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Ridiculous Flix: Buckskin, Boycotts, and Busted Hollywood Narratives

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Theodore C. Van Alst, Jr.

Ridiculous Flix: Buckskin, Boycotts, and Busted Hollywood Narratives



Figure 1. ©2015 by Gregg Deal. All rights reserved. Courtesy the artist.

“Indians in buckskin and feathers is the only way studios want to see us because it fits their narrative. They don’t want to see the truth. We have to roll up our sleeves and keep creating truth.”

–Sterlin Harjo¹

WILL PATCH

(to Sits-on-Face)

Say honey: how bout after this, we go
someplace and I put my peepee in your teepee?

–Some writer hired by Adam Sandler’s company²

Wildfire

On April 22nd, 2015, yet another story about white privilege and appropriation raced across the Internet, speeding along on pages and sites frequented by Native folks. This one, though, appeared to be a little different. First reported by Vincent Schilling at *Indian Country Media Today Network*, it was quickly picked up by everyone from TMZ and Variety to CNN and NBC, with the Associated Press ultimately reporting that actor Loren Anthony and eight extras from the cast of Adam Sandler’s Netflix production *Ridiculous Six* had walked off set due to repeated insults and derogatory remarks embedded in the script; its disrespect of women, elders, and sacred items exceeded the actors’ capacity to overlook the intended “satire” of the production and caused one actor³ to tell *Indian Country Media Today Network*:

"We understand this is a comedy, we understand this is humor, but we won't tolerate disrespect. I told the director if he had talked to a native woman the way they were talked to in this movie—I said I would knock his ass out."⁴

This story had legs.



Happy 100th, Ernie!

And since it seems to most that this story had been running for quite some time now, let's look at how it got here. This lengthy quote will be of great service:

It is only within the last two or three years that genuine Redskins have been employed in pictures. Before then these parts were taken by white actors made up for the occasion. But this method was not realistic enough to satisfy the progressive spirit of the producer.

The Red Indians who have been fortunate enough to secure permanent engagements with the several Western film companies are paid a salary that keeps them well provided with tobacco and their worshipped "firewater."

It might be thought that this would civilize them completely, but it has had a quite reverse effect, for the work affords them an opportunity to live their savage days all over again, and they are not slow to take advantage of it.

They put their heart and soul in the work, especially in battles with the whites, and it is necessary to have armed guards watch over their movements for the least sign of treachery. They naturally object to acting in pictures where they are defeated, and it requires a good deal of coaxing to induce them to take on such objectionable parts.

Once a white player was seriously wounded when the Indians indulged in a bit too much realism with their clubs and tomahawks. After this activity they had their weapons padded in order to prevent further injurious use of them.

With all the precautions that are taken, the Redskins occasionally manage to smuggle real bullets into action; but happily they have always been detected in the nick of time, though on one occasion some cowboys had a narrow escape during the producing of a Bison film.

Even today a few white players specialize in Indian parts. They are past masters in such roles, for they have made a complete study of Indian life, and by clever makeup they are hard to tell from real Redskins. They take leading parts for which Indians are seldom adaptable.

To act as an Indian is the easiest thing possible, for the Redskin is practically motionless.

Ernest Alfred Dench—“The Dangers of Employing Redskins as Movie Actors.” 1915.⁶

We begin our search with that almost-comically paranoid and racist essay which, while dated, is nevertheless relevant to the current state of Native American filmmaking and establishes an historical base from which to work. This attitude, while perhaps not voiced as readily in public commentary in later years, was nevertheless discernible in Hollywood casting choices made right on through the 1950's and 60's. Actors such as Chuck Connors ("Geronimo" in *Geronimo* [1962]), Jack Palance ("Toriano" in *Arrowhead* [1953]), Rock Hudson ("Young Bull" in *Winchester '73* [1950]), Sal Mineo (!) ("Red Shirt" in *Cheyenne Autumn* [1964]) and even Elvis Presley ("Joe Lightcloud" in *Stay Away, Joe* [1968], and "Pacer Burton" in *Flaming Star* [1960] though some claim he had Chickasaw heritage...) all played Indian roles. Later, Revisionist Westerns that purported to tell the Indian point of view, or were at least considered more sensitive to Indian issues, still starred whites. Subsequent decades carried the torch along and the first year of each featured a new Western. The 70's kicked off with *Little Big Man* (Dustin Hoffman), and *A Man Called Horse*," (Sir Richard Burton); the 80's got going with *Windwalker* (Trevor Howard [he passed on the "Sir" bit, declining the CBE in 1982), and the 90's started off with *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner). The new millennium handed us *Grey Owl* (Pierce Brosnan) while principle photography started pretty early in the 2010's for Johnny Depp's *Tonto*. All of these films featured white actors as leads; at times those same actors became 'better' Indians than the Indians portrayed in the films by Native actors. It is interesting as well that those later films made for the Baby Boomers toed the Me Generation line and were all titled after their main characters.

