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Adrian C. Louis: Loss and Complicity

“Everywhere I look there are sad fools
pretending they understand Indians.
Indians don’t even understand Indians.”
--“Earth Bone Connected to the Spirit Bone”

Adrian C. Louis was born, I think, in 1946 (“Once in ‘57 / when I was eleven” – “White Bread Blues, *Savages* 102; but “April 24, 1982, my thirty-fifth birthday” in “La Carga,” *Vortex* 10) in Nevada, the oldest of twelve children. He is a mixed-blood Indian, a member of the Lovelock Paiute Indian tribe. He attended the University of Nevada-Reno, flunked out, worked at the casinos, re-enrolled and flunked out a second time, then worked for Anaconda Copper Mine. In the late sixties he drifted into San Francisco, then attended Brown University, where he graduated with a MA in Creative Writing. T. S. Eliot, the Beat poets, and sixties music are important influences, reflected in numerous references, style and epigraphs. From 1984 to 1998 he taught at Oglala Lakota College on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota (just south and east of the Black Hills and Mt. Rushmore), and is thus closely linked with the Lakota Sioux. He also worked for or edited various Indian newspapers, including *Lakota Times*, the largest Indian newspaper in America. He is a co-founder of the Native American Press Association.

Louis has felt more than the usual dislocations during his life. A successful high school scholar and athlete, he became a flower child in the sixties, attended a prestigious Ivy League college, then returned to life on a reservation, not with his own tribe in Nevada, but on Pine Ridge in South Dakota. His life is full of problems related to women, alcohol and Alzheimer’s Disease which afflicted his wife Colleen. Looking back, he recalls “Some Idiots I Have Been”:

Epitaphs for some Idiots I have Been

The stud. I have traveled like a truck
a thousand one-night stops and more
for the telegram that rhymes with luck
I have died at the sound of the closing door.

The stud again. My book of manhood was a series
of screams stuck together with unholy semen.
I prayed and preyed.

The failed academic. I ate Narcissus
and his blood was delicious but I was weary
of Greeks baring myths.

The lonesome traveler. I had the pulse of hobos.
The Southern Pacific roared me away.
The tracks were stitches upon pummeled America.

The substance abuser. Hark ye! Put peyote
in chocolate mousse and any Maginot Line
will be imaginary.

The lackadaisical poet. Pray tell.
Would it be a French dip
or a French high coup?
Diving naked off the Eiffel Tower.

The atheist. Puffs of light explode chants
behind my eyes inciting prayer.
Wish I may, wish I might never forget
that God of the blind man's sight.

The Romantic. I whined soft C chords
just like Dylan and I thought I'd never fall
from the ceiling where I hovered
with candles advancing and incense burning
and Che Guevara on the wall.

**

The redskin. I can dance and drum
and I know the past that is present

though I really resent those darker and drunker
I can fight with the best of my brothers,
the white half of me said
before it died strangely one sober night.

(*Fire Water World* 66)

Louis, who writes both fiction and poetry, is included in the Oxford University Press anthology of twentieth-century American poetry. He has received fellowships from the Dakota Arts Council, the Bush Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His novel, *Skins*, was filmed last summer; it is being edited this winter. Producer is Jon Kilik's Grandview Pictures (*Before Night Falls*, *Pollock*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Do the Right Thing*, *A Bronx Tale*, *Bamboozled*). The director is Cheyenne Indian Chris Eyre (*Smoke Signals*). Graham Greene and Nicholas Cage play major roles. Plans are to release it at Sundance or Cannes next year.

Louis's favorite subject is dislocation and loss: his own personal confusions as an Indian in white society, as a college-educated Indian returned to rez life, as a sixties person still alive in the 1990s; the dislocation suffered by all Indians in a culture defined by Euro- and African-Americans; and the dislocations of all us Older Ones in a media-constructed, postmodern society. His awareness of the multi-dimensionality and inter-connectedness of these various saves his work from overly simplistic analysis, but it does create some confusion and fuzziness: Louis's own alcoholism is seen as an Indian cultural legacy, but it's tied up in exploitation . . . which is partially racist, but partly just plain capitalist. Louis attributes own violent Doppelganger to the violence inherent in Pine Ridge life, but it may also be the work of evil spirits on and off the reservation . . . which may be the evil side of the trickster, or may be white devils, or may be 1990s pistol-punk thugs. The salvation Louis seeks and thus posits may be some Indian Grandfather, some sixties vision of Faith, or--yes--some Christian Jesus. (Marilyn Nelson Waniak notes that "the imagery of Christianity holds a prominent role in Louis's book [Among the Dog Eaters], although he also alludes to traditional nature reverence."

