



October 2016

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### Recommended Citation

Hawk, L. Daniel (2016) "Indigenous Helpers and Renegade Invaders: Ambivalent Characters in Biblical and Cinematic Conquest Narratives," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 20: Iss. 3, Article 24.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss3/24>

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## Indigenous Helpers and Renegade Invaders: Ambivalent Characters in Biblical and Cinematic Conquest Narratives

### Abstract

This article compares the role of ambiguous character types in the national narratives of biblical Israel and modern America, two nations that ground their identities in myths of conquest. The types embody the tensions and ambivalence conquest myths generate by combining the invader/indigenous binary in complementary ways. The Indigenous Helper assists the invaders and signifies the land's acquiescence to conquest. The Renegade Invader identifies with the indigenous peoples and manifests anxiety about the threat of indigenous difference. A discussion of these types in the book of Joshua, through the stories of Rahab and Achan, establishes a point of reference by which to view the use of corresponding characters in three films that attempt to invert the American conquest narrative: *Little Big Man*, *Dances with Wolves*, and *Avatar*. The three films overturn the conquest plot but also evoke motifs that affirm national identity. This comparison of literary and cinematic narrations reveals the contested and fluid character of national narratives.

### Keywords

Conquest, America, Westerns, National Mythology, Joshua, Identity, Little Big Man, Dances with Wolves, Avatar, Ambiguity, Renegade, Nationalism

### Author Notes

L. Daniel Hawk, Ph.D., is Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Ashland Theological Seminary. His scholarship focuses on the ways that narratives construct and contest identities and on the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and violence in biblical texts and modern narratives. These emphases come together in three recent books: *Joshua in 3-D: A Commentary on Biblical Conquest and Manifest Destiny* (Cascade, 2010), *Ruth* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary, InterVarsity, 2015), and *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations*, co-edited with Kay Higuera Smith and Jayachitra Lalitha (InterVarsity, 2014).

Myths of origin comprise an element of what Anthony D. Smith has termed the “sacred foundations” of a nation; that is, the deep cultural resources of myths, symbols, memories, and rituals that render the nation as a sacred communion. Smith advocates an ethno-symbolic approach to the study of nations and nationalism that focuses on the role that myths and symbols play in the formation and maintenance of national identity. Nationalists, Smith argues, galvanize populations by taking up ethnic traditions and symbols and reappropriating them to craft a convincing narrative of national identity. At the core of the project is a quest for authenticity, which drives nationalists to sift through available cultural, religious, and historical resources in order to discern a true vision of the nation. A return to the past thereby provides access to the “true nation” in its pristine form (pure, natural, uncorrupted, and unique). The true nation in turn constitutes an ideal that can be called upon to renew and regenerate the nation.

A “cult of authenticity” thus lies at the heart of nationalism, which may be conceived as a “political religion,” a new religion of the people in which the nation itself becomes the object of devotion. The sacred foundations of a nation function as guides and guarantors for this political religion, which calls on “members strive to ensure that their nation continues to be ‘authentic’ or ‘true to itself.’”<sup>1</sup> In times of flux and challenge, the foundations offer resources “to interpret and guide much-needed changes to the received traditions of national identity and its values.”<sup>2</sup>

Origin myths constitute a charter for national identity by articulating national values, connecting the nation to its ancestors, and forging an attachment to a historic homeland. Narrating the origin myth facilitates “processes of reinterpretation and sifting older beliefs, myths, memories, traditions, and symbols, in accordance with changing circumstance and understandings of the past.”<sup>3</sup> Every iteration of a national origin myth, in sum, is both an *authentication* and a

*renegotiation* of national identity in light of contemporary experiences, challenges, and self-understandings.<sup>4</sup>

With Smith's work in mind, we may appreciate the problem encountered by those nations that render their origin myth as a narrative of conquest. Such nations must address why they, and not the indigenous peoples of their country, possess an organic attachment to the homeland. Conquest creates a tension at the core of identity, generating a feedback loop that looks to narrative to legitimate the bond between the people and the land and to reconcile violent beginnings with national values.<sup>5</sup> The nation may resolve the tension positively by an appeal to transcendence (e.g. divine election or national destiny) or negatively by rendering the indigenous peoples as unworthy of or detrimental to the land.<sup>6</sup> Conquest narratives, in short, must negotiate an ambivalent national identity that, on the one hand, differentiates the nation from the indigenous peoples it displaced, and on the other constructs an organic bond to a land it seized by force.

Biblical Israel and the United States both cast their national narratives as narratives of conquest, rendered as the conquests of Canaan and the American West respectively. The American narrative echoes motifs that configure the biblical one, e.g, a sense of election, the erasure and removal of the indigenous peoples, conquest as a sign of divine presence, and a justification of mass violence by appeal to God's will. Puritan theology, which identified the community with Israel and the continent as the Promised Land, comprised the trove of symbols and traditions that were drawn upon and reconfigured to shape the new political religion of the nascent United States. The biblical narrative, in short, provided the mythic framework for a national narrative that articulated America's self-understanding as "God's New Israel."<sup>7</sup> This being the case, one might expect to see frequent appeals to the biblical book of Joshua, which narrates Israel's conquest of Canaan, throughout the narrative westward expansion.

