

# 'in the city of **blinding lights**'

*Indigeneity, Cultural Studies and the  
Errants of Colonial Nostalgia* | JODI A. BYRD

Everything's going to be affected by this seismic change in the universe.

Spike Lee, on his prediction that Barack Obama would become president, 10 July 2008<sup>1</sup>

I blame the Writers Guild of America strike of 2007–2008. First, for *Dr Horrible's Sing-A-Long Blog*.<sup>2</sup> And second, for creating an environment in which the mainstream media and progressive bloggers alike could 24/7 parse the ins and outs of the most recent US presidential contest.<sup>3</sup> Whether it was Mitt Romney and his sons touring Iowa in an RV and suggesting it was equivalent to serving in Iraq (it's not), or John Edwards and speculation on whether he'd had an extramarital affair (he did), the narrative void left by the lack of new episodes of scripted television programming in the United States turned the primary election season into a drawn-out version of *Who Wants to Be the Next Imperial American President?* as some ill-conceived new reality show for Fox. Everything was primed for the contest, and there was nothing to keep it from becoming all-consuming. Joss Whedon's *Dr Horrible*, which was born out of this crucible as a project through which to resist the hegemonic and capitalistic control studios have over the kind of programming produced (not to mention the discrepancies of who gets paid) for television, becomes a parable of sorts for a campaign that has drawn in Britney Spears and Paris Hilton to create narratives of celebrity in the wake of such voids.<sup>4</sup> A technogeek villain obsessed with confronting the darkness of societal collapse that lurks on the edges of the redemption songs and struggles that heroes traffic in, *Dr Horrible* as played by Neil Patrick Harris imagines a world in which the titular doctor strives to prove his evil genius in order to win the girl. As if these two things are not complete contradictions that are doomed to fail, as is often the case in super-villain origin stories. The girl dies and the villain wins, even if it is pyrrhic and fleeting.

The juxtaposition of *Dr Horrible* with the US Democratic primary contest between Senator Barack Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton may seem spurious, but it serves as a surprisingly apt contrapuntal foil for the narratives at play within the blogosphere and media coverage that followed their campaigns. Part of the obsessive attention paid to the primaries had to do with the historic nature of the contest. For the first time in US settler history, an African American man (Barack Obama), a white woman (Hillary Clinton) and a Latino (New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson) were running to fulfil the narrative of America's inclusive promissory dream. Hope, change and struggle against all odds became the mantra for the early months of 2008. But what *Dr Horrible* reveals, and what all the speeches promising a more perfect future and a gentler US imperialism do not, is that beneath that optimism and transcendent hope there still lurks a decidedly cynical musical score that moves us towards disaster (or continued colonialist oppression, depending on your view).<sup>5</sup> The questions that have arisen, for the purposes of this article and for me as I've tried to make sense of the stakes at this juncture, centre on these: How might we understand the tension within these competing cultural and political narratives of hope and cynicism, of struggle against and maintenance of oppression? What might they teach us about the collision between cosmopolitan inclusion and the very real historical ramifications of settler imperialism née colonialism?

These questions lead to others precisely because the United States is the only settler colony to have become a world super power. Such an acknowledgement troubles, or at least it has for me, the stakes within academic discourse about the nature of the work we do in fields at the crossroads between cultural studies, critical theory and Indigenous studies. What might it mean to bring 'Indigenous' into view within these larger political, cultural and historical analyses around the nature of liberal democracy, especially when it gestures towards tolerance or inclusion? What would foregrounding Indigenous peoples, along with issues of race, gender, class and militarisation reveal about the intersections of oppressions within current US cultural and political climates? In other words, what might an Indigenous-centred 'cultural studies' entail? This final question, like the ones before it, is thorny given that certain branches of the field, especially within US contexts, draw upon New Historicism as a methodological approach that often reifies colonial possession even as it critiques it. Absent from a text as key and foundational as Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* is an acknowledgement that on the new world side of the ocean were lands peopled and filled with worlds, cultures, and knowledges prior to any other arrivals. Part of the problem is the frame. When the word 'culture' comes into play with 'Indigenous', it almost always moves towards the anthropological or towards projects of recovery recast as projects of resistance. Even postcolonial theory, with its emphasis on colonial discourse analysis, has been slow to consider Indigenous peoples on a world stage, as part of the structures of power that have divided the world into North and South. When cultural studies has merged with Indigenous studies or moved toward

what one might call Indigenous critical theory in the United States, it has often been a project of correcting stereotypes, or tracking moments of representation within dominant narratives of the state. Despite all the critical work Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars have done to activate the Indigenous within US-based cultural studies, the larger discursive field has ghettoised it as niche. Posited as bearers of culture and identity, Indigenous studies in the United States has often been cast as an illegitimate love child that has come to signify, in opposition to the British and American schools of high theory, a perceived anti-intellectual, identitarian project that must be tolerated for the sake of diversity. American Indian studies, rather than being seen as a project of decolonial struggle and sovereignty rights, is framed as yet another facet within that exceptional mosaic that makes up the United States as a nation of immigrants and arrivants.