We cannot, I suppose, be entirely judgmental of an assumedly benighted early Hollywood. Here is the conclusion to Stanley Vestal's somewhat awkward and earnest (though still vaguely racist) essay from 1936:

Recently the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs secured the passage of a law making it a crime to offer for sale as genuine Indian work fake Indian baskets, pottery, jewelry, and handicrafts. It seems time for similar legislation designed to prevent the sale of fake Indian drama. It is really too bad that the moving pictures have wasted and ruined such splendid screen material as the American Indian. Let us hope that the Hollywooden Indian may soon go the way of his cigar-store prototype.⁷

Who knows what the last 70 years of cinematic representation of “*the American Indian*”⁸ would look like if the government had taken up Vestal’s cry for authenticity shortly after the publication of his quirky piece? Would there have been more “progressive” and... “beneficial” calls for authenticity? After all, through the magic of cinema, America was quickly falling in love all over again with *The Last of the Mohicans* (1911 [x2], 1920, 1932, 1936, 1957, 1966, 1969, 1977, 1987, 1992, 2004, and I hear they’re looking at it again, seeing how, I suppose, it’s been more than a decade since the last version) as well as other Indian themed films.⁹ Here’s a longer selection that will illuminate an often-overlooked segment of the industry, a critic who calls for authenticity in casting:

It will be as easy in the distant future as it is today to produce the “make-believe Indian.” But the question arises, should not the Indians of today be real? A company of Indians who recently saw some of these reproductions most justly resented the untrue, unreal, and unfair representations of themselves and their habits. Truthfulness in picture has previously been advocated in these columns, and it is well that this timely and authoritative protest should come. While we still have the real Indians with us, why cannot thoroughly representative films be produced, making them at once illustrative and historic recorders...? It is hoped that some of our Western manufacturers will yet produce a series of films of REAL Indian life, doing so with the distinct object in view that they are to be of educational value, both for present and future use. Such a certified series will be of great value.¹⁰

Now granted, I removed from this lengthy quote the section which comes after “illustrative and historic recorders” but only because what follows—“of this noble race of people, with their splendid physique and physical prowess” –would immediately date this piece.

Though the rest of the quote could have been written in Hollywood last week, this anonymously penned essay appeared in *Moving Picture World* #8, back in 1911. Perhaps the author didn't care for the portrayal of Native people in either of that year's releases of *The Last of the Mohicans*.

And what happens when this persistent imaging of Native people by Hollywood goes unchallenged? Hollywood dictates what Native people are supposed to look like (I usually say "like Graham Greene riding in on a horse from 1875," but as I get older, that seems unfair to Graham Greene, whom I really like, and what with that Order of Canada they gave him just the other day, I'll have to come up with someone or something else), and that expectation is received by the American public, who then feel free to challenge the identity of any Native person who doesn't meet those received expectations, be they physical, social, cultural, or otherwise. This extends right on into seemingly unrelated realms; e.g. usually the very first challenge thrown at someone protesting the use of a mascot (looking at you in particular, here, Washington NFL club) or an offensively appropriated headdress (Lana Del Rey, Karli Kloss, Gwen Stefani, Steve Aoki, et al) by some internet troll or occasionally an aggressive quotable fanatic (yup, "fan" is short for "fanatic) is, "How much Indian are you? / What part Indian are you?" followed by increasingly violent and vulgar language that then spins into "Well you don't look Native American (occasionally that subtle shift, though, from "Indian" to "Native American" or whatever the other half of this angry dyad uses *does* occur) / "There aren't any REAL Indians left!" Along the way we get the "But we're honoring you" / "My best friend when I was growing up was Indian and it didn't bother him," and myriad variations on themes of denial and distrust. The deep thread / final trump card in this argument often ends in, "well, I'm 1/64 native american (*sic*) (and when any supposed blood quantum claim is too thin even for the pretender to

countenance; “I was born here so that makes me ‘Native American’), and I’m not offended.” As we can see, ultimately, control and definition of the image is paramount.