Yet this is not the case. References to Joshua are strikingly absent from the civic and religious discourse of the United States from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, when the colonists and citizens were mimicking the program of Israelite conquest as the nation expanded westward. The puzzling silence has been termed “a powerful repression or bracketing out of the Canaan complex . . . so that it is rarely cited by name, in *explicit* reference to Joshua and his exploits.” More to the point,

Judeo-Christian tradition seems to have built a fortress of discursive repression and encryption around its primal biblical narrative of colonial slaughter. There seems to be an implicit understanding of the Joshua paradigm here. It informs the colonial present and its agenda without specific concrete reference, perhaps a kind of discursive tact to avoid explicitly invoking the most violent genocidal chapter in Biblical narrative.<sup>8</sup>

The avoidance of Joshua in public discourse, in other words, does not necessarily mean that Joshua did not (and does not) function paradigmatically in American national mythology. Joshua may have indeed provided the foundation upon which the American narrative of conquest has been rendered, but if that is the case, it has done so subliminally.

While the extent to which the biblical conquest narrative influenced the configuration of the American myth remains a matter of debate, the commonalities in structure, motifs, and symbols suggests that a study of American narrations of conquest may be illumined by reading them in light of the book of Joshua. I undertake the task in this paper by focusing on two character types that appear prominently in both narratives and which, I propose, provide the vehicles for addressing unresolved contradictions in the nations’ collective narratives and identities.<sup>9</sup>

The types combine the Indigene/Invader binary in opposing ways. The first, which we may call the Indigenous Helper, is a “good indigene,” a woman who protects and assists the invaders and by so doing signals the land’s acquiescence to conquest. An erotic ambience defines her character and story, signifying the land as the object of the invaders’ desire. The second, the

Renegade Invader, is a “bad invader,” a man who transgresses the internal boundaries that define the nation and identifies instead with the indigenous inhabitants. He is a threatening figure who manifests anxiety about indigenous difference and the exposure of those fictions that justify the invader’s claims to superiority.

I begin with the characters of Rahab (the Indigenous Helper) and Achan (the Renegade Invader), who appear at the outset of Israel’s conquest narrative (Joshua 2:1-24 and 7: 1-26 respectively). Joshua represents a fixed form of a national conquest narrative, and the prominence of these figures testifies to the persistence of the anxiety and ambivalence the characters embody. I then move to an elaboration of corresponding characters in three cinematic narrations of the American conquest narrative: *Little Big Man*, *Dances with Wolves*, and *Avatar*. Each film takes up the figure of the Renegade Invader as a vehicle for overturning the conquest narrative, the latter two by bringing the Indigenous Helper into the story. The focus on the Renegade Invader distinguishes the three films from the many cinematic renderings of the well-known Pocahontas story, which centers on the figure of the Indigenous Helper and which has received extensive treatment elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

## **Rahab and Achan**

Immediately following a series of opening exhortations, the narrator of Joshua reports that the Israelite leader dispatched two spies to reconnoiter Jericho and its environs. The spies spend the night with a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab, who hides and protects them when the king's men come looking for them. After she has convinced the king's men to look elsewhere, Rahab goes up to the roof where she has hidden the spies and succeeds in wangling an agreement that will spare her and her family from the destruction to be meted out on the rest of her people. She then facilitates their escape from the city by lowering them from the window of her house and telling them to hide out in the hills until the coast is clear. The spies follow her directions and return to the Israelite camp three days later with a report that the city's inhabitants are terrorized (2:1-24). When the Israelites enter and destroy the city after a seven-day siege, the invaders wipe out the entire population but allow Rahab and her family to survive (6:22-25).

Rahab is both a welcoming and threatening figure. The Hebrew text introduces her as “a woman, a prostitute, whose name was Rahab” (v. 1b). Her name is formed from the same Hebrew root that describes the land as expansive and so associates her with Canaan, the “good and expansive land, flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:8). In this sense, the hospitality and protection that Rahab gives the spies represents the land's welcome of the invaders who have arrived to displace the indigenous nations. Yet her identification as a prostitute also associates her with the seductive allure of the land, that is, its power to draw Israel away from the covenant relationship that defines the nation; to “prostitute oneself” is an idiom for apostasy (Exod 34:14-16; Deut 31:16-18; Judg 2:17).

The narrator constructs the character of Rahab so as to blur the boundaries that differentiate Israelites from the peoples of the land. Rahab, first of all, displays the attributes of initiative, cunning, and opportunism that characterize the sons of Jacob. She presses the advantage gained by hiding the spies to extract from them an agreement to protect her family. The Israelite spies, on the other hand, are rendered in consistently passive terms (e.g. lying down, getting ready to sleep, dangling from a rope). Second, Rahab acclaims Yahweh's mighty deeds and lifts a creedal paean to Israel's God, echoing the cadence of testimony and praise that configures Israel's confession. She acclaims Yahweh's miracle at the Red Sea and defeat of the two kings of the Amorites and then exclaims, "Yahweh your God is God in the sky above and on the earth below" (vv. 9-11). The Israelite spies, by contrast, say nothing about their God and seem concerned only with saving their own lives. Rahab, in sum, is a Canaanite who acts and speaks like an Israelite. By casting her in this manner, in stark contrast to the Israelite spies, the narrator destabilizes the ascriptions by which Israel constructs its identity over against the peoples of Canaan.<sup>11</sup>

The first episode of Israel's conquest narrative thus features an ambiguous character who, by her hospitality and protection, welcomes the invaders into the land, protects them, and acquiesces to the extermination of her people, but who by virtue of her identity as a Canaanite prostitute personifies the threat of ethnic difference that must be eliminated if Israel is to possess the land and flourish (Deut 7:1-5; 20:16-18). The narrative therefore manifests, on the one hand, an impulse to legitimize the conquest by depicting indigenous acquiescence and on the other hand, expresses anxiety about the threat of ethnic difference. Rahab is the pivot on which the land turns away from the indigenous peoples to embrace the invaders who will replace them.

