THAT WHICH REFUSES TO STAY BURIED: TWIN PEAKS AND THE SPECTRAL
NATIVE OF AMERICAN DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

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In this project I analyze David Lynch and Mark Frost’s television series Twin Peaks, with special focus on the presence of a “spectral” Native American antagonist in the mythology of the series. I briefly trace the image of the spectral Native American in the history of American arts and letters—a history that conveys the preoccupations and anxieties of a young nation—and I explore how the presence of a contemporary spectral Native American in Twin Peaks both complicates our understanding of the social politics embedded in Lynch’s body of work, and indicates a collective American psyche still struggling to come to terms with the origins of its stolen land. I argue that Twin Peaks is a televisual update of what Renee Bergland names American literature’s discursive strategy of “ghosting” Native Americans, and I explore how depictions of ghosting in the medium of television elucidate the modern-day dynamics of a centuries-old feature of American letters.
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INTRODUCTION

I, too, am haunted by the spectral entity that stalks the people of *Twin Peaks*. This statement is neither testament to my adoration of the cult television series nor to the depths of lasting terror that its antagonist can instill in a viewer. Instead, it is an indication of how I remain deeply perplexed by a burning question I had already been mulling over for weeks when I finished watching the entire series: “Why is the show’s villain a demonic spirit who possesses the body of one of its central characters, and why is that spirit figured as Native American?”

While undeniably postmodern in some regards, the narrative structure of *Twin Peaks* initially follows the familiar format of the police procedural. The first season introduces a classic whodunit, the inexplicable murder of small-town prom queen Laura Palmer. Seven episodes into its second and final season, however, well before the conclusion of the series, it’s revealed that Laura was killed by her father, Leland Palmer, while he was possessed by a demonic entity called BOB that occasionally controls his actions and mind. While that revelation technically solves the mystery around which *Twin Peaks* revolves, it also generates further questions. Does the series intend for the viewer to interpret BOB literally or figuratively? Is Leland a villain or victim? And why does the series, mainly through the expository dialogue of Deputy Hawk, its only Native American character, associate BOB with the spiritual mythology of an indigenous Native American tribe?¹
The co-creator of the series is writer and director David Lynch. Over the past four decades Lynch’s name has become synonymous with the narrative non-sequiturs and gratuitous eccentricities that abound in his film work.² It is tempting to shrug off BOB as merely another instance of Lynch’s logical incoherence and stylistic strangeness, to be content with the suggestion that his screen presence doesn’t “mean” anything beyond providing Lynch, a classically trained painter who turned to film because he wanted to see one of his paintings move, with a startling visual presence on screen. But fans of Lynch’s film work know that while his narratives are often superficially incoherent, their fractured natures frequently obscure otherwise coherent meanings, and every “eerie or outré” scene and image “actually serves a functional role in the film’s meticulous formal narrative design” (Thomas 96). Finding those meanings requires the viewer to pay very close attention and interpret clues, not unlike detective work. For this reason Twin Peaks plays as close to meta-text as Lynch’s visions ever get: the criminal investigation that slowly pieces together the circumstances of Laura’s death parallels the viewer’s process of interpreting Twin Peaks, or any of Lynch’s “self-referential ‘dream films’” (Thomas 82). The viewers at home encounter the very same clues in hopes of solving the same mystery as Special Agent Dale Cooper, the affable do-gooder assigned to lead the investigation into Laura Palmer’s death. The role of detective and viewer is only differentiated by which side of the television screen one sits.

While secrets and mysteries abound in Lynch’s film work, Twin Peaks is the most overt in exploring the themes of investigations and clues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the serial crime drama format, the mystery in Twin Peaks is the only one in Lynch’s body
of work that is explicitly solved for the viewer. I argue, however, that this inconsistency within Lynch’s greater body of work forces us to reassess the solution to the narrative’s central mystery not as the culmination of what *Twin Peaks* is “about,” but rather as a clue to a greater mystery: what broader point is the series, ultimately about a man who rapes and kills his daughter while being possessed by a demon, making? Does absolving Leland, by making BOB responsible for his actions, excuse patriarchal violence?

A non-human entity whose nature is never unambiguously defined, BOB is also vaguely linked to the spiritual mythology of a Native American tribe whose cultural history in Twin Peaks is intimated throughout the series. This mythology is introduced through the expository dialogue of the series’ resident “‘noble savage,’ albeit in rather subdued form, in Deputy Hawk, friend of the white man who yet preserves some of his Indian ways and is possessed of mystic knowledge” (Carroll 291). The connection between BOB and a Native mythology resonates with a backdrop of muted references to Native American iconography that populate the narrative margins of the series: elements of The Great Northern Hotel’s interior design recall the features of totem poles (Figure 1), and the white son of the hotel’s owner, Benjamin Horne, constantly wears a headdress and stereotypical Native clothing.

While such details appear inconsequential, Lynch’s films demand the viewer treat them as potential clues to a mystery, which suggests that the investigation into Laura’s death will only reveal part of a greater mystery. Crucial to my parsing out the meaning and significance of BOB’s characterization will be Renee Bergland’s concept of the “ghosting” of Native Americans in early American letters. Her discussion of the spectral
Native unites the two aspects of BOB’s characterization that I find demand further examination: his ambiguous ontological status and his even more ambiguous ethnicity. By examining BOB through Bergland’s lens, I will establish the ways in which he represents a contemporary televisual update of a centuries-old trope of American discourse, and I will argue that *Twin Peaks* depicts a collective American conscience still wrestling with some old anxieties it had wished to forget.
As Kenneth Kaleta sees it, the distinguishing characteristic of Lynch’s work is its moral ambiguity. “Lynch’s world is good and evil,” he says. “Bad and good openly and plainly coexist. Under every façade lies an infected root; under every clean, middle American picture is some dark and hidden secret. But in Lynch, good and evil also commingle. Good may be evil or evil good. It is left to the observer to make the value judgment” (xi). But after surveying a broad swath of Lynch criticism, it becomes apparent that it is not only the morality of the Lynchian universe that is ambiguous, but its cultural and sexual politics too. While many critics have written about aspects of Lynch’s work that are largely irrelevant to the debates being waged in the greater body of Lynch criticism (Freudian undertones; his use of diegetic and non-diegetic music; parallels with Hitchcock, Dante, and Flannery O’Connor), many more make the value judgments Kaleta speaks of. This often takes the form of strong disagreement over alleged misogyny or cultural conservatism in Lynch’s work. While some charge the filmmaker with promoting retrograde social politics, others insist that such readings misunderstand Lynch’s work by taking it too literally. Indeed, they often argue that the aspects of Lynch’s work that his detractors point to as problematic serve narrative purposes that actually critique conservative, patriarchal hegemony.

Due to the critical and popular acclaim of his film *Blue Velvet* and television series *Twin Peaks*, Lynch’s name has become synonymous with depictions of unassuming small-town Americana. Detractors of Lynch’s politics focus on his
unabashed fondness for the iconography of the American pop culture of his youth. As Jeff Johnson sees it: “Lynch’s image pool teems with icons of the 1950s and 1960s, when the cold war demarcations of good and evil were as clearly delineated as a Jim Crow prescript at a public water fountain” (4). Johnson sees Lynch’s embrace of America’s pop cultural past as a conservative nostalgia for that time period.

