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The Representation of Natives in American Culture:
from the Colonial Period to Hollywood

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ABSTRACT

Since Christopher Columbus and his expedition disembarked in the American continent in 1492, the autonomy of native population started to decrease as they were enslaved, massacred, and forced to leave their lands. Many of the written records of the time presented the new continent as a promised land ready to be colonized, full of treasures and opportunities. However, these vast territories were already inhabited by different native communities which would be despised and annihilated by the new settlers. Natives were presented as savage and barbarous creatures that had nothing in common with Europeans. For this reason, whites considered that they had the right to invade native territories because they were superior to Indians, a stereotype that unfortunately was disseminated by the writings of the time and early cinema productions, and has lasted until our days.

Keywords: *American Conquest, 17th Century Writings, Hollywood Movies, Indians, Native Americans, Stereotypes.*

RESUMEN

Desde la llegada en 1492 de Cristóbal Colón y su expedición al continente Americano, la autonomía de los pueblos nativos que allí habitaban se vio reducida debido a que en muchos casos fueron esclavizados, masacrados y obligados a abandonar sus tierras. Las crónicas de la época presentaban el nuevo mundo como una tierra prometida que estaba esperando a ser colonizada, llena de tesoros y oportunidades al alcance de la mano. Sin embargo, dichos territorios ya estaban habitados por diversos pueblos nativos que fueron menospreciados y aniquilados por los nuevos inquilinos. Se representó a los nativos como verdaderos salvajes que no tenían nada en común con los europeos. Los blancos se creyeron seres superiores y con derecho a invadir los dominios de los indígenas, un estereotipo que, por desgracia, los escritos de la época y las primeras producciones cinematográficas propagaron y aún persiste en nuestros días.

Palabras Clave: *Conquista de América, Estereotipos, Indios, Nativos Americanos, Películas de Hollywood, Textos del Siglo XVII.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the United States of America has been described as a melting pot of people from a huge diversity of cultures and races such as European people from different countries that decided to move there for economic or social reasons, or followers of distinct religions that needed to escape from European religious oppression. To this initial mixture, it is necessary to add the Native Americans that were already living there and the black slaves that were brought from Africa to work in the fields. With the passing of time, the population started to mix among themselves, resulting in the modern heterogeneous American society.

Despite the fact that USA has always been presented as "The land of Opportunity", the country where every single human being could achieve wealth and freedom through their own effort, this is just applicable to some fraction of the citizens. Soon after the initial settlements, the native population was progressively subdued to the white Anglo-Saxon settlers who eventually became the dominant social class, status that has remained until the present day.

Although white society has always tried to project an image of tolerance and equality, history proves that this is not true at all. From the beginning, Native Americans, or Indians as white people referred to them, were moved away from their lands and forced to flee from their villages and to seek new territories to live, just to end confined in Indian reservations. American culture has also systematically portrayed a negative image of Native Americans, from the first writings of the 17th century, to the Hollywood films of the 20th century.

Through this junior thesis, I will analyze the situation of social exclusion that the Native Americans were forced to face after the British colonization of North America, and how the white men have constantly depreciated Natives, with some traces still visible at present. In order to reflect this situation, I will briefly review the historical context to highlight the most significant events of the colonization process, combined with an analysis of some literary texts written by the first settlers that reflect the initial struggles. Once this theoretical framework has been set, the study will then center on the analysis and reflection on two American films of different nature: a classical Hollywood film, *Dances with Wolves*, and an alternative cinema film, *Smoke Signals*.

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to clarify if the United States has overcome the problems of social discrimination that appeared with the conquest and the creation of the new country, or if these problems still remain visible in American society and culture.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Misconceptions

A series of misconceptions have surrounded the culture of the Natives from the early contact. So often the Natives were negatively depicted by white men as a bunch of dehumanized people without any kind of sophisticated culture, as savage and barbarous beings that had nothing in common with European people. Although their culture might not be the richest of the time—for example Central and South American Indian civilizations were more advanced in cultural terms—accepting as true the previous statement is going too far. Due to the ocean barriers, the people of the American continent lived in isolation and the Natives could neither trade with other regions nor take profit of the technological advances, as people from other continents could do. For example, because of this isolation, agriculture was discovered later in America than in the rest of the world. The origins of agriculture in the American continent are in Mexico around 5000 B.C. and circa 1000 B.C. a complete agriculture had already extended to the territories that today belong to the United States, making the life of some tribes more sedentary and allowing them to live in small villages. For instance, some cultural remains from this period have been found, such as burial mounds of different size and shape (Asimov, 1983:12-13).

When talking about their culture, it is almost impossible to generalize because each group had its own identity and created its own culture, with its language, way of life, and religious beliefs. Usually, the way of life was determined by the environment in which they lived, and it determined the tools they used and the sociopolitical organization. But there was one thing that all different cultures shared: their closeness to nature, the land they inhabited was for them tremendously important and constantly present in their lives. This idea makes a lot of sense considering that many of them survived thanks to nature because they were mostly hunter-gatherers, and it may be appreciated from their artistic expressions to their ideas of union between natural and supernatural world. Luther Standing Bear, chief of the Oglala Lakota, clearly illustrates this:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and the winding streams with tangled growth, as "wild." Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land "infested" with "wild" animals and

"savage" people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it "wild" for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the "Wild West" began (qtd. in Callicot 1998: 201).

2.2. The 1492 "discovery"

At the very end of the 15th century there was a brief period of peace and economic wealth in Europe: several internal and religious conflicts had been put to an end, such as The War of the Roses and the Reconquest of Spain. This interval of stability allowed to save money which started to be used in some kind of luxury products, and for this reason in Europe the demand for exotic products such as spices or silk, that were abundant in Asia, increased constantly. However, there was a problem: the ships had to go around Africa which made the trip long, really expensive, and dangerous because of the abundance of pirates. In an attempt to reduce the cost of these commercial trips, Christopher Columbus convinced the Spanish monarchs to organize an expedition to reach the Indies sailing to the West. Although Columbus did not reach Asia as he thought, he had discovered a continent rich in gold which later would be named America: the fate of Native Americans was sealed.

Columbus' expedition left the Spanish coast the 3rd of August 1492 with three small ships and ninety sailors. They thought that they were heading towards the Indies to enrich themselves by trading, but without being conscious of the expedition's importance, they were on their way to an unknown land in the most crucial sea travel of human history, a trip that would eventually change the world as it was so far. The travel extended for eight weeks, more than it was originally planned because Columbus' information about the distance to the Indies was erroneous, so it triggered some anxiety and demoralizing effects on the crew. Finally, the 12th of October they saw land. It was not the continent, but the island of Guanahani, named San Salvador by Columbus. This island was inhabited by people whose skin color was darker than European's, so Columbus thought that he had reached India and called this inhabitants Indians (Asimov, 1983: 54).

