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Updating Mythical History: Standing Here and Now in Randy Redroad's *The Doe Boy* (2001)

Introduction:

The Doe Boy, an independent Native movie released in 2001, unfolds the coming-of-age story of a mixed-blood teenager in rural Oklahoma. Starting in 1977, it focuses on a compromised father and son relationship, as Hunter, a young hemophiliac overprotected by his mother, has difficulty bonding with Hank, his white father. What was supposed to seal this bond and project Hunter into adulthood, his first deer hunt ends up being a humiliating failure for both of them as Hunter accidentally kills a doe.

The Doe Boy consists of a very personal movie, for it actually puts into images real-life events, as director Randy Redroad explains in “Through the Mythic Lens”:

“When I was ten, I shot a doe deer while my father napped at the base of a tree beside me. Although I was proud to have gotten a deer on my first-ever hunt, I felt bad it was a female, and I was traumatized by the feeling of having killed something bigger than I was. To make it even worse, the doe's almond-shaped brown eyes looked like my mother's and like the eyes of all the Indian girls I know [...]

As I got older I began to think of that original hunt as an emasculating event in my life. I attached to it a mythic significance that would blow each detail so far out of proportion it would fit only on the big screen.” p117

From this highly meaningful starting point, the movie contrives a modern initiatory journey leading Hunter toward the reconciliation of his dual cultural heritage and the affirmation of self-worth. Indeed, under the distant guidance of the enigmatic Deer spirit, and thanks to his interaction with many important male figures—Marvin, the wise Indian grandfather, Tommy, the legendary hunter, and Manny, the proud warrior—Hunter progressively learns to overcome his doubts and finally achieves self-reinvention.

Relying on Chadwick Allen's blood/land/memory complex and referring to David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous*, I intend to show how *The Doe Boy* proposes a two-fold narrative that draws on a powerful and pervasive blood metaphor and reimagines traditional totemism in order to address a critical comment on mainstream Hollywood representation of Indians.

“Blood Narrating” a Good Story!

Blood pervades noticeably the movie's aesthetics as it acts as a multi-layered signifier. Indeed, very soon in the movie, pulsating blood imposes the regular and fast rhythm of a heartbeat doubled by loud breathing, thus immersing the viewer into the lead character's incorporate sensuous experience. Later on, the vital substance makes itself visible through the discreet nose bleeds, leakage from an injured lip, and, by the very end of the movie, more dramatically, through the abundant flow of blood from Hunter's damaged hand, which drips on the floor parallels the bloody tracks that led to the agonizing doe. Moreover, from the red shirt offered by his mother on his eighteenth birthday (metaphorically alluding to Hunter's medical condition, hemophilia, a maternal inherited disease) to all the other red shirts or sweaters the character will wear throughout the movie but also the beads of his medical identification necklace, blood is made into a color directly associated with Hunter's physical appearance. Finally, blood colors the light of some highly symbolical scenes, the man-to-man conversations Hunter engages with his father in Hank's garage, with his grandfather in Marvin's workshop, and with the doctor in the latter's office. In all three dark dens, a slightly reddish glow partially enlightens the setting and reveals only profiles and half faces.

The *mise-en-scene* thus emphasizes the looming presence of this Sword of Damocles hanging over the lead character's head: at first represented by the insidious threat of being hemophiliac, then, more precisely asserted by the possibility of having contracted AIDS through a blood perfusion. Consequently, blood is staged as an ambivalent substance, signifying both an impending danger and the material proof of vital energy flowing, a promise of rejuvenation.