Johnson argues, furthermore, that Lynch’s films are a platform for the director to moralize. For Johnson, *Eraserhead* “is a bedtime Bible story for wayward adolescent” and *Blue Velvet* “a course in sex education for preteens” (10). In *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, he sees Lynch using the “subtlety of a jingoistic, Reagan era superpatriot” as he “creates an after school special detailing the dangers of that trinity of American scourges: sex, drugs and rock’n’roll” (10). Johnson views Lynch as both buying into and proselytizing for a distinctly American brand of righteousness.

Other critics argue that the aspects of Lynch’s “image pool” that draw from America’s past are satirical— that Lynch uses them to criticize the limitations of conservative ideologies. Paul Coughlin’s “Postmodern Parody and the Subversion of Conservative Frameworks,” for example, questions the link between Lynch and nostalgia: “With *Blue Velvet* Lynch is not pleading for a ‘return to the fifties’ or deferring to a ‘nostalgia’ of the past, he is actively criticizing the past to facilitate a greater understanding of the limitations of many of its representations” (310). Coughlin sees Lynch’s metaphoric white picket fences not as endorsing the perfection of the American dream. He argues, instead, that they are collocated with the film’s brutal violence in order
to suggest that familiar depictions of the American dream mean to redirect our attention away from the nightmarish elements contained within.

For Coughlin, Lynch’s aesthetic involves juxtaposing Americans’ collective dream against a nightmare that can wake us from our sleep. The latter appears in the form of what Coughlin calls the “prevalence of excessive and disarming elements,” which include *Blue Velvet*’s iconic image of a severed ear lying in the grass. For Coughlin’s argument, what typifies the excessive and disarming most in *Blue Velvet* is the extremity of the conduct of Dennis Hopper’s Frank Booth: “Frank is the utterly unknowable, and excessive, antagonist” with a “penchant for inhaling gas, popping pills, [and] sadistic sexual rituals” (308). For Coughlin, Frank’s one-dimensional extremity, as juxtaposed against the impossibly idyllic fifties-sitcom setting of *Blue Velvet*’s Lumberton, serves as an implicit critique of the decades-old media tropes that would deny the possibility of suburban American family life possessing a single blemish. The depravity that Frank signifies is Kaleta’s “infected root,” one that conservative nostalgia ignores when it evokes the façade of an ideal American past.

Lynch’s treatment of female characters—and, by implication, his sexual politics—is even more contentious, however, and more difficult to explain away. Laura Plummer argues in “‘I’m Not Laura Palmer’: David Lynch’s Fractured Fairy Tale” that Lynch relies heavily on clichéd archetypes in creating his female characters, ones that have roots in centuries-old fairy tales. Plummer compares Laura Palmer to both the Brothers Grimm and Disney versions of Sleeping Beauty, arguing that Lynch’s creation of “merely reactive” female characters that do not exercise agency “celebrates the
misogynist hegemony of American literature and cinema” (310). Like Johnson, Plummer views Lynch as a mouthpiece for the hegemony of consumer capitalism, white privilege, and especially patriarchy.

Other critics contend that Lynch’s work represents women in ways that break from Hollywood’s patriarchal norms. Kelly McDowell asserts in “Unleashing the Feminine Unconscious” that Lynch is an ally for women rather than problem for them, that his work “actually affirms an active and powerful female sexuality, one that is not simply based on lack or passivity, as traditional Freudian theory suggests” (1039). McDowell furthermore insists that Lynch employs clichéd elements familiar to audiences (in this case the initially tantalizing premise of lesbianism on screen for a male gaze) in a subversive manner. For McDowell, Lynch’s work restores women to the role of subjects rather than objects, restoring an agency that Plummer sees as absent from much of America’s literary and cinematic histories. She focuses largely on Lynch’s treatment of two lesbian characters in Mulholland Drive, elucidating how, in them, “theories of the male subject, the female object, and the masculine gaze become destabilized and ripe for reinterpretation” (1048). Plummer and McDowell both identify as feminist critics. Where they disagree is in deciding whether Lynch’s work affirms or opposes their ideology. Plummer sees a sexist artist repackaging retrograde ideas that contribute to the objectification of women. McDowell sees a champion of feminist reclamation of female agency and sexuality.

Lynch’s persistent reliance on opaque symbolism renders his films ambiguous and undecidable. The open-ended nature of his narratives invite radically opposed
interpretations. This is why the discourse surrounding Lynch’s work echoes Kaleta’s description of the films themselves, and, I would argue, Lynch’s conception of the country that his work is so often associated with. In one locus is contained both good and evil, bad and good, darkness and light, contradictory halves of a paradoxical whole that somehow persists despite the conflict raging inside.

While claims of conservative moralizing and sexism have been amply contested in the dialogue surrounding Lynch’s work, oddly absent from that dialogue is the subject of race. Critics have objected to the paucity of people of color in such seemingly frivolous shows as Seinfeld and Friends—but oddly, not in Lynch’s universe, where one could almost count the number of non-white characters on one hand (and doing so would reveal how marginal those characters are). In Blue Velvet, for example, there are two black hardware store clerks, one of which is an elderly blind man. Comedian Richard Pryor makes his final film appearance in Lost Highway. Riddled with multiple sclerosis and confined to a wheelchair, Pryor has scant screen time as the owner of an auto shop who just wants to avoid trouble. And there is Bobby Ray Lemon, would-be murderer of the protagonist of Wild At Heart, who is brutally murdered in hand-to-hand combat in one of the film’s opening scenes. The few Black characters in Lynch’s films occupy the narrative margins, disabled or predestined for death. There is a vague subtext of white supremacy in these repeated images. The nature of these images could easily be interpreted as evidence of Lynch’s retrograde racial politics, even if Paul Coughlin might explain them away as the instrument of Lynch’s subversive irony. In any event, it is
surprising that race is almost completely absent from the debates surrounding Lynch’s work.

The only prominent minority character in Lynch’s body of work is Josie Packard, played by Joan Chen, inheritor of the Packard sawmill in Twin Peaks. While the first season of the series mainly uses Packard as an innocent foil for her maniacally power-hungry sister-in-law Catherine Martell, the second season exposes her as a murderer working for a shady international business syndicate. It is revealed that Josie had paid to have her husband killed as part of a larger plot to gain control of the Packard mill. Josie is a double agent duping the people of Twin Peaks, including her lover sheriff Truman, a fact made clear by the revelation that her poor English skills and amusing malapropisms are merely an act meant to allay suspicion: they dissolve when she needs to speak frankly to her business partners. Josie embodies several of the series’ recurring concerns, then: secrecy, romance, betrayal, and land rights. What her character arc adds to these concerns are nationalist anxieties and racist stereotypes.