The story of Achan directly follows the destruction of Jericho and like Rahab's story stands in counterpoint to the account of a city's destruction at the hands of the Israelites, in this case, Ai



(7:1-8:29). Achan, who is introduced with a long Israelite pedigree (7:1), subjects the nation to divine wrath by crossing a forbidden boundary; specifically, by taking Canaanite plunder devoted to Yahweh and hiding it in the Israelite camp. The action has an immediate effect on the invaders, who suffer their first and only defeat immediately thereafter. An appeal to Yahweh elicits a furious response and begins a process of identifying, exposing, and eliminating the Canaanite materiel and the one who brought it into the community. When Achan is identified, he and his family are stoned, everything belonging to them is burned, and the bodies are interred under a pile of stones (7:26). Death by stoning links Achan symbolically with the Deuteronomic legislation on apostasy (Deut 13:1-18) and with the king of Ai, who is interred the same way after being executed (8:29). The story that begins with a pedigreed Israelite ends with the same character bearing a curse and resembling the defeated kings of the land.

The narrator signals Achan's outsider identity through a cryptogram that comprises his name. The name "Achan" (*c-k-n*) is nonsensical; it derives from no known Hebrew root. A transposition of the letters, however, yields the root for "Canaan" (*k-n-c*). Achan's name subtly signifies the threat of difference hidden within the camp, a presence that changes the character of the nation and which must be exposed and eliminated. Achan is a Canaanized Israelite, a bad invader who infects and imperils the nation by clandestinely bringing the materiel of Canaan into the community.

The appearances of the good outsider and the bad insider at the beginning of the conquest narrative, each in counterpoint to a report of the annihilation of a Canaanite city, manifests ambivalence about the conquest of the land and anxiety about identity and difference. The types work together, as I have argued elsewhere, to humanize the inhabitants of the land and work through the problem of indigenous difference. In the face of Rahab, Israel sees its own reflection.

In Achan the transgressor, Israel distances itself from the peoples of the land and everything associated with them.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Indian Princess and the White Savage**

The figures of the Indigenous Helper and the Renegade Invader coalesced around the historical personages of Pocahontas and Simon Girty during the early years of the American Republic. By the mid-nineteenth century, the stories of the two historical figures had acquired fixed mythic forms and a prominent role in American national mythology. The story of Pocahontas is well-known and need not be summarized here. Her transformation into an American icon evolved at the beginning of the century along a trajectory that rendered her as a peace-loving Christian convert, in contrast to her savage and treacherous people. Her first literary appearance in this guise occurred in the 1797 edition of Noah Webster's *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking* and was subsequently embellished and romanticized in story and poetry throughout the century.

Drama proved to be an even more prominent medium for articulating her myth. The first dramatic rendition in English was James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess, or, La Belle Sauvage* in 1808. From that point on, the Pocahontas myth became a staple of American drama. Approximately forty plays were performed between 1825 and 1869, one of the most prominent being George Washington Custis's *Pocahontas, or the Settlers of Virginia*, first performed in 1830, the year that the Indian Removal Act was passed. The advent of film brought numerous cinematic iterations, most recently by Disney's *Pocahontas* and Terence Malicks' *The New World*.<sup>13</sup>

Less known today is the story of Simon Girty, the White Savage. Girty and his brothers were sons of an Irish immigrant who were captured and adopted into the Seneca Nation during the French and Indian Wars. Simon served the colonists as a frontier scout and translator before and during the early years of the Revolutionary War. During the course of the war, however, Girty became disgusted by the colonists' perfidy and turned to the British in solidarity with indigenous resisters. He subsequently fought with the Shawnee and their allies for the duration of the Revolution and throughout the ensuing Indian Wars.

Girty's defection to the British, along with the fact that he continued to dress and live as an Indian, cemented his reputation as a renegade. But it was his presence among the Delawares during the torture and death of Col. William Crawford that accelerated his transformation into a mythic icon. A sensationalized account of Crawford's death, based on the recollections of an eyewitness who escaped from the Delawares, was first published in 1783.<sup>14</sup> The author, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, was intent on persuading his readers of the depths of Indian savagery and recounted Crawford's death in gruesome detail. He depicted Girty as an inhuman monster who delighted in Crawford's suffering and callously rebuffed his pleas for intercession. Coupled with the characterization of Girty as "the wicked white savage" by Moravian missionary John Heckewelder, the account shaped Girty into the quintessence of treachery and brutality.

Scores of literary treatments followed that depicted Girty as far surpassing the Indians in cruelty and bloodlust, to such an extent that within a few decades he was commonly said to have stirred up peaceful Indians against the settlers. Mothers used his name to chastise unruly children. Girty the renegade became "the Fiend of the Frontier" and "Dirty Girty."<sup>15</sup> White anxiety about "Indianization" as a resistant force to civilization, anxiety about the deleterious influence of Indian ways on white society, and longstanding revulsion of race-mixing during the nineteenth century

all contributed to the transformation of Girty into a mythic monster.<sup>16</sup> Small wonder then that he appeared among the satanic jurors in Stephen Vincent Benet's *The Devil and Daniel Webster*.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Little Big Man***

In 1972, director Arthur Penn took up the figure of the Renegade Invader as a vehicle for flipping the American conquest script and the white/red binary that configures identities within it. *Little Big Man* tells the story of Jack Crabb, a man who has lived fully in both white and indigenous worlds. Jack's story begins with the deaths of his parents at the hands of a Pawnee raiding party as the family is journeying west with a small wagon train. A passing Cheyenne warrior rescues Jack and his sister after the raid and takes them back to his village. Jack's sister subsequently escapes, but Jack remains and is adopted by Old Lodge Skins, the village leader. When he has grown into adolescence, he escapes death again when he claims his white identity to avoid being killed by a cavalryman. Jack is then transported back to a white settlement, where he is taken in by a preacher and his promiscuous wife. The sequence initiates a chain of vignettes that jostle Jack back and forth, by chance and circumstance, between white and indigenous worlds.