Redface



11

How does Hollywood maintain that image? Do they really do this in 2015? C’mon.

America is “post-racial,” right?¹² I mean, really. There are tons of Native actors out there, right?

Mmmhmm. Here’s a quick look at how that’s going for some of them:

While critics have been pointing to the dozen or so Native American extras who have walked off Adam Sandler’s *Ridiculous Six* set, citing offensive scenarios, others close to the production say the makeup department also has been rife with unease.

According to an on-set pro, members of the makeup team have been darkening actors of various ethnicities (including black and Asian talent) to make them appear Native American.

One of the actors, Allison Young, confirmed to MSNBC that makeup was used on talent. “I’m full-blooded Navajo and they bronzed me.”¹³

Seriously. And where and when did this “bronzing” get started?



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Pretty early on, it looks like. Hollywood (and here by extension, “America”) quickly developed an ideal “Indian” character, and how that character should appear. The simplest of Hollywood’s conceptions usually included that big feather bonnet and a tone some of us older folks remember from the crayon box as “Indian Red.”



15

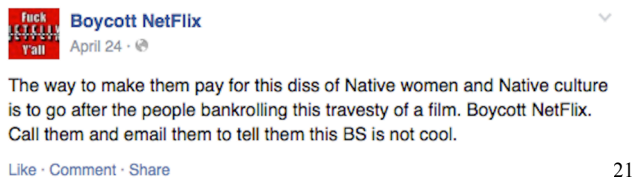
As we can see, those waxy Hollywood notions of authenticity and appearance are still with us, even if the crayon is not. Or at least we still experience those notions as filtered through an utter lack of awareness of contemporary American Indians in the world. A look beyond those insulated surroundings many of Hollywood’s producers and directors seem to live in might have been helpful. There are lots, and I mean *lots* of Native folks on social media.¹⁶ We use it for a variety of reasons, but it seems lately that one of our favorite purposes is to go after public stupidity and stumbling racism. Shortly after the Walk Off/Sandler story broke, Native social media reacted quickly. And in the way these things often happen, folks were divided. How best to gear up and go after Sandler and (again with that phrase “by extension”) Hollywood? Considering what is at stake when image control is discussed, it would seem that the social media issue-specific

mini-campaigns that arise in a flash would frequently benefit from a bit more thought than what is produced at the encounter with the initial breaking stories, stories that still occur with alarming frequency, but that is far easier said than done. That step-back, that breather, that moment of calm needed to compose one's thoughts can be hard to come by, particularly when sought against the backdrop of so many issues. Here is Loren Anthony (from the on-set shot shown above) quoted in the *New York Times*: “‘Our people are still healing from historical trauma,’ said Loren Anthony, one of the actors who walked out. ‘Our youth are still trying to figure out who they are, where they fit in this society. Kids are killing themselves. They’re not proud of who they are.’ They also don’t, he added, see themselves on prime time television or the big screen.”¹⁷ That same article goes on to describe the destructive power of Hollywood stereotypes, referencing both depression and rates of Native suicide, which are the highest of any minority group in the U.S. Anthony continues, pointing out why Native youth don’t see themselves on the silver screen: “according to the Screen Actors Guild in 2008 they accounted for 0.3 percent of all on-screen parts (those figures have yet to be updated), compared to about 2 percent of the general population.”¹⁸