I want today to present a simple introduction to Adrian Louis, his world and his work following this outline: (a) Louis's world and welcome to it, (b) Native American cultural losses, (c) Adrian Louis's personal loss, (d) lost Amerikkka. I want to follow that with a closer look at *Skins*, since this is the book you are most likely to encounter when the film comes out. And I know how Poles like film, so I'm sure you'll run into it.

(a) Louis's World and Welcome to It

Louis's world is, as every critic has noted, raw and "steeped in the pathology of powerlessness," and "unalloyed sexism" (Waniak 415). It is full of "humiliation, demoralization, cynicism, and self-pity" (*Native North American Literature* 391). *Fire Water*

World is "one of the angriest, raunchiest books of Native American poetry to be published in a long time" (*Bloomsbury Review*). "The vocabulary [of *Dog Eaters*] is potentially offensive to almost everybody," wrote Denise Low. Craig Womac is more polite: "Contrary to some other Indian art which is a little too mystical, too idealized, too much situated in the past, Louis places his work squarely in the present and concentrates on the stories that inform our lives today. . . ." Alcoholism, violence, and abuse are too pervasive almost to mention, especially on the first of the month when "White Clay, Nebraska explodes / with a thousand faces / of my drunken race / cashing their welfare checks" (*World* 4). Louis calls Pine Ridge Reservation "The Fire Water World."

Louis' reservation is rusting cars, dog shit, broken beer bottles, and dirt: "the land that time forgot. / Here is the Hell the white God gave us. / The wind from the Badlands brings / a chorus of chaos and makes everything dirty" ("Dust World"). It's also a world of casinos and sex. Speaking of making love, Louis's sexuality is raw and often incestuous: "I took your mother home after [your] funeral / and she showed me that region / where you first saw light" ("Elegy for One of Us").

I knew he was pissed at me too.
Stupid Sandra had *told* him
that she'd handjobbed me, twice!
But then she was *only* his sister
and I was his best friend.
"Crow Song," *Savages*)

The anger, self-pity and bitterness are redeemed by irony and humor. Returning home after a funeral to discover that somebody has stolen his typewriter, Louis rages, "When I find them, / they will bleed broken English / from shattered mouths / and my fists / will sing songs of forgiveness, / unless of course / they're my in-laws" ("This is no Movie of Noble Savages"). In "Breakfast at Big Bat's Conoco" (*Dog Eaters*) he muses, "I have murdered all inner conflict. / I have no anger, no remorse / and the white world / can just sit on my face / if it wants to."

And sometimes Louis suggests a potential reconstruction--both personal and communal--a form of the Ghost Dance, the interaction of spirit world and human world found in "Petroglyphs of Serene," or Louis's prayers to the Grandfather and the Great Spirits:

Spirits of the East--

From you comes the Morning Star
which radiates wisdom.
From you comes the sun filling

our dark world with light.
From you comes the moon that gives
us help and protection at night.
I have been unfaithful and dishonest,
yet I know that in your Yellow Mountains
powerful Elk people shake their great horns.
Send the Bald Eagle and help me gain
wisdom that I may find the things
to do and say to help
the sad lady I love.

("Earth Bone Connected to the Spirit Bone," *Ceremonies* 31)

(b) Native American Cultural Loses

Old Indian culture heroes loom large in Louis's work, especially Crazy Horse and Wovoka, who dreamed the dream of the Buffalo Dance.

[aside: There is some evidence that Louis considers himself a later-day Wovoka, a Paiute bringing some healing ceremony to the Dakota: "Louis grieves for a defeated and demoralized people which two or three generations ago was a nation of seers, workers, hunters, and counters of coup," writes Marilyn Nelson Waniek in *The Southern Review* (Spring 1993, 413); "He confessed tremendous self-contempt in poems describing his longing for *wasicu* complacency, for the material rewards of *wasicu* life, yet his chosen identity, his lived solidarity, and his respect for the history of his blood mark him as the troubled holder of deep, wounded pride."]

