

XVIII
THE REMEMBRANCE OF NAVAJO CODE TALKERS ON
SCREEN: *WINDTALKERS*, A CLASSIC CASE OF NATIONAL
CELEBRATION VERSUS HISTORIC ACCURACY?

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The remembrance of Navajo Code Talkers and their consequent depiction by the representatives of the tribe, the American military establishment and the newspapers which have been publishing Code Talkers' obituaries in their columns¹ gives proof of the important role played by Navajo soldiers on the Pacific Front during World War Two. Navajo Code Talkers helped the Allies defeat the Axis powers which proved unable to construe the Navajo language and decipher the code used by the Native-Americans on duty. Along with other American Veterans, Navajo Code Talkers became military figures honored by memorials and patriotic tributes. Several reasons may account for the praising of feats by Navajo Veterans. By serving the United States while using one of their distinctive ethnic qualities (the Navajo language), Navajo military men became the symbol of the army's power to integrate racial minorities into the mainstream of society. Yet, as shown in the movie *Windtalkers*, directed by John Woo and released in 2002, many Navajo soldiers, notwithstanding their skills and their commitment to the American flag, were victims of discrimination by their peers because of their racial and body appearance. The presence of Navajo soldiers among American military ranks illustrates the struggle of individual fighters who were bound to embrace community codes that were foreign to their traditions. Paradoxically, they won back respect and national recognition by accepting to use part of their cultural heritage as a military stratagem and tool. After reviewing how Navajo Code Talkers' heroism has been narrated in John Woo's film, this essay will try to determine to what extent *Windtalkers* exemplifies a classic Hollywood characterization of war heroes, thus offering a limited representation of history and remembrance. The controversy over choosing Adam Beach, a non-Navajo actor to play a Navajo code talker in the John Woo movie, will also be discussed to reflect upon the importance of "racial accuracy", ethnic features and body visibility in public representations of war and minority soldiers.

REMEMBRANCE AND CELEBRATION ON SCREEN:
HEROISM DURING WARTIME

Given the polemical dimension of the Navajo Code Talkers experience—they were only recently recognized and celebrated as heroes—John Woo was faced with two possibilities. He could have written a documentary that enabled Code Talkers to give a testimony of their participation in the conflict. By opting for a war movie loaded with special effects and mind-blowing action feats, the much-appraised director developed the Code Talkers topic insofar as it served the melodramatic dimension of the relationship between the young Navajo Code Talker and the white senior officer.

WINDTALKERS: A CLASSIC JOHN WOO TALE OF
MANLY LOYALTY AND FRIENDSHIP?

Windtalkers is a traditional hero-movie. One could even label it a buddy-movie. The tragic fate of Navajo Code Talkers constitutes the background for the depiction of a moving friendship between two opposite characters: the easy-going Navajo newbie soldier, Ben Yahzee, portrayed by Adam Beach, and the grumpy “seen-it-all” senior officer, Joe Enders, played by Nicolas Cage. As the somewhat improbable buddy-movie unfolds, it acquires another dimension with Nicolas Cage, despite his disturbing post-traumatic syndrome, becoming the mentor of Adam Beach who, in turn, helps him open up and acknowledge his feelings of loss and grief. The historical subplot offered James Woo the opportunity to prove that he is more than a gifted stunt director. With *Windtalkers*, he could tackle issues such as racism among the ranks of the army and the preservation of culture through language recognition. Yet Woo’s film also reunited him with Nicolas Cage, whom he had already directed in *Face/Off* (1997) and delivered a Manichean movie full of bombastic special effects and cardboard characters. Navajo audiences had been expecting this movie for several years. It was not until 1982 that President Ronald Reagan proclaimed 14 August as National Navajo Code Talkers’ Day to express appreciation to all American Indians who had served the United States in times of war. In the 1990s, several documentaries produced by the National Geographic or Native American broadcasting consortiums paved the way for a dramatization of the Code Talkers’ heroic feats.² Documentaries such as *War Code: Navajo* by Navajo filmmaker Lena Carr not only cast a favorable light upon the Navajo soldiers’ bravery and ingenuity, they also dared to confront the paradox in which Code Talkers had become embroiled. Navajo soldiers became a valuable human resource insofar as their language, which Anglo teachers and missionaries had earlier tried to eradicate, was suddenly considered

an effective military tool, instrumental in winning the war over the Japanese. The history of the Navajos is itself one of oppression and resistance. Defeated by the US army led by Kit Carson in 1864, the Navajo were banished to Fort Sumner (Bosque Redondo) in eastern New Mexico where they were held captives until 1868. Stories about this tragic deportation have been transmitted to young generations, who are told about their ancestors dying of diseases and starvation during *The Long Walk*. Unlike members of other tribes such as the Cherokees, who were also displaced following *the Trail of Tears*, the Navajo survivors were allowed to return to their traditional homelands after being released from Fort Sumner.³ The Navajo were able to maintain their religious customs and resisted the efforts made by members of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Christian teachers or doctors to assimilate them.