The mysterious Hong Kong syndicate member that appears in Twin Peaks in order to bring Josie home—who is actually referred to as “Asian Man” in the series credits for three episodes before being given the name Jonathan for his last two appearances—furthers the series’ use of stereotypes in depicting Asian characters as dangerous and inscrutable. The series initially seems to treat this “Yellow Peril” seriously. The appearance of a mysterious Japanese investor who approaches Ben Horne with a business deal, however, makes a farce of the matter when the investor is revealed to be Catherine Martell in a disguise. The fact that “Mr. Tojamura,” who initially appears
to potentially be involved in the same dangerous syndicate as Josie, is actually a white woman wearing a disguise makes a mockery of the very constructions that the show reiterates with its actual Asian characters. When the series later intensifies its ‘duplicitous Asian’ caricature of Josie by revealing that she was the unseen figure who had shot Dale Cooper in the Season One finale, it becomes apparent that while the show isn’t afraid to draw attention to the artificiality of reductive media stereotypes, it more often isn’t afraid to reiterate those same stereotypes when they can further the progression of the story in some way.
THE SPECTRAL NATIVE OF AMERICAN DISCOURSE

There's a sort of evil out there. Something very, very strange in these old woods. Call it what you want. A darkness, a presence. It takes many forms but... its been out there for as long as anyone can remember and we've always been here to fight it. —Sheriff Harry S. Truman, Season 1, Episode 3

The national anxieties that are expressed in the series’ treatment of Asian characters play out even more strangely and obliquely in the way it depicts Native American cultural history in its small-town setting. Situated in the midst of a forest in the American Northwest, Twin Peaks recalls the gothic frontier settings of James Fenimore Cooper and some of his predecessors. Indeed, Michael Carroll observes how “Twin Peaks mirrors the Leatherstocking myth in that it may be viewed as a retreat to the wilderness (of the frontier-like Pacific Northwest, which, like Fenimore Cooper’s Lake Champlain setting, is situated near the Canadian border)” (289). Surrounded by cultural borders and the untamed natural environment, Twin Peaks acts as a threshold, a point of contact between white civilization and the shadowy figures lurking around its borders.

*Twin Peaks’* mysterious, woodsy setting is thus a fitting location for the ghost story that unfolds therein. The series’ treatment of its setting, confused nationalist anxieties, and ghost story elements all converge in its use of BOB, Twin Peaks’ resident spectral Native. Examining the longstanding history of rendering Native Americans as
spectral presences in American arts and letters can help contextualize the imagery *Twin Peaks* plays with, and help us better understand what purpose BOB might serve for the series’ writers, as well as how he fits into the critical disagreements regarding Lynch’s politics of representation.

In *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* Renee Bergland studies what she names the “ghosting” of Native Americans in American literature. Bergland describes ghosting as an age-old tradition in which European Americans “call Indians demons, apparitions, shapes, specters, phantoms, or ghosts. They insist that Indians are able to appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously, and also that they are ultimately doomed to vanish. Most often, they describe Indians as absent or dead” (1). The subtle differences among the examples Bergland enumerates suggest that “ghosting” may serve as an umbrella term for diverse ways in which Native Americans have been represented as unreal, even as it carries multiple connotations. To depict Natives as “demons” has undertones of evil or malevolence, while “apparition” and “shape,” suggest greater indeterminacy than “ghost” (usually thought of as a dead human).

Bergland’s analysis of Native American ghosting requires at least brief reflection on some of what we associate more broadly with ghosts. “We often use the concept of the ghost to denote ideas or memories that frighten us,” she explains. “Ghosts are thought to arise from repression and guilt” (6). In the times of American frontier expansion, European American settlers forced Native Americans into the position of enemy combatant. We now primarily remember the violence of the era for greatly reducing the population of Native Americans, and for the mass dispossession and cultural degradation
that this genocide entailed. During that time, however, white Americans were preoccupied with the threat that Indians posed to themselves and their community. The fact that Native tribes were forced to defend their lives and the land that was their birthright was strategically ignored when white discourse defined the Indian as possessing an inherently violent and savage nature. The ‘savages’ who populated the adventure novels of the early and mid-nineteenth century, then, articulated a fear of Indians that characterized the lived reality of many white Americans. Ghosting furthers this strategy by combining the unknowable “other” of that particular cultural moment to the equally feared but more universal figure of the ghost.

White America’s fear of Indians waned as their numbers visibly diminished over several generations. This trend inspired the popular trope of the “Vanishing Indian,” a figure eliciting more pathos than fear. The Vanishing Indian is a construct that attributes the gradual disappearance of Natives Americans to their unavoidable destiny of being replaced by white society. The figure suggests that “Indians were destined to ‘disappear with the animals they hunted, and the forests that sheltered both,’” making them a “doomed figure about to succumb ‘before the spirit of civilization’” (Dippie 21).

Bergland’s Native ghosts adhere to, and further, the logic that shaped the Vanishing Indian, by rendering them as the already-Vanished Indian.

The fatalism surrounding the Vanishing Indian is reflected in the title of James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1827), perhaps the most famous text Bergland discusses. Bergland argues that Cooper’s novel displays similar features to an earlier, more obscure novel, Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomek* (1825), which Bergland sees
as being “central to American literature,” by virtue of its being “the first to introduce many elements that are associated with frontier romances” (67). While enumerating what she sees as features of Child’s novel that would soon become defining features of an ascendant style of American literature, Bergland explains how, in lieu of portraying a literal ghost, *Hobomok*’s “discourse of ghostliness” underscores the novel’s themes:

It is the first American novel to portray the miscegenistic union of a white woman and an Indian man. Most important, the novel presents the American frontier as an essentially mysterious place, uncharted and unstable. When the frontier is imagined as an unstable region where meanings shift as cultures encounter each other, the discourse of ghostliness becomes a useful tool for describing the mysterious encounters that take place within it. (67)

Bergland uses this discourse of ghostliness to describe the novel’s “miscegenistic” union as constituting a “ghostly exile from the American nation” (67) for the white woman. But that notion, in turn, is crucial to how she sees *Mohicans* as deviating from the otherwise similar *Hobomok*. Bergland argues that *Mohicans* portrays its white female heroine’s interest in a Native male in fatalistic terms that Child’s novel did not. “Child views this exile as figurative, and reversible; Mary Conant comes back from the ‘oblivion’ of Hobomok’s wigwam to a substantial house in Salem,” while Cooper’s novel, conversely, “will allow his miscegenistic marriage to be consummated only in the actual burial of his characters” (67). Through Bergland’s analysis of how the link between miscegenation and ghosting is expressed in *Mohicans*, we can observe how Cooper’s novel thus reiterates the logic that birthed the figure of the Vanishing Indian. Not only are the Indian
men of Cooper’s novel doomed to vanish, as the title makes obvious, their romantic connections to white female characters only drags other individuals into their doomed trajectory. These elements of Cooper’s novel thus implicitly function as a cautionary tale. They suggest that while Mr. Cooper’s Indians may retain some nobility, they are still harbingers of death to be sympathized with cautiously.

Bergland argues that Native characters in American literature are generally “figures of melancholy and loss, homelessness and death” (3). But while those associations fixate on the observable effects of Native American demise, they do less to indicate its causes. That is, these associations ostensibly posit Natives as nonspecific emblems of death and melancholy, rather than explicitly signifying the murderous abuses committed by white men. The reason for this oversight should be obvious: Native Americans are used to signify death in generalized terms that only halfheartedly and indirectly acknowledge the causes of their plight because European Americans dominate the production of such representations.

