiders or outsiders, what Bryan Brayboy and Donna Deyhle describe as the “dual position” of an “insider-outsider” (2000:164).

A useful way of discussing ethnographic and indigenous filmmakers is through Richard Kurin's conception of the *culture broker*, which “captures the idea that these representations are to some degree negotiated, dialogical, and driven by a variety of interests on behalf of the involved parties” (1997:19). The insider---outsider position of many indigenous filmmakers enables them to serve as cultural brokers based on their own experiences and community relationships. While ethnographic filmmakers may be more “scientific” than their indigenous counterparts in some ways, their methodologies and subject positions tend to severely limit such a critical engagement with identity.

Human beings are driven not only to struggle to survive by making and remaking their material conditions of existence, but also to survive by making sense of the world and their place in it. This is a cultural production, as making sense of themselves as actors in their own cultural worlds. Cultural practices of meaning making {performative subject constitution} are intrinsically self-motivated as aspects of identity-making and self construction: in making our cultural worlds we make ourselves. At least for those who have moved out of economic subsistence, perhaps the balance has tipped from instrumental to expressive struggle, so that humans are concerned more with the making of their cultural world than with the material world. Even in their material struggles for survival, they grapple with choices in “how to go on,” so as to deal with the maintenance of a viable cultural identity and its distinction and acknowledgement from others (Willis 2000:xiv).

Not only have indigenous peoples struggled for material survival, but centuries of systemic attempts at cultural annihilation by colonial powers have resulted in complex and multifaceted identity politics. However, multiculturalist and post-modernist discourses have generally failed to address the

unique postcolonial contexts that inform contemporary indigenous identities. Grande, a leading scholar on Native American identity and political thought, has discussed the unique challenges of addressing indigenous identity discourse in *Red Pedagogy* (2004). She argues that Western models based on left-essentialism and postmodernism are inadequate, and that:

[There is] a need for an indigenous theory of identity – one historically grounded in indigenous struggles for self-determination, politically centered in issues of sovereignty, and spiritually guided by the religious traditions of American Indian Peoples. The aim is to develop an emancipatory theory – a new Red pedagogy – that acts as a true counterdiscourse, counterpraxis, counterensoulment of indigenous identity (2004:95).

Grande admits that postmodernists have helped to “uncover the ways in which... ‘universalist’ theories have operated to normalize whiteness” (2004:101). These scholars have also articulated how “identity is shaped and determined by social and historical contingencies, not by some checklist of innate, biological, or primordial characteristics” (see de Lauretis 1989). However, the assumption of many postmodernists that individuals are “struggling to define their place within the larger democratic project” does not correspond to the priority of many indigenous peoples of political and cultural sovereignty (Grande 2004:98). The vast majority of multiculturalist scholarship—usually dealing with migration or immigration—is focused on how individuals fit into systems of power. Conversely, many indigenous peoples are more concerned with fending “off the global capitalist forces that crave indigenous cultures (while) at the same time... (operating) to destroy all that sustains indigenous communities” (2004:107). Grande describes how much of postmodern scholarship “primarily serves white America” and how “the notion of fluidity has never worked to the advantage of indigenous peoples” (2004:112).

Indigenous peoples “are neither free to ‘reinvent’ themselves nor able to liberally ‘transgress’ borders of difference, but, rather, remain captive to the determined spaces of colonialist rule” (2004:113). In order to move beyond the “reduction of difference to matters of discourse,” Grande suggests a critical engagement with the ways in which hybrid identities “both further and impede indigenous imperatives of self-determination and sovereignty” (2004:115). Ultimately, Grande’s development of a Red pedagogy “operates at the crossroads of unity and difference that defines this space in terms of political mobilization and cultural authenticity, expressing both the interdependence and distinctiveness as tribal peoples” (2004:118).

