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Natives, Nostalgia, and Nature in Children's Popular Film Narratives

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C. Richard King,
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Abstract: In his paper "Natives, Nostalgia, and Nature in Children's Popular Film Narratives," C. Richard King offers a critical reading in an effort to appreciate the entanglements of nature, natives, and nostalgia in children's narratives. In this context, an analysis of *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron Spirit* affords an ideal occasion for such a reading because it centers on the relations between Native Americans, Euroamericans, and the natural world as it tells the story of a wild mustang living in western North America in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, as close examination reveals, the film uses race, gender, civilization, and wildness to meditate upon cultural conflict, freedom, and nature. King finds that while *Spirit* challenges accepted ideas about modernity and technology, it reiterates troubling connections of environment and Indianness while allowing viewers to escape accountability through individualism and longing.

C. Richard KING

Natives, Nostalgia, and Nature in Children's Popular Film Narratives

Native Americans have long occupied a space in the socialization of children in the United States: schools have offered young people opportunities to learn about indigenous peoples through arts and craft projects around the holidays of Columbus Day and Thanksgiving, youth organizations, most notably the Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, and Y-Indian Guides and Princesses have woven Indianness into their missions, objectives, and activities; and popular culture directed at children from comic books and television programs to chapter books and games have long used Native Americans to impart important messages, rewrite history, or stage human dramas. The narratives central to these diverse media have shared in common the production of what Robert Berkhofer terms the "White Man's Indian," that is, creating imagined indigenous Others through which to better know themselves, more properly address their problems, and more fully appreciate the past. In a very real way the White Man's Indian has unfolded in popular stories for children as a symbolic and experiential space of desire, central to efforts to resolve the contradictions of history, while providing a language to name and even escape the problems of modernity. Following Renato Rosaldo, we would characterize correctly many of these projections and representations as manifestations of "imperial nostalgia," or the longing for that which one has destroyed through conquest, in this case a longing for the freedom, life ways, values, and possibilities associated with indigeneity in the absence of indigenous peoples devastated by genocidal projects and ideological erasures. Even after the crystallization of multiculturalism as a civil ideology, educational framework, and marketing tool, imperial nostalgia continues to shape the uses and understandings of Native Americans in stories for children. Importantly, these stories, intent to acknowledge humanity and respect difference, favor the figure of the "noble savage," binding the indigenous Other tightly to nature as an ill-fated alter/native to and necessary pedagogic resource for Euroamerican civilization. Of course, such renderings do not come any closer to capturing embodied Indians, their powerful cultures and histories, or the painful paths inscribed through their relations with/in the U.S. The entangling of nature and native, especially in the form of a noble savage, has allowed popular culture and educational institutions to revise the stories they tell about us and them, now and then, wilderness and civilization, rewriting (if only slightly) the sincere fictions imparting two fundamental elements of dominant ideologies to children in the United States: national narratives and common sense.

In this paper, I untangle the intersections of environment and Indianness as well as those of identity and history through a critical reading of the recent children's film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (Asbury and Cook), a text centering on relations between Native Americans, Euroamericans, and the natural world. The film tells the story of a wild mustang living in western North America in the late nineteenth century. It uses race, gender, civilization, and wildness to meditate upon cultural conflict, freedom, and nature. *Spirit* concerns the efforts of a wild horse of the same name to regain his freedom, commenting on the expansion of civilization at the expense of the wilderness, while celebrating the humanity of the Lakota Nation. It counters the accepted ideas about modernity and technology through a clear critique of the expansion of industrial US-America and manifest destiny that affirms simultaneously intimate associations between natives and nature and masculine tropes such as independence and dignity.

Spirit, a beautifully drawn feature film from DreamWorks Entertainment, tells the story of a wild Kiger mustang born free in the America West in the late nineteenth century, who, following his capture by the United States Cavalry, must struggle to regain his independence and return to his herd. The film places horses at its center, using their actions and relationships to make broader lessons about nature, freedom, and civilization meaningful. In addition to the protagonist and narrator, Spirit (Matt Damon), two other horses figure prominently, his mother and Rain, a paint he encounters and

whom he comes to love. People, in turn, play a more marginal role. In fact, only two men emerge from the background to shape the dramatic events of the stallion's life, the brash and stern Colonel (James Cromwell) and the young and caring Lakota warrior Little Creek (Daniel Studi). Importantly, unlike many films aimed at children, while Spirit has a voice and narrates the story, neither he nor the other animals actually speak to one another or the human characters. Moreover, in contrast, with most Westerns, the equine is not cast as an instrument of conquest and domesticated or subservient, but instead, is the central force of the narrative, a persistent sign of liberty.