Through careful examination of the terms Bergland uses, we can understand how depicting Natives as “insubstantial, disembodied, and finally spectral beings” (3) implicitly excuses their removal from the land. To describe Natives as “insubstantial” characterizes them as both weak and imaginary. To rhetorically depict a group as weak, as relatively incompatible with survival, partially mitigates the seriousness of the crime of killing them. This is a strategy of white supremacist discourse, which first requires outside groups to be weak in order to maintain a conception of whiteness as being superior.
Rendering Native people as *imaginary* further mitigates the seriousness of the crimes committed against them. The weird, twisted logic that renders Native Americans as nonexistent renders the events of their deaths and displacement as nonexistent as well. The genocide committed against Native Americans becomes less disturbing in this scenario, as a result of it becoming less real. To render Natives as unreal and “disembodied,” then, implies a veiled attempt to exonerate their killers, since a logic that permits Native Americans to live without bodies fails to convey the seriousness of their murder. If rendering Indians as unreal implicitly exonerates white Americans, depicting white Americans as haunted by Native ghosts furthers this dynamic by attempting to generate pathos for a white consciousness being threatened by outside forces.

Indeed, Bergland asserts that the process of ghosting indicates a desire on the part of European Americans to recast themselves as victims rather than perpetrators. “Europeans take possession of Native American lands, to be sure, but at the same time, Native Americans take supernatural possession of their dispossessors” (3). By depicting Native Americans as ghosts who are unrestrained by the conditions of the living, and who set out to haunt them, European Americans render themselves as victimized by forces they cannot stop, since “the Indians who are transformed into ghosts cannot be buried or evaded” (5). Ghosting requires European Americans to absurdly position themselves as a group who are perpetually disturbed by outside forces, a rhetorical act of exculpation and a perverse reversal of history, since “[a]lthough Native Americans can be said to have
taken possession of the American imagination, this means that they have vanished into the minds of those who have dispossessed them” (3).

While discussing the disappearance of Natives into the minds of their dispossessors, Bergland touches on the manner in which that process bolstered the sense of a uniquely American identity: “By discursively emptying physical territory of Indians and by removing those Indians into white imaginative spaces, spectralization claims the physical landscape as American territory and simultaneously transforms the interior landscape into American territory” (5). Forcefully obtaining control of Native lands obviously provided European Americans with the physical resources required to sustain a young and growing nation. More crucially, perhaps, removing Indians from the land provided that developing nation with a sense of identity, as the end result of contact between whites and Natives reaffirmed the intersecting ideologies of Manifest Destiny and white supremacy: the Indians are now gone because they were weak, and white civilization prospers in their place because it was meant to. This conception of white Americans as indomitable masters is reaffirmed when ghosting renders Native Americans as only able to exist in the discourse of their dispossessors.

The mainstream, white discourse surrounding Native Americans has shifted substantially in the nearly two centuries since Cooper chronicled the “last” of the Mohicans. While plenty of ugly stereotypes about Native Americans are still alive and well, and while Indians are now more likely to figure as objects of pathos and condescension than as objects of fear, the mainstream view of Natives is still far more
sympathetic than it once was. Nowadays, the Indians of America’s past are recognized as victims of genocide, rather than as enemy combatants, or as a lesser race that is basically waiting to be supplanted by a superior white civilization. Fear of Indian ambushes has been replaced by an inability to reconcile the horrors committed against Natives by the country’s white forebears. In this regard, a once vilified group has since developed into figures that remind mainstream white America of their own villainy. The ghosting of Native Americans in centuries past reflected the attitudes of a culture that either feared the savage Indian, or anticipated their impending extinction, without daring to actively prevent it. The radical shifts in our cultural perception of Native Americans allows the figure of the spectral Native to resonate with a contemporary audience by more effectively tapping into the emotional states that Bergland argues are associated with ghosts in more general terms: guilt and unsuccessful repression.
THE SPECTRAL NATIVE OF TWIN PEAKS

The primary antagonist of Twin Peaks is “BOB,” a demonic entity that takes possession of peoples’ bodies (specifically Leland Palmer’s body), forcing them to commit acts of rape and murder. When he does not inhabit others, BOB takes a physical form visible to viewers, and in this incarnation he is played by crewmember-turned-actor Frank Silva. The fact that Silva, a Native American, was asked to play a supernatural demon doesn’t in and of itself make BOB one of Bergland’s “ghosted” native figures. But other aspects of BOB’s characterization and of his function in the series’ plot strongly invite us to view the character as an instance of literary ghosting.

Silva’s face is one of the indelible images of the show. Emblazoned on a WANTED poster, leering back at Leland as his reflection in a mirror, BOB’s presence on screen is used to provide a striking and frightening visual image, and seemingly little else. He is a mute and unknowable monster, and as such, an aggressively one-dimensional figure. His eyes permanently house an intense stare that accompanies a grotesque smile, rendered most visible when BOB successfully incites fear in others. BOB provides the narrative with the consummate dehumanized boogeyman, terrifying in part because of his silence. Because his motives and origins must remain unknowable, perhaps even to himself, his violence appears indiscriminate, liable to occur at any place and time. BOB, in short, is darkness and irrationality incarnate.

The manner in which BOB functions as a sign of irrationality is made more clear by the introduction of a secondary antagonist late in the second season. Windom Earle,
Special Agent Dale Cooper’s former partner, is the perfect foil for BOB. He is the most articulate and talkative character we encounter in the series, seeing every moment as an opportunity to launch into unsolicited monologues that are part Shakespeare, part Bond villain. Unlike BOB, Earle’s capacity for violence is expressed in ways that are anything but indiscriminate. He sends a series of elaborate threats to Cooper, engrossing him in a literal chess game that Cooper reluctantly agrees to play, the Manichean binary that *Twin Peaks* uses to differentiate heroes from villains expressed literally on the dichromatic game board.

Earle’s desire to reduce life and death into a game of logic, his reliance on arcane poetry in expressing himself, and his career as a detective all make him a perverse symbol of Western rationalism. BOB, wild and inarticulate, is savagery personified. But although they are diametrically opposed in nearly every way, BOB and Earle similarly represent a danger to Dale Cooper and the people of Twin Peaks. Earle’s descent into madness could be a cautionary tale detailing the pitfalls of a myopic overvaluation of rationalism. Such a reading is consistent with how *Twin Peaks* suggests the limits of rationalism in other ways—the way Dale Cooper’s dreams provide him with clues that break the case of Laura’s death, for example.

The way that BOB is used in the series, however, undercuts any potential critique of Western ideologies. By equating a spectral Native figure with irrationality and savagery, the series reiterates the stereotypes that were used to justify manifest destiny. Moreover, Windom Earle is both a poster boy for the Enlightenment, and a sociopathic lunatic. This duality complicates the idea that Western rationalism necessarily improves
the human condition. Yet BOB’s characterization sees the series back away from attempting any such critique by vilifying the figure of the Native “other” as even more murderous and insane—evil as Earle is, his hokey disguises and overblown speeches make him a far less terrifying figure than BOB. Twin Peaks’ potential critique of rationalism is ultimately inconsistent with respect to its duel antagonists, then. Just as the show never settles into one mood, or even one genre, it also never settles unambiguously into a critique of the limitations of Western rationalism, despite appearing to want to.