The picaresque mode of narration generates a striking contrast between the two worlds and a sense of chaos and confusion. The device allows Penn to maintain the white/red binary in order to reverse the associations that define its polarities.<sup>18</sup> The Cheyenne live in harmony with each other and the world. They are calm, rational, affable, and compassionate. Their living space is tidy. By contrast, the various characters that Jack encounters in the white world are vengeful, violent, dishonest, self-seeking, and hypocritical. White towns and cavalry camps are squalid and lawless. By reversing the ascriptions that define white and red, Penn collapses the civilized vs. savage

binary that configures the American conquest narrative. Coupled with the disjointed narration and comic tone, the film creates a sense of chaos, signaling the dissolution of longstanding identities.

*Little Big Man*, however, also evokes motifs that undergird American conquest mythology even as it attempts to overturn it. The ambivalence is best illustrated by Old Lodge Skins, the one stable and admirable character within the swirl of Jack's story. It is Old Lodge Skins who, early on, speaks to the chaos of white society. Upon entering a village whose occupants have been recently massacred by the cavalry, he declares, "These white men do not know where the center of the world is." From that point on, Old Lodge Skins becomes the voice that characterizes white society. Later on, he elaborates the difference between the Cheyenne and the whites. "The white man," he tells Jack, "believes everything is dead. Stone. Earth. Animals. And people. Even their own people. If things keep trying to live, white men will rub them out. That is the difference."

The character of Old Lodge Skins, like biblical Rahab, confuses the invader/indigene identities and so transforms the indigenous people from stereotypes to human beings in the eyes of viewers. Yet his character also incorporates two prominent motifs that sustain conquest mythology: the Noble Savage and the Vanishing American. The myth of the Noble Savage serves American society in times of social flux – as was the case in 1972 – by connecting the nation to its authentic self. The Noble Savage embodies the romanticized virtues settler America sees in the indigenous peoples of the land and which the nation acquired when it wrested the land from them. The figure thus functions as an agent of renewal who exemplifies the virtues that emanate from the land the nation inhabits.

The Vanishing American constitutes a complementary mythic type that glosses anxiety about indigenous difference by relegating the indigenous peoples to the past. Old Lodge Skins acknowledges and articulates the trope in two conversations with Jack, during which he voices his

determination to die. When Jack asks him why he wants to die, the old man declares, “Because there’s no other way to deal with the white man, my son. Whatever else you can say about them, it must be admitted, you cannot get rid of them... There is an endless supply of white men. There has always been a limited number of Human Beings.” As the film nears its conclusion, Old Lodge Skins decides that it is time to die and prays, “You make all things and direct them in their ways, O Grandfather. And now you have decided that the Human Beings will soon walk a road that leads nowhere.”<sup>19</sup> Old Lodge Skins in sum reverses the white/red ascriptions that configure the conquest narrative but at the same time embodies the fantasies of Indian nobility and disappearance that sustain American identity.

In contrast to Old Lodge Skins, Jack never establishes a coherent, stable identity. He fails at becoming white and becoming Indian. Jack tells his story with a sense of detachment, offering little in the way of commentary or evaluation. He possesses no agency and drifts from one happenstance to another, in perpetual reaction to the vicissitudes that beset him and switching indigenous and white identities as circumstances require. He is often rescued but never truly returns. He does not, in short, succeed in holding white and indigenous identities together but “more and more separates into an incoherent handful of selves.”<sup>20</sup>

The dissolution of Jack’s identities receives explicit utterance in the latter part of the film after Jack has witnessed the U.S. Cavalry, under the command of General George Custer, slaughter his Cheyenne wife and newborn child at Washita. Jack enters Custer’s camp posing as a cavalryman but is immediately exposed. He is about to be hanged as a renegade when Custer appears and orders his release. Later that evening, Jack comes to Custer’s tent, hiding a knife and intent on exacting revenge. He wavers, however, and Custer, with his back to Jack, soon detects Jack’s real intent. When Jack reveals the knife, Custer declares, “Well, I was correct in a sense.

You are a renegade. But you are no Cheyenne brave!” Jack then comments via voiceover, “Custer was right. I was a total failure as an Indian.”

This Renegade Invader is a threat to no one. In the person of Jack Crabb, the threatening persona of the Renegade Invader dissolves into a pathetic figure. The dissolution of his identity expresses the disintegration of identities that take place all around him; both the civilized identity of white America and the opposing savage identity of indigenous America. Like American society in 1972, Jack is swept up in events beyond his control. He has no center, no direction, and no future. We leave him, a solitary figure at the end of the film, sitting quietly with his head in his hands.