When the inhabitants of these lands, the Arawaks, saw the tree big ships, they ran to the beaches to greet the Europeans and brought them some water and food, as well as some welcome gifts such as parrots or spears. Natives were amazed by the sunshine in the body armors and this led to an episode of hospitality towards their new visitors. They had a good will and there were no attempts to harm the Spaniards. This tribe was similar to some other tribes of the continent who were also known for their disposition to share items and trade (Zinn, 2003: n.p.). Although not all native communities were as friendly as the Arawaks were, this was not the case and from the very beginning Columbus started to speculate about the possibility of a conquest of the new land, as he reflected in his diary:

They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane.... They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want (qtd. in Zinn 2003: n.p.).

Christopher Columbus was a merchant, and as such, his main objective was to make fortune. When he signed the treaty with the Spanish monarchs, he was granted a 10% of all benefits of the expedition, so at that moment, to find gold was his main worry. As he recognized in his personal diary, once he saw that some Natives wore some gold ornaments in their ears he ordered to take some of them as prisoners in order to be guided to the gold origin. With these Natives on the ships, the expedition reached Cuba and Hispaniola, where they found some gold in the rivers which made the members of the expedition start to dream about mountains of gold. Unfortunately, one of the ships run aground on Hispaniola and with its wood they built a fort named *Navidad* where thirty nine men stayed to look for the gold while the rest of the expedition returned to Spain (Asimov, 1983: 56).

When he returned, Columbus was received as a hero at the Metropolis and soon he became one of the most famous people of his time. After his exaggerated tales and gold promises, soon many investors were willing to finance and to take place in the incoming expeditions to the Indies. The objective of the investors was to make as much money as possible, and it meant to gather gold and slaves. Later on, during the second trip, Columbus found the fort destroyed and the men missing, probably killed by the Natives. This led to a series of raids of revenge where Spaniards attacked the Native's

villages to capture slaves, and also they established a system to force the Indians to collect gold for them. In case the Indians did not cooperate, they were persecuted and executed, which caused the mortality rate of the Indians to rise uncontrollably. Within the first two years of the Spanish domination of Hispaniola, half of the 250,000 Natives were dead (Zinn, 2003: n.p.). This was the first glimpse of the situation that would develop in the upcoming centuries: Europeans that reached America and used their technological and military superiority to dominate the Natives in order to fulfill their goals.

During the first half of the 16th century, the Spaniards conquered large areas of the Caribbean and the actual Mexico, which eventually led to an expansion towards the North. In 1528, the Spanish conqueror Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca took part in an important expedition to North America, which started in the actual region of Florida and moved to the West. However, the explorers got lost and some of them, including Cabeza de Vaca, were made prisoners by the Indians for six years. During this period, he stayed in contact with the Natives and he reflected his impression and ideas in his diaries, as we will analyze later. The following decades were characterized by several expeditions along the West through the Southern states, by the start of the conflicts with the Natives, and by the foundation in 1565 of the first permanent European settlement in North America: San Agustín (Jenkins, 2012: 28-29).

2.3. Initial English settlements

Although at the beginning of the 16th century the English were not very much interested in the colonization of the new lands, once they realized that the Spanish crown and explorers were obtaining enormous benefits, they decided to take part in the adventure. During the reign of Elisabeth I, the diplomatic relationships between Spain and England worsened because of the religious differences. Even though there were no attempts of colonization, this new confrontation favored the harassment of English pirates such as John Hawkins and Francis Drake to Spanish ships and settlements (Asimov, 1983: 80-84; McFarlane, 1992: 26-30), so the English crown was more focused on weakening the Spaniards than on the financing of new expeditions to America.

Despite some colonizing failures such as the colony founded in Roanoke Island in 1584 by Walter Raleigh, during the reign of James I, in 1606, the Parliament founded the Virginia Company with the idea of supporting a private colonization of America. This company was divided into two branches: the London division and the Plymouth one, both supported by merchants and investors of each town respectively. The following year, the former section organized an expedition which eventually founded the city of Jamestown in the area of Virginia. The land where they disembarked was not the paradise that they had been told about, it was just a new land where they had to work hard to survive (McFarlane, 1992: 51-52). Considering that many of the settlers belonged to the upper middle class, they were not able to hunt, fish, or build houses, which led to a drastic drop in the population after the first winter, from the original 104 settlers to only 38 (Asimov, 1983: 96).

The other main enterprise organized by the English took place in 1620 as a result of a religious affair. After the religious reformation performed by Elizabeth I, some English puritans did not agree with the catholic precepts of the Church because their religious conception was more extremist. They wanted to settle in a new territory where they could express their own ideas without fearing the consequences of repression for it. Therefore, some pilgrims known as the Pilgrim Fathers embarked on the Mayflower and sailed to the new continent, founding the city of Plymouth, Massachusetts (Jenkins, 2012: 38; Asimov, 1983: 109-111). In all these new settlements, religion was fundamental and social life was ruled by religious precepts and morality. Sinner, adulterous and heretic pilgrims were severely punished and this caused that some dissatisfied pilgrims decided to found other colonies, such as Rhode Island, or Maryland which became a refuge for Catholic people (Doval, 2009: 83-84).

2.4. Anglo-Indian relationships

As was stated before, the first years of the new settlements were characterized by the difficulties that the pilgrims had to overcome, such as hard winters, hunger, or the lack of help from the metropolis. Considering this dramatic situation, it is not difficult to believe that the new settlements would not have lasted longer by themselves. Nevertheless, the governor of Jamestown, John Smith, managed to establish contact

with the local Natives, the Powhatan, who taught the Europeans to labor the land and provided them with some food during the initial months (Asimov, 1983: 97). These encounters almost ended with Smith's life, who was captured during an expedition and was going to be executed in December 1607. However, according to traditional interpretations of the event, Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, managed to save him, leading to a period of friendly relationship between both societies. Indeed, Pocahontas converted to Christianity and married an English settler named John Rolfe, becoming the first intermarriage between both cultures. The couple lived for some years in America, and in 1616 they travelled to England with their son, where Pocahontas died next year of smallpox or pneumonia (Doval, 2009: 103-104).

In the case of Plymouth colony the situation was more or less the same: when the pilgrims arrived, they found themselves in a hostile territory at the mercy of the weather conditions and the lack of supplies. During the first winter, half of the pilgrims and the governor died of starvation and of several diseases, so John Winthrop was elected governor. Nevertheless, the Wampanoag Natives showed their friendliness and helped the settlers to survive by introducing them to the local crops such as corn. With the help of Squanto, a Native that had been previously enslaved and had learned English during his captivity, the pilgrims established a peace treaty with Massasoit, the chief of the Wampanoag. In 1621 the harvest was very abundant, so in order to celebrate it, they organized the first Thanksgiving Day with the Indians, a tradition that has lasted until our days (Asimov, 1983: 113-114).