This slippage between cultural studies as a marker of a certain British/American concern with history and class consciousness with the notion that only certain ethnically and class-based identities constitute 'culture' to be studied with a kind of anthropological recovery erases the legal and political relationships—grounded in treaties and international recognitions—that American Indian nations have with the US federal government. If the question we are supposed to consider centres on what cultural studies might do for Indigenous studies and whether these things should be coupled at all, then the first thing I want to do is uncouple Indigenous studies from projects of 'recovery' and polemics and, rather, reframe it as a site for critical analysis of the intersections (or better, competing hegemonies) among indigeneity, sexuality, colonialism, gender, race, and class. If certain strands of cultural studies, especially those concerned with early modernity on the one hand and the cusp between modernity and postmodernity on the other, have everything to do with Indigenous peoples and/or encounters with the new world and its colonial discourses, how might we reframe the scope of inquiry to focus on the competing struggles for hegemony amongst race, class, gender and indigeneity that continually produce meaning about Indigenous peoples and the possible resistances that might occur upon our lands? How would such an Indigenous framing of cultural studies be operationalised in the United States and elsewhere and what epistemological tools would such a project entail?

There are, it seems to me, a multitude of possible strategies Indigenous scholars might deploy to answer such questions that range from developing critical theories situated in and arising from the histories and philosophies at the core of Indigenous communities to an indigenously minded rapprochement of the critical tools laid out by Western critical theories. For the purposes of this article, however, I plan to draw upon my own locus of enunciation as a Chickasaw scholar who exists liminally between the fields of literary, political and Indigenous studies to examine some of the underlying assumptions of cultural studies at the crossroads between colonial and political discourse analysis. What I am interested in, as a

result of such a conflicted positionality, are the discrete moments and occasional discursive bumps within the settler-colonialist US empire in which the Indigenous disrupts or otherwise radically transforms the stakes.

That the discourses of and resistances to oppressions—anti-black racism, homophobia, sexism and classism for example—collide with discourses of liberal inclusion and democracy (see particularly Wendy Brown's recent *Regulating Aversion*, Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak's *Who Sings the Nation-State?*) that seek to maintain order, power, *civility* is, at this point, well understood by scholars whatever their locus within the academy and/or without. By their very presence, Indigenous peoples and the ongoing colonialisms within their territories, lands and lived conditions trouble discourses of anti-racism and transformative equality. Indigeneity remains troubling, I think, for the very reason that those colonial conditions disrupt—often exponentially in relation to the violences done to Indigenous peoples—the notions of liberalism, democracy, and humanism in large part because such concepts have all too often depended on the eradication of indigeneity however such a concept might function legally, epistemically or philosophically. It is a madding Möbius strip precisely because most European traditions that assert such noble ideals as 'the good', 'democracy', and 'liberalism' have done so only through encounters with and control of Indigenous peoples, what Aileen Moreton-Robinson has identified and named as 'white possession'.<sup>6</sup> Such projects sometimes seem insurmountably impossible to theorise within this matrix of discourses when the outside remains incommensurable, threatened and largely unintelligible. Given all that, I want to make the case in the pages that remain for placing the Indigenous at the centre of cultural studies and operationalising it as an entry point for inquiry. For Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, centring indigeneity within critical theory—despite the concomitant pitfalls—is worth the effort as it helps to deconstruct the trappings of affect, liberalism and tolerance at the heart of current cultural studies concerned with issues of anti-racist inclusion, destinarial transcendence and cosmopolitan hope, and moves us toward radical justice, kinship, and community.

#### — INDIAN LOVE CALLS AND OTHER MUSICAL CATASTROPHES

Often, cultural studies depends on the intuitive riffing and personal awareness of pop cultural moments in order to access the populist within the popular. Or, rather, how to access 'mass' culture in order to theorise something as amorphous as 'everyday life' to which such things as 'popular' music, fiction, television, and films might speak. It is in this vein, then, that cultural studies in the 1990s and through the work of scholars such as Paul Gilroy, bell hooks, Constance Penley, Michelle Wallace, and Henry Jenkins to name just a few, began to consider the intersections between textual production, race, gender and reception and

provided us richer tapestries through which to understand some of the questions that haunted Marxist critique. Paul Gilroy in *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* interrogated how race inflected nation and culture; in *The Black Atlantic*, he considered the cultural and political economies that arose from the new world slave trade and underscored diasporic black modernity. His *Against Race*, while engaged in a utopian project that tries to pry cultural studies and politics away from overdeterminations of race and racialisations, is not an easy, or always well-liked, project. Resisting the linkages between the cultural and nationalist inclinations of radical identitarian politics and resistances to Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi-inflected fascism, Gilroy gestures towards a solution grounded in a kind of cosmopolitan humanism that, while recognising and atoning for historical oppressions, does not remain tied to dialectics of race and racism. In the process of considering such a utopian desire, and as conclusion for his overall argument, Gilroy briefly engages the intersection between science fiction, radical identity politics, and a possible futurity that transcends what he criticises as race-based thinking.