### ***Dances with Wolves***

*Dances with Wolves*, released in 1990, was one of a new wave of Westerns that sought to correct the conventions of the genre by presenting a balanced, historical narration.<sup>21</sup> The film takes up and extends many elements of *Little Big Man*, notably the voiceover and the Noble Savage and Vanishing American motifs, but eschews the comic and chaotic in favor of the linear historical narration that constitutes “one of the fundamental markers of the Western genre.”<sup>22</sup> The narrative pace is easy and unforced; the frenetic pacing of *Little Big Man* is reflected only in scenes that take place at Fort Hays.<sup>23</sup>

The film tells the story of John Dunbar, who has been dispatched to occupy Fort Sedgewick, a frontier outpost that has been abandoned by its garrison. Observed first by three Lakota boys and then by men from a nearby village, he gradually earns the trust of the Lakota, ultimately confirming his goodwill by making the risky decision to enter the Lakota village to

report the presence of a large herd of buffalo. As time passes, he spends more and more time with the Lakota and becomes fast friends with Kicking Bird, the village's spiritual leader. Dunbar thus becomes the viewer's eyes into the Lakota world and to a vision of Native American identity that contests the conventional white construct of savagery.

*Dances with Wolves* follows *Little Big Man* in rendering a stark white/red binary in order to reverse the ascriptions associated with it. Unlike Jack Crabb, who is driven back and forth between white and indigenous worlds, Dunbar is a strong and thoughtful character who undergoes a steady, measured transformation as he is drawn into the web of belonging that configures Lakota relationships. The film lingers over the human connections that Dunbar makes with people in the community and this, along with scenes of Lakota village life, forges respect and empathy for the Lakota. The people whom Dunbar befriends exhibit strong and caring relationships, laugh readily, resolve internal conflicts calmly, and keep their village and lodges clean and tidy.

The contrast with the white world is presented even more starkly than in *Little Big Man*. Fort Hays is infested with repulsive, rude, brutal, and violent men. Dunbar characterizes the mule driver who accompanies him to the outpost as "quite possibly the foulest man I have ever met." The commander who receives and sends Dunbar to the fort is a madman who urinates in his pants while talking to Dunbar. The contingent of soldiers who later beat and capture him when he returns to the fort on a peace mission are vicious and dishonest; the film depicts one of them defecating and wiping himself with pages from Dunbar's journal, which he has stolen. While the Lakota display a respect for creation, the whites are wantonly violent. They kill bison only for their tongues and hides, kill a wolf for sport, and shoot Dunbar's horse when he approaches the fort.

The contrast transforms the image of the Renegade, in the person of Dunbar, from a threatening to a sympathetic figure. The film constitutes something of an apology for the White



Savage by defusing the figure's devilish maliciousness. When tensions arise, Dunbar seeks to make peace with the cavalymen at Fort Hays but is shot at, beaten, ridiculed, and branded a renegade for his trouble. Whereas Jack Crabb undoes the Renegade's threatening persona by his weakness and passivity, Dunbar undoes it by his loyalty and courage. This is most evident by the evocation of two of the most heinous acts commonly associated with the Renegade: giving guns to the Indians and killing whites. Through the character of Dunbar, the Renegade undertakes both actions but elicits sympathy rather than terror. Dunbar gives Fort Sedgewick's stash of guns to his Lakota friends so they can defend themselves from a Pawnee raiding party. Later, the soldier he kills is one of a detachment that takes him in shackles to be hanged, and the same disgusting miscreant whom the viewer earlier had seen defecating.

Our attention, however, is particularly drawn to the relationship that Dunbar develops with Stands with a Fist, a white woman who was taken in as a child after her family had been killed by the Pawnee. At the direction of the spiritual leader Kicking Bird, she teaches Dunbar the Lakota language and ways, and thereby becomes the bridge by which he is integrated into the community. Their relationship brings together the stories of the Indigenous Helper and the Renegade Invader, which otherwise follow discrete, separate narratives in American conquest mythology. The merging of the stories yields a different, ambivalent rendering of the Helper, who becomes the liminal counterpart of Dunbar's character. The Lakota woman Stands with a Fist was originally a white woman. She knows the white speech and Lakota speech. She takes on the role as Helper at the direction of her people in order to integrate Dunbar into the community, not as a figure who intervenes to save the settler from harm.

The erotic element of the Helper myth, however, receives full attention and manifests the racialized thread that binds the two types together in the film. Stands with a Fist and Dunbar fall

in love and clandestinely consummate their relationship. When they first meet, Stands with a Fist is in mourning for her slain husband and therefore bound by strict social protocols, protocols that she struggles to maintain as their relationship deepens. The mourning protocol signifies the bond that ties her to her people, the Lakota, and which her romance with Dunbar violates. Her deepening attachment to Dunbar, against the protocols that separate her from him, signals the relinquishing of her Lakota identity and a return to her white identity.

The Helper's ambiguous identity, along with her erotic relationship with the Renegade, intimates anxiety about white racial identity. The tension comes to the surface in a remarkable manner during a conversation between Kicking Bird and his wife Black Shawl. Alone together in their tent, the two discuss the relationship between the Dunbar and Stands with a Fist. The conversation sweeps over the violation of Lakota protocol and instead affirms the pairing. Black Shawl tells her husband that Stands with a Fist has found love with Dances with Wolves (Dunbar's Lakota name). In response to Kicking Bird's question about how the people view the match – clearly with the violation of mourning protocol in the background – Black Shawl reports that they approve. Then she gives the reason: “It makes sense. They're both white.”<sup>24</sup> This is an odd statement in the mouth of a Lakota; Stands with a Fist is fully Lakota by virtue of her adoption. The comment, however, implies that it is natural and self-evident that white people should be with white people. The whole scenario articulates a white separatist ideology, restores white society's internal boundaries, and projects the ideology into an indigenous context, where it is uttered, affirmed, and validated. Native people, not whites, thus implicitly declare the naturalness of whites being with whites and so reestablish the boundary between white and indigenous that Dunbar's renegade status has mixed.

