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Betting on Red? Recent movies by Native American filmmakers.

“Gambling is/nothing new for the Indians./ Gambling is traditional/ and began when Columbus arrived/ in our country. Indians started/ to roll the dice every time/ we signed another treaty/ but we’ve always been the losers/ because the dice were loaded/and the treaties broken/ by random design. Now/ we’ve got our own game/ of Reservation Roulette/ and I’d advise the faithful/ to always bet on red.”¹

This statement, taken from Sherman Alexie’s “Love, Hunger, Money” essay, points to the necessity of choice that contemporary Native Americans are faced with. Since they have to live or should we rather say, “survive” between two cultures, they are forced to “place their bets” on the culture that promises a better, more rewarding life. While for some the answer to the question which one to choose is obvious, others are on a ceaseless search.

The protagonists of the two films I would like to discuss in this paper are also faced with this dilemma. They all make choices and however contrasting those choices may seem, in the end they all follow Alexie’s advice and, in their unique way, “bet on red.”

Examining Sherman Alexie’s *The Business of Fancydancing*, I would like to look at the figures of the three main characters: Seymour Polatkin, Aristotle Joseph and Agnes Roth. Each character presents a different attitude towards the issue of one’s place in the contemporary Native American reality.

Seymour Polatkin, the central character of the film, displays a particularly complex approach towards his ethnicity. In his case, it can safely be said that “betting on red” is synonymous with capitalizing on it. Being an acclaimed poet with university education, he *seems* to have found the way of integrating the two worlds which constitute his reality: the so called “white world” which he decides to live in and the reservation which he comes from.

¹ Sherman Alexie. “Love, hunger, money.” 19.Sep.1994 [High Country News](#). Online. 22.Oct.2004

In the opening scenes of the film, he is presented as a witty writer at a poetry reading, who plays his keen, white audience, confidently selling his Indian stories. We see fulfillment and completion in his actions. He's a young, educated Native American, a thriving poet who talks about his childhood, his family and friends and, above all, about the life on the reservation in the most straightforward way:

We waited in the car / outside the bar / my sisters and I / "for just a couple of drinks" / as we had heard it so many times before / as Ramona said / like all Indian kids / have heard / before / from their parents, disappeared into the smoke and laughter of a reservation tavern.

The picture that emerges from his poems is one of, at times, harsh reality which however, the poet does not seem to be bitter about, on the contrary, he talks about it with distance but at the same time with certain tenderness:

For this mother and father who staggered from the bar always five minutes before closing, so they could tell us later *At least we left before the last call*. But we did love them, held tightly to their alcoholic necks and arms as we drove back home.

As we later hear him reminisce also about his carefree childhood, filled with play and laughter, it seems that his reservation background has given Seymour nothing but strength to live and succeed in the white world. He appears to have found a way of combining his past and his present and forming an integral whole.

In the later scenes however, the viewer learns that the two worlds of Seymour Polatkin are not at all seamlessly blended. In fact, Seymour is not swimmingly uniting the two realities but he is torn or rather trapped between them. His life in the white world is a desperate attempt to escape from the reservation. He views the reservation as a prison, offering him no prospects; leaving for college appears to him as the only way to break free from the confinements of his background. The poetry that he creates however explicitly claims quite the opposite. What his poems do not say is that he's troubled by how much the reservation remains a part of his identity and troubled by his memories of the reservation life. He is still very much a part of it or rather it is the reservation that constitutes an inextricable part of him. In fact it is impossible to break

away from it. At one point he even notices: “Every time I sit down and write a new poem I want it not to be about the reservation, but the reservation just won’t let me go.”

Moreover Seymour capitalizes not only on his own reservation memories but also on what we might call collective memory of his whole community. He appropriates his friends’ stories and presents them as his own. At one point in the film he admits that in his mind his own and his friends’ memories have blended. When he is asked by an interviewer about the creative process he answers: “Memories and lies get all mixed up and they spin and that’s when the poems happen.” What we witness here is a kind of memory theft on Seymour’s part. In one of the first scenes of the film we see Mouse reading from the collection of Seymour’s poems and recognizing in them his own experience. He says to Aristotle: “He (Seymour) took my life man. It’s all lies man.”

Later on, the journalist conducting an interview with Seymour quotes the words of Primo Levi, a Jewish concentration camp prisoner and a writer, who claims that it was only the liars, the cheaters and the thieves that survived the Holocaust. The interviewer draws a parallel between this situation and that of Seymour’s. She seems to suggest that Seymour can be treated like a survivor, someone who managed not only to last but also prosper in the white world. At the same time, she implies that in order to do that Seymour must have turned to the same means as the survivors of the Holocaust, that would be lying, cheating and stealing. This comparison only corroborates Mouse’s accusation and the fact that he is indeed treated like a liar and a cheat by most of his childhood friends.