Nevertheless, all that glitters is not gold, and after a brief period of pacific coexistence between white men and Natives, the first conflicts appeared. As the colonists became stronger and the population of their towns increased, they started to demand more lands from the Indians to grow tobacco, the main economic activity. In spite of the Indian superiority in quantity, European advanced technology played a crucial role in the new settlers' victory. Furthermore, epidemic diseases were a key factor in the English victory; even deadlier than wars, diseases highly contributed to the decrease of indigenous population. In Virginia, the new settlers invaded some Indian territories, which caused in 1622 an Indian attack on Jamestown where one third of its population perished. This attack gave arguments to those settlers who claimed that Natives were barbarous and savage people who needed to be exterminated, and by

1650, the Native population of the coastal plains had decreased from 20,000 Native inhabitants in 1608, to roughly 2,000 (McFarlane, 1992: 89-90).

The situation in New England was similar, with a tendency of depicting Natives as pagans whose traditions and beliefs were bad just because they were different from the Christian ones. These settlers had strong racist beliefs and in exchange for the original Natives' help, they claimed that Natives were nomadic tribes made of hunters who did not labor the land, so they did not need it and it could be claimed by the English when appropriate. Several conflicts such as the Pequot War together with the diseases contributed to the drastic drop of the Native population of New England from 70,000 Indians in 1620, to 12,000 in 1670 (McFarlane, 1992: 91). This situation has been very well summarized by the British historian Anthony McFarlane:

While the settlers wanted to use the Natives for war and trade, the English considered themselves as the ethnic superior lineage and regarded the Indians as ignorant people [...] who had no place in white society. In contrast with the Spanish tendency of assimilating the Natives in the colonial society, the English considered them as an obstacle for the colonization, suitable only to be separated or removed (McFarlane, 1992: 92-93. My translation).

2.5. Native Americans decline

The remaining years of the 17th century and the 18th century were characterized by the massive migrations of European settlers to the new continent. By 1650, the population of the English colonies was close to 50,000 inhabitants, and just fifty years later, it had already grown up to 400,000 (McFarlane, 1992: 212). In addition to the European technological supremacy, the Natives were also losing their numerical advantage, so during the next decades the Europeans continued gaining lands at the expense of the Native. Although several peace treaties were signed, as soon as the new settlers needed more lands, they invaded the Natives' territories which eventually evolved into a new series of conflicts such as King Philip's War. These conflicts, which were mainly triggered by the continuous desires of expansion, arose not only with the Indians, but also with other European nations, especially with France. Between 1688 and 1763, four of these French and Indian Wars took place, and they were characterized

by the manipulation of the Natives to fight for the Europeans. Both the French and the English used their Indian allies, and this situation favored a further weakening of the Natives (Doval, 2009: 115-122).

As historian Isaac Asimov points out, by 1763, only one century and a half after the first arrival of English pilgrims to North America, the English had absolute naval superiority, they had expelled the French from the new continent, and the Natives from the East coast were a minor problem due to the continuous plunder of their lands and way of life. At this time 1.2 million white people lived in North America, a 20% of England's population, and they were not up for the acceptance of any kind of insulting laws from the metropolis that restricted their ability to colonize new lands, that limited their economic activity in benefit of the English one, or that imposed them new abusive taxes. The English kept on exploiting the colonists through high taxes and trading restrictions, and as the inhabitants of the colonies no longer needed the English to defend themselves from the French or the Indians, this situation eventually led to the Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies in 1776 which won the war against England and founded the United States of America (Asimov, 1983: 258-261).

If there is a feature that perfectly represents the situation of the United States in the 19th century, it is the expansion to the West. If for the first pilgrims the Indians represented the unknown savage world, for the Americans the Natives were a mere obstacle in the territorial expansion towards the Pacific Ocean. As Gregorio Doval highlights, "Since the United States became a sovereign country, they made clear their intention of conquering, sooner or later, the rest of the continent no matter who disagrees" (Doval, 2009: 136-137. My translation). This is a clear reference to the Natives, who by the end of the century were largely outnumbered by the white population. In the first census of the US in 1790, the white population almost reached four million inhabitants, in contrast with the Indian population which was of one million according to the most optimistic estimations (Paredes, 1992: 197-198). At this point, the white expansion to the West was unstoppable, but they were not open to a peaceful coexistence, giving the Natives two options: either to remain in their communities and fight for their territories, or to flee to the West leaving the land for the Americans. With the pass of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 started one of the most shameful episodes of the American history, causing a huge wave of mass migrations to the West resulting in the infamous Trail of Tears in which thousands of Natives passed away (Doval, 2009:

167, 170). There were some exceptions though, as the Five Civilized Tribes. This term was used to refer to the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, who decided to adopt the white way of life based on permanent settlements. In contrast with other Indian tribes that relied on hunting, they made a living by agriculture, wore "normal" clothes, and even adopted slavery, features that gained the "civilized" designation by the whites (Spicer, 1969: 69-70).

This situation exacerbated during the following decades, especially after the discovery of gold in California that intensified the conflicts between the new settlers and the Natives. In 1851 a peace treaty was signed at Fort Laramie by which the native activity was limited to a specific area, being considered the precedent for the actual system of Indian reservations (Jenkins, 2012: 175). After a series of military victories achieved by the Indian chief Red Cloud, in 1868 the Natives were assigned some territories known as the Great Sioux Reservation in the area of the Black Hills where the access of white people was forbidden without permission (Paredes, 1992: 278). Nevertheless, when gold was discovered there a few years later, it was not long before the gold seekers invaded these Indian sacred territories causing new confrontations. The army, instead of stopping these invasions as accorded in the 1868 treaty, invaded the territories to reduce the Natives and seclude them in the reservation which caused a series of conflicts. The United States suffered a serious defeat at the Battle of Little Big Horn, where General Custer and 225 soldiers of the 7th Cavalry Regiment perished in a reckless and careless attack against the Indians led by brilliant chiefs such as Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull (Jenkins, 2012: 225).

In spite of the shocking effect of this Indian victory over the Americans, it marked the beginning of the end of Indian tribes as free communities, and from this point onwards the American public, governmental, and military opinion fully focused on the submission of the Natives. Crazy Horse surrendered in 1877, and between 1881 and 1886 some other tribal chiefs as Sitting Bull and Geronimo followed the same path (Doval, 2009: 288-293). The infamous "battle" of Wounded Knee is considered the last violent episode of the Indian wars. The 7th Cavalry Regiment went to Pine Ridge Indian reservation to disarm a group of Natives, but as a consequence of a quarrel between an Indian named Black Fox and the soldiers, the latter, maybe as a kind of revenge for the Little Big Horn defeat, opened fire against the Indian multitude killing more than 300 people (Doval, 2009: 310-311).