In *Windtalkers*, John Woo successfully managed to craft this aspect of Navajo history into the dramatic plot which exploits the theme of conflict between friendship and duty through the eyes of the character played by Nicolas Cage. Enders is reluctant to befriend the Navajo Code Talker portrayed by Adam Beach for fear of having to kill him in order to save the Code. Joe Enders' estrangement from the Catholic Church, which played an important role in his upbringing, adds to his feeling of self-loathing and guilt. During what is supposed to be one of the most harrowing scenes in the movie, Joe confides in Ben Yahzee and admits to him that he is no longer "a soldier of Christ." Ben, in turn, tells Enders that when he was eight years old, the age of Joe's confirmation, he spent two days chained to a radiator in a Catholic Church basement after a priest heard him speak in Navajo. Yazhee's commitment to serve the American flag and his Saint-like demeanor towards racist officers may thus seem hard to believe. Nonetheless, it contributes further to exploit the characterization of the loyalty theme and it makes plot and history entwine by mirroring the stance adopted by the Navajo tribe representatives during World War II. Indeed, despite the bone of contention that existed between Navajo leaders and the American government, the Navajo issued the following statement on 6 June 1940, a year and a half before the United States entered World War II: "We resolve that the Navajo Indians stand ready as they did in 1918, to aid and defend our Constitution against all subversive and armed conflict."⁴

The Navajo population numbered approximately 55,000 people when the Second World War broke out. Many Navajo men tried to join the forces but were not accepted initially because of language barriers. Ultimately, 3,600 Navajo soldiers served the USA during World War II and almost 300 Navajo died in conflict. The opening sequence draws the attention of the audience to the majestic and arid landscapes of the Navajo reservation, home of the Code Talkers. The producers have

chosen Monument Valley to symbolize the life of the Navajo soldiers before their enrollment. This Navajo region has appeared in many westerns. Choosing Monument Valley as the setting for the traditional and peaceful Navajo life offers a dramatic counterpoint to the bloody nightmare of the damp Pacific warzone. As women are left at home, the audience is plunged into the troubled waters in which Nicolas Cage is engulfed. Despite what the bus sequence shows, the film will not focus on a group of Navajo Code Talkers. It will instead insist on the relationship between the Navajo Code Talker and the Anglo officer he is subordinate to.

WINDTALKERS:
CLASSIC CHARACTERIZATION OF WAR HEROES?

To the producers, the Navajo Code Talker may have seemed the ideal counterpart to the Japanese hero, renowned for his sense of sacrifice and his visually striking hara-kiri. The Navajo Code Talkers represented in the movie all had to consent to being murdered by their fellow soldiers if the chances of escaping an enemy ambush were very slim. The Code had to be protected at all costs. This fact is not known to have been true and Native American critics of the film were dismayed by John Woo's treatment of the central moral conflict. Malinda Maynor, Native American (Lumbee) filmmaker and Assistant Professor of History at Harvard University, believed that using the Code Talkers' tragic fate to highlight the dilemma of Joe Enders left ample room for white domination to be exerted upon Navajo people, this time on screen. She wrote in *The Progressive*:

The central moral conflict in the movie... makes *Windtalkers* a new kind of Lone Ranger, where the friendship between Indians and Whites is based on white guidance and superior judgment. In the movie, white superiority is based on Enders'... power to determine life or death, a power that white society has exercised again and again with the Navajo. By maintaining a stereotype about Indian-white relations, the filmmakers sacrificed a much more complex tale of how Navajo and White Americans came to respect one another.⁵

Indeed, the movie insists on the personal struggle of a white soldier torn between his desire to serve the establishment and his growing hatred of killing. However, by portraying Enders like this, John Woo is consistent with a traditional characterization in war films. Nicolas Cage, as many other actors before him, impersonates the post-traumatic officer who is willing to end his moral dilemma and physical suffering by getting killed. Marred in his mind and his flesh by the war – he has lost part of his hearing—his animosity towards his Navajo subaltern is

fuelled by his bitterness. He does not believe in military comradeship anymore.