In a rather curious paragraph, Gilroy considers why science fiction imagines a post-race enlightenment that escapes and criticises the rather mundane and archaic racism of the contemporary world. The paragraph begins with a reminder that it was during an episode of *Star Trek: The Original Series* that the first interracial kiss to be broadcast during a US television series and between a white man (James T. Kirk) and a black woman (Uhura) took place in 1968. That kiss between Kirk and Uhura, Gilroy tells us, endorses the conclusion that 'because race consciousness is so manifestly arcane, its victims and others who perceive the open secret of its residual status must be closer to advanced interplanetary travelers than they are to its deluded earthly practitioners'.<sup>7</sup> Remember, 1968 was the same year that Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King (who was a huge *Star Trek* fan) were assassinated, and yet, for Gilroy, the transcendence of racial politics becomes possible in a futurity where space travellers have rejected race-thinking. Gilroy links this moment in *Star Trek* with Amiri Baraka and a kind of Black to the Future, in which space travellers only want 'the hippest jazz music'.

Everything is going swimmingly and then the paragraph turns to Tim Burton's 1996 *Mars Attacks!*, a postmodern parody of films such as *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* from the mid-1970s and an unintentional counterpoint to the US nationalistic and bombastic Hollywood blockbuster, *Independence Day*, released on 4 July that same year. Suggesting that the *Star Trek* interracial kiss in some way explains advanced alien music tastes, he quips that:

something as dangerously 'old-timey' as Slim Whitman's white-bread country music could still prove fatal to the mean spirited alien invaders in Tim Burton's postmodern *Mars Attacks*. There is a clear implication that Burton's postmodern Martians are as comfortable with hip-hop and its profane offshoots as are the rest of the inhabitants of this decadent planet.<sup>8</sup>

The paragraph, drawing on different registers of cultural production from 1960s sci-fi to the 1990s nostalgia for 1950s schlock, to poetry and jazz, implies that the Martians in *Mars Attacks!* have some hip musical sensibility where the only thing that can destroy them is a horrible throwback—with yodelling. Gilroy's point that science fiction often depends on a utopian transference of a postracial future that then serves to defamiliarise, by making archaic, contemporary racilogies is similar to the one that other scholars make about sexism and homophobia—for instance, it is *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* that aired the first romantic kiss between two women on US network television in 1995 and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that includes what is, for US audiences at any rate, the first lesbian sex scene. But what is interesting in this quick gesture, for me, depends upon a supplemental interpretative deconstruction of Gilroy's point that brings the Indigenous to the fore in unexpected and unintended ways. The song that serves as the emblematic white-bread country music that he refers to in *Mars Attacks!* is entitled 'Indian Love Call' and was written in 1924 by Oscar Hammerstein. To imply that this music that kills the Martians is merely just horrible or that its very whiteness is 'dangerously old-timey' is to miss another riff that problematises calls for post-racial, US-based cosmopolitanism. That riff, of course, is the fact that not only are the violently genocidal Martians instantly killed by this indisputably hideous song, they are killed in such a way that reinscribes US colonialist mastery over Indigenous peoples through a moment of mimetic colonialist nostalgia that underpins even *Star Trek's* desires for 'new frontiers'.<sup>9</sup>

This moment in Tim Burton's film is both a repudiation/affirmation of hip-hop and an affirmation/repudiation of white-bread country music, and it is also a kind of return of the repressed where what kills the Martians specifically is the song 'Indian Love Call', which speaks to a colonialist nostalgia where the United States' past subjugation of Indigenous peoples provides the instant kill of colonising aliens. As Gilroy argues for a 'planetary humanism' through which diaspora and movement disrupt nationalistic and racialised politics, the actual song as interpretable text within the film signals the degree to which that utopia depends upon the liberal democratic sacrifice of Indigenous peoples who remain tied to place and land.

One could read Gilroy's argumental aside as speaking symptomatically to what Slavoj Žižek critiques within the European Union's use of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' as its national anthem. In an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* that appeared on Christmas Eve 2007, Žižek takes as his occasion the European Union's signing of the Treaty of Lisbon to discuss the 'Ode to Joy' as an 'empty signifier'—a symbol that can stand for anything'.<sup>10</sup> The problem for Žižek is that this piece of music, which has been evoked as a symbol of brotherhood in service of both revolution and fascism, has always been haunted by an odd imbalance from which the piece never quite recovers. Žižek argues that the appearance of the 'marcia turca', or Turkish March, that 'borrow[s] from military music for wind and percussion

instruments that eighteenth century European armies adopted from the Turkish janisseries' disrupts the main 'joy' melody and where, according to critics, 'everything goes wrong, the solemn dignity of the first part of the movement is never recovered'.<sup>11</sup> The turn he makes next is instructive and useful for understanding the moment in Gilroy that I discussed above and which helps elucidate the way in which indigeneity disrupts and challenges cultural and critical theory. 'But what if', Zizek ponders, 'the critics are only partly correct. What if things do not go wrong only with the entrance of the *marcia turca*? What if they go wrong from the very beginning?' The implication of such questions for him is that the 'chaos that enters after Bar 331 is a kind of the "return of the repressed", a symptom of what was errant at the beginning'.<sup>12</sup>