Usually those lost heroes appear by way of contrast to modern Indians who are "wasted to the point where we cannot think of / Crazy Horse, or who he was" (*World* 6). Returning to the reservation after "decades of dozing / in the Holy Order of Objective Correlative," Louis writes,

I toot my tune in the fire water horn
and bank my mind to the warrior's song
and wonder where the Great Spirit has gone,
hey, on this valley soil a century ago
Wovoka welcomed the wildass Sioux
who thought they really needed to know
how to Ghost Dance
how to Ghost Dance
how to die.

("The Walker River Night," *World* 11)

The execution of 38 Santee Sioux warriors in 1862, the massacre at Wounded Knee, the deaths of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, the New Messiah movement founded at Walker Lake weigh

heavily on his consciousness, as do less celebrated ancestral figures, whose greatness, by contrast, measures the present decay. As an epigraph to *Blood Thirsty Savages* (1994), Louis selected passage from Crazy Horse: "We had buffalo for food, / and their hides / for clothing and our tipis. / We preferred / hunting to a life of idleness / on reservations where / we were driven against our will. . . . We were no expense to / the government then. / All we wanted was peace / and to be left alone."

Anglo culture, including Christianity, is a mistake: "the inquisition of education: / electric cattle prods placed lovingly / to the lobes of my earth memories" ("The Sacred Circle"), Louis's experience at Brown are a youthful disaster from which an older Louis must recover. "There is so much we have forgotten," begins a long poem titled "Some of What We Have Forgotten" (Vortex, 39).

White women represent the same temptation, the same danger:

Thanksgiving at Pine Ridge

Weaned from laden brown dugs
I dared the simpleton's witticisms
and in the venal speed of molasses I
sweetened at your small, white breasts.
Your loins sang to my loneliness
like the sun sings albinos.
My wetness of mixed-up blood
forever drowned the inferno
of flesh dreamed for
and for dreams fleshed out.
You, of all the white women I loved,
chased me back to Indian land
and I thank you, I thank you,
Great God Almighty, I'm me at last!
. . . and Great Spirit I must be gassed
to even think of your sweet, white ass
but then it's Thanksgiving
and I'm thankful I'm on Indian land.

(*World* 62)

Most irritating are the white Indian wannabes who co-opt Indian traditions, and history, and work, and money, and women. They are plentiful at the college and on the rez itself:

Some years ago
in your infinite European boredom
you finally concluded
that maybe Indians *are* really

a noble race, yes, somewhat tragic
but definitely tied to the earth.
So, you decided to become one. . . .
With your beaded words
and researched knowledge you became
well-known as a *Native American* writer.
I envied you your university job
and I used to say that you were just
another fucking white thief
stealing what little we have left
but I just bought your new book
and I liked it, a little.

(“Note to a Culture Vulture,” *Savages* 88)

Even natives are suspect if they drift too far from real life:

Indian College Blues

Friday’s all-staff meeting dissolves
into structure because time is money
and the wasicu neo-colonials in charge
have learned to ignore “Indian time.”
The breed guest speaker is dressed
in black like a skinny witch Johnny Cash.
Self-proclaimed as an Indian expert
she launches into her talk about the ancient
Indian astronomy inherent
in a tribal history she herself has conjured
according to fullbloods sitting near me.
They ignore her and talk about the rodeo
or who got shot at and missed by his old lady
then wrecked his car like he was in a movie
after eluding the tribal cops
by speeding through a herd
of a thousand whiteface steers. . . .

(*World*, 38)

Louis as a strong sense of Indian complicity in Indian tragedies and in the general cultural collapse. “The truth Louis forces us to face,” writes Robert L. Berner (*American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, winter 1996, 262), “is something much darker--that the Indianness of that reverence does not mean that every Indian has it, that the racial accident of being born Indian does not necessarily make anyone any saintlier than anyone else, that the wisdom of Wovoka or Black Elk or any other traditional Indian holy man is not inherited in the blood but

embraced in the heart, and indeed that some Indians are so brutal toward the environment and toward each other that they hardly can be distinguished from other sociopaths.”