In her work with Australian Aboriginal media, Ginsburg discusses how film in particular has been able to serve as a

medium for indigenous peoples to not only engage in identity discourse, but also self-conscious identity *production*:

For Aboriginal producers, the goal of their media work is not simply to maintain existing cultural identities, what some Aborigines have called the ‘cultural refrigeration’ approach. The production of new media forms is also a means of cultural invention that refracts and recombines elements from both the dominant and minority societies.... Young Aboriginal people who are or will be entering into production are not growing up in a pristine world, untouched by the dominant culture, nor do they want to assimilate to the dominant culture. They are juggling the multiple sets of experiences that make them contemporary Aboriginal Australians (Ginsburg 2002:283).

TECHNIQUE IN FILMMAKING: LEACH VS. CRAIG

To operationalize these ideas, I apply the previously discussed critical indigenous identity discourse to both an ethnographic and indigenous film. Both Leach’s *Trobriand Cricket* (54 min.) and Craig’s *4 Wheel War Pony* (10 min.) present the appropriation of a Western-associated activity by an indigenous group, resulting in increased cultural sovereignty. Leach’s film is on the adaptation of the game of cricket by Trobriand islanders in response to British colonization, while Craig’s film explores the relationship between Fort Apache reservation skateboarding culture and the pre-contact Apache warrior system. *Trobriand Cricket*’s traditional ethnographic film style stands in contrast to with *4 Wheel War Pony*’s experimental juxtaposition of film, images, and animation. A stark difference exists between Leach’s omniscient narration and Craig’s virtual lack of any spoken words. Despite their emphases on similar topics, these films differ greatly as a result of their respective filmmakers’ subject position and relationship to the filmed community.

Trobriand Cricket (1976), as noted above, was produced by anthropologist Jerry Leach (with the help of filmmaker Gary Kildea) and was one of the earliest ethnographic films to engage issues of cultural hybridity (Leach 2002). As in Rouch’s *Les Maîtres Fous* (1959), Leach addresses the response of indigenous peoples to colonization. However, unlike Rouch’s work, the film follows traditional ethnographic conventions that, ironically, serve to reinforce cultural holism. This is in part due to the relationship of Leach with the Trobriand peoples.

As the primary architect of this film, Leach maintained a strictly scholastic association with the Trobriands. Studying this group for his dissertation, Leach conducted extensive participant-observation and archival research on these islanders. The Trobriand Islands represented a particularly crucial position in the history of ethnography, serving as the location of

The Applied Anthropologist

WILLIAM LEMPERT

Telling Their Own Stories...

Malinowski's seminal work on the Kula ring (1916). As if in homage to Malinowski, *Trobriand Cricket* is a manifestation of the idealized Malinowskian ethnographic tradition: an anthropologist, who had done extensive ethnographic fieldwork with a particular bounded culture, identifies an interesting cultural practice and conducts a functionalist analysis. Leach demonstrates this through extensive footage of the cultural practice including some insider perspectives by Trobriands. Through this methodology, Leach is able to illustrate how the Trobriand version of cricket embodied many of the rituals previously practiced in Kayasa war games. For example, Leach describes how it is guaranteed that the visiting team always loses the game, as is customary in Kayasa (Leach 2002).

While *Trobriand Cricket* follows traditional ethnographic film methods, its engagement with culture change does distinguish it from previous ethnographic films such as Marshall's *The Hunters* (1956) and Gardner's *The Nuer* (1971), which assumed a timeless ethnographic present (Heider 2006:101). However, the presentation remains deeply problematic. Leach's framing of Trobriand culture change is itself homogenizing. There is minimal engagement in the film with how colonization has fractured and reformulated identities variably between individuals and groups. This incorrectly implies that the subversive appropriation of cricket led to a distinctive cultural victory for the Trobriands over colonizing forces. In addition, the interviews in the film are sparse and highly structured; we do not get a sense from Trobriands of their general perspective on the game or what they think is important about it. Furthermore, the audience is led to believe that this cricket game occurred by happenstance, when in fact it was "specifically enacted for the camera team by the members of a local political movement, who at the time of filming were seeking an ascendant role in the Trobriand politics" (Weiner 1977:506).