The Campaign: #NotYourHollywoodIndian & #WalkOffNetflix

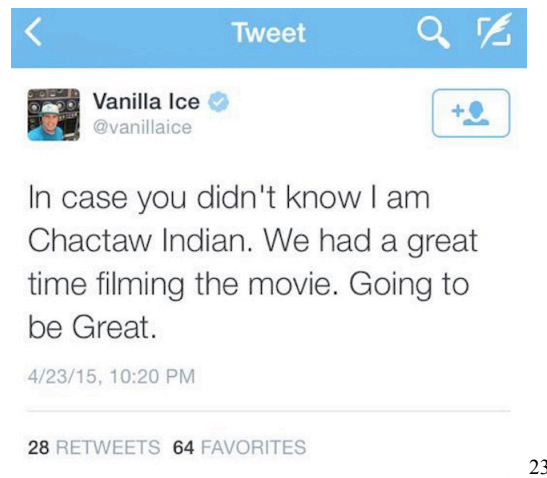


Native people are extremely effective users of social media; in particular around the issue of portrayal and depiction they have been able to force the removal of racist imagery across a variety platforms (particularly celebrity headdress appropriation—reference Karlie Kloss, Oklahoma Gov. Mary Fallin’s daughter, H&M’s sale of hipster headdresses), music video (Gwen Stefani/No Doubt et al), offensive festivals (Nightclub Thanksgiving Parties with Pilgrim/Indian costumes), as well as maintain consistent pressure around the changing of the Washington National Football League club name. These translative accomplishments continue almost daily, but Hollywood is far bigger than any one of those entities, and still bigger than all of them combined. Netflix, a purveyor of Hollywood and other cinematic and television productions, is a massive platform for film and its consumption. Its subscriber base topped 57 million at the beginning of 2015.²⁰ Hundreds and maybe even thousands of folks boycotting a behemoth likely wouldn’t make a difference. Still, activists wanted to do *something*:



That spirit, that drive, that sentiment, must be honored, no matter how few or many ears it might fall upon. Native digital activism can be a full-time job. The issues and needs are constant and relentless, and a no-brainer issue can be quite welcome. On the surface this one seemed to be a layup. But this is the digital reality of a global world. It’s not the same as boycotting a local movie theater or grocery store. Was there another route not considered, a solution buried in the problem? Smaller in numbers, but with good networking skills, there might be a way to use the incident to make a statement. A

boycott would certainly be tenable and might even get some media coverage, but would the deeper issues be lost in the haze? How to start a dialogue around access to production and distribution networks for Native artists? How to begin to address the dearth of Native voters in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (though over on Deadline I just learned that Sonny Skyhawk is in as of three days ago²²)? How to get cameras in the hands of Native people, and let Native people tell Native stories? In the end, while Netflix might lose a few customers, they would certainly lose no sleep. But thousands of folks watching a “niche” genre all at the same time? That’s saying and doing something, and (short of buying non-existent advertising) is about the only way you might get Netflix to notice. Should there be a boycott or not? Both sides had valid arguments. Well. Even Vanilla Ice weighed in:

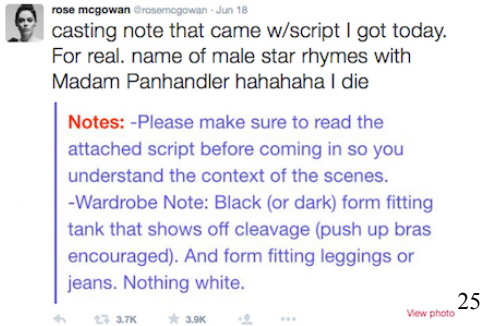


The duality of the story extended to the media. For example, note the differences in the titling of two pieces from the same day—one written by non-Native reporter Matt Wilstein, and the other written by Native reporter Vincent Schilling. Schilling’s breaking story reads, “Native Actors Walk off Set of Adam Sandler Movie After Insults to Women, Elders.” The derivative report from Wilstein at *Mediate* is quite closely, and if somewhat unimaginatively entitled,

“Native American Actors Walk Off (*sic*) Adam Sandler Movie Set over ‘Racist’ Jokes”—note the quotation marks around the word “racist” in the title, and that “‘Racist’ Jokes” has replaced “Insults to Women, Elders.” Really? ‘Racist’ is still that subjective of a word, even after those using it are clearly the victims of it? Right. And America is a “post-racial” country. As Sen. Daniel Inouye once said in yet another hearing of the Senate Committee on American Indian Affairs, “Well. We got problems.”²⁴

Some of those problems (in this instance, control of the image and narrative) have been with us from the beginning of the industry. A sample filmography of works ostensibly *about* rather than *by* Native people (“Hollywood”) would include everything from Thomas Edison’s *Sioux Ghost Dance* (1894) and D.W. Griffith’s *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch* (1913) to the previously mentioned much-beloved *Last of the Mohicans* (adapted, made, and remade at least a dozen times with a new production rumored to be in the works), the 2013 remake of *The Lone Ranger*, and yet another version of *Peter Pan* (2015). What we might term “Native Cinema,” that is, film made *by* Native artists, would include works that range from James Young Deer and Lillian St. Cyr’s body of work that got underway in 1909 with *The Falling Arrow*, right on up through the work of Alanis Obamsawin (*Incident at Restigouche* (1984), *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), et al), Chris Eyre (*Smoke Signals* (1998), *Skins* (2002), *Law and Order* (2008), *Friday Night Lights* (2008-11), et al), Sterlin Harjo (*Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007), *Barking Water* (2009), *This May Be the Last Time* (2014) and *Meeko* (2015), and many more young Indigenous filmmakers who seem to expand the form almost daily. Though largely unknown, Native filmmaking has a long pedigree, and with the advent of digital capabilities (and a bit of a reduction in costs), it promises to thrive, stronger than ever.