In Big Bat’s Conoco I wanted to scream:
Wake up, you damn *people*, wake up!
America does not owe you a living.
America does not owe you your souls.
You’ve got to grab your balls
and fill them with fire
and stop whining
and drinking like bums. . .
 (“Among the Dog Eaters”)

The most damaging loss is the loss of the memory: “Our children have no respect / because their parents cannot connect / the values of the ancient chiefs / to the deadly grief that welfare brings. / We’re reaping the womb’s reward of mutant / generations who stumbled toward disremembering / the long and sometimes senile span between you, / Great Spirit, and your artwork, man. / The question is, can the children be saved?” (“Petroglyphs,” 9).

(c) Adrian Louis’s Personal Loses

Someone once remarked that your life is what happens when your planning what to do with your life. As the first poem I read indicates, Adrian Louis often views his life as a series of detours which turned out to be his life. One, certainly, was academia, both the training at Brown University and the teaching at Oglala Lakota College (and, I’m sure, at Southwest State!). Especially the detour was stylistic: much of his early work is marked by a low-level surrealism taken second-hand from the French; an unnatural, foreign, and abstract vocabulary and form; and an absence of place or a series of foreign places: Alabama, Mississippi, west Texas, Tulsa, Charleston, Boston, Germany, San Juan, France to tick off the twenty pages of poems in *Muted War Drums* (1977). Louis drifts into abstract academic discourse: “Inevitable are the lies of winter / when in cold coagulation the warmth / was focused into this futile fission. / In the white and mindless blizzard / of love we eliminated / the temporal dislocation of snow blindness” (“South Dakota Woman”). “The language in many of the poems is flaccid,” notes Rhoda Carroll in *American Indian Quarterly*. From this learned language, Louis exploded suddenly and somewhat inexplicably (perhaps it was the journalist experience) into brilliant spoken idiom and language: “you can bet your ass” (“Coyote Song”), “so perfect he would / even pray Jesus / just to jump / her fourteen-year-old bones” (“Elvis Presley in pine Ridge”); “I want to go get my pistol / and make that heifer-humper / crawl up the street / and pick up the glass shards / with his teeth and tongue” (“Fullblood Girl on a Blue Horse,” *Savages* 37)

Alcoholism is a Louis family tradition. "Mom," ten-year-old Louis pleads in a bar with his mother, "Don't drink no more here now tonight" ("Muted War drums," *World* 9). Brown was a personal disaster, as was the scene at Berkeley. Acid dropped in the late sixties troubles Louis still. His wife's Alzheimer's Disease created a personal hell unrelated to race, which Louis explored in *Ceremonies of the Damned*:

Three days a week I imprison you among
the shrieking aged, the palsied pukers, the
damned and abandoned, the certifiably
insane. I do this because I am weak and I
think I'm going crazy too.

--"It Has Come to This"

Once my woman would have understood
the sad irony of this scenario immediately.
Now I could slowly explain it ten times
or more and she would not get it.
Still, she would smile sweetly and say,
"Sure, of course I understand you."
O Grandfather, is my life to be miserable
from here on in? More miserable
than the miserable it has always been?
This self-pity is the worst part, yet
it feels natural and right.

--"Medicine Song"

And there is no ceremony for Alzheimer's, and "ceremonies of the damned are useless" anyway (*Ceremonies*, 545).

(d) Lost Amerikkka

As specifically tied as they are to Indian experience and, during the 1980s, to Pine Ridge, Louis's poems also paint a world familiar to all of us: Presley, Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Dylan, Beatles, Grateful Dead, Vanilla Fudge, Bryant Gumbel, Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan, Mister Donut, Big Bat's Conoco, McDonald's, Kool-Aide, KFC, MTV, ESPN, WKRP, KSD2, Coke, Crown Victorias and Thunderbird cars, Winston Cup Series races, Levis and baseball and small town farm kids who "speed desperately up / and down the main drag wearing / their baseball caps backwards, hands / out the windows, stackin', throwing / gang signs they've seen on the tube" ("Manifest Destination").

And Louis's main preoccupations--loss of self and community in the modern world--are certainly not only Indian themes.

In 1960, nearly half a century ago, Paul Goodman presented a bill of particulars on post-modern America which still stands today:

For it can be shown—I intend to show--that with all the harmonious belonging and all the tidying up of background conditions that you please, our abundant society is at present simply deficient in many of the most elementary objective opportunities and worth-while goals that would make growing up possible. It is lacking in enough man's work. It is lacking in honest public speech, and people are not taken seriously. It is lacking in the opportunity to be useful. It thwarts aptitude and creates stupidity. It corrupts ingenuous patriotism. It corrupts the fine arts. It shackles science. It dampens animal ardor. It discourages the religious convictions of Justification and Vocation and it dims the sense that there is a Creation. It has no Honor. It has no Community.

