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**Author**

Aleiss, Angela

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## COMMENTARY

### Le Bon Sauvage: *Dances with Wolves* and the Romantic Tradition

ANGELA ALEISS

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The noble savage, according to eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is an individual living in a "pure state of nature"—gentle, wise, uncorrupted by the vices of civilization. Producer-director Kevin Costner brings this vision to his film *Dances with Wolves*, and thus he creates a nation of Sioux Indians living in a golden age, free from European social convention and removed from the failings of "civilization." His film is less about Indian tradition than European romanticism: Its white hero longs for the Arcadian wilderness, pursues his own "dream woman," and searches for a nature uncontaminated by contemporary society. Costner's vision of Sioux life before white contact is a chimerical dream of Native American existence, a portrait of a people doomed to extinction.

*Dances with Wolves* is the story of Lieutenant John J. Dunbar (Kevin Costner) and his life among the Lakota Sioux. The year is 1863, and Dunbar, a Civil War hero, requests a transfer to the isolated Dakota Territory. As the only white in an alien world, he

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Angela Aleiss recently received a Ph. D. in film studies at Columbia University and has taught at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

establishes contact and eventually befriends the Sioux. Dunbar adapts to Indian culture, defends the Sioux against attacking Pawnees, and marries a captive white woman who has lived with the band since childhood. When Dunbar later returns to his post to retrieve his diary, the army captures him and accuses him of treason. The Sioux, however, ambush the military party and rescue the officer. Ultimately, the soldiers begin to search for Dunbar, so, in order to protect his Indian friends, he and his wife must leave the Sioux community.

The dichotomy between white society and the wilderness pervades the film's imagery. Opening shots of bloody hands and surgical instruments, a familiar sight in wartime, contrast sharply with the later one of a warrior's hand passing gently over the reeds near the water in which Dunbar is bathing. Shots of Dunbar and his guide as they ride across the Plains reveal a stark, arid region with little vegetation. The deserted army post lies somewhere in the middle of this barren land, abandoned by a people at odds with their hostile surroundings. A pond near the post contains the carcass of a large elk, apparently killed and left to contaminate the water. The Sioux village, in contrast, rests on fertile land, its tall trees and flowing stream bringing life to a native culture that thrives on its natural environment.

The Sioux epitomize noble savages. Their existence is truly idyllic. They demand little from the land other than what is necessary for survival, and, except for Pawnee attacks, they seem free from ordinary disturbances. Dunbar's description of the Sioux community resembles a paradisiacal state: "I've never known a people so eager to laugh, so devoted to family. . . . The only word that comes to mind is harmony." Not one Sioux disrupts this harmony, for even the recalcitrant Wind In His Hair (Rodney A. Grant) learns to like Dunbar, and when another warrior steals the lieutenant's hat, Wind In His Hair demands that he give the officer something in return. A sense of fair play dominates the tribe: A warrior council convenes before each important decision; Kicking Bird convinces a group of warriors not to attack Dunbar because he did not come to "make war."

A childlike simplicity characterizes Sioux behavior. In an early encounter when the Indians steal Dunbar's horse, Wind In His Hair, his face streaked with dark paint, rides close to where Dunbar is standing and yells, "I am not afraid of you," then hastily rides off. His actions are only a bluff, an attempt to intimidate the white intruder; Dunbar apparently senses the pretense, for shortly

thereafter (when his horse instinctively returns), he resolves to visit the Sioux camp. The Indians' reaction to white customs and behavior appears amusingly naive when *Wind In His Hair* dumps several fistfuls of sugar into Kicking Bird's coffee cup, and when Kicking Bird's eyes grow wide with astonishment as he peers through Dunbar's telescope. Civilization and its inventions are unknown to these Indians, and they fumble with modern objects like children with a new toy.

*Dances with Wolves* places its Sioux characters in a secluded Arcadian wilderness. Indian life exists as a pastoral community, a tranquil habitat that safely isolates its natives in a remote past, removed from the vices and corruption of civilization. The camera paints a romantic vision of the Sioux: A warrior's silhouette faces the horizon during the buffalo hunt, and the Indian council convenes in an atmosphere of soft light that illuminates only their human forms. The wedding between Dunbar and the white woman, *Stands with a Fist* (Mary McDonnell), is followed by a shot of birds flying overhead in a symmetrical pattern. This serene image contrasts sharply with that of vultures picking at the flesh of Dunbar's dead horse, killed near the army post by soldiers who wrongly assumed that the officer was an Indian.