The film resolves anxiety about racial mixing by removing the white man and woman from the Lakota at the end of the film. After his rescue by a group of Lakota, Dunbar assumes the character of the Renegade by telling the council that killing the white soldier was a good thing, which he was glad to do. Yet now, he informs them, he will be hated by them with an unmatched intensity. Since the cavalry will not rest until he is apprehended, he decides to leave the Lakota so as not to endanger the people. Before he does, Dunbar receives an affirmation of his Indian identity through the village leader, reversing the denial of Indian identity that Jack Crabb receives from Custer. Countering his announced departure, Ten Bears tells him that the “man the soldiers are looking for no longer exists. Now there is only a Sioux named Dances With Wolves.” Dunbar, however, ignores Ten Bears’ counsel and leaves. In so doing he steps back into his white identity.

The film concludes with an extended scene of departure interspersed by brief shots of the pursuing cavalry. Dunbar leaves without speaking or reciprocating expressions of grief and friendship.<sup>25</sup> He is intent on cutting all ties, except to the white woman who is seated behind him in the saddle. The scene evokes the rescues that typically conclude the captivity narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Captivity narratives addressed white anxiety about the threat of indigenous difference through lurid depictions of the captive’s life among the Indians that underscored their savagery. The narratives countered the challenge presented by the many settlers who chose to “go Indian,” choosing to live with indigenous peoples rather than among settlers. The phenomenon of whites choosing to live with Indians rather than in civilized society threatened the fiction that white civilization was more advanced and to be preferred to the societies of the indigenous peoples. The captivity narratives thus typically closed with the return of the white person (usually a woman) to white society.

Dunbar's departure with *Stands with a Fist* evokes the rescue of the captive woman and expresses the same anxiety that prompted the captivity narratives; the anxiety is resolved as the white man and woman go back to their world and leave the Lakota to their fate. The Renegade's departure with the adopted Helper thus paradoxically erases racial ambivalence and reasserts the internal boundary that separates whites from Natives.

### *Avatar*

*Avatar* takes up Hollywood Indian conventions to render yet another inversion of the American conquest narrative.<sup>26</sup> The plotline, which mimics *Dances with Wolves* in a science fiction mode, displaces the conquest narrative into a fantasy world. Indeed, the film has been criticized for being so similar to *Dances with Wolves* as to constitute a virtual remake.<sup>27</sup> Retelling the conquest narrative in the context of a different world establishes a distance that allows director James Cameron to take the inversion of the conquest narrative to its logical end.<sup>28</sup> In *Avatar*, we see the Renegade Invader, in the person of an American Marine qua aboriginal avatar, uniting the indigenous peoples of the planet and leading them, along with a few other renegades, in battle against his own people. *Avatar*, in short, revives and redeems the Renegade Invader by placing him in a fantasy world, employing the artifice of narrative to persuade viewers that the war he wages against the invaders is noble and right.<sup>29</sup>

The mediating figure between indigenous and invader worlds is Jake Sully, a disabled ex-Marine, who is recruited by the Avatar program to gather intelligence on the Na'vi, the indigenous people of Pandora, a moon in the Alpha Centauri system. The moon is being colonized by the Resources Development Administration (RDA), which is mining the world for Unobtanium, a

prized and costly commodity. The RDA has developed a way for humans to survive in the toxic atmosphere of Pandora through a technology that transfers human consciousness into bodies that genetically resemble the Na'vi.

Like *Little Big Man* and *Dances with Wolves*, the film sets the idyllic life of the indigenous people over against the dystopic world of the invaders. The Na'vi are peaceful, harmonious, spiritual, and united with each other and their world. The “sky people” by contrast display the opposing attributes, in this instance with an emphasis on corporate greed and brutality. They exhibit the same proclivity toward wanton violence rendered by *Little Big Man* and *Dances with Wolves*. It soon becomes clear that the earthlings will stop at nothing to acquire Unobtanium, even if it means annihilating the Na'vi and all that is sacred to them. As the film nears its climax, Jake joins the Na'vi in a successful uprising against the RDA, culminating in a one-on-one battle with Miles Quaritch, the head of the colonizers' military force.

Despite its efforts to flip the conquest script, however, *Avatar*, reasserts a number of stock figures and elements that populate the genre of the Western, leading one commentator to characterize it as “a set of shopworn tropes about indigeneity in general, and American Indians in particular.”<sup>30</sup> Specific to our topic, Ney'tiri, the daughter of the clan leader, assumes the role of the Indigenous Helper. Reprising the role of *Stands with a Fist*, she is directed by the spiritual leader (her mother) to instruct Jake in the language and ways of the people. As per the script, Ney'tiri and Jake fall in love and eventually become “mated for life,” even though the match violates established protocol; Jake has earlier been informed that the warrior Tsu'tey will become the next clan leader, Ney'tiri the next spiritual leader, and the two will “become a mated pair.”

What makes Sully a distinctive rendition of the Renegade is the theme of chosenness that shapes his character. Because he is genetically identical to his twin brother, Jack is chosen to

participate in the Avatar project when his twin brother dies. Later, Ney'tiri is about to kill him as he wanders through the jungle, only to be halted at the last second when a seed from the sacred tree Eywa, The Tree of Souls, alights on the tip of her arrow. At this occurrence, she withdraws her bow; it is a sign that the man has been chosen. This is later confirmed when a swarm of sacred seeds, "very pure spirits," appear and alight on Jake. Ney'tiri brings Jake to the village and, when her father the clan leader asks why, she replies, "I was going to kill him, but there was a sign from Eywa." Over the course of time, Jake is adopted into the community, and he and Ney'tiri fall in love. Under the canopy of Eywa, she tells him that he may choose a woman. Jake responds, "I've already chosen. But this woman must also choose me." When Ney'tiri answers, "She already has," the two consummate their relationship.