The psychologically-disturbed officer is a recurrent character in war movies. So is the freshman soldier who, like Yazhee in *Windtalkers*, progressively loses his innocence when subjected to the harsh realities of military life. We may think of Matthew Modine in *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) or Charlie Sheen in *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986). Though Nicolas Cage is bitter, he is never sadistic or remorseless, unlike other sergeants in war films such as Gunnery Sergeant Hartman seen in *Full Metal Jacket* or Sergeant Barnes from *Platoon*. John Woo added another white-Navajo couple to the plot. Christian Slater plays Sergeant Ox Henderson, a pragmatic and fun dude who befriends the Code Talker he ultimately sacrifices. This extra character contributes to make *Windtalkers* a typical war movie. Indeed, Cage and Slater represent the two opposite sides of a coin. Heads: a guilt-ridden officer who resents obeying military orders because he feels responsible for the loss of his patrol. Tails: a compassionate officer who also reckons that sometimes the end justifies the means. Christian Slater's character may remind the audience of past compassionate soldiers pictured on screen such as Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe) in *Platoon* for example. Noah Emmerich plays Corporal Chick Rodgers, a bigot, who incarnates the racism rampant among military ranks. Thus, the heroes portrayed by John Woo are consistent with what the audience should expect from lead characters in war movies. What about the Code Talkers themselves? Supposedly the main stars of the movie, did their characterization conform to what the surviving Code Talkers expected?

TELLING A LONG-FORGOTTEN STORY...

Windtalkers created considerable expectations among the remaining Code Talkers, their families and Navajo people in general. A few months before releasing the movie, the famous toy company Hasbro created a Navajo Code Talker GI Joe, the first doll of the brand to speak a Native American language. The existence of the Navajo Code Talkers first came into light in 1968 when their story was declassified by the Pentagon. At that time, Navajo people were also trying to assert more rights for themselves in the fields of health and education. The Navajos believed their healing ceremonies could be passed on to the next generations through the preservation of the language. The Rough Rock community school experiment led to the creation of several books in Navajo. Before that, Navajo was only taught orally and there were few publications featuring written Navajo words. Today, most of the schools scattered around the reservation offer a bilingual education.

The Navajo take pride in the Code Talkers: they symbolize bravery and a sense of duty. They are also celebrated because they contributed to the governmental recognition of the native language's worth. In an interview given to Bill Papich from the *Chicago Tribune* on the 17 March 2000, Teddy Draper, J.-R., whose father was among the Code Talkers, declared: "They had been beating us down, and then they use our language to win the war."⁶

In order to ensure authenticity, *Windtalkers*, a Pacific-Western Productions movie, was produced in association with Red-Horse Native Productions. Valerie Red-Horse, the company's president, of Cherokee and Sioux heritage, wanted to cast as many Navajo actors as possible. She declared:

I think the concern of the Code Talkers is this is probably their only shot to have their story told in a big way... I think they know they don't have a lot of time left on this earth, and they want to leave a legacy. They want their story to be told right.⁷

Sam Billison, president of the Navajo Code Talker Association and voice of the GI Joe Navajo Code Talker, also counted on the story's truthfulness: "When our Navajo kids look at it we want them to be proud of it and to learn from it, the things we did and said."⁸ Did the movie fulfill the hopes of the approximately 150 Code Talkers' survivors and their families? Was it both truthful and moving?

TEACHING THE AUDIENCE

The producers tried to make the Code Talkers' experience an authentic one. Real Navajo fighters had to deal with the prejudices of their military peers and the army's hierarchy. Their physical appearance, somewhat resented by other American soldiers, also proved a military disadvantage to them. To American soldiers unfamiliar with Native American ethnic features, they often looked like Japanese. Several Navajo soldiers had been imprisoned by American squads who believed they were Japanese spies. The presence of Navajo during battles raised concerns about the success of the program. One marine declared that the Code Talkers were "more trouble than they were worth."⁹

Moreover, Navajo Code Talkers had to adapt to the intricate jungles and tropical temperatures of the Pacific. Some of them had never flown nor sailed before. They were cut off from their own medicine men and traditional healing cures. In *Windtalkers*, Willie is shown performing an *Enemy Way*, a protection ceremony.¹⁰ Of course, Navajo Code Talkers were afraid of being pursued by the *chindi* (bad spirit) of enemies killed in combat but, as one Code Talker

recalls, they did not have much opportunity to perform protective rituals. He reported: “*One night a screaming Japanese soldier leaped into the trench and killed my partner with a samurai sword before other marines could shoot him. I had to stay there sending messages with my friend’s blood gushing over me.*”¹¹

Despite the many problems encountered by Navajo soldiers, they were clearly a hugely important weapon for the US army. After a series of bitter and disheartening defeats at the hands of the Japanese, they seemed to offer the prospect of final victory.