Among those who do not understand Seymour’s decision to leave the reservation is Aristotle. In many respects, he is Seymour’s opposite. Having the same background and similar opportunities, having gone through three years of college, he drops out and decides to go back home. The two men who, until that moment, have been best friends, suddenly become enemies

with diametrically opposed opinions. The moment of truth comes during an argument that they have just before Aristotle returns to the reservation:

Aristotle: I'm leaving ... I'm leaving the school. Going back home, back to the rez.

Seymour: You're always saying that

A: I mean it this time. Car's all packed up. Come with me. Only five hours to get home.

Only five hours and we can celebrate. We'll get drunk like Indians, man.

S: Ah... no!

A: There is nothing for us here. We don't belong here

S: I don't belong on the reservation.

A: You were always too good for the rest of us

S: I am better than the rest of them.

A: How can you say that, man? That's our tribe. That's our reservation!

S: And you're better than the rest of them. You just don't get it.

A: Better than all the white people here.

S: You've got more in common with these white people here than you do with Indians at home.

Clearly the two men differ in their aspirations. While for Seymour the only way to move ahead is to stay in college and try enter the white world, for Aristotle it is the exact opposite. He has to go back as he is unable to play the role that, in his opinion, the white society imposes on him. In his case, staying means denying his true self and living within a framework of a strange world. For Aristotle, the white world is not a place for Indians. In his opinion Native Americans never have been and never will be a part of this world. At the same time he is unable to understand Seymour's readiness to compromise and assimilate. He sees it as betrayal:

Aristotle: You like it out here, don't you? Playing Indian, putting on beads and feathers for all these white people. Out here you are the little public relations warrior, you're a Super Indian, you're the expert and the authority. But at home you are just a little Indian who cries too much.

Seymour: Next time I see you I'm gonna be a big star and you're gonna be a dirty Indian with not enough teeth.

A: And next time I see you I'm gonna hurt you. I'm gonna hurt you! You got no heart!"

For Aristotle staying and doing what Seymour does, is artificial. His behavior is not about *being* Indian but about *playing* Indian. It is *acting* in the way that is expected. Aristotle's own "betting on red" means only one thing: choosing the life of the reservation even if it is equivalent to self-destruction.

Another noteworthy character is Agnes, Seymour's girlfriend from college years. Her way of "betting on red" is yet of a different kind. Having graduated from the university she moves to the reservation to become a teacher. Being half Jewish half Indian she is proud of the two cultures and has no problems living in both: in the opening scenes of the film we see her performing traditional Indian ceremonies over the body of Mouse and reading a passage from Kaddish afterwards. She is able to find peace and harmony in herself and share them with the Indian community she chooses to be a part of.

What is more, she is also trying to make a change in the way the reservation people think. For her "betting on red" means "betting" on the people. She believes that with some help they can make their lives better. "Betting" is synonymous with "acting." The attitude she adopts is connected not only with doing something for the community but also teaching the community to do something for itself. It is also one of the reasons why she supports Seymour when he comes back for Mouse's funeral. She is convinced that everyone on the reservation should be a little like Seymour. She considers him a contemporary warrior, fighting battles not only for himself but also for his people. She argues: "He's out there. He's fighting a war. He's telling everybody that we are still here. He does it for all of us." According to her, it is through his poetry that Seymour is able to make a change. She remarks that when he speaks white people actually listen to what he has to say. She also takes his side when others argue that, due to his nine-year long absence, Seymour is no longer a part of the reservation. "He belongs here," she says "whether he wants to admit it or not."

The final scenes of the film prove exactly that. All of them - Agnes, Aristotle but also Seymour - belong on the reservation. Also all three of them, each in his or her own way and via contrasting choices, "bet on red."

The choices are not presented in terms of being right or wrong. Alexie does not present the viewer with a ready-made answer as to which attitude is a proper one. In fact, when looking

at Seymour and Aristotle, there does not seem to be an ideal solution. On the one hand there is Seymour, who choosing the white reality is condemned to being treated like a traitor, a liar and a thief, on the other hand, there is Aristotle whose choice of living on the reservation seems equivalent with self-destruction. The only character, whose decisions do not raise as much controversy, is Agnes. Alexie however, does not point to her choice as the only correct one. It seems that the question of belonging is left open as there is no one clear solution.