Zizek's discussion of 'Ode to Joy' tempts me to make a similar charge, that within the United States and its Declaration of Independence is an errant that continues to symptomatically call into question the very project of 'pursuit of happiness' that is the core stricture of US rights discourse. Nothing illustrates this point better than the Fourth of July 2001 dramatic reading of this founding document on its 225th anniversary by a multicultural (and multinational) cast of notable actors. Morgan Freeman, Mel Gibson, Ming-na, Whoopi Goldberg, Winona Ryder, Benicio Del Toro, Kevin Spacey and Graham Greene, among others, were gathered together on the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art to pay homage to the birth of the nation. Broadcast on the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) television network, the camera followed as the actors each voiced the words that begin with 'We the people ...'. As they round-robin the entire text, the only time that Oneida actor Graham Greene appeared on screen at all was to read 'he has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all sexes, ages, and conditions'.<sup>13</sup> He promptly disappears from camera, never to return.<sup>14</sup>

In a moment of multiculturalism by Hollywood celebrity (underscribed by corporate media) gone horribly awry, this moment starkly and unintentionally reveals what has been wrong with the United States and liberal democracy from the very start. And unlike women who are excluded by the very prominent 'all men' who hold the truths delineated in the opening shots of the Declaration, and African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinas/os who can all be more or less eventually recouped through 'created equal', there is no way to incorporate the Indigenous body or Indigenous nations into the United States without either a horrible physical erasure or a complete disavowal of the violent history of colonisation that allowed the 'founding fathers' to declare the frontiers theirs. Precisely because, and this is the point that is important, the dialectical relationship between indigeneity and US liberal democracy is structured upon—even as it simultaneously disavows—the necessity of the liminal

Indigenous subject/subjected. To come at this another way, the very happiness the fledgling United States demanded as its right, the very foundations upon which an inclusive liberal democracy was structured, arises from the colonialist violence of invasion that is then abjected upon the 'merciless savage'. All Indigenous counter-arguments by the same fold depend upon this moment of exclusion from the origins of the United States as the evidentiary recognition of sovereignty. This dialectical double-bind makes a lie of any inclusive gesture because of its symptomatic, and necessary, originary exclusion.

For Žižek, the return of the repressed that he is concerned with is the fact that at the same time the lyrics and music of the 'Ode to Joy' grandly gesture towards a celebratory embrace of the millions of the world, there is a caution to those who do not or cannot rejoice. For them, and Žižek here draws on the fact that Turkey remains still outside the European Union, he asks his fellow Europeans to 'spare a thought for those who cannot rejoice with us, all those who are forced to "steal weeping away"'.<sup>15</sup> In much the same way, then, the 'merciless Indian Savage' functions as the *marcia turca* within United States political and national documents, as a paradigmatic symptom that torques open such celebratory moments to reveal the undercurrent of colonialism and imperialism that infects ideas of affect and tolerance, and reveal the assimilatory nature of multiculturalism that slips sovereignty into racial difference that can be solved through a diverse inclusion that depends upon the destruction wrought by colonialism and genocide. As Indigenous citizens of Indigenous nations occupying the same lands as the United States, we must 'steal weeping away' even as we are forced to cathect US metanarratives of progress towards a more perfected, more inclusive union.

Unfortunately, there are all too many examples in US and in global popular and political cultures through which one can illustrate the ways in which colonialist discourse functions as epistemic violence, especially when it comes to Indigenous peoples. But because cultural studies as it is practised in the United States academy informs political studies and affect theories, it seems useful to consider how these symptomatic errants or references continue to haunt the United States as it stands on the brink of what Spike Lee has identified as a 'seismic change in the universe' and that others popularly assert will 'change the face of America to the world'.<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest in the least that the United States does not stand upon the cusp of a radical change within the course of its history. That Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were able to compete at all is already a radical shift in the histories of sexism and racism in this country. But just as the song 'Indian Love Call' reinscribes colonialism within repudiations of the kinds of racialised thinking that Gilroy critiques, the 'hippest jazz' that offers Gilroy his emancipatory planetarity slides all too easily into commercial hip-hop and into will.i.am's viral Emmy winning song/video 'Yes We Can!'. In the process, these musical interludes encounter a repeated Indigenous errant that disrupts and troubles such desires for transcendence in the multicultural post-racial vision of 'nuestra America, mi America, tu

America' populism seen to be united under the candidacy of Senator Barack Obama rather than Senator Hillary Clinton.<sup>17</sup>

— WHO SINGS THE UNFORGIVING WILDERNESS?

It is in light of Žižek's reading of the 'Ode to Joy' that one might then say that Indian love calls serve a similar function to campaign dog-whistles meant to reassure the colonialist order that nothing is really changed even as there is a rearranging of the chairs on the deck of US titanic imperialism, whether it is through electing the first woman or the first African American to the office of the presidency. I write this fully aware of the fact that during the past decade, starting with Morgan Freeman in 1998's *Deep Impact*, Hollywood has had a tendency to imagine black presidents only in films where the earth is about to be utterly destroyed by asteroids or earthquakes or random geological eruptions in the middle of Los Angeles, where the final scenes of *Volcano*, for instance, end with a Rodney King-like moment where everyone covered in ash realises that in moments of human crisis, everyone has schmutz on their face. Indian love calls are the interesting deconstructive supplement that accompanies Spike Lee's statement about the 'seismic change' that is about to occur in the universe with the impending 2008 elections, and speaks to the racist discourses of exclusion and rupture that underscore narratives of happy multiculturalism. That such inclusive moments cannot hold is attested to by the line from the song 'Savages', in Disney's *Pocahontas*, that was changed by producers in some insufficiently politically correct awareness that having children hear, 'their whole disgusting race is like a curse' was too offensive, while 'this is what happens when races are diverse' was somehow not a problem.<sup>18</sup>

