

NATIVE AMERICANS: MYTHS, PRESENCES, and PEOPLE

This online project provides background and expansions of ideas in Alide Cagedemetrio's essay "A Plea for Fictional Histories and Old Time Jewesses."

This rather difficult essay begins by looking at some novels by Sir Walter Scott, focusing on the the "Wandering Jew" as a threat to English and European purity. In the U.S. this threat, I believe Cagedemetrio says, is parallel to the threat of the "Octoroon," a person 1/8th Black. In both cases, such people could appear to be so completely white that whites might actually make the "horrific" mistake of marrying them. The essay makes its most insightful points, however, when Cagedemetrio extends this idea to how "Americans" have constructed their relationship to Native Americans. Here, though there is no danger of mistaking The Native American with The Wandering Jew or the Octoroon, a tricky relationship must be constructed whereby Americans gain entrance into the Native American family so as to become "heirs" to the land. This social, cultural, and *psychological* move covers over and helps us deny how we actually took the land from Native Americans.

Cagedemetrio's analysis is complex and subtle. 1) Start with the passage about Naming which begins the essay excerpt I've given you. We associate Native American language, as we associate Native Americans themselves, with being close to nature. Linguistically, this means that we think their language perfectly names the thing it signifies; a person's name, especially, names that person perfectly. This is not the way language actually works—all language being ambiguous, always imbued with a gap between the word and the thing named—but we mythologize this closeness to nature and this perfect naming.



2) In a complex process illustrated by James Fennimore Cooper's "Deer Slayer" or "Leather Stocking" novels (an image of Daniel Day Lewis as Bumpo is at right), the white man is first named by Native Americans, then adopted. In particular, the white Natty Bumppo is, for many reasons, named by the "Indian" as Father of his own people, thus gaining an equivalency with the Indian Father. Natty then adopts an *Indian* warrior, thus setting in motion a mixing not only of Native and White identities, but all kinds of rights and privileges—including inheriting the land.



3) BUT—and this is *the* crucial point—this mixing does not involve any mixing of blood. It is handled solely through *adoption*. Pay particular attention to p. 33 (starting in the middle), then to the final paragraph of this section in the middle of p. 35. The rest of the essay excerpt analyzes important subtleties in the blood/adoption dynamic.

Read the Cagedemetrio piece with this summary in mind, then do the following and consider the questions at the end of this project carefully.



I. Watch a live-music showing of Steve Bilich's short film *Native New Yorker*. Winner, among many accolades, of the best documentary short at the prestigious Tribeca Film Festival in 2006, it has been screened and "performed" live around the world, including at the National Gallery of Art. The YouTube clip [HERE](#) shows such a performance. You will see the audience

and music ensemble playing William Susman’s wonderful score with the film playing on a screen. Though at times dim and far away, you’ll be able to catch enough of the film and get the idea: Native American actor Terry “Coyote” Murphy—a sometimes ghostly, sometimes “real” presence—wanders New York both before and after 9/11. The film gained much praise, some of which was technical: it was shot using a hand-cranked 16mm camera! To get a somewhat clearer view of the film watch its short [trailer](#), then learn more by investigating the following sites.

II. Read this [blog post](#) by William Susman, composer of this film’s score, and this article in the [Austin Chronicle](#).

III. There are thousands of Native American videos and sites on the web. A United Methodist Church pastor, Billie Fidlin, for example started [Whisper and Thunder](#). Another site that serves as a major portal for many other sites is [Native Americans Online](#). Explore one or both of these sites looking for something that interests you, as well as connections to the Cagedemetrio essay. For example, on the first page of Native Americans online you will find this: “For the Full Blood Native Americans and those who see a better life following the Traditional lifestyle. You need not be Blood to be respected in our world.”

Short assignments and reflections

- 1) By Sunday noon, list one interesting thing you found on either site in III above and write a short reflection on that thing or the sites in general. Recall that in our discussion of Sandra Cisneros’ *Woman Hollering Creek* we explored, in Ann Beattie’s words, “how and why we mythologize love,” and try to be sensitive to how and why we mythologize the Native American. By our online session Monday evening, please look at each of your group member’s post on this topic and be ready to give a reaction to at least one of the posts, plus talking briefly about your own post.
- 2) By Monday noon write a short reaction to the *Native New Yorker* film, and be prepared to discuss reactions more online.
- 3) IF you know the film *Dances with Wolves*, please be willing to share your views of it. (No formal writing or posting needed.) It won the 1991 Best Picture Oscar, drawing both respect and criticism from Native American groups. Part of the respect was what seemed a “realistic” portrayal of Native American struggles, plus its use of actual Native American languages. The criticism, though, was indeed deep, including the implication that there were no more “free Indians.” After reading the Cagedemetrio piece we also know that it further mythologized the Native American, especially with respect to the adoption/blood dynamic.