Just look at that list. There is nothing in it that is surprising, in either the small letters or the capitals. I have nothing subtle or novel to say in this book; these are the things that everybody knows.

Growing Up Absurd, 12)

Adrian Louis's experience confirms those particulars, beginning with the lack of enough man's work. "My broken watch tells me I am possibly late / to ask a man I despise / for a job washing dishes," he writes in "Dandelion" ("Sweets for the Dancing Bears"). And later, "Yes, the boss said. / No, I thought, but yes, I answered. Expediency. / The day's work ending & no need for complications" ("A Lie of the Common Language").

Academic work is just as equally mindless: "An adjectival all-staff meeting at the Indian / college: useless and mandatory" ("Notes from Indian Country"). Most serious scholars detest the small stupidity of meetings and regulations just as much as Louis, and Louis' love poems to younger students ("First Day of Spring Semester" in *Dog Eaters*, "Petroglyphs of Serena" in *Ceremonies*) could have been and have been written by . . . well, any of us guys.

The culture outside the college is insane in a manner that is not specifically racial: "aimless yuppies / bound for the ski lodges" ("Something About Being an Indian"); "Deep down in the bowels of our / televisions, / America swims in the electric drool / of self-inflicted dementia" ("Good Morning America," *Ceremonies*); "This bright hell is America" ("Manifest Destination"). My personal favorite is the Ginsburgesque "A Colossal American Copulation." It knows no ethnic boundaries:

They say there's a promise coming down
that dusty road. They say there's a
promise coming down that dusty road, but
I don't see it. . . .
So, fuck the bluebird of happiness. Fuck

the men who keep their dogs chained. Fuck
the men who molest their daughters. . .
Fuck every gangbanger in America.
Fuck furiously the drive-by shooters,
the carjack thugs, the Columbian coke cartels.
And the ghost of Richard Milhouse Nixon.
Okay, add the yuppie-hillbillies who mess up
the powerspray carwash when they come down
from the hills with half the earth clinging
to their new four-wheel drives.
Fuck my neighbor who beats his kids.
And my other neighbor who has plastic
life-sized deer in his front yard.
And Tommy's Used Cars in Chardron, Neb.

Fuck my high school coach for not starting
me in the '64 State Championship game.
Fuck the first bar I puked in.
That first cigarette I ever smoked.
That first pussy I ever touched.
Fuck it again, Sam.
And that know-it-all Larry King
and his stupid suspenders.
Fuck the Creative Writing programs
and all the Spam poets they hatch. . . .

Louis's reminiscences of the late-sixties sex and drug scene in Haight-Ashbery, contained in *Ancient Aid Flashes Back*, also recount a nightmare that is only occasionally (and accidentally) related to race.

Frequently Louis appears to accept the admittedly lost ideal of America as some lost Eden "whose sappy song is a state of mind" ("Time is the Fire," *Firewater World* 1). Sometimes his poetry "rises toward an idealism that bears an unaccidental resemblance to certain primal ideals of a lost pre-Columbian world" (Peter Thorpe in a *Bloomsbury Review*), but sometimes that ideal is more recent and less Indian, more "American" (Gatsby's green light) and more shared. Louis speaks for of use who came of age during the sixties when he writes, "The America I knew went to Hell / with a madman perched in schoolbook storage" ("Breakfast at Big Bat's Conoco").

The process of escape from place, loss of cultural identity, and return/recovery is neither Louis's personal bailiwick or a uniquely Indian experience, as any number of writers can attest. In "Breakfast at Big Bat's Conoco Convenience Store in Pine Ridge," Louis sounds like Bill Holm come back to Minneota, Minneota:

This town where desire
and defeat share the same
bed and give birth to depravity
is no longer a source of pain to me.
It is the same world I grew up in
and left only to return, forever tethered.
I will not scorn it as a world governed
by grandmothers, welfare, and wine.
It has been my sanctuary
It has been my home.
(*Dog Eaters*, 77)

Neither is that odd paradoxical alienation from and attraction to the popular, commercial culture: "I closed my eyes and dreamed of McDonald's. / Yes, I closed my eyes / and dreamed of McDonald's" ("Notes from Indian Country"). We all know it. Certainly the process of aging, with its accompanying sense of loss, is neither Louis nor Indian: "O Christ of the raggedy-assed old cross! / I am getting old; Russia is now our ally. / The years have flittered away / like calendar pages in an old B-movie" ("After Long Silence Marilyn Returns"). "You shoulda caught my act ten years ago" ("Verdell Reports on His Trip") is a line right out of Dylan, and Louis probably knows it.