Ultimately, this lack of engagement with issues of identity has dire consequences; it permits Leach to exclude the larger political Trobriand context. A shocking omission is any discussion of the indigenous Kabisawali movement, which began in 1968, and was engaged with particularly violent conflict with the colonial government during 1973, the year of *Trobriand Cricket*'s filming. While this movement was indeed anti-colonial, it also promoted some development and even assisted in setting up a bank, a hotel, as well as cultural tourism ventures (Jolly 2003). This complexity of identity and divisions within Trobriand society did not match Leach's framing of this game as a powerful symbol of cohesive resistance to colonization.

Narrative and self are inseparable in that narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience. Narrative activity provides tellers with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected events, and to create conti-

nunity between past, present, and imagined worlds... Through various genres and modes... narratives bring multiple, partial selves to life (Ochs and Capps 1996:19).

Many indigenous filmmakers have been able to engage issues of identity, because they are intimately connected with relevant personal experiences and native communities. Unlike Leach, Dustin Craig has not attempted to create distance to his subject. Rather, like Rouch, he includes images of himself: skateboarding, with his family, working on skate park construction, as well as filmmaking. Framing Craig as an "insider" in relation to anthropologists as "outsiders" would be a vast oversimplification. While Craig has strong ties to his home community, he is also a formally trained filmmaker, has lived in many cultural contexts, and has conducted academic research on Apache history and culture. It is his experience both within and outside of his home community that has enabled him to engage complex identity issues.

Craig spent much of his childhood on the Fort Apache reservation and has remained active in the community. Throughout his twenty years of skateboarding experience, he has been mentored by older Apaches and has himself mentored two generations of youth skateboarders. Craig has also spent much of his life in the Navajo capital of Window Rock (he is also Navajo), as well as other non-reservation urban areas around the country. He has also conducted in-depth scholarly research into Apache history for the 2009 PBS documentary *We Shall Remain: Geronimo*, which he directed and produced. Frequently referencing Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* (2006), Craig has been deeply interested in the relationship between Apache and Western ways of knowing. He makes the case that connecting the present with the past in Apache society is crucial for imagining futures for his community:

There is this whole world that the Apache used to live in before conquest. It was like a bubble of reality and everything happened inside that. Today we live in a different bubble. All of our anger about the bubble, our hopes, dreams, everything today is in that bubble, even if we rebel against it. We can't go back to how it used to be. All we can do is realize that that is where we came from and use that knowledge to create a new bubble in the future that will be neither like the old one or the current one (Craig 2008).

4 Wheel War Pony is born out of this perspective and is about more than a mixture of cultures. It also addresses possibilities for the production of future Apache identity:

On the surface, this film may seem to depict White Mountain Apache youth borrowing pop culture in place of their own, when it is actually their ancient Apache culture of young men, manifesting itself



within skateboard culture, resulting in a very distinct blend of two cultures that are both indigenous to the Americas (Craig 2008, mission statement).

While Leach meticulously articulated the function of the cricket game, Craig leaves the meaning of his film open to interpretation. In his film, footage of youth skateboarding in the reservation skate park is juxtaposed with archival Apache photographs, as well as reenacted footage of Apache scouts in a rapid-fire experimental style. There are also moments in which the scouts themselves are skateboarding, framing skateboarding within Apache cultural traditions as opposed to the United States subculture. However, by not explicitly defining the nature of these connections, Craig challenges the viewer to actively construct the specific meaning. While the primary goals of ethnographic description have been to accurately document, analyze, and present cultures as they are, the identity discourse contained within his film challenges viewers to critically engage stereotypes while imagining new possibilities of being.