The 2008 Democratic primary season saw a rather contentious collision between liberal discourses of inclusion, particularly those of second-wave feminism and anti-racism activism, over which liberatory struggle would fulfil America's destinial promise. Unfortunately, and often unintentionally, those primary contentions also drew upon Indian errants through which US nationalism and liberal democracy gain hegemonic authority. By the first few weeks of January, the media perfected its bombardment of the US with stories about whether Hillary's tears were calculated or revealed a lack of emotional control and, on television, speculated as to whether she had planted two men in her audience to hold up a sign that commanded, 'Iron my shirt!' Gloria Steinem weighed in with the classic second-wave observation that if Barack Obama were a woman, he would not be able to run at all. The overarching meta-narrative was that the election was already over and Hillary had lost by losing Iowa.<sup>19</sup> There were also glimmers of an emerging media narrative of racism and racist dog whistles that the Clinton campaign was about to unfurl when Bill Clinton called the laudatory framing of Barack Obama's opposition to the Iraq war a 'fairy tale' and Hillary implied that Martin Luther King, Jr's dream was only a reality because of Lyndon B. Johnson.<sup>20</sup> Those subtle and overt

racist and sexist moments travelled into South Carolina and into March when Geraldine Ferraro declared intractably that Obama is 'lucky to be who he is'.<sup>21</sup>

While the corporate mainstream media pondered those questions and political bloggers across the internet debated every altercation, there was one exchange that did not elicit much attention or consideration, despite the hyper-awareness of the problems race and gender posed to the candidates and to the supposed neutral journalistic voices interrogating and translating them for the rest of the country. At one point during the New Hampshire ABC/Facebook-sponsored debate that included Democratic candidates John Edwards, Bill Richardson, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, one of the moderators turned to Senator Obama and asked him what he thought about what the Republicans had to say about him during their debate. Obama laughed and said, 'Well, you know, I was going back and forth between the Republicans and football.' The moderator then inquired, 'How did the Redskins do?' Obama responded, 'The Redskins lost.'<sup>22</sup> The 'Redskins' here signify the NFL team based in Washington, DC and the name is one of the most egregious examples of the use of American Indians as mascots within US sports culture that proliferates in high school, collegial, semi-pro and professional athletics. The moment, of course, serves to elicit a male bond between the candidate and moderators, and in the context of the gender and racial tensions that emerged as Hillary and Obama competed for votes in New Hampshire, served to momentarily reorder power and privilege around gender rather than race. And it depended upon an overt and naturalised colonialist epithet unnoticed by most non-Indigenous Americans in a media climate in which every slight was analysed for racial bias and spun by the mainstream media. As with ephemera, this moment quickly disappeared as the media, as well as the Clinton and McCain campaigns, quickly returned to the work of Othering Senator Obama through journalistic aesthetics, constructing him simultaneously and often conflictingly as an inscrutable elitist terrorist who was suspiciously effeminate and, above all, threateningly black.<sup>23</sup>

It is in the shadow of all these competing discourses of racism, sexism, homophobia, and in the light of hope that the Republicans and President George W. Bush would finally be deposed of power that Senator Barack Obama delivered his concession speech after he lost the New Hampshire primary to Hillary Clinton. Coming on the heels of his electrifying and unexpected win in Iowa, the speech he gave that night served to crystallise for his supporters and those still undecided but leaning in his direction the momentum and magnitude of his candidacy. Taking the stage as U2's cosmopolitan 'In the City of Blinding Lights' played in the background and, perhaps inadvertently, evoking resonances to Ronald Regan's 'shining city on a hill' and John Winthrop's seventeenth-century vision for a Puritanical America, Senator Obama spoke about a change that must come to America. In the course of the speech, Senator Obama presented a vision of the United States and spoke of the founding principles

that made it possible for someone with his unlikely story to contend for the presidency and secure the moral victory, if not the popular vote, that night.

For when we have faced down impossible odds, when we've been told we're not ready or that we shouldn't try or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest of nights: Yes, we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness: Yes, we can.

It was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot, a president who chose the moon as our new frontier, and a king who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land: Yes, we can, to justice and equality.

Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.<sup>24</sup>

The anaphoric structure of the speech performs what Nikhil Pal Singh identifies as an alternative historical arc based on struggles for emancipation rather than a smooth curve of increasing prosperity. 'In contrast to those who blithely emphasize his lack of connection to the social heritage of slavery,' Singh writes, 'Obama has clearly and repeatedly articulated Emancipation as the ground of an unfinished and ongoing project of substantive democratic revision, one linked to a series of progressive "enfranchisements"—of workers, African Americans, women and sexual minorities from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Eras.'<sup>25</sup>

Embedded within his speech, and unfortunately contravening the inclusive message of struggles against oppression, are the foundational US nationalist seeds that culminated in a nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny against American Indians, and an imperial colonialism that remain at the root of the US continued domination of Iraq. In a speech that does not mention American Indians in the framework Obama gives to describe a movement motivated by hope—'And whether we are rich or poor, black or white, Latino or Asian, whether we hail from Iowa or New Hampshire, Nevada or South Carolina, we are ready to take this country in a fundamentally new direction'—the 'unforgiving wilderness' by way of absence and through the frontier narratives of Manifest Destiny functions as metonymy for American Indians against whom those pioneers pushed.<sup>26</sup> As the pioneers, immigrants, slaves and abolitionists progressed towards a destined more perfect union, American Indian nations had to be pushed to the margins and then out of the picture altogether.<sup>27</sup> Such rhetoric is

hardly unexpected from a presidential hopeful who must run on nationalism and patriotism in order to win votes. And because Obama has already been Othered within media constructions that have debated daily his patriotism, 'Americanness', faith and eligibility, it makes a certain kind of sense, painful as it might be, that such narratives would come to the fore as racist, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant discourses competed for hegemony against sexism, classism, and homophobia. Anti-Indian master-narratives serve as a safety valve of sorts and provide the ground upon which change would be allowed to come to America. It is in what happens after that such moments become remarkable.<sup>28</sup>

— WE ARE THE HOPI WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

In the wake of that New Hampshire transcendence, many commentators, reporters and especially the self-described 'netroots' bloggers across the Internet framed the campaign as a movement made up of progressives, liberals and members of the 'creative class'.<sup>29</sup> They have argued that the groundswell of support for Obama represents a populist uprising on the left that will eventually sweep the nation and take back the White House, not just for blue states, but for all the states of the Union. Will.i.am's and Jesse Dylan's viral videos, 'Yes, We Can!' and 'We Are the Ones' are two striking examples of the degree to which the creative class within the United States has invested in the idea that Obama's candidacy represents the fulfilment of America's multicultural promise.<sup>30</sup> Arising from the optimism and hope generated by Obama's campaign, and building off a slightly inverse blues progression where the song moves from minor to resolve in major chords, will.i.am and Dylan's first video sets Obama's New Hampshire speech to music. Shot in black and white, the video places the lines from the speech quoted above into the voices of a multi-racial cast of Hollywood celebrities and musicians as their voices accompany news footage of Obama's speech. Capturing the multitudinous chanting of 'O-ba-ma,' echoing it through 'yes-we-can', and transforming it into 'we-want-change', the viral video and the musical structure of the song tap into the raw excitement crowds have had when Obama delivers variations of this speech. What happens in the process of setting the speech to music is that the emancipatory struggles for enfranchisement rise to a crescendo that then culminates in the music video's cast becoming the pioneers who sang 'yes we can' against the American Indians who struggled to say 'no you can't'.<sup>31</sup> That the harmonic vocal line embellishes and rises to the fore for the first time in the song to become the singing of immigrants and pioneers serves to make the colonialist discourses underriding the words all the more striking.

In *Against Race*, Gilroy writes, 'We must concede today, that making politics aesthetic has become harder to distinguish from Walter Benjamin's alternative—the politicization of art—and that both possibilities exist together, embedded in the more benign but decidedly volatile

forms of authoritarian populism to which we have grown accustomed in the overdeveloped countries'.<sup>32</sup> Here, the authoritarian populism exists within the tensions for a more progressive politic that speaks to the voices of the oppressed and the incommensurable Indigenous outside upon which the entire frame of the US nation-state depends. Just as Žizek observes within the 'Ode to Joy', the 'Yes We Can!' song, which strives to give voice to a multitude of voices crying for change, builds its sense of overarching freedom and joy through a symptomatic errant that has been there from the beginning. What's wrong with the video and what's wrong with Obama's speech is the errant within the Declaration of Independence. The video, with its sampling of the speech itself and the crowds' cheers, gestures toward an uneasy turn that Gilroy cautions against as authoritarian populism, especially when the entire text centres upon the absence of and 'pushing against' Indigenous peoples as 'unforgiving wilderness' standing in the way of the fulfilment of Manifest Destiny.

Will.i.am's follow-up video entitled 'We Are the Ones' takes as its inspiration a line from Obama's 5 February 2008 speech that is itself a quote of Maria Shriver's invocation of some generic and unnamed Hopi elder.<sup>33</sup> In an attempt to give further voice to Obama's assertion that 'in America, there's never been anything false about hope', will.i.am's second video riffs on 'We are the ones we have been waiting for'.<sup>34</sup> Its Indian trace becomes in the song, and as a sequel to the evocation of Manifest Destiny, a kind of playing Hopi prophecy that captures new age mysticism and ties it to a passive hope that 'war will end' and 'the environment will be saved'. The errant into the wilderness that begins in the founding documents of European colonisation of the new world culminates finally in the transformation of a multiracial US citizenry into the new Indians of the twenty-first century with no accounting for the historical processes that have shaped the systemic colonialist and imperial project that pushes ever globally westward and southward in search of resources and conquest.