What is more, in the last scenes, when we see Seymour both screaming and remaining silent at the funeral ceremony, both leaving and staying behind, we become aware of a certain schizophrenic duality that Alexie presents in the film. Consciously the characters make their choices but subconsciously they remain suspended between the two realities, being at the same time a part of both.

The protagonists of Chris Eyre's *Skins* constitute yet another voice in the identity search discussion. The film is a compelling story of two brothers and, at the same time of two completely different lifestyles on one reservation. Again, it can be argued that, even though they adopt two contrasting ways of dealing with the reality, both of them "bet on red."

Rudy is the younger of the two brothers. Working as a policeman on the Pine Ridge reservation, he leads an apparently regular life. He also wants this kind of life for other members of his community, especially for his alcoholic brother Mogy. The conditions on the reservation however, are far from what Rudy considers acceptable. We see him constantly dealing with the same cases, namely alcohol abuse and fighting. Everyday, as he witnesses the self-destruction of his people, he grows more and more frustrated. Eventually Rudy decides to take matters into his own hands and become a vigilante. As he later explains to his brother he "does little things to help his people." He feels that he is doing something good for the community, that he is not giving up on it and, most importantly, that he is taking care of his older brother Mogy. In the attitude that he adopts, he is like Alexie's Agnes in *The Business of Fancydancing*.

After seeing the television program about alcoholism on the reservation, Rudy decides to burn down the liquor store which, to him, is the embodiment of the problem. In a desperate act, he sets it on fire, not knowing that his brother Mogy is sleeping drunk on the store roof. To Rudy it seems he is destroying the cause and the symbol of contemporary Native American weakness. He can no longer bear the thought that the television commentary about “Indians drinking beer and cheap wine” is indeed a “sad cliché brought to stark reality every Friday night – payday for the Indians on Pine Ridge reservation.”

What he does not want to admit however, is that by destroying one store he is not going to achieve any long-lasting results. The fact that he nearly destroys his brother in the process can also be treated symbolically. Apparently alcoholic plague which is annihilating his people, and which in the film is as if embodied in this liquor store, is such an inextricable part of the reservation reality that fighting it is synonymous with fighting the people themselves. Its destruction in turn, would at the same time mean the destruction of the greater part of the community.

Mogy, Rudy’s older brother on the other hand, presents a completely different approach towards his life. He is among those people who cannot come to terms with the present reality of the reservation. And since he finds it unacceptable, Mogy chooses to live in the past. The horrors of Native American history are so obsessively vivid in his head that he refuses to acknowledge the present. The scene when Mogy is having dinner with his family presents his detachment from the reality in the most poignant way:

Mogy: The Knee was nothing but a damn massacre of women and children. American Horse testified before the Congress

Herbie (Mogy’s son): What happened after the American Horse testified?

M: They were all given a Congressional Medal of Honor.

Evangeline (Mogy’s wife): Herby scored 21 points in the last game

M: I don’t give a rat’s ass!

Rudy: Mogy!

M: I’m sorry son.

The present is unbearable for Mogy. It is as if he was not even a part of it. Such denial of the here and now is a fighting strategy that he adopts. Since there is not much he can do about the world as it is, he is trying to blot it out, even if it means destroying himself in the process. Mogy's self-destructive attitude is something that his younger brother, Rudy, is unable to understand. Throughout their adult lives the two brothers cannot make peace. However the final scene of the film, brings Rudy and Mogy together. For a moment Rudy adopts his late brother's irrational way of fighting the present and fulfills his last wish: he spills a bucket of paint on the Mount Rushmore Monument. This desperate action unites them in their struggle and shows that despite the different means, the goal remains the same: not to give up on the Indian people, their culture and their history.

Both Sherman Alexie's *The Business of Fancydancing* and Chris Eyre's *Skins* present various ways of dealing with the issue of cultural dislocation and search for identity - questions which contemporary Native Americans are faced with due to their heritage. The methods the protagonists use in their struggle, contrasting as they may seem, invariably point to one aim: all of them want to live being true to themselves. And while for Seymour it may mean "walking in the two worlds,"² for Agnes and Rudy struggling for a better reservation and for Aristotle and Mogy living denying the present, the bets remain the same.

² MariJo Moore, ed. *Genocide of the Mind*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003.

Works cited

The Business of Fancydancing. Dir. Sherman Alexie. Fallsapart Production, 2002.

Skins. Dir. Chris Eyre. First Look Media, 2003.