This period of armed confrontation between Indians and Americans during the second half of the 19th century highly contributed to the creation of the derogatory image of the Natives that prevailed during the following decades. In addition, it also refreshed the original racist and pejorative stereotypes of the Indians that had firstly appeared with the first pilgrims and that later on would be present in many Hollywood movies.

2.6. Life in a reservation

Although we may think that the Indian problems finished in the late 19th century with the end of the Indian Wars, it was just the beginning of a new Trail of Tears in which the Natives were forced to live deprived of their culture and whose consequences are still visible in modern Indian communities. Under the actual conception of the world, the actions of the white settlers during their first two centuries in America are totally condemnable and despicable; however, at those times there was a different conception of the world and there were not so many ideas related to human rights, with the national expansion prevailing over the means used to get it. For example, if slavery was a standard practice, what did the situation of the savage Natives matter? For this reason, the most reprehensible behavior was not the one of the initial centuries, but the one of the 19th and, especially, 20th century, in which the Natives were still mistreated and marginalized by the modern American white society, having detrimental consequences on the identity and lifestyle of these peoples.

When the American frontier was still moving to the West, some tribal groups were assigned vast territories to perform their activities without interfering in the white man expansion. At the beginning this system seemed a promising option for both social groups, but when the whites needed more lands, the Indians were either forced to move into another territory or the limits of the reservation were reduced, so thousands of people were forced to live in a cramped area. Indeed, the American anthropologist Clark Wissler goes further and even points out that after several reductions of a reservation's area, it looked like a concentration camp (Wissler, 1993: 361). Although this definition may look quite exaggerated, it is not so far from reality as we are going to see in a while. There were some reservations where the death rate exceeded 10%, while the

standard mortality of the country at the time was 3%. Diseases had much to do in this situation, but also the bad quality of the food, and the bad hygienic and sanitary conditions of the reservations that were characteristic of extremely poor living conditions. As Wissler highlights, in many cases the reservation agents, the government employees with supreme authority in the reservation, were corrupt and instead of using the public funds to buy the necessary items for the Natives, they kept some benefits.

Historians such as J. Anthony Paredes, Gregorio Doval, and Clark Wissler highlight the importance of the word "civilization" for the whites: the main goal of the reservation system was to civilize the Indians, without considering that the Natives already had their own civilization; indeed, they had had their own civilization for centuries, and it was with the white men's arrival to America when this civilization started to be destroyed. The white man not only snatched the lands from the Indians in an unceasing push to the West, but also they wanted to force the Natives to abolish their culture and way of life. The agents promoted some measures that contributed to the loss of identity of the Natives such as the change of their original tepees for huts, the obligation to wear "civilized" clothes, and the encouragement to deposit their money in a bank account. The males were forbidden to arrange their hair in a plait style and were forced to cultivate "civilized" crops such as wheat instead of the traditional corn, something very humiliating for them because traditionally women performed this task (Wissler, 1993: 367-369).

One of the most harmful measures was the decision to send the native children to study in boarding schools away from their reservations. In these schools they were deprived of their culture, they were forced to talk in English and these measures had terrible consequences on them: when they returned to the reservation, not only were they completely different people who had lost their culture and traditional values, but also they had many problems to adapt themselves to their ancient way of life. In addition, their religion and ceremonial activities were also forbidden for many decades, causing an irrecoverable loss of culture for the next generations (Doval, 2009: 325-328).

The Natives also fell behind in the legal sphere, and although it may look like a paradox, in the land of freedom and opportunities the Natives did not obtain neither the right to vote nor American citizenship until 1924 with the Indian Citizenship Act. During the 1950s, the government erroneously considered that the Natives were ready

for their immersion in American society out of the reservations; the Indians were given some money and a job, but the reality was very different and soon they found themselves with many debts and unemployed. They were not used to an economic system where all was about money, private property and individualism, so they never fully integrated themselves and ended up impoverished, marginalized in ghettos such as Denver or L.A., and with a severe addiction to alcohol. Many of them were the offspring of the generation that had lost its cultural values while studying in the boarding schools, so now they had nothing to fight for because they had no culture, no job, and no hope (Doval, 2009: 332-333; Wissler, 1993: 370).

Although in recent years the native population has increased up to 2,750,000 individuals and their living conditions have improved mainly due to the ownership of casinos, they still are a disfavored social group within American society, and their unemployment, alcoholism, and suicide rates are higher than other groups'. As sociologist Algernon Austin highlights, the main obstacle of actual Natives is their elevated unemployment rates in comparison with the ones of white population. In 2011, these rates reached 14.6% in contrast with the 7.7% of the whites (Algernon, 2013: 5-6). These high rates of unemployment resulted in additional problems such as poverty and depression, which lead to suicide and alcoholism. These ones are serious problems that urgently need a call for action and a bigger implication of the government; for example, in Gila River Indian Reservation of Arizona, two years ago, eight Natives committed suicide in less than a year. As Sari Horwitz, staff writer of *The Washington Post* claims, this is the result of several chronic problems within native population: poverty and unemployment, domestic violence, and alcohol and drugs abuse, to name a few. One of the saddest facts which perfectly summarizes the magnitude of this incident is that after an interview with several native teenagers, all of them knew a person that had committed suicide (Horwitz, 2014: n.p.).

With all this information in mind and considering that there has been a positive progression in the living conditions of the Natives during the last few decades, it may seem that the solution is near; however, in order to reach a fully egalitarian society without discrimination or social differences, there is still a long way to go which will probably take several decades to fulfill these objectives.

3. LITERARY DEPICTION OF NATIVES

3.1. First writings

The first years of the colonies were a period of self determination and self government in which the colonists essentially depended on themselves. The new settlers needed to obtain as much support as possible from the metropolis so that they could develop their settlements and expand their domains. Literature emerged as the perfect means to achieve this. During the first stages of the conquest, the description of what was really happening in the new continent had less importance than the image portrayed by the writings of the time. This did not happen by chance, but as something planned, because in order to have political power, it was necessary to control the opinion of the people. For this reason, it was essential to convince the authorities and the citizens that indigenous people were savages and cruel. If these beings were considered inferior and dangerous, or not even human, Europeans would not have moral obstacles to claim the property of the land because it "belonged to nobody".

