



REVIEW ESSAY

William ‘Spirit’ Knifeman: The post-indian warrior of survivance in *Reservation Dogs*

Harjo, Sterlin, and Taika Waititi. *Reservation Dogs*. Disney+, 2023.

Introduction: The Post-Indian Warrior William “Spirit” Knifeman

Reservation Dogs (2021-2023) revolutionised Indigenous representation on television. It was the first show in the United States to include an all-Indigenous writer’s room, alongside an almost completely Indigenous cast and crew. The show portrayed the everyday lives of four teenagers, their families, and their community in a contemporary Oklahoman reservation setting. It has since won multiple awards and was nominated for five Primetime Emmy Awards.

Reservation Dogs was not only a commercial success, but it also shed light on both the contemporary and historic experiences of Indigeneity within a settler-colonial state. The narratives within the show constitute what Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) defines as ‘survivance’ in *Fugitive Poses* (1998). Narratives that are “more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are successive and natural estates; survivance is an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (15). Many of *Reservation Dogs*’ storylines and narratives attest to a sense of survivance. The fundamental premise of the show revolves around the four main characters – Bear (D’Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai), Elora Danan (Devery Jacobs), Willie Jack (Paulina Alexis), and Cheese (Lane Factor) – coming to terms with the death of their best friend, Daniel. Initially, they believe that the reservation caused his death and actively refuse to become the next victims of circumstance, opting to raise money to travel from Oklahoma to California. Dominance, tragedy, and victimry are repudiated in episodes that explore economic disparity in the health care sector (“NDN Clinic”), land sovereignty (“This

is *Where the Plot Thickens*”), and the legacy of the boarding school system (“*Deer Lady*”).

Multiple genres are explored throughout the three seasons of *Reservation Dogs* and the most overarching of these is comedy. Humour is fundamental in creating the sense of survivance within the show. In her book *Reservation Reelism*, Michelle Raheja (Seneca) states that humour is “a strategy of the oppressed” (42) and is used to “laugh at dominant portrayals of Indigenous people” (41). The use of humour as a strategy of the oppressed has a long tradition of functioning in the form of the trickster figure that often serves as “a savvy, pedagogic function that predates European settler colonialism, often sacrificing something special in order to do good, placing himself or herself outside the boundaries of the community in order to make a didactic point” (Raheja 20). The trickster is therefore a narrative device used within *Reservation Dogs* as a teaching tool that defies European settler colonialism. The clearest example of this figure in the show is the character William “Spirit” Knifeman, played by activist, comedian, and 1491s¹ member Dallas Goldtooth (Mdewakanton Dakota/Diné).

William Knifeman is a reoccurring character throughout the three seasons of *Reservation Dogs*, appearing in ten out of the twenty-eight episodes. Despite playing a minor role in overall screentime, William Knifeman is prominent and essential to the overarching narrative of the show. He first appears onscreen in Season 1, Episode 1 (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs”) in a vision that teenage protagonist and member of the *Reservation Dogs* gang Bear Smallhill has after he is shot with a paintball gun in a drive-by (paintball) shooting by the rival teenage gang on the reservation, the NDN Mafia. He appears on horseback and is initially mistaken by Bear as Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull. Knifeman explains that ever since he died a comically tragic death at the Battle of Little Big Horn - his horse stepped into a gopher hole as they chased down Custer and, in the fall, Knifeman was squashed underneath - he wanders the spirit world looking for lost souls like Bear. He also admits to Bear that he didn’t fight bravely and he wasn’t able to kill anyone in the battle. The character of William Knifeman is portrayed as a Lakota Plains Indian stylised in the “leathers and feathers” that have become a stereotypical representation of the invented Indian across popular culture through western movies, mascots and other inaccurate media portrayals.

William Knifeman is the embodiment of what Vizenor describes as a postindian warrior. In *Manifest Manners* (1999), Vizenor asserts that the “postindian warrior is the simulation of survivance in new stories” (11). The postindian counters the fact that the concept of the Indian in relation to North American Indigenous communities and Tribal Nations is a simulation invented by settler colonialism. Raheja succinctly summarises Vizenor’s postindian warriors of survivance as those “who attempt the balancing act of simultaneously deconstructing the fabricated hyperreality of mass-mediated Native American experience and serving Native American communities in the embodied, material world as they confront political, cultural, and spiritual crises” (252n68). William Knifeman is the simulation of survivance in the contemporary Indigenous within the narrative of *Reservation*



Dogs. Employing a blend of trickster storytelling, humour, and subversion, he acts as guiding figure to both young and elder members of the community. For example, while I will focus exclusively on his interactions with Bear, he also had a minor story arc where he also acts as a guide to the elder character Uncle Brownie (Gary Farmer).