Rendering Natives as ghosts is an exaggerated form of the manner in which they are dehumanized and othered by European American discourse. As Bergland argues, the figure of the spectral Native “reinforc[es] the intractable otherness of Indians,” by implying that “they are so other that they are otherworldly” (5). When she traces the written origins of the spectral Native to the writings of the Puritans, we can see how that writing deploys the figure of the Indian in order to illustrate the Puritan belief in the inner depravity of man in ways that both reiterate, but also complicate, the “intractable otherness of Indians.” “Puritan writings described Native Americans as demonic manifestations of an internalized psychic struggle. Ever since, spectral Indians have continued to return to American letters” (1). As its played out in the minds of white Puritan settlers, that internalized struggle is concerned with the capacity of human beings, including the god-fearing, white American, to live and behave as savagely and brutally as Natives are imagined to. Indians were argued to be manifestations of the devil, and as the
Salem Witch Trials made clear, there were inordinate fears over the susceptibility of the 
white, Puritan mind to be possessed by the devil.

That is to say, Ghosting Natives does superficially exaggerate the concept of a 
fundamental difference separating Native and whites to a cartoonish extreme. As it 
functions in the “internalized psychic struggle” of the Puritans, however, the discursive 
demonization of the Indian suggests a recognition of white America’s disturbing 
potentiality to possess its own “savagery.” This is what is strategically denied by 
ascribing that quality, in exaggerated terms, to a group that the discourse of white 
hegemony is obsessed with rendering as different from itself.

This process of attributing unsavory traits to another group in order to define the 
self as superior is a textbook example of “othering.” Bill Ashcroft, et al. define the other 
in postcolonial theory as “the colonized subject [who] is characterized as ‘other’ through 
discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary 
separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the 
colonizing culture and world view” (169). While BOB’s frequently silent leering, 
interrupted only by the occasional maniacal laugh, suggests a “primitive” lack of 
elocution, it is particularly interesting to note that he is indeed portrayed as a figurative 
cannibal: BOB uses Leland in a consumptive fashion, preying upon his physical body as 
a means to reconstitute, and reinvigorate, his own physicality.

BOB has to “consume” Leland’s body by taking over all of its functions in order 
to secure a physical body for himself. The way BOB eventually exits Leland’s body for 
good reflects the manner in which cannibalism necessitates the destruction of a body.
Immediately after Cooper throws Leland into a holding cell, having just realized that Leland/BOB killed Laura, BOB forces Leland to induce massive head trauma by bashing his head into the interior wall of the holding cell. BOB’s reconstitution of his own physicality destroys Leland’s body, and the effects resemble the end results of cannibalism for both.

Cannibalism is just one item in the repertoire of savage practices that “primitive” groups were accused of—scalping is another that involves brutal physical mutilation. Michael Carroll draws parallels between Leland’s death scene and the final shot of the series finale, in which BOB forces Cooper to smash his head into a bathroom mirror, observing that, “In both cases, the victim receives a bloody gash across the forehead, thus mimicking the most feared of the evil savage’s practices—the scalping ritual” (291). While the parallels to cannibalism suggest BOB conforms to a non-specific conception of generic “native” savagery, his evocation of the scalping ritual reinforces his status as a more distinctly American savage.

The clearest, and most distinctively Lynchian metaphor of the consumptive nature of BOB’s possession of Leland’s body is the substance that characters call “garmonbozia.” Garmonbozia is negative emotional or spiritual energy, associated with fear and suffering. It manifests as a substance resembling runny creamed corn (Figure 2), which is eaten by BOB and other nonhuman characters associated with the Black Lodge, an extra-dimensional location that BOB inhabits. While the metaphysics—never mind the biology—of garmonbozia are left unclear, the takeaway is obvious: BOB exercises
control over Leland’s body as a means of obtaining nourishment, since he can generate fear and suffering in those around Leland through using his body to commit atrocities. The association between garmonbozia and BOB recalls the spectral Native’s association with death, suffering, and emotional/non-rational states, all of which metaphorically give BOB life.

The implication that BOB commits murder as a means of generating a frivolously named version of creamed corn would appear to be the moment that Twin Peaks fully
embraces surreal absurdity rather than serious social critique. As Paul Coughlin’s analysis of Blue Velvet argued, however, there is a precedent for interpreting the absurd elements of Lynch’s work as actually being subversive in nature. But what, if anything, could the decidedly surreal elements of Twin Peaks be interpreted as deconstructing? The answer depends upon the degree to which we can interpret BOB as either a literal or imaginary ghost. Whether or not BOB is imaginary determines the degree of culpability Leland has for his actions, since if BOB actually exists, then Leland is not accountable for the acts he commits while under BOB’s control. While the series usually seems to treat the existence of BOB, and his possession of Leland, as real, they can just as easily be interpreted as some kind of psychological projection concocted by a delusional Leland in order to ignore accountability for his crimes.

Some of the show’s characters even question BOB’s existence outright. While reflecting on Leland’s last words in Season 2, Episode 9, where Leland “speaks” as both BOB and as himself, Cooper’s FBI coworker Albert Rosenfield remarks, “Maybe that’s all BOB is. The evil that men do. Maybe it doesn’t matter what we call it.” Rosenfield’s nemesis, Sherriff Truman, opines that he has trouble believing BOB is real, interpreting the whole ordeal as a result of Leland’s utter insanity. Truman’s position is seemingly supported by Leland’s unstable behavior in the days after Laura’s death. This behavior includes a hysterical outburst at Laura’s funeral, and the inexplicable performance of two song and dance routines, one in the Palmer living room and another at the Great Northern Hotel, that both end in more uncontrollable emotional outbursts. These scenes, played against others from the same episodes in which Leland remains utterly stoic, suggest the
possibility that Leland is working through more than a father’s grief, but also the guilt of a killer. As Truman’s testimony confirms, neither the audience nor the other characters can deduce with any complete certainty to what degree Leland is consciously or subconsciously aware of his actions, let alone responsible for them.

One problem that arises from portraying Leland as “possessed,” is what Bergland suggests is problematic about the ghosting of Natives in general: it resituates the white male figure as a victim. BOB’s presence in the narrative exonerates Leland for the heinous crimes of incestuous rape and filicidal murder. The possession subplot frees Leland from control over his actions, and thus from responsibility for them. But certain plot details from Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me, the 1992 prequel film over which Lynch retained far greater creative control than he did over the weekly series, further trouble the idea of Leland being an innocent who is the passive victim of possession.