In this context, the value of writings as a propagandistic tool was tremendous. Depending on the colonizers' interests, the Natives were depicted in one way or another in order to obtain the maximum profit: if the colonizers were interested in trading or attracting new settlers, the Natives were presented in a more positive way than if the goal was to occupy their lands to expand the colonial territories. Europeans were superior technologically, so they eventually achieved supremacy by military means, and as the famous proverb says, "history is written by the victors". Taking this into account, we can state that during the next centuries, the writings and the culture of the white man would be used as a way of portraying an unreliable depiction of Natives in order to displace them from the rulers' position: firstly they were forced to leave their lands and to move to the West, just to be finally confined to the life in reservations where they were deprived of some of their most ancient traditions.

The texts that we are going to deal with share a series of features that contributed to the displacement of the Natives to the margins of society and triggered the creation of stereotypes around the figure of the Indians. One of the most common trends was the use of condescending and disrespectful terms when describing the Natives, and in these texts abound adjectives such as "uncivilized", "savage", or "barbarous". We cannot

determine if in all cases these words were included consciously or just as a natural response of the impression that the Europeans had of the Natives, but what we can assert is that the use of these terms would eventually ruin the future of the Indians. The generalization and standardization of the culture of one Indian tribe to all the native societies was another common feature of these first writings, a practice that was especially significant, as we will see in the next section, in the Hollywood movie industry of the 20th century. It is widely known that the diversity of the tribes and cultures was immense, with pacific and warlike tribes, hunter and agricultural societies, etc., but they were usually represented as fierce warriors who liked dancing around a fire while wearing feathers in their heads and having their faces painted in diverse colors. There is one last feature that was particularly harmful for the Natives: they were depicted through the differences of their indigenous cultures from the European ones rather than highlighting the characteristics in common. This practice favored the concept of the Indians as a very different race that had nothing to do with modern and sophisticated white cultures, and therefore, that they were expendables.

3.2. The Relation of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (1490-1558) was a Spanish explorer and conqueror who during his first expedition to America in 1528 was captured by the Natives and spent nine years living with them. When he returned to Spain, he published *The Relation of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca* in 1542, a narrative written by himself in which he described his adventures and experiences during the time he spent with the Natives (Baym, 2003: 58-59). Although in this narrative he included some negative words such as barbarous peoples, he kept one of the friendliest attitudes of the time towards the Natives, portraying a very particular view of the Indians, which were presented as ingenuous and generous beings. We have to take into account that at the time, the Spanish Empire's main interest was to conquer the biggest portion of the new continent and, after that, to perform a social and religious colonization of the people of these lands. Even though the Spaniards committed numerous atrocities and many Natives died because of forced labor and slavery, in general terms they favored the integration of Natives into society and tried to convert them to Christianity (McFarlane, 1992: 91). This concept of integration is perfectly reflected in the narrative because it

covers both de Vaca's adaptation and learning of the native way of life, and the integration proposal which de Vaca suggested to the Spanish king, as we can appreciate in the following words by the Spanish explorer: "[...] to bring all these people to Christianity and subjection to Your Imperial Majesty, they must be won by kindness, the only certain way" (de Vaca, 2003: 67).

The narrative evolves from an initial negative image of the Natives in which Cabeza de Vaca even fears for his life, in his own words "My hope of going out from among these nations was always small" (de Vaca, 2003: 60), into a more positive one in which Natives are defended against the Spaniards' brutality. At the beginning Indians are represented as barbarous tribes with very awkward traditions, making special emphasis on their differences rather than on the similarities. Among these customs that are described in detail, de Vaca pays special attention to the habit of being naked, the easiness of finishing marriages if there is no offspring in the couple, and the tendency of "not sleeping with their wives from the time they are discovered pregnant to two years after giving birth" (de Vaca, 2003: 64). Although these traditions were not bad in themselves, they sounded extremely rough and unrefined for the Europeans of the time and contributed to the amplification of the differences between both cultures.

In spite of the positive attitude towards the Natives, they are still tagged with the stereotype of the innocent and ingenuous Indian who is below the Spaniards, as the following words by de Vaca perfectly illustrate: "They were all convinced that we came from heaven. We Christians travelled all day without food, eating only at night, and then so little to astonish our escort" (de Vaca, 2003: 66). In contrast, de Vaca and his explorers depict themselves as the protectors and saviors of the Natives when they intercede to avoid their capture by Spanish slave hunters. This conception will later on reappear in some Hollywood movies such as *Dancing with Wolves*, a movie that tries to present a renewed image of the Natives, even though they are characterized as beings who require white intervention to survive.

Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses, it introduces the reader to a friendlier image of the Natives in which they are represented as very generous people who do not hesitate in sharing everything they have with the Spaniards. Several times, de Vaca and the other Spanish explorers managed to survive thanks to the Indian food offers, and this was very well detailed in the narrative. De Vaca makes special emphasis on this

feature so that this generosity does not remain overlooked, as we can see in this extract: "It would be unnecessary to command them to bring food, [...] the Indians were always diligent to bring us all they could" (de Vaca, 2003: 69). Last but not least, it is important to highlight the numerous detrimental references to the Spaniards that we find through the final pages of the text. They are portrayed as the true savages, who do not let the poor Natives live in peace because they continuously invade native territories to kill, slaughter, and capture slaves. In contrast with this idea, the Natives are represented as beings of good will who do not mistreat the conquerors despite previous Spanish attacks to their communities, as we can see in de Vaca's own words, "they received us with the same awe and respect the others had—even more, which amazed us" (de Vaca, 2003: 67).

3.3. John Smith and William Bradford

John Smith (1580-1631) and William Bradford (1590-1657) were two English colonists that highly contributed to the foundation and development of the first permanent English settlements in North America, Jamestown and Plymouth respectively. Both authors shared a series of common features, for example they were self-made men, they became governors of their settlements, and they expressed their experiences, beliefs, and reflections of these initial years in their writings: *General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* by Smith, and *Of Plymouth Plantation* by Bradford (Baym, 2003: 103-105, 156-157). Naturally, the early relationships between the new settlers and the Natives were described in these narratives, but this time we face a much more derogatory image of the latter, with abundance of disrespectful terms such as "savages" and "barbarians".

As historian Anthony McFarlane remarked, even though the Indians helped the pilgrims to develop their settlements during the initial months, the English never trusted them and Indians were always considered a potential threat (McFarlane, 1992: 89), an image that it is perfectly supported by these two writings. For example, during Smith's captivity, when they brought him some food, he thought that it was a strategy to "fat him and eat him" (Smith, 2003: 110). In contrast with the Spanish model of colonization based on the relationship with the Natives, English society was more exclusive and

close-minded when dealing with racial issues. Maybe this was one of the reasons why English writings kept a more negative view of the indigenous people than the Spanish ones: if Natives were represented as brutal and ruthless savages, English pilgrims would develop more negative prejudices about them and this would make the integration of Indians into society impossible, giving the British an excuse to initiate a conflict to expel the Natives from their lands.