Spirit opens with the birth of its mustang hero, painting his coming of age through the bold movements of the herd across the lush, boundless plains and valleys of the West and brief scenes in which the curiosity and spunk of the young stallion seemingly court trouble only to find comedic resolution. Spirit, like his father before him, matures into the leader of his herd, evidenced not simply by his obvious power, strength, and majesty as he moves across the screen, but more through his fearless defense of two young foals threatened by a cougar. The Cimarron herd, happy and free, lives in peace and harmony with the world around them; until, one day, something new comes to the land, people. The intrusion of a group of cowboys, introduced as little more than a campfire on the horizon, piques the curiosity of Spirit, who, despite his mother's efforts, takes it upon himself to investigate. The mustang stallion, now reproached by the domesticated horses of the strangers, cautiously explores the campsite, getting his first glimpse of the odd ways of what he calls the two-legged, including strange clothing, foul tasting liquor, and fire. His inquiry awakens the camp and a chase ensues, which quickly changes from a playful display of Spirit's bravado to a fierce effort to escape. Spirit leads the cowboys away from his herd and is eventually caught, brought under control by several of his pursuers. Once ensnared, he is marched away from his lush homeland, across a barren landscape to a fort. Here, the Colonel instructs his troops to induct Spirit. Unbroken despite his capture, Spirit resists vigorously the efforts of soldiers, head-butting, kicking, and biting as his handlers cut his mane, attempt to shoe him, and want to brand him. The uproarious scene, which leaves the blacksmith unconscious and all the other horses in stables laughing, transforms the escalating struggle between man and beast into a humorous statement of the obvious: man cannot -- and should not try -- to tame the wild. Undeterred, the Colonel orders, next, his soldiers to break Spirit. In turn, they try unsuccessfully to ride the wild mustang; all meet the same fate, being thrown, but each in a unique and more amusing fashion. Determined to break Spirit, the cavalry officer has the stallion tied to a post in the middle of the corral for three days without food or water. The cruelty of this strategy is underscored and personalized when at the peak of the second day's heat, the Colonel, making eye contact with an envious and angry Spirit, drinks cool water, splashing the remainder on his face and neck.

On the second day, the soldiers capture "a hostile," who we later learn is named Little Creek. The Colonel recognizes immediately him as a Lakota, suggesting this must be the case because he lacks the fine features of the Crow and the stature of the Cheyenne. He orders that he too be tied to a post in the middle of the fort. At daybreak on the third day, Little Creek communicates through animal calls with unseen others outside the fort who toss successfully a knife just within the young warrior's reach. Able to free himself, but unable to escape because of revelry, Little Creek must bide his time. He watches as the Colonel himself attempts to break Spirit, an intensely choreographed scene in which each exerts his will with ferocious intensity. In the end, it appears that the cavalry officer has prevailed and he offers a grand speech about progress, civilization, and manifest destiny: "You see, gentlemen any horse can be broken ... There are those in Washington who believe the West will never be settled, the Northern Pacific Railroad will never reach Nebraska, a hostile Lakota will never submit to Providence and it is that manner of small thinking that would say this horse could never be broken. Discipline, time and patience are the three great levelers." At the close, Spirit throws the Colonel, who reaches for a rifle with which to shoot the beast. In the nick of time, Little Creek intercedes, mounting the stallion and dislodging the weapon just as the Colonel pulls the trigger. The pair romp through the

stables, freeing the other horses, all of whom are the same dark brown, in contrast with Spirit's golden hue, before escaping from the fort.

Spirit, who thinks he has regained his freedom and soon will return to his herd, is sadly disappointed when Little Creek, upon reuniting with his friends outside the fort, places a rope around his neck and leads him toward his village. In a pristine river valley, the stallion again enters a corral and those around him seek to break him. Once more hilarity accompanies human efforts to tame the wild mustang. Resolute in his desire to make Spirit his own, Little Creek gently and compassionately endeavors to domesticate him. Central to this kinder and gentler approach is Rain, a paint mare ridden throughout the film by Little Creek. The Lakota warrior ties the two horses together with a long piece of rope, leaving them to their own devices. Spirit tries to escape but Rain resists, causing the former to think of the latter as a traitor to her kind. With time, the two fall in love. And, Little Creek comes to appreciate Spirit as a friend. In the end, Little Creek concludes that no one will ever ride Spirit, nor should they, and he releases the stallion. Free at last, Spirit endeavors to convince Rain to run away with him. Before she can make up her mind, the U.S. Cavalry descends on the village. Under the leadership of the unnamed Colonel, undoubtedly modeled after the notorious George A. Custer, the cavalry attacks the peaceful Lakota community. In the conflict that follows, Rain is shot, and she is washed down the river, followed by Spirit who rushes to save his love. The mustang succeeds in pulling her from the water, but fears Rain will die, as he is taken as a trophy by the soldiers after the battle. Captured once more, Spirit is placed on a railroad car. Heading west, the landscape again turns barren and snow begins to fall. Little Creek sets out on foot after his friend. Arriving at a base camp, Spirit and the other horses are pressed into work hauling a massive train engine over a mountain pass. As they near the crest, Spirit realizes that the railroad line being built is headed right for his homeland and will ultimately destroy it. Resisting the march of progress, he feigns death. As he is dragged away from the teams of horses, he escapes and works to free the other horses. In turn, the massive locomotive slides back down the mountainside, chasing Spirit and carving a path of destruction in its wake. At the foot of the mountain, it hurtles into the base camp, causing an explosion and fire that rapidly engulfs the forest and threatens to kill Spirit. Happily, Little Creek saves the day and leads the stallion away from the fire and face-to-face with his nemesis, the Colonel. The cavalry officer and a group of soldiers give chase, pursuing the pair of friends up a butte. At the summit, there appears to be no way out, save for an impossible jump. With the soldiers rapidly closing in, Spirit gallops to the edge of the butte and springs into the air; after a slow motion flight across the gap, the two land in a heap, but still find the guns of the cavalry pointed at them. Impressed with the tenacity and power of the mustang, the Colonel orders his troops to stand down. Finally free, Spirit reunites with Rain. The two horses return to the Cimarron herd. Once more in the wild, they live happily ever after.