As scholars such as Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Paul Gilroy seek alternative modes of belonging that do not reinscribe homogeneity within the body politic (I'm thinking here of Gilroy's initial planetary humanism, his turn to conviviality in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Butler's hope for 'the expression of a new nationalism'), a deeper question emerges in light of the critique made by Indigenous scholars.<sup>35</sup> How might we address the negative dialectics of indigeneity to engage the cacophony of struggles for hegemony while also moving toward restorative justice with regards to Indigenous land claims, slavery, the continued violence directed at women, the exclusion of immigrants, and, and, and ... ?<sup>36</sup> What cultural studies offers, when in conversation with Indigenous dialectics, is a mode through which to analyse the ways in which most pop cultural, political and academic discourses operate from an assumption that formal colonialism is over. The project we are all now engaged in centres on where everyone fits within lands expropriated from Indigenous peoples. With the resources

to survive taken at our expense. As the twenty-first century faces looming economic and environmental disasters, along with territorial wars initiated by current and former superpowers, questions of living convivially at the expense of Indigenous peoples will continue to haunt us even as we strive to reorganise political structures in ways that are inclusive for all. Until the ongoing colonisations of Indigenous peoples around the world are recognised and redressed, the project of liberal democracy, no matter how inclusive it becomes, will remain a lost cause.

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JODI A. BYRD is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma and an Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies and English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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1. Lynn Elber, 'Spike Lee: Obama's Election Will Be "Seismic Change"', Huffington Post, 10 July 2008, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/07/11/spike-lee-obamas-election\\_n\\_112142.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/07/11/spike-lee-obamas-election_n_112142.html)>.
2. Joss Whedon, *Dr Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, <<http://drhorrible.com/>>. *Dr Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is a 43-minute long musical created and filmed entirely for the internet. Produced during the Writers Guild of America strike in 2007 and 2008, *Dr Horrible* was Joss Whedon's experiment to see what support there would be for scripted episodic programming that did not rely upon the television industry for distribution. Conceived as an arch-villain's daily weblog, the three episodes, which went live on 15 July, 17 July and 19 July 2008, track Dr Horrible's rise to power within the Evil League of Evil.
3. This article focuses on the US Democratic primary elections that concluded when Obama was declared the Democratic Party's nominee on 28 August 2008 and was written before John McCain announced Alaska governor Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate. The critical discourses and racial constructions of Sarah Palin, whose husband and children are Yup'ik, deserve their own analysis to understand how race, class, gender and indigeneity affected the 2008 US presidential campaigns.
4. On 30 July 2008, John McCain's campaign posted a YouTube-only campaign, titled 'celebrity', that juxtaposed Britney Spears, Paris Hilton and Barack Obama in a racist, sexist, and homophobic attempt to suggest that Obama's appeal was just celebrity appeal. The video can be found at <<http://www.youtube.com/user/johnmccaindotcom?ob=4>>. On 8 August 2008, Paris Hilton responded with her own video posted at *Funny Or Die*, <<http://www.funnyordie.com>>.
5. See particularly the duet between Dr Horrible and his love interest Penny titled 'My Eyes'. Lyrics available at the *Dr Horrible* official site, <<http://drhorrible.com/linernotes.html#myeyes>>.
6. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Writing Off Indigenous Sovereignities: White Possession within the United States of America's Whiteness Studies Literature', talk given at Conditions of Settler Colonialism, University of Chicago, 25 April 2008.
7. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 344.
8. Gilroy, p. 344.
9. See Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, Antheneum, New York, 1992. Slotkin links 'new frontier' formulations to Democratic political strategy deployed by John F. Kennedy in the 1960s. In 2008, Barack Obama is building a similar political playbook to counter his Democratic and Republican opponents.
10. Slavoj Žižek, 'Ode to Joy Followed by Chaos and Despair', *New York Times*, 24 December 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/24/opinion/24zizek.html>>.
11. Žižek, 'Ode to Joy Followed by Chaos and Despair'.
12. Žižek, 'Ode to Joy Followed by Chaos and Despair'.
13. United States Declaration of Independence, <[http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html)>.
14. American Broadcasting Company, Live Broadcast, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 4 July 2001. The event is commemorated in a video produced by