ACCURACY VERSUS CELEBRATION?

Windtalkers ultimately might be thought to pay a higher tribute to the Army than to the Code Talkers. Traditional military values such as collaboration, self-sacrifice, and respect for orders are underlined through the evolution of the various characters. Saved by the Navajo he despised and harassed, the ordinary racist suddenly overcomes his own biases and hints at a possible reconciliation between American and Japanese soldiers in the future. The battlefield turns out to be a place of fraternal and multicultural encounter. When hearing his Navajo Code Talker playing the flute, Christian Slater joins in with his harmonica. However, both this sequence, loosely woven in the plot, and Corporal Chick Rodgers’ conversion from bigot to open-minded intelligent soldier, appear shallow.

We may also ask if the movie is about Code Talkers or Nicolas Cage. Indeed, the celebration of the action-man hero outweighs the importance granted to the historical relevance of the Code Talkers program. The different movie posters used for the film promotion show that Nicolas Cage is the real hero of the movie. Paul Tatara, CNN movie reviewer, believed *Windtalkers* “miss[ed] the point” when trying to picture the relevance of Navajo Code Talkers to American history. He wrote: “the screenplay, by John Rice and Joe Batteer, is quickly victimized by a common Hollywood back-pedal: it mostly ignores the minority figure in favor of focusing on a white guy.”¹²

Indeed, nothing is ever said about the creation and implementation of the Code Talkers Program. The name of the man who persuaded the Army to use the Navajo language is never mentioned in the movie. In fact, the American army was quite reluctant to use a code based on Native-American languages. During World War I, the Americans had hired eight Choctaw Indians to send and receive orders by telephone. Yet the experiment, led by Company D of the 141st Infantry, was not to be repeated during World War II because

German students had been sent to America to study indigenous languages. However, Philip Johnston, a civil engineer for the city of Los Angeles, made up his mind to convince the US army to use the Navajo language as a code.

Johnston, raised on the reservation by missionary parents, held different jobs among the Navajo people. He was one of the few white men to master the language. He knew that no one could succeed in understanding Navajo unless they had learned it from a very young age. No allusion is ever made in the film to Philip Johnston and the training of the Code Talkers, which proved so difficult, is covered in a few minutes. Nothing is said about the specificities of the Navajo language, such as the four separate tones of voice that can change the meaning of the same word. Moreover, from the very beginning of the movie, the Code seems a success. This was not initially the case since the first list of 211 words Navajo soldiers had devised during their training proved inadequate. Navajos used clan names to refer to the different units. Airplanes were given names of birds: the Navajo code word for dive-bomber was their word for sparrow-hawk. Some of the code words referred to the Navajo social conception of the world. The base was called “mother”, mirroring the matriarchal organization of Navajo society. However, despite their creativeness, the Navajo had to create new words to ensure that the Code kept pace with the evolution of army technology. *Windtalkers* could have developed these points more.

In failing to integrate the history of the Code Talkers program into the plot, John Woo ends up producing an all-action movie with a misleading title. The Navajo Code Talkers, though depicted as heroic soldiers, are foils to the persona of the white soldiers embodied by Nicolas Cage and Christian Slater. Critic Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun Times* wondered why the story was not told from the point of view of the Code Talkers. He wrote: “I was reminded of ‘Glory’, the story of heroic African-American troops in the Civil War, which was seen through the eyes of their white commanding officer. Why does Hollywood find it impossible to trust minority groups with their own stories?”¹³

John Woo proved unable to wrestle with the ethnic and social dilemma of the Navajo Code Talker on screen and off screen. Like its language, the Navajo was forced to remain invisible during combat. However, shooting a movie about this silent minority who played a major military role during World War II could have been a way to feature Code Talkers prominently on screen. Woo’s first blunder was to opt for a big-budget production starring an internationally recognized non-Navajo actor. Roger Ebert believed a low budget picture, from the indie circuit, would have been better suited for the scope of a Native point of view narration. He wrote:

A low-budget Sundance-style picture would focus on the Navajo characters, their personalities and issues. The moment you decide to make *Windtalkers* a big-budget action movie with a major star and lots of explosions, flying bodies and stunt men, you give up any possibility that it can succeed on a human scale.¹⁴

Even if no Navajo actor could compete with Cage's fame, why choose Adam Beach, a Canadian-American Indian actor, a member of the Sauteaux tribe, to play the lead Navajo character? Harrison Craig, son of a Navajo Code Talker, attended the premiere in Los Angeles. He commented that "the movie was not heavy enough on personal interaction between the Code Talkers, Willie's Whitehorse character and Ben Yahzee, portrayed by Adam Beach.... Willie, being true Navajo, is more adept at speaking Diné than Beach, and it shows."¹⁵

The surviving Navajo Code Talkers who viewed the movie commented upon the improbability of the no-capture order. Marine Corps historians have denied the existence of such orders and Navajo Code Talkers interviewed did not remember being assigned a body-guard. Were these orders kept confidential? We may assume it is a melodramatic device to enhance Joe Enders' moral dilemma.