John Smith's text was published in England in 1624 and it was one of the first English narratives about the new continent. The fragment that we are going to deal with belongs to the second chapter of the third book and it describes how Smith was taken prisoner by the Natives at the same time that it perfectly reflects his thoughts about them: they were evil, ignorant, and savage people who were a constant threat to the English colonial society. Smith places special emphasis on using the derogatory term "savage" to refer to the Natives, with 17 examples in this chapter and more than 200 in the whole text. Sentences such as "But now was all our provision spent [...], each hour expecting the fury of the savages" (Smith, 2003: 106) flood almost every page and they contribute to the propagation of the view of the Natives as barbarous creatures.

The following words by Captain John Smith require special attention because they reflect different methods used to discredit Natives: "when God [...] changed the hearts of the savages that they brought such plenty of their fruits and provisions" (Smith, 2003: 106). Indeed, from the very few references to the mercy actions of the Natives that were represented in the narrative, Smith downplays the most significant one by arguing that it was not performed by the Natives, but by God's mediation. Thankfully, history has reinterpreted this statement and nowadays we know that the first pilgrims managed to survive thanks to the Indian help and support.

After a couple of confrontations with the Natives, it was very well detailed how the Natives attacked them and slew his men (and not the other way round). Although Smith was taken prisoner, he managed to escape for a while, and in the confrontation that took place Smith used a native as a human shield to avoid the arrows, an action that reflects the lack of respect that he felt for them, as we can appreciate in this fragment: "Then finding the Captain, as is said, that used the savage that was his guide as his shield" (Smith, 2003: 109). This disdain persists during the whole captivity period, for example when Smith describes the Indian ceremony around the fire as if it was the

weirdest thing in the world, or when Smith criticizes how the Natives feasted an Indian king in "their best barbarous manner they could" (Smith, 2003: 112).

In addition to all the foregoing, it is necessary to highlight that the already existing topic of the ignorant native who gets astonished by anything unknown to him but usual for the civilized Europeans appears again. This concept is mainly appreciated when Smith represents the Indians as bumpkins who are amazed by his tales about the shape of the world, or when they plan to plant gunpowder as if it was a corn seed (Smith, 2003: 109, 111-112). Although the purpose of these statements is not openly seen, the intended target of these defamatory descriptions was to keep on damaging the positive view of the Natives that some colonizers might have by the progressive destruction of their human dimension.

In the case of William Bradford, he started to write *Of Plymouth Plantation* in 1630 to have a historical compilation of the events that occurred to the Pilgrims in their religious adventure. If we observe the whole text, we can appreciate that it covers the events since they left England to move to the Netherlands in 1608, through the Mayflower voyage in 1620, until the year 1647 when the Plymouth colony had become a stable settlement. Even though Bradford's opinion about Indians is more positive than the image presented by Smith, he still includes several references to them as "savages", "beasts", and "wild men" (Bradford, 2003: 168). In Bradford's narrative we can observe that the approach used to discredit the Natives is different from Smith's; this time, instead of keeping a constant negative view of the Natives, he presents the English pilgrims as if they were the chosen people by God, and for this reason they were over all the other civilizations.

The narrative reflects the importance of God for the Puritan mind, and for this reason the whole narrative includes plenty of allusions to Him, especially when they have successfully overcome an adversity because they are the apple of God's eye. A passage that perfectly illustrates this idea is the one when the pilgrims have the first confrontation with the Natives before settling at Plymouth. It is presented as a quasi-epic battle in which the English manage to defeat the Natives thanks to God's help, as we can see in this fragment: "Thus it pleased God to vanquish their enemies and give them deliverance; and by His special providence so to dispose that not any of them were either hurt or hit" (Bradford, 2003: 172).

Special attention requires the contrast that Bradford makes between the good words about the Natives when Squanto helps them to survive by signing a peace treaty and teaching them to fish and plant corn –always by God desire, because according to Bradford, Squanto "was a special instrument sent of God" (Bradford, 2003: 177)– with the fragment about Mr. Dermer's adventures. Dermer states that the Indians have an "inveterate malice to the English" (Bradford, 2003: 177) to revenge previous English and French attacks. One of the most significant Dermer's fragments is the one in which he was betrayed and mortally wounded by the Natives in a trading exchange, supporting the idea that they were continuously threatened by Natives' presence.

3.4. A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson

Mary Rowlandson (1636-1711) was an English Puritan from the city of Lancaster who was captured by the Natives during King Philip's War. She was taken prisoner the 20th of February 1676 together with her three children and other inhabitants of that city, and she was forced to live with the Natives for almost eleven weeks before she was ransomed the 2nd of May. After she was released, she started to write a narrative about her experience, which was published in 1682 as a Captivity Narrative, a literary genre that later on influenced authors such as James Fenimore Cooper (Baym, 2003: 308-309). In her narrative, Rowlandson constantly keeps a negative perception of the Natives and portrays them as absolute savage creatures who have lost their humanity. She compares Indians to the beasts of wilderness, and mordant descriptions of them as "barbarous creatures", "heathens", or "wretches" are frequent (Rowlandson, 2003: 309-311). However, Rowlandson generally uses the term "Indian" to refer to the Natives, in contrast with previous writers who constantly included degrading words such as "savage" or "barbarian". This tendency, together with the constant negative descriptions of them, can be interpreted as an attempt to tie the connotation of the word "Indian" with something negative in order to damage Natives' reputation.

The initial section of the narrative is very significant in that it includes the most violent episode. It describes in detail the attack and massacre of the English by the Indians, presenting one of the most dehumanized images of the Natives ever seen. This idea is perfectly appreciated in the following words by Rowlandson: "the father, and the

mother and a sucking child, they knocked on the head; [...] and stripped him naked, and split open his bowels" (Rowlandson, 2003: 309). The text highlights the horrors of the attack, and Natives are described as heartless creatures who mercilessly kill apparently innocent English colonists, including women and children, which causes Mrs. Rowlandson to feel like being "butchered by those merciless heathen" (Rowlandson, 2003: 310).

Previously, I have said "apparently innocent colonists" because the continuous English invasions of the Natives' lands triggered this conflict. However, Mrs. Rowlandson considers that the true victims of the situation are the English settlers, presenting the Natives as the antagonists of the story. In order to achieve this effect, she uses a very subtle metaphor: while the colonizers are compared with a flock of sheep, Rowlandson puts the Indians at the same level than a ruthless wolf pack, as we can see in the following lines: "like a company of sheep torn by wolves, all of them stripped naked by a company of hell-hounds" (Rowlandson, 2003: 311). This comparison contributes to the stereotyping of the Natives as one of the predators that the human being has traditionally had as enemy, in contrast with the innocent and harmless image of the English. The attack that the English have suffered has been a kind of God's punishment for their bad behavior, but eventually God will intercede to save them because Puritans are superior beings. There is a sentence at the end of the narrative that perfectly captures her conception about the conflict and where she reflects how she sees the English as the rightful owners of these lands: "I entreated, begged, and persuaded them, but to let me see my daughter; [...] They made use of their tyrannical power whilst they had it; but through the Lord's wonderful mercy, their time was now but short" (Rowlandson, 2003: 311).