The revelation that creates the greatest ambiguity regarding Leland’s characterization is the film’s incrimination of Leland in the murder of Teresa Banks. Teresa is a girl of roughly Laura’s age, who the film reveals blackmailed Leland after the two began an affair when Leland responded to her ad in a “swinger’s magazine” called Flesh World. This new information makes Teresa’s murder appear premeditated by Leland for personal reasons, which challenges the notion that a demon is behind his acts of murder. Whether or not BOB was inhabiting Leland at the time Teresa was murdered—the only suggestion that he was are Leland’s unverifiable claims in the television series that he has been possessed for decades—seems irrelevant to the fact that Leland clearly has a compelling motive to have murdered her for personal reasons, to
bury his secrets and guilt. The new information provided by the film forces the viewer to address the fact that when they mourn Leland’s death in the television series, they mourn the death of an adulterer who murdered a seventeen-year-old girl. While the series treats Leland as a tragic figure victimized by an unstoppable outward monster, the film suggests that he may be the only monster responsible for his grisly acts.

An infamous scene at the Palmer family dinner table reinforces the implication that Leland is less innocent than the series depicts him. Upon noticing a charm necklace clearly given to Laura by a “lover,” Leland’s normal paternal manner is suddenly replaced by the behavior of a jealous and controlling lover. It isn’t explicitly signaled that BOB is in possession of Leland when he violently squeezes Laura’s cheeks and responds to his wife’s protestations with a chilling “How do you know what she likes?” Other scenes in which BOB controls Leland’s actions throughout the series visually express BOB’s presence by intercutting shots of Leland with ones of BOB standing in his place. No such editing technique is employed in the scene at the Palmer dining table. This encourages the viewer to interpret the scene as not depicting a demonic entity crashing an average family dinner, but rather as a snapshot of an ostensibly normal domestic setting that is actually haunted by patriarchal violence.

The plot of *Twin Peaks* would have been complete, and arguably far more emotionally compelling, had the investigation into Laura’s murder simply revealed a story of incestuous abuse. The superimposition of a “ghost” story begs the viewer to ask what BOB adds to the story, as well as what his presence might rob the story of. Obviously the possession plotline works to exonerate a man from being responsible for
raping and murdering his own daughter. While *Twin Peaks* remains decidedly dark in tone regardless, laying blame for the grisly acts it depicts onto a fantastical figure mitigates the darkness of its examination of the human capacity for brutality. This fact is reflected in Agent Cooper’s response to one of Truman’s professions of skepticism in Season 2, Episode 9: “Is it easier to believe a man would rape and murder his own daughter? Is that any more comforting?”

The series opts not to commit to a story with truly discomfitting themes with any real conviction, however. It prefers, instead, to develop into a ghost story that is distinctly Lynchian in its superficial “weirdness,” anchored by a spectral antagonist all too familiar from American letters. The manner in which the series exonerates its antagonist by reviving an old literary trope diminishes the reality of the series’ “darkness,” but also diminishes the potentiality of middle class white patriarchs to be monsters. Conversely, *Fire Walk With Me* hints at the artificiality of the construction that the show had relied on by heightening Leland’s moral ambiguity and capacity for violence. In doing so, the film suggests that the source of the narrative’s horror is far less remarkable than how the series had first played it. If Leland isn’t actually possessed, then the source of abject terror is far less exotic than it was initially made out to be—it’s actually found in the white male patriarchy that structures the social order of the everyday.

Many critics observe, as Kaleta does, that the paradox structuring Lynch’s work is his depiction of the American Dream, along with a disturbing nightmare that the dreamers would like to forget. Only after reflecting on the differences between the series and the film can we see that the series is mainly concerned with that American Dream,
maintaining the notion that Leland, symbol of the patriarch, is an otherwise good man who is destroyed by an unknowable presence lurking in the wilderness just outside town. The film, conversely, also examines the festering decay hidden deep within that “dream,” but it suggests that we need not look outside our own communities—or even our own selves—to find the real monsters that haunt us.

Differences between the series and film contributed to the vitriolic audience reaction to the film. True, viewers were also upset that the show’s ensemble cast of identifiable characters was largely discarded so Lynch could portray Laura’s slow demise in more intimate detail. But the larger objection was to the film’s significantly “darker tone,” one that explored themes of sadistic patriarchal violence unburdened by a ghost story. That is to say, audiences rejected the film in part because Lynch dared to reverse his stance on giving Leland a pass. This decision revokes the redemptive optimism about human nature that the series allows to remain intact when it explains away Leland’s crimes. The redemptive act of *Fire Walk With Me* is that it renounces the trope of a spectral Native bogeyman familiar both from America’s past discourse, and from Lynch’s recent television series. The film does so by relocating inhumanity within the familiar by restoring the role of monster to Leland, the series’ metaphoric signifier of the father figure.

But if *Fire Walk With Me* works toward correcting the television series’ problematic explanation of Leland, it does far less to ameliorate BOB’s problematic characterization. Even though the film rethinks Leland, the way in which it still uses BOB to elicit abject terror hardly indicates a rethinking of the figure of the spectral
Native. While *Fire Walk With Me* illustrates how representations of ghosting unjustly exonerate the figures that they depict as haunted, the film still does nothing to humanize BOB. On an intellectual level, the film exposes the construction of the spectral Native for what it is: a coping strategy for mitigating the culpability of white Americans for the horrors they have enacted. But the film does so while simultaneously using BOB, the spectral Native, to mine the emotional effects that very construction has proven reliable in eliciting. While *Fire Walk With Me* brings a killer to justice, it fails utterly to free the spectral Native from its discursive bondage.
GHOSTING IN A MODERN CONTEXT

Bergland argues that the spectral Native American figure is an enduring facet of American arts and letters. All of the works she discusses at length, however, were written before the end of the nineteenth century. Her analysis helps us understand how ghosting functioned during a time in which violent conflicts abounded between Native and European Americans, how the literary trope drew from, reinforced, and (occasionally) contested the attitudes toward Natives held by white Americans of the era.

Spectral natives are familiar to modern readers in part because some of the writers Bergland focuses on such as Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne continue to be read today. What Bergland doesn’t discuss is how ghosting of Natives has persisted even in more contemporary American narratives. The presence of a spectral Native in a hit television series that debuted in 1990 reflects the true endurance of the image in the public consciousness. It indicates the trope of Native ghostliness finding continued life long after the era in which it was most directly relevant to the nation’s political and social concerns.

To apply the lens of “ghosting” to Twin Peaks not only creates a new way of understanding the series’ story, and perhaps its ambiguous ideology, but it adds a new dimension to our understanding of the dynamic of ghosting, what the image of the spectral Native suggests about the American psyche. That ghosting persists in contemporary works suggests that there is a certain fixity to the elements of the American psyche that ghosting reflects. It reflects the greater extent to which the American
consciousness may be truly haunted by something which refuses to stay buried: the undeniable horrors that enabled the foundation and expansion of our nation.

Bergland’s argument links ghosts with guilt and with incomplete recovery from trauma. With respect to the Native American ghosts haunting the European American subject, that guilt and trauma stem directly from the genocide of Natives, whose removal provided a developing American nation with geographic space and resources. For Americans to still be wrestling with their demons and apparitions into the new millennium suggests the impossibility of ever fully recovering from that trauma. That is to say, contemporary ghosting indicates that the distance of time has not fully diminished our awareness of living on stolen land. To be clear: the presence of a ghosted Native in a contemporary narrative does not diminish the figure’s inextricable ties to the historical context that produced it. It merely applies to the collective American psyche Freud’s notion that “nothing that has once been formed in the life of the psyche can disappear; that everything is somehow retained and can, under appropriate circumstances… be made to remanifest itself” (Mackenthun, 103).