Spirit is much more than an entertaining film aimed at children. It is a powerful statement about nature, history, culture, and their relationships. Indeed, it exemplifies popular environmentalist discourse: on the one hand, it formulates a pronounced critique of modern life, particularly its attitudes toward nature; on the other hand, its use of natural symbols and indigenous imagery reaffirms values and ideals central to contemporary systems of environmental, social, and racial injustice. Arguably, the key moment in the film is the struggle to break Spirit. To be sure, this scene reinforces Elizabeth Lawrence's observation that such conflicts between man and stallion represent invariably a test of manhood. What is more, this battle in *Spirit* pits two versions of masculinity against one another. The Colonel represents the rationalized masculinity of a trained soldier and of promise-keeper of modern civilization, a masculinity marked by control, precision, persistence, and will power. In contrast, Spirit embodies the natural man; more primal, more authentic, he demands, defies authority, rises to affronts from others, and asserts himself aggressively regardless of the dangers or consequences. Importantly, Spirit's ultimate triumph underscores the victory of wildness over civilization central to the film. Beyond the powerful entanglements of gender and nature, efforts to break Spirit also highlight a deep desire at the heart of the movie. Horses, according to Jane Tompkins, "express a need for con-

nection to nature, to the wild ... [they] fulfill a longing for a different kind of existence. Antimodern, antiurban, and antitechnological, they stand for an existence without cars and telephones and electricity" (93). *Spirit* renders the world in stark, reductive contrasts. In part, this may be a function of what wild mustangs have signified in US-American culture; in the words of Elizabeth Lawrence, a beast typically bound and domesticated remains free, unifying a set of fundamental contradictions: wild/tame, free/captive, savagery/civilization. More significantly, in this case, it is not simply that the film pivots around a series of binary oppositions, which it does, but that it links the categorical distinctions together to encode larger meta-narratives. For instance, U.S. Fort/Indian Village, Railroad/Cimarron Herd Homeland, Civilization/Nature, White/Red, Bondage/Freedom, Domestication/Wilderness, Modern/Primitive, Change/Transcendence, Desert/River Valley, Terror/Love, Harsh/Nurturing, and Bleak/Lush. Together, these symbolic binaries and juxtapositions form what Roland Barthes would term myths, naturalized accounts of the world that individuals take for granted as true.

In *Spirit*, modern life, or civilization, is represented in the Colonel, the military outpost in the desert, and the railroad built in winter is cold and bleak; it embodies the destruction of the wilderness, of individuality, of difference; it cultivates discipline, control, and restraint; it stresses domination, assimilation, and means over ends. In contrast, nature, embodied by Spirit and Little Creek, is bright and bountiful; it demands interdependence, particularly friendship and love; it fosters independence, liberty and individuality; it is uncontrollable. *Spirit* communicates these messages not simply because it is an animated feature or a film aimed at children. Rather, these meta-narratives, no less than the categorical distinctions underlying them, inform common sense understanding of social problems and environmental issues. Their centrality to *Spirit* point attention the mythic structures at the heart of popular notions of the US-American West. *Spirit* takes place in the US-American west, itself the subject of much moralizing and mythmaking. In contrast with the symbolic meanings of the wild mustang refusing to be broken and the meta-narrative of wildness/civilization, the mapping of the west in *Spirit* works to reinforce common sense understandings of nation, history, and place (on this, see, e.g., Mitchell).