This theme actually stands as a metaphor for another concern, namely, Native identity measured out and calculated by settlers' standards as a percentage of Indian blood. Hunter regularly correlates his blood instability and his body's inability to self-heal to the void left by the half-Indian blood he's only able to claim:

“When I was little, I used to think my blood was bad caus' I wasn't a full blood like you.” 53'

“Your blood ruined me! It's a goddamn white disease!” 32'

Due to his lack of tangible acknowledgment of fully belonging to his nation, Hunter struggles to find congruence in his environment and his people's history. To address this issue, he engages into a totemic journey aiming at finding congruence through the narrative this journey represents. Accordingly, *The Doe Boy* openly draws on the blood/land/memory complex as stated by Chadwick Allen in *Blood Narrative*:

What I call the blood/land/memory complex is an expansion of Momaday's controversial trope of blood memory that makes explicit the central role that land plays both in the specific project of defining indigenous minority personal, familial, and communal identities (blood) and in the larger project of reclaiming and reimagining indigenous minority histories (memory). Like Momaday's trope, the blood/land/memory complex articulates acts of indigenous minority recuperation that attempt to seize control of the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of indigenous "blood," "land," and "memory" and that seeks to liberate indigenous minority identities from definitions of authenticity imposed by dominant settlers cultures, including these definitions imposed by well-meaning academics. P16

Marvin's recurrent voice-overs indeed disclose the trope at work. In the opening scene, he asserts:

"Nobody cares how much blood runs through a deer. But everyone wants to know how much blood runs through an Indian. It's kind of hard to tell, unless you cut one of us open and watch all the stories pour out." (1')

He eventually confirms it when he concludes the film by saying:

"There was a boy who dreamed of becoming a good story. And made it happen." (1:19)

Incidentally the many "There was a boy..." stories told by Marvin confirm this point as they all consist in legendary variations of one precise narrative: Hunter's contemporary coming-of-age story.

In the movie, blood acts as a subtext, a notion central to understanding Randy Redroad's work and that is deeply rooted in his childhood:

"And in that moment I realized that there was subtext in the world, that any emotion had a basement, an attic, and a safety deposit box." p115

Both revealing an actual material reality, Hunter's medical condition, and the set of connections linking our world to other strata of experience and other realities, blood adds texture to the whole film, thus re-contextualizing a teenage boy's anger into a bigger-than-life quest for identity, a quest suffused with magic for, contrary to Hank's assertion: magic is everywhere hiding in the details:

“There ain't magic around here, Marvin. This is real life.” (15')

Stepping into the animal footprints, Hunter reenacts other legendary encounters with the Deer spirit. Throughout the encountered ordeals, heroic Hunter regularly seeks protection and relief by letting himself cuddled by two curing and caring female figures: his mother, a nurse who tends to his medical treatment, and his girlfriend, Geri, a student in linguistic pathologies who intends to help people heal their language issues and consequently tending to their storytelling. If the former's well-intended influence results in sometimes oppressive over-protection, the latter's affectation represents a positive stimulation. Geri is herself a proud mixed-blood, in other terms “an Indian goulash” (45') as Hunter astutely qualifies her, at peace with her inherited plural identity, part Pueblo, part Navajo, part Mexican, part Spanish. Her soothing presence highly facilitates Hunter's reconciliation of legacies.

Becoming a Buck

In contrast, the father-and-son relationship portrayed here is highly ambiguous. Both characters are craving for a stable bond. However, they continually engage in fights and hurtful conversations. Hank's main concern is to make a man out of his son. Drawing on his family tradition he unconsciously projects his intention on deer hunting, a very manly activity intended as a rite of passage. To become a buck, well-named Hunter must kill a buck. After the disastrous initial hunting episode when young Hunter murders a doe, Hank repeatedly voices his doubts about Hunter's virility because of his medical condition: the army, this paragon of manhood, “will never have him.” As Hunter grows up, his father's incomprehension deepens. Hank does certainly not hate his son, quite on the contrary, he just can't seem to grab who Hunter really is and defensively reacts with scorn. This situation is early on epitomized by Hank's attacks on Hunter's tartan trousers, attacks the father will soften up by saying:

“I don't hate them pants, I just don't understand them.” (23')

Hank's confidence in buck hunting to transform his son into a man clearly echoes Native traditional totemic practice when young boys entering their teenage were isolated from the tribe and sent on a vision quest in the course of which their animal spirit would challenge them and eventually reveal to them a renewed identity. Noticeably, even though referring to the same activity, Hank and Marvin do not rely on the same vocabulary. When Hunter's Indian grandfather uses the word "deer," invoking the generic name of the totemic animal, for Hank, the world is divided between bucks and does.