As a television series, *Twin Peaks* brings ghosting Natives to a new medium. Representing a spectral native on screen rather than in print subtly tweaks Bergland’s argument that ghosting eliminates the physical body of the Native while forcing it to disappear into white consciousness. Although BOB does disappear into Leland’s consciousness while inhabiting him, the nature of the medium also grants BOB a physical dimension that literary ghosts are denied. Literature largely requires its reader to imagine the world signified in words. Readers construct a novel’s characters in their minds, using
descriptions provided by the author as blueprints. This practice is largely absent in the image-dependent medium of television, where viewers are visibly shown what literature merely describes. BOB undeniably has a face and a body, which viewers see for themselves. More important, BOB does not disappear into the consciousness of other characters completely, rather he leaves behind observable traces for the audience.

Moreover, while television “restores” the body of the spectral Native by means of a visual image, it also allows the spectral Native to address the viewer directly in ways not possible in print. In a scene from an episode directed by Lynch (Season 2, Episode 2), the camera’s shot composition allows BOB to approach the viewer by beginning in the back of the frame, and slowly advance toward the camera while never averting his gaze from it (Figure 3). That is, BOB observes the audience rather than another character, and his scrutiny seems intended mainly to unnerve the viewer at home. Television partially re-substantiates the spectral Native, then, by requiring him to have an obvious physicality. The other elements of BOB’s characterization, however, indicate that this is not a strategy designed to humanize or ennoble the figure of the Indian. BOB’s physicality instead appears to mainly be the product of a desire to allow the spectral Native to haunt not just other characters, but the audience as well.

There are other subtle ways in which BOB’s physical appearance complicates the old configuration of the spectral Native. BOB is always depicted as wearing a blue denim
jacket and jeans, even while inhabiting the formally dressed Leland. This generic and informal outfit stands in stark contrast to the traditional clothing Native Americans are frequently associated with in pop culture depictions. While traditional Native American dress has been used to caricaturize Natives by emphasizing their otherness, it still acknowledges a rich Native cultural history, albeit backhandedly. A spectral Native clothed in generic denim has symbolic significance that denies, or at least occludes, that history. The denim jeans and jacket used for BOB’s style of dress denotes the mass production of consumer goods that characterizes postwar American consumer capitalism. To adorn a spectral ghost with those materials subsumes that unreal figure into the quotidian reality of American daily life. This is a distinctly Lynchian maneuver, to locate seemingly supernatural horror in the same locus as the banality of the everyday.¹⁸

BOB’s nondescript wardrobe is counterbalanced by another character’s sartorial peculiarity. Ben Horne’s mentally handicapped son Johnny is always depicted in
stereotypical Native American clothing, including a headdress that he is only willing to take off for Laura’s funeral. The series never explains why Johnny “plays Indian,” an affectation that appears to bemuse his father. The show does, however, associate humor with a white man wearing Native dress, mining cheap laughs from the image in a scene where it disrupts an otherwise traditional family dinner. Johnny’s handicap projects an implicit association between Native cultural history and arrested development, reverberating with old tropes that configured Natives as less “evolved” than the white Americans displacing them.

While adorning Johnny Horne with a Native wardrobe makes a spectacle of him, giving a banal wardrobe to the spectral Native killer diminishes the Otherness of that particular figure. While BOB’s supernatural nature lends the series part of its surrealist quality, his relatively pedestrian appearance subtly bridges some of the distance between him and the other townsfolk. This aspect of BOB’s appearance resonates with the question of whether or not BOB is purely a product of Leland’s imagination, a question posed by Sheriff Truman shortly after Leland’s death. It presents the audience with a monster who comes slightly closer to resembling Leland, and to resembling themselves.
ECHOING PAST FRAMEWORKS OF REPRESENTATION

When Bergland traces the image of the spectral Native back to its written origins, she establishes the figure’s association with religious configurations of temptation and moral fortitude, noting that “Puritan writings described Native Americans as demonic manifestations of an internalized psychic struggle” (1). BOB, too, can easily be interpreted as little more than the “demonic manifestation” of Leland’s “internalized struggle.” Yet Puritan configurations of temptation and moral fortitude also must factor heavily into readings of Twin Peaks that treat BOB as a real demon, existing outside of Leland’s guilt-addled imagination.⁹

These configurations contribute to how end of the series subtly parallels the biblical story of the fall of man, in ways that materialize if BOB is interpreted as an actual demon rather than a psychological projection. If BOB is a demon, then the town of Twin Peaks has transformed into hell on earth. A familiar Manichean binary distinguishing heaven from hell also influences the names given to the “Black Lodge” and the “White Lodge,” dimension-bending locations with access points tucked away in the forests surrounding Twin Peaks. BOB is associated with the Black Lodge, which unsurprisingly signifies hell. While the White Lodge is alluded to by name, we only ever see the Black Lodge in the series. That visual imbalance serves to implicitly emphasize the idea that Twin Peaks signifies a portal to hell. Moreover, the lodges have explicitly stated connections to the ancient spiritual beliefs of tribes native to the area of Twin Peaks. This is made clear mainly through expository dialogue from Native American
sheriff’s deputy Tommy “Hawk” Hill, who warns in Season 2, Episode 11 that “if you confront the Black Lodge with imperfect courage, it will utterly annihilate your soul.”

The series ends with the indelible image of Dale Cooper, recently returned from meeting BOB in the Black Lodge, smashing his forehead into a mirror, and laughing at a cracked reflection that houses the face of BOB (Figure 4). BOB, we’re given to understand, now possesses Cooper. Cooper has failed the test of entering the Black Lodge, leaving his soul “utterly annihilated” by BOB, implicitly because of Dale’s “imperfect courage.” This implied flaw has everything to do with why Cooper enters the Black Lodge to begin with: to save Annie Blackburn, a former nun and Cooper’s

Fig. 4 Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) Smashes the Mirror. Source:
recent love interest, who was taken into the Black Lodge against her will by Windom Earle. Since BOB preys on people’s fear, it becomes clear that Cooper becomes possessed by BOB, and fails in his mission, because he is not immune to feeling either fear or love. The two are now intertwined by the fact that Cooper doesn’t pursue the villain into “hell” out of bravery, but out of foolhardiness fed by selfish love.

*Twin Peaks*, then, ends by depicting a double “fall of man” within an idyllic natural setting, a fall that is nominally attributable to a woman, yet actually animated by two men’s inherent “internalized psychic struggles.” That BOB possesses both Leland and Dale connects Laura’s murder to the narrative’s larger mythology, by rendering *Twin Peaks* as a series about the dissolution of the self that results from the inability to overcome desire. The familiarly Puritan dynamic that structures BOB’s role in such a configuration suggests that the spectral native is deployed in *Twin Peaks* in ways that mimic, rather than critique, the function that the spectral Native served in its earliest appearances in American letters.