What Sully has been chosen *for* is revealed when he later returns to the Na'vi village to warn of an impending strike against the sacred tree. He arrives riding a Toruk, a predatory flying dragon, as the community is praying around Eywa. The viewer has been prepared for the scene by an earlier one in which Ney'tiri reveals that her grandfather's grandfather was a "Turok Makto, Rider of Last Shadow." At the time, Sully replies, "He rode this?" and Ney'tiri answers, "Turok chose him. It has only happened five times since the time of the first songs." Sully now makes a dramatic entrance, at the time of the Na'vi's greatest need, as the sixth Toruk Makto.

As Turok Makto, Jake achieves a position of honor. Knowing that the RDA is preparing to strike, he receives permission to address the Omatacaya clan that has adopted him and gives them a message of defiance to send to the sky people. Then he tells the Omatacaya to go to the other clans with the message that Turok Makto calls to them. "Will you fly now with me?" he says. After concluding his speech, he mounts the Turok and flies out, followed by the rest of the Omatacaya clan on their ikrans (flying beasts). The ensuing scenes show the messengers going to

the clans with the message that Turok Makto calls them, leading to a final battle where Jake leads the Na'vi to victory. The film ends with Jake and his avatar under Eywa, with sacred seeds hovering around both.

An astonishing transformation has taken place. The Renegade Invader at the beginning of the film morphs, at the conclusion, into the Chosen One destined to save the world from destruction. The Election and Savior myths, of course, are staples of American national mythology. They assert themselves forcefully in *Avatar* at the film's climax, at the point when the conquest plot is completely overturned. In addition, the more Sully identifies with the Na'vi, the more he resembles the White Indian, an iconic frontier figure exemplified in historical remembrance by Daniel Boone and in literary form by James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo. The White Indian is another mythic type, who learns indigenous ways, acquires indigenous skills and ends up besting the indigenous people. Sully – the Chosen One, the White Savior and White Indian in the guise of the Turok Makto – does what only five other Na'vi have ever done and what no one else among the present assemblage has been able to do. The feat gives him a stature that enables him to colonize the prerogative of the Na'vi, by speaking for them and rallying the indigenous clans under his leadership. *Avatar* thus concludes with a clash of images. The White Savage leading the indigenous people into battle against the invaders is at the same time the White Indian and White Savior who reinforce invader identity and dominance.

## **Conclusion**

The biblical and cinematic narratives under review take up the Renegade Invader and Indigenous Helper in diverse ways to renegotiate the narratives of conquest that ground national identity. The

figures of Rahab and Achan, in the biblical narrative, blur the boundaries between Israelite and Canaanite and so render an implicit critique of the accounts of mass killings recounted and celebrated in Joshua 2-12. The presence and prominence of these figures in a fixed form of national conquest narrative attest to the persistent and powerful role they play in both confirming and challenging the symbolic infrastructure of conquest mythology.

The corresponding characters in American cinematic narratives reveal a similar role in support of revisions that attempt to reverse the conquest plot. The Renegades and Helpers remain ambivalent figures, whose attributes shift according to the currents that impact the society. None of the three films is able to suppress the eruption of nation-affirming motifs, types, and ideologies. The confused, passive figure of Jack Crabb personifies the paralysis of a society suspended between culture and counter-culture, and *Little Big Man* as a whole looks back to romanticized Indian virtues to recover the nation's authentic character and values. *Dances with Wolves* aspires to reconfigure the conquest as myth and history, yet concludes by reasserting the boundaries of a racialized white-separatist identity. In *Avatar*, Jake Sully transforms the Renegade Invader into a sympathetic, praiseworthy figure and exposes the greed and militarism that drive colonial programs. Yet he also revives deep-seated mythic types that identify America as a nation destined to save the peoples of the world and endowed with a superior wisdom to do so. The complementary Indigenous Invader, absent in *Little Big Man*, reappears in the other two films to reinforce both the inverted Renegade and the reiteration of national motifs.

These variations on a common story attest to the fluid and fixed character of origin narratives in general and conquest narratives in particular. The articulation of nation-affirming motifs works alongside reconfigurations of types and symbols in the context of new challenges and changes for the nation. Each narration expresses an impulse to resolve contradictions between



the nation's violent origins and the values that comprise the nation's true self, while also attempting to purify the nation from the foreign and false. One wonders how the changes and challenges that confront American society and self-understanding will impact the reconfiguration of these character types in future cinematic iterations.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003): 258.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 259. Other relevant works from Smith's voluminous scholarship are idem, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999); idem, *The Antiquity of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); and idem, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (Abingdon, 2009). Shorter treatments include "Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism," *International Affairs* 72:3 (1996), 445-58; idem, "The Formation of National Identity," in *Identity*, ed. Henry Harris (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 129-53; and idem, "The Origin of Nations," in *Nationalism*, ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 147-54.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 256.

<sup>4</sup> Smith's work on the role of religion in the construction and maintenance of national identity, as it addresses the role of the Bible in this enterprise, has been extended in important ways by Steven Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002) and Braden P. Anderson, *Chosen Nations: Scripture, Theopolitics, and the Project of National Identity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> L. Daniel Hawk, "Indigenous Helpers and Invader Homelands," in *Joshua and Judges, Texts @ Contexts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 109-122.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Baird observes: "Tautologically, the defining American characteristic has been the continual redefinition of the American character;" "Going Indian: *Dances with Wolves* (1990)," in *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1998), 152-69.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed; Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina, 1998); George McKenna, *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009); Richard T. Hughes, *Christian America and the Kingdom of God* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 2009); Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996); and Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Bill Templer, "The Political Sacralization of Imperial Genocide: Contextualizing Timothy Dwight's *The Conquest of Canaan*," *Postcolonial Studies* 9.4 (2006): 358-391.