- the Norman Lear Center in 2003 that was part of its Declaration of Independence Road Trip Project.
15. US Declaration of Independence.
  16. Elber, 'Spike Lee: Obama's Election Will Be "Seismic Change"',
  17. will.i.am, 'We Are the Ones', *Dipdive*, <<http://www.dipdive.com>>.
  18. Original lyrics quoted in the *New York Times*. Sarah Kershaw, 'Coming to Classrooms: The Real Pocahontas Story', *New York Times*, 12 July 1995, <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE1DD1431F931A25754C0A963958260>>.
  19. Gloria Steinem, 'Women Are Never Front-Runners', *New York Times*, 8 January 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/opinion/08steinem.html>>.
  20. Jake Tapper, 'Bill Seems Flustered', *ABC News: Political Punch*, 8 January 2008, <<http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2008/01/bill-seems-flus.html>>. Bill Clinton's 'fairy tale' comment was often misquoted and misremembered as referring to either Obama's lead in the polls after Iowa, or to Obama's campaign as a whole. See 'Matthews Mischaracterized Bill Clinton "Fairy Tale" Quote', Media Matters for America, 4 March 2008, <<http://mediamatters.org/items/200803040001>> for further discussion of Clinton's remarks and how the media presented them. For the rest of the sentence, see Tim Reid, 'Hillary Clinton Gaffe Over Martin Luther King May Cost Votes in South Carolina', *The Times Online*, 12 January 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/12/us/politics/12campaign.html>>.
  21. Katharine Q. Seelye and Julie Bosman, 'Ferraro's Obama Remarks Become Talk of Campaign', *New York Times*, 12 March 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/12/us/politics/12campaign.html>>.
  22. Dan Steinberd, 'The Dems and the Redskins', *Washington Post*, 9 January 2008 <[http://blog.washingtonpost.com/dcsportsbog/2008/01/obama\\_a\\_redskins\\_fan\\_nah.html](http://blog.washingtonpost.com/dcsportsbog/2008/01/obama_a_redskins_fan_nah.html)>.
  23. The examples are too numerous to list exhaustively. Betsy Reed's article in *The Nation* entitled, 'Race to the Bottom', 1 May 2008, <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080519/betsyreed>> provides an excellent overview of the intersection between race and gender in the campaign. The *New Yorker's* 'satirical' cover, 'The Politics of Fear', that appeared on 21 July 2008, provides another example of the racial and terrorist othering of Barack and Michelle Obama, <[http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/slides/how\\_blitcovers?slide=1](http://www.newyorker.com/online/covers/slides/how_blitcovers?slide=1)>.
  24. Barack Obama, 'Barack Obama's New Hampshire Primary Speech', *New York Times*, 8 January 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html>>.
  25. Nikhil Pal Singh, 'Why Obama Why Now', <<http://www.nikhilpalsingh.com>>, p. 4.
  26. Obama, 'New Hampshire Primary Speech'.
  27. A month later in Madison, Senator Obama repeated the refrain, 'That's how pioneers went west when people told them it was dangerous. They said, "Yes, we can."' Here, the Indian metonymy is transformed to 'dangerous'. See Barack Obama, 'Barack Obama's Feb. 12 Speech', *New York Times*, 12 February 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/12/us/politics/12text-obama.html>>.
  28. The 'what happened after', and certainly worthy of their own paper-length analysis, includes Obama's adoption into the Crow Nation of Montana on 19 May 2008. The Crow Nation website includes a photo journal of the rally and event here: <<http://www.crowtribe.com/obama.htm>>. In his book, *Dreams of My Father*, published by Time Books, New York, 1995, Obama writes that his grandmother on his mother side is part Cherokee. He also claims he is a distant cousin of Wild Bill Hickok and has challenged John McCain to a 'quick draw' gunfight in addition to referring to Hillary Clinton as Annie Oakley. For more, see Michael Powell, 'Obama Claims "Wild Bill" Heritage in a Challenge to McCain', *New York Times*, 30 July 2008, <<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/07/30/obama-claims-wild-bill-heritage-in-a-challenge-to-mccain/>>. He has also evoked 'new frontier' political discourse to tie his campaign to John F. Kennedy's legacy. Most recently, in comments made at Ke'ehi Lagoon in Honolulu, Hawai'i on 8 August 2008, Obama spoke of his grandparents travelling west to Hawai'i as a new frontier to expand the American dream. Each of these moments signal the degree to which competing discourses of race and colonialism exist within a dialectic of struggling hegemonies. As the teleology of an inclusive US is supposedly fulfilled by Obama's success within the presidential campaign, certain other discourses foundational to US nationalism and its originary violences are reinscribed through references to frontiers and 'unforgiving wildernesses' against which one struggles for freedom. These narratives stem from Teddy Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and contributed directly to the US backed overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i in 1893.

29. 'Netroots' was coined to describe political activism organised around weblogs and other internet forums. It is US webspeak for internet grassroots activism.
30. Both videos can be found online at *Dipdive*, <<http://www.dipdive.com>>.
31. Soon after will.i.am's and Jesse Dylan's video appeared, parodies proliferated on YouTube and other user-posted video sites. Billionairesforbush.com's parody, 'No, You Can't—No, Se Puede', intrigues because it imagines the class power structure as the only ones saying 'no, you can't' to the change Obama and the people, presumably the lower classes, represents. See Andrew Boyd, 'No You Can't—No, Se Puede'. *Bravenew Films*, <<http://bravenewfilms.org/blog/29216-no-you-can-t-no-se-puede>> for more information.
32. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 237.
33. Maria Shriver, a member of the Kennedy family and wife to California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, often uses this 'Hopi prayer' in official press releases. For example, see Maria Shriver, 'Its About We', *First Lady of California*, <<http://www.firstlady.ca.gov/index.php/news/360/>>.
34. Barack Obama, 'Remarks of Senator Barack Obama', Chicago, Illinois, 5 February 2008, *Obama '08*, <[http://www.barackobama.com/2008/02/05/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_46.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/02/05/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_46.php)>.
35. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 121–51 (this text was published in the UK as *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*); Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, Seagull Books, London, 2007, p. 61.
36. I am indebted here to Elizabeth Povinelli and Michael Rothberg for their help in clarifying these ideas during the roundtable sessions of the Decolonizations: Subaltern Studies and Indigenous Critical Theory Symposium hosted at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1–2 May 2008.