We Can't Wait for Madam Panhandler—#VivaNativeCinema



I curate and manage a Facebook page called Native American and American Indian Issues <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NAAIissues/>> with over 12,000 members (screened for bots, spam, and off-brand lunacy [covered in the page description thusly, “No night night white wolf pics or fluorescent dreamcatchers, and no new agey bs”]) as well as administer a Native Lit page and a Native Film page, so I was able to watch the conversation around the boycott and the viewing push develop from both sides. To be sure, the voices calling for a boycott were loud, and were heard. But then fairly quickly, stories and interviews that presented another side to the story, an opportunity that might in fact amplify Native voices in cinema began to appear. And these were the voices of Native filmmakers themselves.

Sterlin Harjo’s interview in *Filmmaker Magazine* netted this statement: “Supporting Native filmmakers will help peel back the decades of misrepresentation of Native people. Netflix can’t stop it. Only we can. We have that power, but we need support.”²⁷ As film critic and program director of the Toronto International Film Festival Bell Lightbox, Jesse Wentz, said, echoing Harjo’s sentiment: “You have to stop expecting for Hollywood to correct it, because there seems to be no ability or desire to correct it.”²⁸ Filmmaker Brian Young set up the

#VivaNativeCinema Facebook event and sent out 2500 invites to individuals asking them to support Native cinema on the evening of Sunday May 3, 2015.

According to the page there were over 500 participants. I thought I'd follow up:

06/30/15

Dear Netflix — pr@netflix.com <pr@netflix.com>

I'm currently writing an article for an academic journal for publication this fall. It concerns the reaction in the Native American community to the Adam Sandler production, *Ridiculous Six*. After the stories of some on-set issues appeared online, many called for a boycott of Netflix, though seemingly far more people chose to support Native filmmakers at Netflix, launching a campaign called #VivaNativeCinema, which had as its goal a mass watching of Native-made films on the evening of Sunday May 3, 2015. I'm wondering if that campaign registered at all with folks at Netflix, and if they in fact noticed the upswing in the viewing of those films.

Any insight or assistance you might provide would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Ted Van Alst

07/05/15

No response yet...

While we're waiting for Netflix (filmmakers, feel free to use that title for the documentary), I'd like to check in and see what another of Indian Country's best directors had to say. Jeff Barnaby (*Rhymes for Young Ghouls* [2013]; *The Colony* [2007]; *From Cherry English* [2004], et al) explained it this way:

Nobody goes into an Adam Sandler film expecting to see *Citizen Kane*; it's bottom feeding to appeal to the lowest common denominator, fart jokes. By the same token I don't think anyone goes to an Adam Sandler film to be educated on Native people or anything else.²⁹

While we can agree that no one is going to an Adam Sandler film to learn about Native people, it would seem that Adam Sandler and company learned something about Native people

on set. David Hill, 74, that Choctaw actor from Oklahoma I said we'd return to, the one who left the *Ridiculous Six* set (and compared the arguments used by the producers to justify their actions to those of Dan Snyder, owner of the R*dsk*ns), said he thought the film industry was heading toward a better portrayal of American Indians before this experience: "Over the years, we have seen change. Then this," Hill said. "We told them, 'Our dignity is not for sale.'"³⁰

Where to, then? What direction for Native Cinema? As I write this, listening to the Black Keys' "Sinister Kid," because it was featured in "Rhymes for Young Ghouls" and I wouldn't have heard it otherwise, I think it would be appropriate to return to its director, Jeff Barnaby, who in addition to making films that actually deal with the working class, lives that work ethic himself, and echoes Harjo's exhortation from the introduction to this essay:

"...if you're rolling back about 100 years of representation in cinema, it's not going to happen with 1 or 2 films. You're going to have to get 40 or 50 films before you can start talking about Native Cinema as a genre. The problem with #WalkOffNetflix is that it is inadvertently suppressing those voices with good intentions, but the last I heard, the road to hell was paved with them.

