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A Lakota Action Script: Embodying Indigenous sovereignty in voice

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A Lakota Action Script:

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by

Marcus Bear Eagle

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Lakota Action Script:

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Master of Arts in American Indian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Henry L. Geiogamah, Chair

Alongside the creation and reading of a feature-length film script, this accompanying essay provides an analysis of the story and reflection of the creation of the script, including work undertaken while attending University of California Los Angeles. Historical context and current challenges for Native American peoples are examined in relation to their impact on the creation of this feature-length Lakota action film script.

The thesis of Marcus Bear Eagle is approved.

Kyle Travis Mays

Edward James Monaghan

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Henry L. Geiogamah, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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I would like to acknowledge my mother always in her unconditional love through my own journey to find voice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Hoye Waye [current title], or "My Voice", is a Lakota action film script, but at its heart it is a larger narrative about settler colonialism, voice, oppressed identity passed through generational trauma, and the healing that comes from freedom to return to original Lakota ways of knowing. Voice is referenced throughout this essay, referring not only to physical circumstance to speak physically, but also referring to a larger idea of freedom to express identity, whether that be physically, emotionally, mentally, or any other means of expressing oneself.

As implied by *Hoye Waye*'s title, the theme of voice in the story of the film script itself was also the driving force in its creation. Sovereignty for Indigenous people to have their own voice in telling their own stories is an ongoing battle which takes an ongoing effort. Scott Richard Lyon offered the view that sovereignty is "nothing less than our attempt to survive and flourish as a people," while also considering that sovereignty should take into account traditional Native American ways of living prior to colonial contact. (Lyons, 2000) I am drawn toward using Lyon's view of sovereignty in this instance of writing about the creation of *Hoye Waye* because as an Oglala Lakota, I have been raised with an emphasis that the Lakota way is one of interconnection, such as language, culture, way of knowing, and every aspect of being Lakota being inseparable from one another. So it is my belief that speaking about survival and flourishing in voice is not disconnected from speaking about survival and flourishing as a people.

In order to elaborate on need for Indigenous voice in storytelling from Indigenous people, as well as the significance of sovereignty as a term used in this paper, in the proceeding pages I will draw work I have undertaken while attending University of California Los Angeles,

acknowledging scholarship which exists on many of the mentioned topics. This text prioritizes accessibility to the Lakota community and what is acceptable to the community; therefore it is my decision to not deny myself the right to speak in this text as a primary source with the lived experience of being raised as an Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. This text is intended primarily as a reflection, which accompanies a reading of *Hoye Waye*. The influences of *Hoye Waye*'s creation will be examined, as well the significance of certain themes and motifs contained within the story.

2. PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCE

On October 14th, 2011, the *20/20* special with Diane Sawyer titled *Hidden America: Children of the Plains* premiered and had accomplished a rare occurrence: it ran a mass media contemporary story of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and the Oglala Lakota people. The only problem was that this story portrayed a very limited perspective of the Lakota people. This story appealed to the shock value of tragedy and poverty, leaving little room to emphasize positive occurrences of strength in a living, flourishing culture. Utilizing the resources available to them, a group of Lakota youth quickly met this portrayal with their own criticism. Todd County High School Lakota students from the neighboring Rosebud Indian Reservation created a rebuttal YouTube video titled "*More than that…*" which gained attention in news outlets such as *Indian Country Today*. Posted by the YouTube account "falcondaily" the Lakota students make their message clear in their words

> "I know what you probably think of us…we saw the special too. Maybe you saw a picture, or read an article. But we want you to know, we're more than that…We have so much more than poverty." (Todd County High School Lakota students, 2011)

The desire to change the narrative about contemporary stories of Native nations by using Native voices is an understandably important goal, as the unfortunate truth is that the non-Native dominant media's hopelessness-focused coverage of most Native nations has an ongoing negative impact on Native youth. Stephanie A. Fryberg's *Of warrior chiefs and Indian princesses* (2008) study tested how Native American students were impacted by mass media portrayal of Native American people. Native American students were exposed to common media portrayals such as Disney's Pocahontas, the Cleveland Indians' mascot, and negative stereotypes such as alcohol abuse, high dropout rates, and high depression rates. A second group of Native American students were given none of those media images. When asked questions relating to self-understanding, self-esteem, potential, and community worth, the group which was exposed to the common stereotypical media portrayals reported more negative feelings such as decreased self-esteem, decreased feeling of worth in their communities, and decreased confidence in reaching further academic possibilities. (Fryberg, 2008) It seems that the Lakota students of Todd County High School understood that continued negative-focused portrayal would continue to harm their community, and that they need to oppose it. They understood that a people should not go without sovereignty of their own voice.