In *Masculindians: Conversations about Indigenous Manhood*, Sam McKegney, addressing the issue of recurrent Native misrepresentation, defines masculinity in such terms:

"I tend to think of "masculinity" as a tool for describing the quality, actions, characteristics, and behaviours that accrue meaning within a given historical context and social milieu through their association with maleness as maleness is normalized, idealized, and even demonized within a web of power-laden interpenetrating discourses." p2

In the case of Native characters, Brian Klopotek refers to the notion of "hypermasculinity" as mainstream audiences expect male Indians to outperform virility due to an alleged perennial closeness to the natural world. He elaborates on the notion by stating:

"For at least the last century, hypermasculinity has been one of the foremost attributes of the Indian world that whites have imagined. With squaws and princesses usually playing secondary roles, Indian tribes are populated predominantly by noble and ignoble savages, wise old chiefs, and cunning warriors. These imagined Indian nations comprise an impossibly masculine race." p251

Hunter, having gained the mocking nickname of "Doe Boy," tries oftentimes to prove he's not a doe but a kicking buck, getting into fights at the bar and twice proudly asking for the thousand bucks he deserves for having left the nest.

"If you're out of here before thirty, I'll give you a thousand bucks." (20')

When he meets the doctor and is told of the ominous possibility of having contracted AIDS, his first worry is of having a gay disease:

"There is no such thing as a gay disease." (49')

By contrast, Hunter's girlfriend offers a steady and reassuring presence, having herself never doubted her own femininity despite what Hunter calls a “boy's name.”

“I'm Geri. I live next door to you.

-You have a boy's name!

-You have a great name!” (45')

Overseeing Hunter's reflection about gender and identity, the totemic deer (as many times represented by bucks as by does in the film) is an elusive and yet ever-present figure throughout the film, often influencing camera angles when we look at the woods through the eyes of the running animal or when Hank, sitting in his armchair below a hunting trophy, is shot from above thus revealing the deer's gaze cast on the events. The totemic deer also discloses her omnipresence alongside Hunter's trajectory in cardboard silhouettes attached to fences, hunted animals in the woods, the magical deer with a necklace appearing in Hunter's dreams, and the many road sign deer.

Becoming a buck by killing a buck rapidly proves to be a nonsensical project for, as Marvin states, Hunter is already part buck, thus incorporating a dual spiritual identity: part hunter and part prey. This fact directly alludes to his mixed-blood identity: part conqueror and part conquered, part perpetrator and part victim. This animal spiritual identity materializes when Hunter, following his animal instinct, smells the does' hair, an intense sensual experience that results in nose bleeds.

”To a buck every doe smells unique.” (21')

The actual goal of Hunter's rite of passage consists of holding the gaze of the deer and recognizing oneself in this animalistic Other. A close encounter filmed by means of a mirror image, Hunter's movements perfectly paralleling the buck's, the filmic shot presenting a scene cut in the middle, soon followed by alternating close shots at Hunter's and the deer's eyes. By facing the animal and holding its gaze, Hunter renews an ancestral covenant and affirms links of reciprocity with the land because seeing and acknowledging the deer implies, in return, to be seen and acknowledged by the deer. Through this suspended moment of mutual perception, Hunter assimilates the Other's reality. Catching the deer's vital rhythm through harmonized breathing, he gets attuned to his environment.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram analyzes these necessary principles of transitivity and reversibility:

“Easily overlooked, this primordial world is always already there when we begin to reflect or philosophize. It is not a private but a collective dimension—the common field of our lives and the other lives with which ours are entwined—and yet it is profoundly ambiguous and indeterminate, since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it.”
p40

Meeting the deer face to face, aiming the arrow at his mirror image, and refraining from shooting it, Hunter regains congruence in the here and now.

Reversing Cliches

Narrating what, at first sight, would appear to be just another Indian story, *The Doe Boy* actually proposes a renewed performance of indigeneity by insidiously undermining the usual dominant voice of authority and breaking down the expected cliches of the genre.