John Woo's commitment to the new approach to war movies, which has been the rule since *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), may also account for *Windtalkers*' limits in representing history and memory.¹⁶ The savagery displayed in large-action sequences may be compared to Spielberg's recreated battlefields in *Saving Private Ryan*, but was it the most efficient aid to picturing the *Windtalkers*' experience? Navajo Code Talkers were not front-line troops. Yet, their role was vital to the military units fighting against the Japanese. Woo's fans who liked his pre-Hollywood movies lamented that almost no traces of his past lyricism could be identified in *Windtalkers*.¹⁷

Despite the film's shortcomings, the press echoed many thankful testimonies issued by the Navajo people. John Brown, J.-R., a Code Talker who died recently, said: "I think the movie is educational, especially as a reference for Anglo people."¹⁸ And another Code Talker, Frank Thomson, added: "All of a sudden, the Code Talkers are starting to be known all over the world."¹⁹ With the passing of the last Code Talkers in the near future—only four out of twenty nine who originally developed the Code remain—the Navajo tribe has insisted on carrying on several projects—among them an official Code Talker museum—to honor the memory of the Navajo soldiers.²⁰

Must celebration be favored over historic accuracy when remembering war on screen? With *Windtalkers*, historic accuracy and relevance were sacrificed to celebration but the movie at least helped the Navajo Code Talkers pass into legend.

NOTES

1. "One of original Navajo Code Talker dies," *The Marine Corps Times*, 18 March 2011; Brenda Austin, "Navajo Code Talker and National Hero, Joe Morris Sr. Passes on," *Indian Country Today*, 21 July 2011.

2. *Navajo Code Talkers: The Epic Story*, 55 minutes, Tully Entertainment, 1994, VHS; *Navajo Code Talkers*, 30 minutes, Santa Fe, NM: Native American Public Broadcasting, 1996, VHS; *War Code: Navajo*, 18 minutes, National Geographic and Lena Carr, 1995, VHS.

3. Broderick Johnson, *Navajo Stories of the Long Walk Period* (Tsaile: Navajo Community College Press, 1973); Gerald Thompson, *The Army and the Navajo: The Bosque Redondo Reservation Experiment 1863-1868* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1973).

4. Doris Atkinson Paul, *Navajo Code Talkers* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973), 2.

5. Malinda Maynor, "Windtalkers doesn't break from Hollywood stereotypes of Native Americans," *The Progressive*, 26 June 2002.

6. Bill Papich, "The Secret is out on WWII Navajo Code Talkers," *The Chicago Tribune*, 17 March 2000.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Paul, *Navajo Code Talkers*, 32.

10. The *Enemy Way* is a Navajo ceremony used by soldiers and warriors to protect themselves from the spirit of the enemies killed during combat. Navajo traditionally believe that what is left of a human being after death is only his negative parts which come back to harass people the deceased might have known when he was still alive. See Nausica Zaballos, *Le système de santé Navajo: transmission des savoirs rituels et scientifiques de 1950 à nos jours* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2009), 42, 174.

11. William E. Hafford, "The Navajo Code Talkers," *Arizona Highways*, February 1989.

12. Paul Tatara, "Windtalkers's flat, by-the-book war movie," 14 June 2002, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/SHOWBIZ/Movies/06/14/review.windtalkers/index.html>

13. Roger Ebert, "Windtalkers," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 June 2002.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Larry Di Giovanni, "Hundreds turn out for *Windtalkers*," *The Gallup Independent*, 14 June 2002.

16. Albert Auster, "Saving Private Ryan and American Triumphalism," in *The War Film*, ed. Robert Eberwein (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2005), 205-13.

17. Ed Gonzalez, "Windtalkers," *Slant Magazine*, 6 June 2002.

18. Larry Di Giovanni, "Hundreds turn out for *Windtalkers*," *The Gallup Independent*, 14 June 2002.

19. Larry Di Giovanni

20. More on the Navajo Museum Project can be found at: http://www.navajocodetalkers.org/the_museum/A small Code Talker Museum already exists in Tuba City, in a Burger King owned by Navajo Richard Mike, whose father, King Mike, was a Code Talker.