Scholar Michelle Raheja writes of the term "visual sovereignty", describing it as a tactic in which one can "confront the spectator with the often absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representations of Native Americans, while also flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotype." (Raheja, 2007) In order words, visual sovereignty 'calls out' instances where Indigenous portrayal is dominated by non-Indigenous control and brings those imbalances of power structure to light. Faye Ginsburg (2016) builds off Raheja's work and introduces the term

"media sovereignty," specifically acknowledging the importance and variety of Indigenous media work, while emphasizing the capacity to control one's own images and words. Media sovereignty also implies a power to control how those are circulated.

Terminology aside, however, the underlying usage of these terms arises because of the contemporary situation for Indigenous storytellers where, more often than not, their narratives are told for them by their oppressing colonial force, often at the expense of truth in its entirety. Faye Ginsburg points out that from old U-Matic analog format in the 1980s, to the contemporary platforms such as social media and YouTube, these forms of expression have been a form of "talking back" at structures of power which erase and distort Indigenous interests and realities. (Ginsburg, 2016) It is not the colonized who dictate how history is told, and as a result, the wrongdoings against them are swept under the radar by the colonizer. To be deprived sufficient opportunity to tell their own story is to render a people invisible. I write *Hoye Waye* with the belief that being deprived voice is a political tool, especially when the stakes of truth are high for those who obtained lands by questionable means. Truths of the past are powerful, and contemporary narratives are powerful in their potential to speak the truths of the present. The truth of the present is imperative to shape the truth of the future.

Unfortunately, the truth of the present for Native nations is all-too-often limited to being at the mercy of whichever way the non-Native majority would like to portray it in the public eye, which often comes in the form of stereotypes, caricatures, and outright racism. As sports teams, brand names, as characters mostly appearing in historical stories, many tribes find themselves fossilized and forever portrayed as how they appeared in a time of the past. The problem with this sort of fossilization, according to Tara Houska, Attorney/Co-founder of *Not Your Mascots,* is that "If we're still considered these kinds of headdress caricatures living on the plains and never

went past 1900, that doesn't allow us into this modern dialogue." (Little, 2017) This leaves no room for the idea that these are a people alive in the present, a people whose physical circumstance and way of life can change in appearance, a people with a stake in national policies of the present and future.

Philip Deloria, Standing Rock Lakota Author, speaks about symbol systems around mascots, finding them problematic because "they generalize Indians in all kinds of ways that always act to the detriment of Indians. Indian people are not monolithic on this issue. But the images give you a picture of a kind of single Indian warrior, war whooping in various degrees of offensiveness, but they don't allow history to happen, because history requires complexity." (Little, 2017) Deloria explains that stereotyping is a political claim. He goes onto compare a stereotype to the brevity of Tweet on Twitter. "A stereotype is 140 characters," Deloria says, "but history in the real world of real people is complicated, it's always complicated. This is why building a picture of a people around a stereotype is a really bad idea." (Little, 2017)

Both the pervasive stereotyping and fossilization of Native American peoples in contemporary media has influenced the creation of *Hoye Waye* to challenge this image by being set in contemporary times, 21st Century, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation of South Dakota. In doing so, the intention is to show the Oglala Lakota people as a living people. Though Pine Ridge is shown as a living community of the 21st Century, with cars and houses, the Pine Ridge Reservation is still unique in its culture and conditions, and it is not my intention to shy away from this. I do not deny that the living conditions contain higher suicide teenage suicide rates, higher poverty, and less job economy than the majority of the United States, but I do not make this the focal point of the story, as is often the case with most non-Native coverage of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, such as the aforementioned *20/20* special *Hidden America: Children*

of the Plains which the Todd County High School Lakota youth voiced opposition to. In the same spirit of the Lakota youth who sent their voice, *Hoye Waye* intends to instead emphasize the unique ways of the Oglala Lakota people, and the resulting displays of strength and hope in everyday life. Whereas most modern coverage of Pine Ridge will tell a story of what was lost and displays what seems to be a hopeless circumstance, *Hoye Waye*'s depiction of Pine Ridge focuses on what survives, regenerates and heals to greater community strength even in the face of ongoing power structure pushing toward assimilation.