The Trickster: Flipping the “Leathers and Feathers”

The creation of *Reservation Dogs* succeeded the resounding success of Harjo’s work with the Native sketch comedy group the 1491s. The description on their YouTube channel, titled *the1491s*, states that they are “a gaggle of Indians chock full of cynicism and splashed with a good dose of indigenous satire...They were at Custer’s Last Stand. They mooned Chris Columbus when he landed. They invented bubble gum” (YouTube). With all of the members of the group contributing significantly to the show, it is fair to say that *Reservation Dogs* is a continuation of the 1491s’ work. It is also fair to suggest from this YouTube description that the character of William Knifeman is the literal embodiment of this continuation of their works ethos, as the character attests to be being at Custer’s Last Stand. In *Reservation Reelism*, Raheja discusses a group from Hollywood in the 1930s/40s known as the DeMille Indians. Led by Victor Daniels (stage name: Chief Thunder Cloud), a collection of Indigenous Native American actors performing within Hollywood petitioned to become their own tribal group as Native American performers within the film and television industry. Raheja describes this as an example of

how Native American actors performed critical work both on-screen and off-screen to create cinematic, cultural, political, and geographical spaces for the exploration of images by and for Indigenous communities...The DeMille Indians’ stories and the narratives they helped create disrupted dominant discourses even as they sometimes, in trickster fashion, seemingly helped validate conventional narratives through the roles they played. (5)

I would argue that the 1491s could be described as a contemporary example of the DeMille Indians collective. They have disrupted the commercial landscape with the production of *Reservation Dogs* and created a launching pad that empowers Indigenous creatives within the film and television industry by utilising an almost completely Indigenous cast and crew and they have used the comedic narratives of their show intently to similarly disrupt dominant discourses whilst seemingly validating them too in a trickster fashion.

Although the DeMille Indians and the 1491s are separated by almost a century, the spaces that they navigate within mainstream filmmaking and the efforts that they make are comparable. In particular, it is the trickster nature in which they conduct themselves. The DeMille Indians were a homogenised group of Indigenous actors

from various Tribal Nations and, by petitioning to become their own tribal group, they ironically validated Hollywood's stereotypical depictions with a "politicized understanding of the ways these images circulate in popular culture" (Raheja 2). By seemingly perpetuating stereotypes of the simulated Indian, the DeMille Indians successfully generated commentary on their status within the film industry. Equally, *Reservation Dogs* commentates on stereotypical Hollywood depictions with the role of William Knifeman. In the first episode of the podcast *Behind the Rez with Sterlin Harjo*, co-creator of *Reservation Dogs* Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Muscogee) discusses the role of music with the composer for the series, Mato Wayuhi (Oglala Lakota). Wayuhi mentioned that in a telephone conversation with Harjo about securing the role as composer for the series, Harjo insisted that the first rule in his compositions was no flute. However, they both acknowledge that this rule was broken straight away (Harjo and Wayuhi). The reason that Harjo and Wayuhi chose to not use flute in the soundtrack for *Reservation Dogs* was because they wanted to show legitimate and humanised experiences of Indigeneity (Harjo and Wayuhi) and flute is associated with stereotypical racial depictions of the mythical Indian that perpetuates erasure. Flute is used in the first scene between William Knifeman and Bear in the first episode of the show. "Spirit" gives Bear advice whilst flute music plays in the background of the scene and stoically poses for Bear, saying that "it's easier to be bad, but hard to be a warrior with dignity" ("F*ckin' Rez Dogs"). This is a moment of trickster storytelling.

Karl Kroeber states in Vizenor's edited collection *Survivance* (2008) that "the trickster's core narrative turns on some form of self-victimization, although always at the end escaped, recovered from, or made socially re-creative through some process of self-transformation" (30). The stereotypical depiction of William Knifeman in *Reservation Dogs* is an example of self-victimization in the trickster form, and as Kroeber states, this narrative eventually leads to a form of self-transformation through the character of Bear who has been grieving his friend's death, coming to terms with his absentee father, and questioning his role within his friend group and community as a whole. William Knifeman follows him throughout the three seasons of *Reservation Dogs* providing him with "cryptic aphorisms" ("Maximus") which eventually leads to Bear maturing and becoming a better person. Harjo actively chose to portray the character of William Knifeman as a stereotypical warrior figure clad in "leathers and feathers." In an interview with David Treuer for *The Atlantic* in 2022, Harjo said that the character of William Knifeman "is so important because I think it's what allows white people into the world...What they're used to is that image. We give them what they want, and we flip it right after" (Treuer). By creating a character in the image of the simulated Indian, in a stark contrast the rest of the cast of characters in the show who wear contemporary attire, Harjo effectively uses trickster storytelling to liberate Natives from their victimisation by white culture (Kroeber 30), using this victimising imagery that continues to circulate within popular culture and flipping it on its head. This flipping is a satirical method that ridicules stereotypical depictions of Indigeneity created by non-Natives and equally invites non-Natives into the critique that the character of William Knifeman presents to the audiences of *Reservation Dogs*. Vizenor poses in *Manifest Manners* that trickster stories include "characters that liberate the mind" (15), which