Craig purposefully breaks the illusion of the ethnographic present. While the scouts are sometimes presented as stoic, in other scenes they are shown as laughing and playing with skateboards and toy guns. This choice was a conscious response to the PBS film he made on Geronimo, in which he felt pressured to portray white fantasies of Apache history. As Edward Said argued through the concept of *orientalism*, for these well-meaning producers, “the exotic is already known” (1978). Craig (2008) remarked: “It was great having the good public television deal, money, time and a staff, but after a hundred years I still couldn’t tell my own story.”

4 *Wheel War Pony* has been able to engage in Grande’s Red pedagogy in ways that ethnographic films such as *Trobriand Cricket* have not. Craig’s film frames issues of acculturation, colonization, and hybrid identities as actively navigated by Apaches. Leach presents the Trobriands as a cultural whole, forced to cope with and adapt to outside systems of power. While acknowledging culture change, it does so while “normalizing whiteness,” re-essentializing the Trobriands in light of these changes (Grande 2004:101). Conversely, Craig centers his analysis from an Apache perspective—in a nuanced and problematizing manner—which leads him to interpret the skateboarding culture largely as an expression of local traditions. By framing Apaches as individual agents of their own destiny within a complex historical context, Craig presents a landscape of possibilities for current and future Apache identities. This contrasts starkly with Leach’s homogeneous Trobriands, whose actions are framed primarily as reactive to Western influences, thus reinscribing their “otherness,” rather than critically engaging novel identities and changing perspectives on critically important and relevant Trobriand issues.

Increasingly, indigenous individuals around the world are intimately connected to multiple communities and, consequently, challenged with navigating manifold cultural selves. As a result, many of the pressing issues that indigenous communities face are directly connected to the hybrid and liminal identity spaces that indigenous films critically engage. Such representations are not only theoretically significant as discussed, but more importantly are practically relevant to indigenous peoples, as they address contemporary community issues.

Craig’s exploration of Apache skateboarding engages the high rates of depression, drugs, and suicide among the teenaged male youths on the Fort Apache reservation. As the complex system for gaining adult male status was largely dismantled during colonization by the United States government, Craig discusses how skateboarding has been able to foster a community that performs a similar social role. However, as his film does not present these issues in explicit narrative, it is necessary for the viewer to either have a background in the topic, read the filmmaker mission statement, or to attend a festival screening in which Craig introduces and explains this film.⁵

Craig addresses the risk rates for youth on the Apache reservation, which are broadly relevant to Native Americans; as a population, people on reservations face some of the worst risk rates of all youths in the United States. They “have the highest suicide rates of all ethnic groups ... and suicide is the second leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaska Native youth” (Duran and Duran 1999:573). Reservation youth are also faced with extremely high levels of interpersonal violence (Bearinger et al. 2005:270). In addition, Native American “youth tend to initiate substance use at a younger age, continue use after initial experimentation, and have higher rates of polysubstance use” than the general population (Beauvais 1992).

Eduardo and Bonnie Duran argue that researchers studying Native American issues of risk behavior have ignored issues of identity confusion and disparity (1995:178). They maintain that for native youths considering suicide, “the person’s relationship with the sacred is nonexistent, and suicide serves a purpose similar to that of alcoholism ... [filling] a hole.” This is supported by the work of Bearinger et al., whose longitudinal research has identified that belonging to a prosocial peer group is the most correlative protective factor against negative risk behaviors (2005:270). Arthur Brief and Stephan Motowidlo define prosocial behaviors as “positive social acts carried out to produce and maintain the well-being and integrity of others ... such as helping, sharing, donating, co-operating, and volunteering” (1986:710).