Despite normalization of silenced voice in mass media, attempts to render Native identity invisible did not begin with mass media. American Indian policies have, over the centuries, come in various forms ranging from assimilation to outright extermination. The goal has always been simple: make tribes disappear. In 1879 Captain Richard H. Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian School of Pennsylvania which became the model of Indian boarding school and the Indian boarding school policies which followed, designed for complete assimilation of Native peoples into white society. Pratt stated:

> "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." (Pratt, 1892)

Pratt's statement promotes the idea that "all the Indian there is in the race" is something which is not human. This degrading view of Native peoples' way of life is the essence of assimilation policy. Painted to the public as a compassionate alternative to extermination, one may wonder how many people knew of the various abuses which took place in many Indian boarding schools, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and forced malnutrition. Accounts of these experiences and their lasting effects continue to come to light. Charlene Ann LaPointe (2008) gives detailed accounts of the horrors of boarding school, recalling unwanted attention

from both male and female pedophiles “It seemed that the rapes, molestations, snarling anger, and the hunter-prey stalking tactics of the predators became common place.” Even extended family who had been institutionalized by boarding schools had adopted destructive behaviors, and so LaPointe only felt safe around immediate family. However, living away from family while at boarding school, she felt that she “was prey just like the rest of the poor innocent children.” (Deere et al, 2008) The effects of boarding school are often too traumatic for many to put into words and have silenced voices on a whole different level. This trauma plays a large role in the story of *Hoye Waye.*

Another aspect of *Hoye Waye* comes in response to a time when federal boarding schools openly “forbade use of native languages and religious practice.” This aggressive and openly hostile attempt to eliminate Native languages and ways of knowing caused a lasting damage of the Native language fluency of the descendants of boarding school survivors (Lomawaima, 1993) For *Hoye Waye*, I believe that portrayal of shift toward positive momentum is important. The utilization of Lakota language throughout *Hoye Waye* acknowledges the revitalization efforts of the Lakota language currently taking place. The bi-lingual dialogue reflects this positive trend in the community and the increasing fluency in Lakota language that is returning to each new generation.

The motif of kinship ties is one of many critical focal points in *Hoye Waye*. The Lakota tiošpaye, or kinship system, is imperative in continuing the Lakota way of life, and this would include being raised not only by parents, but equally by grandparents and other kinship connections. Just as LaPointe recalls in her account of being raised through boarding school, she could never truly stay in the safety of family. (Deere et al, 2008) By boarding schools removing children from their home environment at an early age into a hostile environment of survival, and

indoctrination of fear-based teachings which warned of punishment associated with practicing the Lakota way of life, a new environment of internalized shame was created. This trauma, both in the aspects of its lasting negative impact and displays of strength and healing from it, set the stage for the story in *Hoye Waye*.

3. HOYE WAYE

Indian boarding school policies are a major source of the plot of *Hoye Waye*. In this story, is a troubled Lakota character who is the product of Indian boarding schools, abused by a family member who was abused in boarding school, which becomes an abuse he passes on to the Lakota people. This is an ongoing issue for not only the survivors of Indian boarding schools, but the following generations of the survivor's family. The collective traumas of boarding schools pass on inter-generationally and manifest in poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, depression and suicide (Lajimodiere, 2014). In this troubled character's bitterness toward the Lakota way and its kinship system, his anger has blinded him to the fact that all of his antagonizing actions revolve around that very connection to his people. My intention in portraying strong contrasts of anger and care is to emphasize that the path which these traumas travel, which is through family, is also the same place from which strength and healing occurs; whether pain or happiness, there is connection, and a renewed awareness of the connection's existence ultimately heals and gives strength to overcome hardships.

The strongest motif I have placed throughout this story is drawn from an understanding present in being raised as a Lakota, which is emphasis on interconnection in living, or mitakuye oyas'iŋ. Interconnection is represented in the script through levels of kinship, from immediate family, to extended family, to connection to the entire Oglala Lakota nation. This is especially

important as a motif because it is in direct opposition to the Indian boarding school method of severing kinship ties. Throughout the story are figures who emphasize these kinship ties, including immediate family who still feel compassion for their troubled relative and would like to participate in resolving the situation, as well as community members who still view the troubled man as a member of their community and are willing to consider the deeper root of the his pain. Even the main character must face that regardless to conflict, he also has connection with the troubled man.