The most obvious device chosen by Randy Redroad is his choice of Marvin's voice to tell the story, hence giving control over the narrative to an Indian voice. Throughout the film, Marvin represents indeed a steady and reliable figure who discreetly watches over Hunter's metamorphosis from boy to man. However, at a closer look, this character does not exactly comply with the full requirement of incarnating the archetypal “Wise Old Chief.” Benevolent Marvin is a kind grandfather but lacks many answers as far as Hunter's initiatory journey is concerned, only offering two laconic pieces of advice:

“One arrow is only what a real hunter needs.” (7)

“You don't need practice for what you're looking for, Hunter, just courage.” (1:13)

These pieces of advice are far from sufficient for anybody wishing to kill his first buck.

The other male characters portrayed by the film also fail to fulfill their role. Randy Redroad gives us not one but two archetypal “Indian Warriors,” two faces of the same coin, namely Tommy and Manny. On the one hand, Tommy, the lonesome hunter, the man who can shoot

deer with only one arrow and is so close to the natural world that he can easily put a necklace around a wild buck's neck without hurting it or being hurt by it, recurrently appears as a ghostly and judgmental figure displaying an unalterable stern look on his face.

On the other hand, testosterone-loaded Manny is the solar archetype of a warrior. He nevertheless soon proves to be trigger-happy, a damaged Vietnam veteran who shoots in any direction, hoping that one of the bullets will eventually reach a buck. He is as much a failed father figure to his son as Hank is to Hunter.

The Doe Boy pushes farther this deconstructing work when characterizing Hank. Although a white man, a descendant of settlers, he fully embodies the “Vanishing Man” figure usually associated with Native male characters. He's an alcoholic who can become violent when lacking convincing arguments, a pitiful image of a man when continually slumped in his armchair watching war images on TV and boasting as if he was a war hero even though he never got a chance to go there. In that regard, his psychological wounds echo Manny's: because of war, whether you actively participated or not, you become only a shadow of a man. The most striking feature defining Hank is his actual longing to become invisible physically. According to him, to go hunting means to dress up like a tree, crouch behind one, and wait for hours for nature and the rest of the world to forget about his presence. Sadly, he achieves his goal when, accidentally shot by Manny, he dies silently. This death results in other silent scenes when Hank's family is notified of the tragedy. The last image the viewer will keep in mind of Hank is one of a still man lying on his stomach, his face unseen, with very little blood spilled. Hank has quietly vanished.

Noticeably, Marvin, Hank, Manny, and Tommy do not give clear indications to Hunter insofar as the latter's identity is concerned, leaving him full agency to become who he has to become. Likewise, the end of the film is left open, thus liberating the lead character from predetermination. His story is one of an ongoing process of transformation because one Native identity cannot be defined in terms of static notions such as blood quanta. On the contrary, Native identities are perpetually renewed across generations.

“In each effective telling, the contemporary generation engages the blood/land/memory complex and rebuilds the ancestor as itself.” Chadwick Allen p159

Far from being a political pamphlet against mainstream cinema, the film continually plays on reversing perspectives in order to open a dialogic space between divergent representations. An interpretive key is given to the viewers at the very beginning of the movie when three boys, two full bloods and a mixed blood, run into the woods after a deer, thus mimicking *The Last of the Mohican's* opening scene where two Indians and the adopted Longstocking hunt a deer in the North East forests. Indeed, being himself literate in mainstream cinema canons, Randy Redroad openly draws on multireferentiality to engage in a conversation about intersecting frameworks, thus offering comments on traditional Hollywood Westerns and their strict binary worldview. Whereas Westerns dwell on the idea of progress and conquest, thus implementing a linear timeline, *The Doe Boy* willfully implements a circular timeline, an upward whirlwind where events and images echo one another with additional meaning. Thanks to an individual and very personal totemic journey told from the shared perspective of convergent stories, the film participates in the re-membering of a whole community while refusing to comply with the constructed notion of ethnic authenticity.

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