The army represents white society at its most vulgar and brutal. Particularly disturbing is the obese, deranged officer of the frontier outpost who assigns Dunbar to a (vacant) fort, then announces that he has urinated in his pants. After Dunbar exits the room, the officer shoots himself in the head. Civilization is tantamount to self-destruction, especially for those unfortunate individuals who, when thrust into "primitive" territory, sink into despair and madness because they cannot free themselves from conventional restraints. Indeed, the film's noble Indians are the antithesis of their decadent white (army) counterparts, who leave a trail of carnage and plunder as they trample the natives' sacred homeland. Closeups of soldiers' boots crushing the vegetation signal destruction for the Indian people; bloody carcasses of buffalo, stripped of their hides, are merely the residue of a ruthlessly advancing civilization. These same soldiers shoot Dunbar's horse, knock him unconscious with a rifle butt, and taunt and kill the wolf he has tamed. Even Timmons (Robert Pastorelli), Dunbar's innocuous but foul-mouthed guide, describes Indians as nothing but thieves and beggars. Devoid of humanity, these whites are the products of a corrupt society.

Dunbar stands at the periphery of white civilization and Indian

culture. He is a sentimental idealist who has nothing in common with the corrupt modern world. Driven by a kind of spiritual determination, Dunbar breaks conventional barriers: In the early Civil War scenes, he defies pain, plunges his mutilated foot into his boot, and twice rides past the firing rifles of Confederate soldiers without incurring a single gunshot wound. Arms outstretched like the Christ, Dunbar gallops across the battlefield as if to transcend human frailty. Not surprisingly, this miraculous act makes him a military hero. But his desire to "see the frontier before it's gone" springs from a Rousseauistic ideal to flee "false taste for grandeur which is not made for him," and to establish residence in a harsh, primitive world. Dunbar fends for himself in a potentially hostile wilderness, befriending and taming a timid wolf. Untaminated by the presence of civilization, he chooses nature as his perfect companion.

Dunbar's contact with Indian culture is a process of self-discovery, a return to his primal being. "Nothing I have been told about these people is correct," he states, refuting all previous notions of Indians as bloodthirsty savages. Communication with the Sioux leads to friendship and sharing: Dunbar serves coffee and the Indians offer him a buffalo robe; he smokes the peace pipe with Kicking Bird; and, following a successful hunt, he consumes a buffalo's liver with Wind In His Hair. But the initial respect and cultural participation lead to a deeper understanding. As Wind In His Hair and Dunbar stand facing each other—the camera framing both men—they exchange articles of clothing: The Sioux warrior dons the officer's jacket, and Dunbar places the Indian's breastplate over his own chest. This spontaneous gesture represents a reversal of two cultures, a shift in perspective that demands personal identification with another race. Dunbar ultimately ascribes to himself the characteristics of the Sioux when he defends the village against a Pawnee attack: "I felt a pride never felt before....I knew for the first time who I really was." His contact with the Sioux and his discovery of his ideal mate (a white woman adapted to Indian culture) fulfill his deepest need to be in communion with nature.

Yet Dunbar can never truly shed his white heritage and become a member of Sioux society. Kicking Bird is well aware that racial differences permanently demarcate Indian and white cultures when he explains, "To be a Sioux warrior is not the white way," warning Dunbar not to join a war party against the Pawnee. Dunbar's marriage to Stands with a Fist is a matter of social

preference: It makes sense, says Kicking Bird's wife, because "they're both white." Although Dunbar wishes to remain with the Sioux, his presence poses a real threat: Angry soldiers will hunt for him (with the aid of their Pawnee scouts) and destroy the Sioux village. His only recourse is to flee both Indian and white societies, to hide with his wife in the wilderness.

Dunbar's final departure is symbolic of the Indians' fate. Whites will infect the world of the Sioux like an uncontrollable disease; their arrival is imminent, their spread inevitable. "Thirteen years later," the film's end note reveals, "the Sioux submitted to white authority. Their culture was gone." Like the buffalo they hunted and the wolf that Dunbar befriended, the Indians are destined to disappear. Civilization ultimately rejects the noble savage, leaving only his idyllic image in the visions of the romantics. In this way, *Dances with Wolves* is a reversion to the romantic stereotype, a perpetuation of the myth that only white civilization will flourish.