One of the most significant aspects of this narrative, if not the most, is the amount of racist prejudices and deep hate against the Natives that Rowlandson transmits with her words. Even though one of her daughters died during the captivity, instead of feeling pity or empathy for the death of her mistress' daughter, Rowlandson was pleased when this happened, an attitude that reflects the disrespect and revulsion that she felt against Natives. In addition, not only she hates the Indians that had captured her, but the whole race, as we can appreciate in a fragment when she talks about a group of Natives dressed as Englishmen and she says that "there was a vast difference between the lovely faces of Christians, and foul looks of those heathens" (Rowlandson, 2003: 328).

Throughout the narrative, we can observe that the story is biased because only the situations in which the Natives behave evilly are reflected in detail, for example when a pregnant woman is beaten to death and burned for asking questions, or the different references to the mistreatment that Rowlandson suffered from her mistress. On the other hand, when the Natives are kind and generous with the prisoners, such as when she is offered a Bible or when she is brought to her daughter's tomb, she attributes these lucky strikes to the Lord's mercy because they are the chosen people. This racist concept of Puritan superiority over other people prevailed during the following centuries, being especially significant during the endless struggle against the Natives for the conquest of the country, and still appreciable among some sectors of modern American society.

4. NATIVE AMERICANS IN HOLLYWOOD

4.1. Traditional representation of Natives

The creation of the first video recording in 1895 by the Lumière brothers represented the appearance of a new method of artistic expression which soon became so successful that in some countries even achieved the denomination of "The Seventh Art". Since then, the popularity of the cinema tradition has followed an unstoppable rise and it has become one of the most successful and influential industries around the world. As with literature, cinema is usually a mirror of the cultural, social, and political situation of the time, being frequently influenced by a series of external factors such as the sense of identity of the country or the historical situation in which the film is produced. If we pay attention to the relationship between Natives and American cinema, we can observe that it has continued with the literary tendency of representing the Natives in a stereotyped way, including as a general rule some of the ancient negative topics about the Natives. Fortunately, over time the cinema representation of Indians has progressively evolved into a more faithful and humanized trend that has managed to put aside many of the old racist prejudices against Natives.

Western cinema was the genre inspired by the American expansion to the West and it dealt with the issues related to the wild frontier, reflecting the strong sense of American identity and the figure of the Indian. Since its beginning at the early 20th century, we can differentiate three different stages in the evolution of the genre in which the representation of the Natives has changed substantially (Price, 1973: 153). The first period (1908-1929) covers the initial years of the genre and it includes the coinage of the negative stereotypes that were used in the silent films. It was at this time when the image of the warlike Indian appeared, a wild-nature being who rode a horse in the Great Plains and harassed the white settlers. Natives were usually the antagonist characters of the movies, the obstacle that whites had to overcome in their expansion to the West. This phase was followed by an exacerbated use of the negative Indian clichés during the next years (1930-1947), coinciding with Western cinema's golden age. Indians were stereotyped as buffalo hunters who systematically killed white men with their bows and collected their scalps as trophies. The image of the Natives as drunks, sexual predators of white women, and people who used a simple language reached its zenith at this time. However, after WWII and the Holocaust, there was an attempt to review the use of

these kind of depictions to avoid racial conflicts, so from 1948 onwards the representation of Natives acquired a more sympathetic image, but still remaining as a secondary character (Price, 1973: 153; Clemente Fernández, 2003: 4).

Although we may think that this racial discrimination was a matter of the first half of the last century, the reality was very different from this idyllic idea, and some discriminatory issues are still visible in last few decades. As was stated before, cinema is a reflection of society, and for the Americans the concepts of identity and nationalism had a lot of importance: they were very proud of what their ancestors had achieved in the last two centuries, and in one way or another they had to express these ideas in the films. The concept of the powerful and superior American that had snatched these lands from the barbarous Indians without any kind of help still had a lot of weight (Clemente Fernández, 2003: 1-2). As a response against this state of affairs, during the 1970s some famous voices were raised to denounce the situation. This is the case of Marlon Brando, who refused an Oscar Award for the disdain with which the Natives were being treated. Instead of attending the ceremony, he sent Sacheen Littlefeather, the president of the National Native American Affirmative Image Committee, who denounced "the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry" (qtd. in Robinson, 2014, n.p.). Although she could not read Brando's speech due to "time limitations", the whole piece was later published and it included a very harsh critique against the historical treatment of Natives and the fake depiction of them perpetuated by the movie industry, as we can appreciate in this fragment: "the motion picture community has been as responsible as any for degrading the Indian and making a mockery of his character, describing his as savage, hostile and evil" (Brando, 1973: n.p.).

4.2 *Dances with Wolves*

Dances with Wolves is a 1990 American movie directed by and starring Kevin Costner which won seven Academy Awards, including best director. The release of this film was a huge step forward in the struggle for the rejection of the negative prejudices against American Natives in Western movies. The plot of the movie develops around Union Army Lieutenant John Dunbar who, after being injured and decorated for his brave actions, wants to be transferred to a fort of the West frontier. When he arrives to

his destination, he finds that the fort is almost destroyed and there is no trace of the detachment that should be there. After some weeks being completely alone with his horse and a curious wolf called Two Socks, Dunbar establishes contact with some Sioux Indians when they try to steal his horse. As the time goes by, his relationship with the Natives improves, especially when he helps them to hunt some buffalos and to defend their settlement from Pawnee Indians. Eventually, he is accepted as a member of the tribe and he marries a young white woman who has been with them since she was a child. However, happy days do not last long because the American army is pushing to the West and the Natives are forced to flee. Dunbar is captured and accused of desertion, but fortunately the Natives manage to liberate him, and finally he decides to leave the tribe with his wife to avoid endangering the rest of the Natives.

This film was a huge step forward in the rejection of negative characterizations of Indians because it broke with many traditional Indian stereotypes and included actors who spoke real Sioux language instead of any other Indian dialect. As the film draws on and his relationship with Kicking Bird –the spiritual leader of the tribe– improves, the protagonist realizes that nothing he has been told about Natives is correct: they are neither barbarous people nor beggars, but generous and polite beings who enjoy familiar life and feel a huge respect for nature. On the contrary, white "civilization" performs the ancient Indian role of the bad guy, and whites are presented as the real savages who kill buffalos and wolves just for fun. As a consequence of this, Dunbar starts to question if the real threat for the Americans are the Redskins or, on the contrary, the only enemies of the white man are other white men.