<sup>9</sup> For more extensive studies see L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua in 3-D: A Commentary on Biblical Conquest and Manifest Destiny* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010) and idem, "The Truth about Conquest: Joshua as History, Narrative, and Scripture," *Interpretation* 66 (2012): 129-40.

<sup>10</sup> A connection between biblical Rahab and Disney's Pocahontas has been made by Lori L. Rowlett, "Disney's Pocahontas and Joshua's Rahab in Postcolonial Perspective," in *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible*, ed. George Aichele, JSOTSup 309 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 66-75.

<sup>11</sup> The narrator accentuates Rahab's liminal identity by reporting, before the destruction of the city, that "her house was in the wall of the city; in the wall of the city she was living" (2:15) and after by two reports that locate Rahab and her family both "outside the camp of Israel" (6:23) and "within the midst of Israel to this very day" (6:25).

<sup>12</sup> L. Daniel Hawk, "The Problem with Pagans," in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*, ed. Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn (London: Routledge, 2002), 153-63; idem, *Joshua* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), 19-33.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Binder, Susannah Grant, and Philip LaZebnik, *Pocahontas*, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, produced by James Pentecost, 1995 (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD; Terence Malick, *The New World*, directed by Terence Malick, produced by Sarah Green, 2005 (Burbank, CA: New Line Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD. For a treatment of Pocahontas's transformation into a mythic icon, see Heike Paul, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2014), 102-135. A review of literary and dramatic versions of her story is provided by Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative*. New York: Cambridge University, 1994 and Howard A. Snyder, *Jesus and Pocahontas: Gospel, Mission, and National Myth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Henry Brackenridge, *Narratives of a Late Expedition against the Indians, with an Account of the Barbarous Execution of Col. Crawford . . .* (Philadelphia: Francis Bailey, 1783).

<sup>15</sup> Daniel P. Barr, "A Monster So Brutal: Simon Girty and the Degenerative Myth of the American Frontier, 1783-1900," *Essays in History* 40 (1998). Accessed January 14, 2016. <http://www.essaysinhistory.com/articles/2012/114>.

<sup>16</sup> Colin G. Calloway, "Neither White nor Red: White Renegades on the American Indian Frontier," *Western Historical Quarterly* 17, 1 (1986): 43-66. See also idem, "Simon Girty: Interpreter and Intermediary," pp. 38-58 in James A. Clifton, ed., *Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Studies of North American Frontiers* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Vincent Benet, *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), 43-44.

<sup>18</sup> The screenplay recasts the novel's ambiguous depictions of Jack Crabb and the Cheyenne in order to maintain the white/red dichotomy and gain sympathy for the latter. See Margo Kasdan and Susan Tavernetti, "The Hollywood Indian in *Little Big Man*: A Revisionist View," *Film & History* 23, 1-4 (1993): 70-80.

<sup>19</sup> Calder Willingham, *Little Big Man*, directed by Arthur Penn, produced by Stuart Millar (1972; Hollywood, CA.: Paramount Home Video, 2003), DVD.

<sup>20</sup> Leo Braudy, "The Difficulties of *Little Big Man*," *Film Quarterly* 25, 1 (1971): 33.

<sup>21</sup> See Alexandra Keller, "Historical Discourse and American Identity in Westerns since the Reagan Administration," *Film & History* 33.1 (2003): 47-53.

<sup>22</sup> Keller, "Historical," 52.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Blake, *Dances with Wolves*, directed by Kevin Costner, produced by Jim Wilson and Kevin Costner (1990; Santa Monica, CA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

<sup>24</sup> Black Shawl uses the Lakota word "washitu," which, although translated by "white" signifies the settlers differently in Lakota.

<sup>25</sup> In his mute and undemonstrative response to the Lakota people Dunbar assumes another mythic type. He becomes the Stoic Indian, the dispassionate warrior who accepts all calamities without emotion.

<sup>26</sup> James Cameron, *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron, produced by James Cameron and John Landau (2009; Beverly Hills, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment/Lightstorm Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

<sup>27</sup> Frank Scheide, "Frederick Jackson Turner's 'Frontier Thesis', *Avatar* (2009), and the Representation of Native Americans in Film," *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 5, 6 (2011): 197, 207. For an opposing perspective, see Ellen Grabiner, / *See You: The Shifting Paradigms of James Cameron's Avatar* (Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy 34, Jefferson: McFarland, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> The film also makes use of the voiceover employed in *Little Big Man* and *Dances with Wolves* to evoke a sense of distance. All three films use a mediating device: a tape recorder in *Little Big Man*, a diary in *Dances with Wolves*, and a video log in *Avatar*.

<sup>29</sup> For an interpretation of *Avatar* as a racial revenge fantasy see John Rider, "Race and Revenge Fantasies in *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Inglorious Bastards*," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4, 1 (2011): 41-56. Kyla Schuller presents an analysis of the film's use of movement to elicit sympathy for indigenous suffering, supported by an informed overview of racial and mythic underpinnings in "Avatar and the Movements of Neocolonial Sentimental Cinema," *Discourse* 37, 2 (2013): 177-93.

<sup>30</sup> Orin Starn, "Here Come the Anthros (Again): The Strange Marriage of Anthropology and Native America," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, 2 (2011): 179.

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