With *Blood Thirsty Savages* (1994) narrative poems began to outweigh lyrics, and Louis was on his way to prose. In fact, some sections of that book were prose, and reappeared in the prose collection *Wild Indians and Other Creatures* (1996). To date Louis has produced two volumes of fiction: *Skins* (1995) and the aforementioned *Wild Indians*.

Although *Skins* is going to be the movie, *Wild Indians* is the more complex and interesting book. Animal world and human worlds intermingle, with a strong suggestion that spirit world controls material world. The book is prefaced with a quotation from Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*: "Therefore all the things around you will be armed against you, to deny you, to hurt you, to give you pain, and therefore to reduce you to solitude. And when you have been praised a little and loved a little I will take away all your gifts and all your love and all your praise and you will be utterly forgotten and abandoned and you will be nothing, a dead thing, a rejection. And in that day you shall begin to possess the solitude you have so long desired. And your solitude will bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth."

The novel—or series of interlocked short stories—progresses through desolation to solitude to redemption. Sandwiched between the death and resurrection of Coyote, Raven and Old Bear runs the story of a small cluster of rez Indians, most notably Marianna Two Knives (pregnant at age 16, whore at 21, dead shortly thereafter), closet queer Teddy Two Bears, Gus and Teresa Winters (a brother-sister sex act), and Verdell Ten Bears who plans to avenge

Marianne's death. Dead center of the book come the deaths of Raven and the humiliating scheme of Teddy Bear's buddies to get him laid by Marianne: a nadir of rez life. The sex is raw, alcohol and abuse and violence are everywhere, white girls get plenty of blame ("Those White girls sure were pretty. Pretty and pretty damn dangerous"-9), racism is rife, as are self-criticism ("How come us Indians are forever falling down the toilet to Hell?"-139), and despair about the next generation. The whole world was going to hell in a hand basket. And these young kids, the boys were wearing pants way, way too large. So large that it looked like they had dumped a load in their drawers.

Glimpses of the old Louis humor are everywhere: "Ten Bears? What's all this Bear naming crap with you Indians, anyways," Old Bear asks Teddy Two Bears. "Us bears don't go around naming our kids Jimmy Nine Indians, Johnny Seven Sioux, Jennifer Eight Apaches." And in "Eagles Above Mean Good Luck?" Louis playfully mentions the denouement of *Skins*: "In his bedroom, he glanced occasionally at *Good Morning, America*. There upon the small portable televisions screen were the stone faces of Mount Rushmore. Incredibly, someone had splashed red paint all over George Washington's nose. Arabs were suspected. He laughed and closed his eyes and said a prayer of thanks. . . "

Louis suggests a cosmic and spiritual battle against the Snake People, something akin in its Indian manner to Milton's war between heaven and hell, with the rez as a battleground. Finally, he suggests, things will work out. In the antepenultimate chapter Coyote Woman finds a decent (Indian) man who loves her truly; in the penultimate chapter Old Bear dreams his vision; in the final chapter Coyote breaks free. "Nothing matters, he's headed for home" is the last line of the book.

Skins is a 1995 novel about two brothers, both Vietnam veterans, growing up and old on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Rudy Yellow Shirt--younger by a year--grows up to be a rez cop. Mogie, whom Rudy had idolized until he was Mogie performing a rather disgusting sex act on their drunk and passed out mother after a rez football game, grows up to be a rez wino. Mogie is carrying on a family tradition dating at least to his dad, who drunkenly sold off the family land allotment and moved them all to Pine Ridge.

There's plenty of substance and woman abuse, and plenty of idiomatic dialog: "Geez Louise," "Poop or get off the pot," "dipshits and dildos," "Be there or be square," "acting too bucky," "No way, José."

There's also plenty of Indian complicity and plenty of humor: "We all know it's against the law to have booze on the rez." "We *are* the law," Rudy said. . . .