is exactly what William Knifeman achieves through his subversion of a stereotype. This flipping of the character by Harjo is equivalent to the DeMille Indians almost a century ago, by validating conventional narratives to achieve the disruption of dominant discourses. Therefore, Harjo is able transform William Knifeman from a stereotypical warrior type to a postindian warrior, defined by Vizenor in *Manifest Manners* as an indication of “simulations that overcome the manifest manners of dominance” (6).

Toilet Humour: Transforming Trauma into Punchlines

In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor discusses how “tribes have seldom been honored for their trickster stories and rich humor” (83) in mainstream forms of popular culture such as literature and film. He believes that the representations which form the basis of manifest manners focus on tragedy. More specifically, the emphasis on tragedy in onscreen representations of Indigeneity is confirmed by Indigenous film scholar Joanna Hearne in *Native Recognition*: “Scenes of mourning in Native cinema intervene in a popular culture landscape already saturated with taxidermic significations of Indian vanishing in popular culture - the ‘crying Indian’ and other representations of loss” (289). Vizenor’s analysis of the lack of honour bestowed on tribes for their humour remained pertinent from his time of writing in 1994 to 2010 when Harjo conducted an interview with Cherokee academic and blogger Adrienne Keene. In an *All My Relations* podcast episode titled “Rez Doggin’ with Ryan Redcorn and Sterlin Harjo,” Keene recounts a since-deleted interview that she conducted with Harjo on her *Native Appropriations* blog in 2010. In reference to commissioning films with production companies, Harjo told Keene in the 2010 interview that “I just want to make comedy, and I have not really been allowed to. So far, the things that get funded are not comedy. I just want to make comedy about folks in Oklahoma” (Wilbur and Keene, 8:45). Since its release, *Reservation Dogs* is the most successful comedy within the Indigenous mainstream.² The show uses humour as a tool for approaching traumatic experiences which transform into a means of survivance. This is attested to by Osage screenwriter and actor Ryan Redcorn in the same episode of *All My Relations* whilst discussing his experiences of working on the show:

crazy stuff happens to you [in life] like traumatic stuff, hilarious stuff...the [writer’s] room sometimes has a really dark humour, so people say some of the most horrible, worst things humans can do to one another, and you sit there for a second and someone will crack a joke about it and your whole trauma life has been converted into a punchline in a matter of five seconds...it grinds out really beautiful stories because all the stuff that’s happening in there, other people have gone through and they went through it in a similar way...this is what happened to us. (Wilbur, Keene, and Redcorn, 35:27)

Vizenor considers the trickster to be a “comic holotrope” (Kroeber 29) that uses humour to foster a sense of survivance. The term “holotrope” means moving towards a sense of wholeness. This is how trickster humour successfully acts as a strategy of the oppressed: it can heal or complete a sense of being in an individual or a community. Redcorn’s discussion of using humour to approach trauma within the writer’s room for *Reservation Dogs* provides an example of how this trickster humour is used as a strategy of the oppressed and how converting trauma into a punchline effectively acts as a form of healing, and in turn leads to a holotropic state.

William Knifeman’s comedic scenes throughout *Reservation Dogs* are specific examples of the process in the writer’s room that Redcorn discussed. Bear struggles with the death of his friend, his absentee father, and his sense of self. It is this set of problems that prompts William Knifeman to appear to him as a spirit. In Season 2, Episode 3, titled “Roofing,” he appears to him in a neighbouring portable toilet on a construction site where Bear has recently started a new job. Bear complains to his “Spirit” about the job and how his colleagues expect him to just know what to do. William Knifeman unsympathetically mocks him by saying that “that’s the Native way of teaching. We have this, uh, traditional pedagogy of, uh: just get out there and learn, fucker [grunts] [water plops]” (“Roofing”). Bear continues to tell of his grievances with his new job, one of which is that he didn’t expect the father of his deceased friend Daniel to be working on the same construction site. He then suggests to Knifeman that he thinks he should get over his friends’ death. To this, William Knifeman responds:

Get over it? Shit, you haven't even gone through it, Cvpon [Muscogee phrase for 'boy']...What I'm trying to say is that we cry for those that we've lost [War cries, continues crying]. Like that. You know, we mourn them. We cut our hair, we cut ourselves. We go through all the feels. We take our relatives, their bodies, and make clothing out of it. This is my auntie right here [gesturing to his beadwork necklace]. We airbrush their faces on our T-shirts, get their names tattooed on our bodies in old English script. We tear ourselves to pieces so that we can build ourselves new on the other side. You go through all of it so that they know that they can go, that we'll miss them, but that we'll be okay without them. (“Roofing”)

Before Bear has the chance to confirm with the Spirit that his story is suggesting that he still needs to go through the grieving process for his lost friend, in a trickster fashion, William Knifeman cuts him off and tells him he has to go and help somebody else. This scene encapsulates what it is to use humour as a way to deal with trauma. In the first half of the interaction, Knifeman mocks Bear’s initial complaints about his new job. In the second half of the interaction Bear complains again but this time it is not as trivial. Still, Knifeman manages to use humour to lighten the tone of the conversation by listing the variety of ways that humans go through “all the feels” of the grieving process. While he doesn’t directly turn Bear’s trauma into a punchline, like Redcorn discussed earlier, Knifeman does use humour once again to empathise with Bear’s emotions and uses the list of grieving methods to signal to Bear that his emotions are shared by his community and many others who have been through the same thing as him and processed their mourning in a



variety of ways. *Reservation Dogs* refuses to perpetuate the manifest manners that seek to represent Indigenous experiences as wholly tragic. As Vizenor states in *Manifest Manners*, "Laughter over that comic touch in tribal stories would not steal the breath of destitute children; rather, children would be healed with humor, and manifest manners would be undermined at the same time" (83). William Knifeman's role as a post-indian warrior of survivance utilises trickster humour to heal children, in this instant, guiding the teenager Bear onto the path of grieving for his lost friend.

Conclusion: Less Chiefs, More Warriors

The role of William Knifeman as a postindian warrior is clearly outlined in the interactions that he has with Bear in the first and last episodes of the show. When he first meets Bear, Knifeman tells him that "Being a warrior is not always easy...It's easy to be bad, it is hard to be a warrior with dignity. Remember that. In my time, we gave everything. We died for our people. We died for our land. What are you going to do? [Exclaims. Laughs.] I'm just fucking with you. But for real, though. Listen to what I said. Marinate on that. Aho" ("F*ckin' Rez Dogs"). In this scene Dallas Goldtooth delivers these lines with a stoicism that can be compared to the warrior-like portrayals of invented indians from the Western genre of movies. He then breaks this pose and laughs, telling Bear that he is "just fucking" with him. William Knifeman performs a simulation of an indian and then breaks out of it, shattering the illusion of the mass-mediated figure of the imagined indian. He also uses trickster humour to incite introspection on Bear's behalf with one of the many cryptic aphorisms he offers in their conversations. This scene is bookended with the interaction between the two characters in the final episode of the show. Knifeman asks, "What have you learned, nephew-grandson?" to which Bear replies, "I learned that I don't got [sic] to be the only leader. That I'm from an amazing community, and I'm just proud to be part of it." Knifeman then exclaims enthusiastically, "Ah, there it is! Finally. You got it. That's what I've been trying to tell you. We don't need more chiefs; we need more warriors" ("Dig"). As Vizenor discusses, trickster characters liberate the mind, and this is exactly what Knifeman has achieved with Bear. He has created a sense of survivance within Bear, enabling him to recognise his role in adulthood is one that revolves around his community, creating a new sense of tribal presence within him. The Spirit has healed Bear's sense of self which benefits the community too. I also believe that, throughout their relationship, William Knifeman has transformed Bear into a postindian warrior. As Vizenor states in *Manifest Manners*, postindian warriors are "that sensation of a new tribal presence in the very ruins of the representations of invented Indians" (3). Knifeman asserts to Bear that they don't need more chiefs but more warriors. This is indicative of the element of self-transformation that is found within the trickster narrative. The role of William Knifeman as a postindian warrior in *Reservation Dogs* is essential to creating narratives of survivance. The humour in his trickster storytelling allows healing within

Bear and his community. This repudiation of manifest manners not only has an impact within the show but the wider viewership as a whole with the show's placement at the centre of the Indigenous mainstream. *Reservation Dogs* successfully creates a new tribal presence in the ruins of the invented Indian via the postindian warrior, William "Spirit" Knifeman.

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Notes

¹ The 1491s are a Native comedic troupe consisting of Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Muscogee), Ryan Redcorn (Osage), Migizi Pensoneau (Ponca/Ojibwe), Bobby Wilson (Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota), and Dallas Goldtooth (Mdewakanton Dakota/Diné). They are most famous for their YouTube sketches, and have all contributed to *Reservation Dogs* including production, screenwriting, directing, and acting.

² Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals* (1998) is also considered one of the most popular comedies in the Indigenous mainstream.

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