The primary character the story follows is a young man who thematically has struggled with voice and expression his entire life. This story alludes to the idea that although the boarding school era has ended, the Western education system still leaves very little room to accept anything but assimilation. Even a Lakota person in contemporary times can still feel that their life is forcibly being shaped for U.S. citizenship first, and then any space for Lakota identity is an afterthought that must still accommodate and limit itself around assimilation. The powerful condition of anxiety which this young man lives with as a result of these circumstances is very defining to his character, in the way the story explores his path in dealing with it. Returning to the motif of mitakuye oyas'iŋ, an inter-connection-based approach to understanding the protagonist's condition and the health problems that accompany it are ultimately what provide him the ability to heal. He allows inter-connection to enter his life in various ways, which often relate to return to Lakota ceremonies and other activities, including a personal level of reclaiming his own expression of body. With the recurring motif of boarding school abuses passing on inter-generationally, body is an important place to acknowledge trauma. Tsianina Lomawaima (1993) states that "In order to mold young people's minds, 19th-century educators bent first to mold their bodies." Body is on the forefront for Native nations as a recipient of

violence, trauma, and suppressed identity, and so healing through reclaiming body also echoes the theme of suppressed voice and return to voice.

Violence itself finds its way into this story as a motif, where its usage when fueled by anger always falls short of bringing greater understanding. In the boarding school era, violence acted as a method of inhibiting voice and way of knowing, and so the violence of the story represents of an inter-generational struggle recreating itself. Although this is an action story that includes physical violence, this violence is only the characteristic of certain points of the path, a path which is more importantly driven by the motif of returning to Lakota understanding of inter-connection. Even the final action scene must ultimately find resolution through inter-connection.

4. CONCLUSION

In the opening to Vine Deloria's *Power and place*, Daniel Wildcat (2001) wrote that the United States' problem with Indian Education is actually a problem with education in America as a whole. According to Wildcat, teaching methods have changed very little from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and "Curriculum at all levels of American education, bears the largest imprint of Western metaphysics." Traceable back to the influences of Aristotle's categorization of experience and knowledge in how subjects are divided and taught, "Higher education is one of the most conservative Western cultural institutions in America." (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001)

What is seen in the experience of *Hoye Waye*'s protagonist is that from a young age, the Western education system drills in a binary 'black and white' way of thinking where the facts are the facts, and if knowledge is not processed in the 'right' way, it must the 'wrong' way. For any other way of learning and approaching knowledge to exist and be acknowledged, it is likely to be given a categorization treatment as 'alternative' and written about through a lens of

understanding which focuses on how it relates back to the Western system. Writing this story is to offer voice from a different understanding, with more perspective than Richard H. Pratt may have been willing to be open to learn about when he proposed to kill all that is 'Indian' in the race.

"There is much work to be done" Wildcat stated, emphasizing the need for a dialogue between Western metaphysics of space, time and energy with American Indian metaphysics of place and power. A widely shared Indigenous tribal view, Wildcat says, is one which human understanding themselves as a piece of a "complex living system". In this system, relations and processes are given more initial attention than parts of the experience. Wildcat continues

> "The point should be obvious: we, human beings, in all our rich diversity, are intimately connected and related to, in fact dependent on, the other living beings, land, air, and water of the earth's biosphere. Our continued existence as part of the biology of the planet is inextricably bound up with the existence and welfare of the other living beings and places of the earth: beings and places, understood as persons possessing power, not objects." (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001)

Wildcat essentially explains a system of interconnection, which relates to my own aims in a broad sense when writing *Hoye Waye*, in that I am telling a story of return to understanding of Lakota interconnection. In a world riddled with environmental crisis and diminishing resources, it is difficult to imagine anything but benefit from Indigenous worldviews to be given platform to live and flourish. Upon closer inspection, one will see that this worldview is not romanticism, Wildcat says, but rather is "acknowledgement of a living people's experience and something science too often overlooks." Wildcat points out that it has been nearly three decades since Vine Deloria stated "If we talk and you listen, non-Natives might even learn something useful." (Deloria & Wildcat, 2001)

Although this story's specific details are unique to the Oglala Lakota community, the act of forced assimilation and oppressed voice is not uncommon to Indigenous people all over the

world, and so it is my hope that stories like this and others can be told and find even more platform for Indigenous sovereignty in voice. The childhood experience of the protagonist in *Hoye Waye*, is loosely based on my own life and so the need to reclaim voice is especially close to my heart. I submit this thesis as an act of reclaiming voice, telling my own story and utilizing my own lived experience as an Oglala Lakota. Both the plot of the story and the act of creating this story reflect resilience from forced silence of Lakota voice into a return to expressing Lakota voice. This story is for every Indigenous child who has their very identity oppressed from the moment they are integrated into non-Indigenous education systems.

Thank you for your time. Pilamayayapelo. [“You all have made me grateful.”]

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