The relationship between the two brothers is difficult given the incest and their respective positions in rez society, but Rudy is a complex figure. He can pontificate on other members of the tribe in characteristic Louis rhetoric: "After more than fifteen years on the job,

he didn't have much compassion left for self-destructive fools like them" (22). He drinks occasionally himself, he used to cheat on his own wife (once with Mogie's wife) before "the high blood pressure pills he was on made it nearly impossible to get an erection," and he cheats on her more after a miraculous blow to the head (he trips on a rock: *Iktomi*, the Trickster, disguised as a rock) restores his potency. Most disturbingly, he occasionally acts the role of a very illegal Avenging Warrior. (I suspect there is some relationship to a character in Ed Abbey's *Monkey Wrench Gang*, named Seldom Seen Smith, whose gonzo-environmentalist guerrilla name is "Rudolph the Red; Louis denies knowledge of Abbey's book, but the pun on the Christmas song, made in Abbey, appears on page 139 of *Skins*.) First he avenges the butt-rape of a fifteen-year-old male by taking a baseball bat to the knees of the rapists; then he torches the liquor store just off the reservation . . . a fire which he himself is called to investigate. Unfortunately his drunk brother Mogie was on top of the building when Rudy set it off (trying to break in and steal some beer) and saw him set the fire. "How come you tried to fucking barbecue me?" Mogie asks. Flashback to the 1967 incest. Then The Avenging Warrior torches the Winnebago of a white Indian-wannabe sociology prof whose backyard coyote trap had caught and killed one of Mogie's wino buddies.

The familiar Louis distaste for white liberal academics surfaces frequently: "He'd never met a 'Native American' before. He'd met Indians, skins, dog eaters, sheep fuckers, rabbit-chokers, Apaches, Araphos, Cheyennes, crows, Shoshones, Comanches, and several tough son of a bitch Paiutes, but he'd never met a skin who called himself a 'Native American' " (247). His sense of Indian complicity in Indian disaster is omnipresent: "On the whole, it seemed like Indians just couldn't get life figured out" (39). The good old days are constantly contrasted to the chaotic present: "Today, the whole country lived in a whirlwind of violence. Today kids were shooting other kids for giving them the wrong look. . . . but in the bow-and-arrow days their lives had meaning, they had direction. " (34-35). "The way Rudy figured it, their rez poverty was caused by 10 percent ignorance and 90 percent laziness" (59).

There are also repeated references to male emasculation, real or fancied: "History books told Lakota men that ever since they quit fighting the *wasicu*, their women have had to wear the pants" (95). "The true victims of the reservation system were the men" (209).

The trickster appears frequently in this novel in the guise of a spider or a rock or Mogie (256). There is some suggestion that Rudy himself is a spirit, or in touch with the spirit world, and he may be a trickster himself. Changes in Nature sometimes prefigure changes in the plot, and at one point a spiritual buffalo hunt gone comically away presages developments on the rez. At the very least, Rudy is aware that evil spirits and negative thoughts can produce evil action, and he feels those forces at work in himself. The action of the novel is in fact a purgation of evil spirits inside of Rudy in the forms of a bad marriage, father hatred, mother

hatred, broken brother-relationship, reservation life and American life in general. The process involves recognition of the roots of insanity, asking forgiveness from (now deceased) father and mother and alcoholic brother, a ritual deer hunt . . . and one last prank which Mogie, dying of cirrhosis of the liver, makes Rudy promise on oath to accomplish: “Blow the fuckin’ nose off George Washington on Mount Rushmore” (181), later commuted to pouring five gallons of red paint down his nose. “Rudy figured every real Indian in America would get a huge chuckle out of it” (163).

Mogie dies. Rudy and his wife are reconciled after a spouse-rape and a ceremony put together by Ed Little Eagle (chapter 25).

And in the book’s final chapter, we are given to understand that the raid on Rushmore—that “massive stone idols of Indian killers” (*Savages* 19; that “truest representation of evil [Rudy] had ever seen” *Skins* 223)—is accomplished.

The scene shows up, as I mentioned earlier, in a news flash in *Wild Indians*, and it was, Louis tells me, shot last summer.

I’ll be interested to see how the edited film, released in the hysteria of post-Sept. 11, 2001 patriotism, ends. Louis and I give that scene not much chance, but I suppose we’ll see what we’ll see. At least you’ll know how the film, and the book, really end.

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