The Apache skateboarding community has provided a prosocial environment for the teenage male youths on the Fort Apache reservation. In a discussion I attended, Craig argued that young men “need a shield from the bad parts of society





they are prone to falling into” and that the skateboarding community—whose members pledge to refrain from alcohol, drugs, and violence—provides a setting for these prosocial protective factors. This is supported by Craig’s own experience on the reservation: “When I was in high school there was this older skateboarder who didn’t drink, and that had a huge impact on me. He looked out for me and in a way he was a shield for me.” Craig noted that indigenous films will not serve as a panacea for these issues, but argued that they are vital for drawing attention to, and engaging in, discourse on present realities and potential futures for the Fort Apache youth:

It’s a very charged film for me on many levels. It represents a lot of pride but it’s laced with a lot of despair. Lots of those kids are dead. They’ve committed suicide. They’ve committed homicides. They’ve had their remains scraped off the highways from drunk driving related accidents. Some of them are survivors. Some of those kids are completely washed away by alcoholism and drug addiction. So you are seeing these young men in the prime of their lives. There is a resilience and a strength (Craig 2009: Denver Indigenous Film and Arts Festival Q & A session).

Craig’s critical engagement with Apache hybrid identities in this film demonstrates the active role that Ginsburg (2004) describes as reimagining indigenous identities. Facing some of the highest rates of suicide, drug use, and violence (even among Native American reservation communities), the identity issues of youths on the Fort Apache reservation are literally life-or-death concerns. By drawing upon traditional Apache beliefs and customs, and melding them with contemporary reservation realities, Craig is able to play a productive role in encouraging Apache cultural futures that also actively undermine destructive essentializing identity discourses. While indigenous films vary greatly in style and tone, what they share is an engagement with indigenous identity, not only interacting intimately with contemporary issues, but also proposing possibilities for addressing them.⁶

The focus of ethnographic films on distinctive populations and cultural features makes them generally less effective at speaking to relevant indigenous issues. To reframe this point within the US context, I argue that Leach’s lack of engagement with the complexity of the Trobriand political and cultural context would be akin to a film on the US civil war, focusing entirely on how the Confederate forces altered their flags, uniforms, and military traditions in light of secession. While such a film would be interesting to some, certainly foreign anthropologists, it would have little relevance to the concerns and experiences of the people involved.

Ultimately, ethnographic and indigenous films are able to critically engage different aspects of communities. Ethnographers’ more distanced analyses position their films to investigate cultural dynamics whose purposes and meanings are

often less clear to the people who live within them than they are to outsiders. Appropriately, there is an active discourse regarding the ethical issues of such work. Bill Nichols has argued that at their worst, ethnographic films have been “about a desire to know other people and other cultures... and making other people elements in the ethnographer’s arguments” (Loizos 1993:206). The ethnographic filmmaker Jay Ruby has even argued that the time for outsider anthropological visual representation of indigenous peoples has passed (1995:78). While there are many valid critiques of specific ethnographic films, we should resist the temptation to reject them indiscriminately.

Instead, these films should be judged by their sustained collaborative involvement with the community throughout the film process, rather than the lack of such involvement in the past. Furthermore, there has been a recent influx of ethnographic films, and related scholarship, that do attempt to engage identity and community-defined issues.⁷ However, despite the ability of indigenous films to critically deal with identity discourse and contemporary indigenous issues, there has been relatively little anthropological engagement with these films as *critical works*; rather they too often continue to be pigeonholed as data, art, biography, or an insider’s perspective.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I suggest productive areas of research for further engagement with indigenous film as critical identity discourse. While these films may be discussed as a whole—in this case to contrast them generally with ethnographic film—there are multiple subgenres and local film traditions that remain undeveloped in the anthropological literature. For example, many indigenous filmmakers are drawing on road trip, horror, and western Hollywood film genres, as well as others. Development of critical analytical frameworks is needed to understand the ways in which these filmmakers follow and more interestingly, subvert genre conventions. Recent indigenous science fiction films are particularly promising, in light of this genre’s propensity for social critique via the imagining of dystopian futures and extraterrestrial encounters.