The film opens with a bald eagle soaring, following its flight through the Grand Canyon north toward Arches National Monument and eventually to the forested valleys and mountains of Glacier National Park. Immense, beautiful, and mythic, the landscape is not anonymous. Rather, it is a collection of recognizable natural wonders that are also national treasures. In sense, the mythic map inscribed in the film permits a kind of claiming and forgetting. Audiences know and recognize these places, bounded sites of wilderness carved out from the surrounding landscape that all viewers will identify as part of the United States and its heritage. Moreover, the odd condensation of the desert and the mountains, the slippage between the location of the fort and the Lakota village, and the very presence of a Lakota in what appears to be the desert southwest further underscores the confused spatial imagination of the film. Linking these natural/national locations together encourages audiences to misunderstand the West, erase its indigenous inhabitants, and construct a historical geography by weaving together a fanciful rendering of the region with mappings of the present. *Spirit* offers an equally troubling account of history. The cultural conflicts arising from Euroamerican imperialism and expansion form the backdrop for the film. And to be sure, *Spirit* does not celebrate the conquest of Native America, but its rendering of the past does reinforce the amnesia and privileges associated with white supremacy in the present. To begin, the film misplaces indigeneity: Spirit and his herd are introduced as the natural and native residents of the West. In his narrative, the mustang uses language often associated with US-American Indian storytelling. For instance, Spirit refers to people as the Two-Legged, and he speaks of them as foreigners, strangers, and new. Indeed, the world of the Cimarron herd falls out of balance with the arrival of something new in the land. Converting an imported species into natives trivializes the claims and conditions of actual indigenous peoples. Furthermore, *Spirit* refuses to comment on consequences for indigenous peoples. During the framing narrative of the film, Spirit remarks that his story records important events, but he will leave it to the viewer to decide what hap-

pened, who was right, and who was wrong: "The story I want to tell you cannot be found in a book. They say the history of the west was written from the saddle of a horse, but it's never been told from the heart of one not til now. I was born here in this place that come to be call the Old West but to my kind the land was ageless. It had no beginning and no end -- no boundary between earth and sky. Like the wind in the buffalo grass we belonged here. We would always belong here. They say the mustang is the spirit of the West. Whether that West was won or lost in the end you'll have to decide for yourself but the story I want to tell you is true. I was there, and I remember.
Consequently, it completely disavows the articulations of truth and power in either past events or their contemporary retellings." And even when the pain of the past intrudes, the movie cannot bring itself to address the significance of its story. On one occasion, the Colonel and his troops raid a Lakota village. This event, reminiscent of tragic attacks at Sand Creek, Washita, and Wounded Knee, completely lacks context. What provoked it? What is the broader conflict? What might the indigenous actors say? What is the outcome? How many were killed, injured, and left homeless? Answering such queries, let alone depicting them, would have meant suggesting that history was something other than a backdrop, an objective record, a natural chain of events.

The film individualizes historical processes and social struggles, condensing them around the three main characters: the Colonel, Little Creek, and Spirit. Personality, not structures or power, disperses questions about the past. Individuals make history, they make mistakes, they can be evil, they can do bad things. If, as Henry Giroux has argued, animated films are more than mere entertainment for children, but, in fact, teaching machines, then, what is it that *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* teaches its audiences? In many ways, the myths energizing *Spirit* do not educate viewers as much as they miseducate them, distorting race, history, and power. These distortions derive from both the content and the form of the film. Placing a wild horse at the narrative core of the movie fosters a narrative that speaks of its core concerns from a remove. Indeed, *Spirit* encourages its audience to identify with the stallion and entertain, if not accept, his traumatic interactions as an indictment of the evils of civilization, while letting of the hook as the benefactors of modernity and arguably the enactors of its force fields in the present. At the same time, identifying with Spirit naturalizes the proposed differences between Euroamericans and Native Americans, while rendering their demise as an inevitable and organic process, relieving viewers of an accountability for its legacies. Consequently, *Spirit* pivots around its longing for lost worlds, its desire for those natural forms and native cultural forms destroyed by civilization and conquest. Viewers may grieve, even feel guilty, but they need not be situated in relation to social structures or historical flows in any meaningful. They need only to revel in natural beauty, marveling at its native features (including indigenous peoples) and in the end lament the suffering and struggle associated with their decimation.

In conclusion, reflecting deeper trends with recent racialized narratives for children and multiculturalism and more generally imperial nostalgia for native and nature, then, places *Spirit* in two distinct ways. On the one hand -- racial and cultural -- difference clears a space to differentiate past and present, grounding powerful critiques of historic commitments to racism, progress, and domination, even as it veils recent reformulations. On the other hand, the longing for the lost and destroyed foster, oddly, a kind of amnesia in which the passing of a once proud people is an object of esteem and yearning, while the processes, relations, and ideologies remain invisible.

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