So that was my main beef with it: you're drowning our ethnic voices because of this idiot.³¹

Let's drown out the idiots, and make good films.

P.S./Update/He Said What?



An 18 July *ScreenCrush* article quotes Sandler himself. Prepare to feel all better:

I talked to some of the actors on the set who were there and let them know that the intention of the movie is 100% to just make a funny movie. It's really about American Indians being good to my character and about their family and just being good people. There's no mocking of American Indians at all in the movie. It's a pro-Indian movie.³³

Ridiculous Six is scheduled for a December 11, 2015 release.

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NOTES

- ¹ Wilsot, "Ridiculous Netflix," n.p.
 - ² Sargent, "These Are the Jokes," n.p.
 - ³ 74-year old David Hill, from whom we'll hear more further down.
 - ⁴ Schilling, "Native Actors Walk off Set," n.p.
 - ⁵ Ibid. Photo of Loren Anthony. Image source: [instagram.com/lorenanthony](https://www.instagram.com/lorenanthony)
 - ⁶ See Bataille & Silet, p. 61-62. The essay is reproduced here in its entirety.
 - ⁷ From "The Hollywooden Indian" in Bataille & Silet, p. 67.
 - ⁸ The objectifying definitive article is often used in America when referring to various groups, but none more than American Indians.
 - ⁹ The early film industry produced countless "Easterns," before cheap land and labor sent cinema out to Hollywood where it would soon turn to the Western.
 - ¹⁰ From "The 'Make-Believe' Indian" in Bataille & Silet, p. 59.
 - ¹¹ Graphic "Redface" of Johnny Depp as Tonto by Rob Schmidt from "Depp's Dilemma Over Playing Mexican."
 - ¹² Aura Bogado's excellent piece "Five Racist Ways The New Yorker is Embarrassing Itself" takes down Jesse Eisenberg's May 25th use of "squaw," "chief," and "rain dance," among other terms.
 - ¹³ Gardner, "Adam Sandler's 'Ridiculous Six': Makeup Pros," n.p.
 - ¹⁴ Jimmy Cagney and "Iron Eyes Cody" (Espera Oscar De Corti). Still from *Reel Injun* (Rezolution Pictures/National Film Board of Canada, 2009.)
 - ¹⁵ That color. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Crayola_renamed.jpg
- 
- ¹⁶
 - ¹⁷ Buckley, "Native American Actors," n.p.
 - ¹⁸ Ibid, n.p.
 - ¹⁹ Author photo
 - ²⁰ Spangler, "Netflix Tops 57 Million," n.p.
 - ²¹ An April 24, 2015 posting by the "Boycott NetFlix" Facebook page.
< <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Boycott-NetFlix/1438656496434236>>

²² Hammond, “Movie Academy Invites,” n.p.

²³ A screen capture of an April 23, 2015 tweet (since deleted) from Vanilla Ice’s Twitter feed shown in Spiceland and Byington, “Fact Check,” n.p. By way of follow up, many of us are still wondering who the “Chactaw” Indians might be, and if Mr. Ice’s statement meant that they somehow supported the flick.

²⁴ Quoted this time @57:01 in *The Canary Effect*

²⁵ Gajewski and Rahman, “Rose McGowan: Adam Sandler Film Criticism.” Screen shot from Rose McGowan’s June 18, 2015 Twitter feed. Less than a week later, her June 24, 2015 Twitter feed would show the results of McGowan’s speaking her mind:



²⁶ Here’s someone who couldn’t wait. Bree Newsome takes down the Confederate flag from a pole on the statehouse grounds in Columbia, S.C., June 27, 2015. (REUTERS/Adam Anderson)

²⁷ Wilsot, “Ridiculous Netflix,” n.p.

²⁸ Buckley, “Native American Actors,” n.p.

²⁹ Murg, “Anti-Netflix Campaign,” n.p.

³⁰ Contreras, “American Indian Actors Walk Off Set,” n.p.

³¹ Murg, “Anti-Netflix Campaign,” n.p.

³² “I am not a (insert your own descriptor here)...” photo by Noam Galai, Getty Images, in Sampson, “Adam Sandler on ‘Ridiculous Six’ Native American Controversy,” n.p.

³³ Ibid