Furthermore, indigenous film festivals are ideal and heretofore understudied fieldsites for such anthropological engagement, because the attending filmmakers are available and generally pleased to discuss their work. These festivals are ethnographically rich both on and off screen, where introductions, Q & A sessions, and receptions inform one not only on the filmmaker’s perspective, but also their interactions with audiences and festival organizers (Lempert 2011).⁸ An excellent and rare example is Kristin Dowell’s (2006) work with the NMAI film festival. As anthropologists continue to critically engage with indigenous film, filmmakers, and film festivals, it is essential that analyses be grounded in contemporary issues whenever possible. In order for anthropological scholarship to



The Applied Anthropologist

WILLIAM LEMPERT

Telling Their Own Stories...

remain relevant to indigenous communities, it is imperative that we move beyond any limiting disciplinary conventions that serve to hinder a deep and critical engagement with indigenous film.

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NOTES

¹ Throughout this paper, I quote indigenous filmmakers. Unless otherwise specified, these are taken from personal interviews during the 2009 Denver Indigenous Film and Arts Festival as part of my M.A. research through the University of Denver (Lempert 2011).

² Flaherty's role in the history of ethnographic and collaborative film is complex. On the one hand, he was among the first filmmakers to live for years with an indigenous community. He even showed his films to the Inuits to get their feedback, an important precursor to collaborative filmmaking (Heider 2006). However, he is also charged with fictitious staging that projected noble savage stereotypes. For example, in one scene in *Nanook of the North* (1922), an Inuit man seemingly cannot understand what a record is (despite the fact that the Inuits listened to Flaherty's record player often) and bites it three times, presumably to see if it is food.

³ The debates surrounding postmodernism are vast and necessarily generalized for the purposes of this paper. Postmodernism in anthropology is typified by scholars that are concerned with the possibility of ethnographic objectivity and power disparities between researchers and their subjects. The category is problematic as it can—at its most inclusive—include such divergent scholars as Geertz, Foucault, Marcus, and Gupta. However, for the purposes of this article, such a generalization is useful in contrast to the critical concerns of many indigenous scholars.

⁴ Furthermore, ethnographic claims of "first or early contact" are often less cohesive and "pure" than we are led to believe (Thornton 1988).

⁵ Due to the non-narrative structure of Craig's film, previous knowledge is particularly important. However, it is generally the case that for outsiders, indigenous films will require more engagement beyond the screening than will ethnographic films, which are targeted toward outsider audiences and tend to assume little or no knowledge.

⁶ While I focus on a single film in this section, there are numerous indigenous films that also engage critical identity discourse and community issues. For example, in my masters thesis (Lempert 2011) I explore several of these films, incorporating personal filmmaker interviews. Here I briefly note five representative examples: (1) Tracey Deer's documentary, *Club Native* (2008), on debates surrounded blood quantum, "racial" intermarriage, and membership on the Mohawk Kahnawake reservation, (2) Sterlin Harjo's *Barking Water*, a feature exploring the elderly native experience and reservation poverty, (3) Janelle Wookey's short, *Mémère Métisse* (2008), on issues of intergenerational shame and discrimination of métisse, or partly indigenous Canadians, (4) Reagan Tarbell's documentary, *Little Caugnawaga: To Brooklyn and Back* (2008) on the complexities of Mohawk identity for the families of skyscraper builders in New York City, and (5) José Luis Matías and Carlos Peres Rojas' documentary, *Under the Open Sky* (2007), detailing the community negotiation of wages and social benefits by poverty stricken miners with the Canadian transnational company Goldcorp Mining.

⁷ It is not within the purview of this article to survey the vast amount of scholarship on collaborative ethnographic filmmaking, nor the increasing number of ethnographic films that are deeply collaborative, though this is a related

and important discussion. For excellent engagement with these topics, see Asch (1991), Elder (1995), Ginsburg (1995), Heider (2006), Lutkehaus and Cool (1999), Myerhoff (1978), Ruby (1995), and Turner (1995).

⁸ From my interview experience for this research, the ImagiNative festival in Toronto emerged as a particularly respected and interesting festival for indigenous filmmakers, and I suspect it will make for an excellent field site, especially for engaging experimental films.

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The Applied Anthropologist



WILLIAM LEMPERT



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The Applied Anthropologist



WILLIAM LEMPert



Telling Their Own Stories...

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