Although Dunbar offers a significant contrast with the other Americans and he is presented as an exceptional white man who respects nature and does his best to ensure a rapprochement with Natives, Costner's character embodies the role of the perfect white savior, someone who is the key figure in the survival of the Indians: he is the one who saves the woman when she attempts to commit suicide, he and his rifles make possible the defense of the village from the Pawnee, and thanks to his warning Natives manage to escape before the soldiers arrive. This idea is not openly presented, but it is covered behind all good actions of the main story, and it can be as harmful for the images of the Natives as the most derogatory depictions of them. Unfortunately, this is a common practice that also appears in other recent Hollywood productions such as *Grand Torino* (where a racist American white man saves an immigrant South American family from a

violent gang) or *Avatar* (where a US soldier goes to another planet and helps the creatures that live there to defend themselves against the American soldiers). Both films and many other present a white person as a defender of another race, transmitting the idea of strict dependence of other cultures on American whites, as we can see in the words of American journalist David Sirota:

These story lines insinuate that people of color have no ability to rescue themselves. This both makes white audiences feel good about themselves by portraying them as benevolent messiahs (rather than hegemonic conquerors), and also depicts people of color as helpless weaklings — all while wrapping such tripe in the cinematic argot of liberation (Sirota, 2013: n.p.).

4.3. *Smoke Signals*

Smoke Signals is a 1998 American film directed by Chris Eyre and based on Sherman Alexie's book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. The film is considered a milestone in the Natives' struggle for their rightful representation in the cinema industry because it is the first American film directed, produced, and played by native people (Ebert, 1998: n.p.). In contrast with previous Hollywood productions, Eyre's film rejects the old tendencies: the Natives are neither the enemy as used to be the case in Western movies, nor supporting characters presented in a romantic way as in *Dances with Wolves*. Instead, Natives take the leading role and the story develops around them, dealing with the issues they have to face in everyday life from a non-compassionate perspective.

The film starts with a scene on the 4th of July 1976 in which a baby, Thomas, is saved from a burning house by Victor's father, Arnold. Twenty years later, Arnold has died and Victor has to go from the Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation to Phoenix to retrieve his ashes. Thanks to Thomas's economic help they manage to get there, just to discover that, although Arnold left his family, he missed them. During the trip, Victor and Thomas clash several times due to their different perspectives about Arnold: in contrast with Victor's resentment against his father, the talkative Thomas always defends Arnold arguing that he saved him from that fire. The film ends with a superb reflection about how to forgive our fathers for being imperfect human beings who

commit mistakes and are usually tagged with stereotypes such as the violent husband or the heavy drinker father.

As we have mentioned before, one of the most important characteristics of this film is the spontaneity to address delicate issues. The film openly mentions some of the most serious problems that the American native community has to deal with at the moment: poverty, alcoholism, loss of identity, and life in a reservation. Alcoholism is the first to appear and one of the most relevant for the development of the plot because it is the trigger of many issues of the film, such as the fire in the house, the departure of Arnold, and the final car crash. Victor even says that he has never drunk a single drop of alcohol, suggesting that this is an issue of the past generations. Throughout the film there are several allusions to reinforce the Indian identity, such as their refusal to sign papers (maybe due to the bad experiences they had with the frontier treaties), their use of the oral tradition to transmit stories, and their habit to barter. Indeed, Victor criticizes Thomas because he has developed an inaccurate image of the Natives through the movie *Dances with Wolves*, a kind of paradox considering that he is a native as well. Finally, it is the issue of the life at the reservation, which is presented as a different country from the US. When they have to travel, they are asked for their passports as if they were crossing a kind of border into a hostile world, which later on is represented by a confrontation at the bus with two white men.

The variety of issues that the protagonists have to deal with have one thing in common: they are different pieces within the film's puzzle that contribute to the final meaning. All these situations are little and subtle fragments of criticism against the injustices that Indians suffered in the past and the poor living conditions of Natives in the present day. However, and this is crucial, all these comments are not made from a bitter and hateful point of view, but in a humorous tone. For example, this can be appreciated in a scene at the truck when Arnold asks Victor to imagine how different life would be if white people, Catholics, and reservations disappeared just by saying "Puff". Chris Eyre just wants to make a call for action to improve the current situation of Natives but without incurring in the sphere of culprits and victims, and this is what makes this film so special and representative of the cinema made by Indians.

5. CONCLUSION

Throughout the previous sections of this study, we have been able to appreciate how the native population of the American continent have been systematically segregated and marginalized from the center of society since the arrival of the first European explorers and colonizers in the late 15th century. As it is reflected in the historical context, during the initial decades the social segregation and racial harassment took shape through the continuous invasions of Indian territories and villages that forced them to move westward. After the conquest, the Indian reservations were used to confine the Natives in a minuscule portion of their original territories, in many cases, with underwhelming living conditions. On top of that, if we pay attention to the texts and films analyzed here, we can appreciate how literature and the cinema industry have traditionally contributed to the creation and preservation of a stereotyped image of the Natives that has been so detrimental for them.

It would be foolish to claim that this study has covered all the literary and cinematic productions related to the Indians. That would require a much lengthier study. The limited number of readings and films analyzed here are good examples which offer an accurate description of the evolution of white man's treatment and depiction of Natives during the last four centuries. Fortunately, in the last few decades a great portion of the ancient stereotypes have turned upside down little by little with the introduction of characters like Kicking Bird in *Dances with Wolves*, or Victor and Thomas in *Smoke Signals*. These movies have offered a more faithful representation of the native community and thanks to them, the audience has made some progresses to delete from its memory the old fashioned stereotype of the wild and savage Indian.

However, the white American society's identity and feeling of superiority are so powerful that they have not managed to leave behind the old racist prejudices of white superiority and discrimination against "the other", and now I am not talking about Natives in particular but considering the non-white US population in general. For the second year in a row, all the nominees for the Oscar Awards 2016 were white, something very awkward if we consider the racial diversity of the Hollywood cinema industry. Another couple of examples that reflect this serious problem are the multiple cases of police brutality against the black community that have happened during the last few years, or the absolute senseless political campaign of Donald Trump which, in spite

of the multiple racist and discriminatory statements against other races, has granted him a solid position in the race for the presidency of the United States.

Finally, and without the intention of extending this reflection any longer, it is evident that the native population of North America has not received an appropriate treatment by the white settlers, neither in the social sphere nor in the cultural one. Nevertheless, the latter is the one that has better rectified its ancient racial discriminatory prejudices against the native community, and although this is not the end of the American social problems, hopefully in the upcoming years there will be further improvements to reach a truly egalitarian society.

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