In addition to the biblical resonance of Dale’s demise, BOB’s multiple appearances in mirrors throughout the series, culminating in the iconic final shot, also contain a strong Lacanian subtext. In Lacan’s contribution to the theory of Othering, says Bill Ashcroft, “the other - with the small ‘o’ - designates the other who resembles the self, which the child discovers when it looks in the mirror and becomes aware of itself as a separate being” (170). BOB’s mirror sequences complicate the usual application of Lacan’s “Mirror Stage” to postcolonial conceptions of mastery. In Lacan’s account of the development of human subjectivity, the image in the mirror is said to bear “sufficient
resemblance to the child to be recognized, but it also must also be separate enough to
ground the child’s hope for an ‘anticipated mastery’; this fiction of mastery will become
the basis of the ego” (Ashcroft 170). Instead of signaling an anticipated mastery,
however, BOB’s appearance in the mirror’s reflection evidences an inverted relationship
between the subject gazing into the mirror and the “small ‘o’” other trapped therein.
BOB, the reflection, is undeniably Leland’s master, willfully dictating Leland’s actions
and alienating Leland from his sense of self.

The mirror sequences recreate Lacan’s account of the initial contact between self
and an exterior presence. Depicting BOB, the spectral Native, as the “other” whose
presence constitutes the initial point of contact recalls the experiences of the first
travellers to the New World. Having a spectral Native figure peer out from the mirror’s
reflection, triumphant in his mastery over the observer whose gaze conjures him, negates
the traditional configuration of the mirror. It does so by denying the observer the mastery
they desire, and reverses historical fact by endowing the Native figure mastery over a
European American male whose exploration facilitates their contact. The mirror
sequence’s deconstruction of the observer-as-master dynamic that is implied by
traditional readings of Lacan’s Mirror Stage is suggested by the cracked mirror that BOB
destroys using Dale Cooper’s head. That BOB appears trapped within the reflection of
the mirror signals that he is merely a “reflection” of the repressed savagery of white men,
a representation of the “internalized psychic struggle” described by the Puritans. When
BOB smashes the mirror in the last shot of the series, he metaphorically signals a
repudiation of that reading.
As the prominent father figure of the series, Leland is a fitting choice to stand in for the “capital O” Other in the image of the mirror that successfully contains BOB.

“Fundamentally,” says Ashcroft, “the Other is crucial to the subject because the subject exists in its gaze. Lacan says that ‘all desire is the metonym of the desire to be’ because the first desire of the subject is the desire to exist in the gaze of the Other” (170). The desire to exist and the desire to be seen become synonymous in the mirror sequences, as the only times that we undeniably observe BOB controlling Leland and exerting influence in “our” world are in sequences where Leland and audience alike must first observe BOB in the mirror image. This dynamic hints at an underlying and necessary symbiosis operating in the mirror scenes and in the possession subplot in general. BOB controls Leland utterly, and yet is dependent on him at the same time. Without Leland as a vehicle, BOB has no means of inducing states of terror in others, or the subsequent sensations of overwhelming grief in Leland himself, both states being associated with the production of garmonbozia. The identities of master and mastered aren’t so much neatly inverted as made a confusing mess of in Twin Peaks. Whatever capacity the show has for being viewed as subversive is contained in the fact that it so consistently obliterates familiar dichotomies, without reassembling them. The ideology of the show comes to parallel the actions of BOB in that it destroys the façade surrounding small-town Americana, but chooses not to articulate a broader motive for doing so.

While Twin Peaks remains somewhat ambiguous about whether the fates of Laura, Leland and Dale are apart of a social critique intended by the show’s creators, the fate of one of the secondary characters, Windom Earle, is at least decidedly
unambiguous. The series has Earle “go native” and cross over into the Black Lodge as the culmination of his obsession with the unclear spiritual power of the place. And at the end of a speech from Season 2, Episode 19, Earle reveals that his obsession with the Black Lodge results from a desire for power rather than from scientific curiosity, describing the Black Lodge as:

- a place of unimaginable power, chock full of dark forces and vicious secrets. No prayers enter this frightful maw. The spirits there care not for good deeds or priestly invocations; they’re as likely to rip the flesh from your bone as greet you with a happy ‘good day.’ And if harnessed, these spirits in this hidden land of unmuffled screams and broken hearts would offer up a power so vast that its bearer might reorder the Earth itself to his liking.

The note regarding immunity to prayers and “priestly invocations” helps develop the concept of the Black Lodge representing hell on earth. Describing BOB and other inhabitants of the lodge as being “as likely to rip the flesh from your bone as greet you with a happy ‘good day’” echoes the popular trope of cannibalism from colonial discourse, even contrasting it with banal social niceties that implicitly denote civility.

Earle’s desire to cross over, to risk entering a hell on earth populated by uncivil cannibals, in order to harness power and play god echoes Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Kipling’s “The Man Who Would Be King.” Earle’s demise in the Black Lodge is reminiscent of that of Kipling’s Dravot, who is revealed as playing god rather than being god, and subsequently murdered by the “natives” he attempted to rule over. Earle tries to play god by stealing Cooper’s soul in the Black Lodge, but is stopped by an angry BOB,
who intervenes and destroys Earle’s body and soul for trying to exercise power in a realm
he did not belong in. The Earle subplot culminates in the depiction of a white man, one
especially emblematic of Western empiricism and bureaucracy (owing to his mannerisms
and social position), swiftly being exterminated at the hands of BOB, a presence native to
the lodge Earle had originally devised plans of conquering. While the Earle subplot
renders a familiar type of narrative more abstract by literalizing the demons and portals to
hell alluded to by the discourses of imperialism, then, it retains the basic logic and
structure of cautionary tales of colonialism gone wrong. The show clearly passes
judgment on Earle and the fetishization of imperial forms of power that he represents. It
does not, however, humanize BOB, whose presence continues to elicit abject terror rather
than pathos.

Pathos is instead reserved for Laura Palmer, especially after her tragic demise is
finally depicted in *Fire Walk With Me*. As her iconic “burst into fire” speech from the
film evidences, Laura sees herself as already being metaphorically dead. She sees herself
as predestined for imminent destruction, a view that both echoes and identifies with the
fatalism associated with the image of the Vanishing Indian. But as the nature of the abuse
she suffers becomes clear, so does the fact that her drug abuse and flirtations with Twin
Peaks’ seedy sexual underworld are an unsuccessful coping mechanism meant to numb
her emotions. Bergland’s argument that ghosts are the external manifestation of failed
attempts at repression suggests that the failure of Laura’s coping mechanisms sets the
stage for the appearance of a spectral Native.
A reading of *Twin Peaks* that interprets BOB as a coping mechanism meant to deflect culpability for Laura’s abuse away from Leland could easily suggest that BOB is an imaginary construct in which all three members of the Palmer family choose to believe. This interpretation would, among other things, explain Laura’s mother Sarah Palmer’s otherwise inexplicable psychic powers. Sarah is the only character who unambiguously “sees” BOB, in psychic visions that render her hysterical. If BOB is a delusion, then Sarah’s “visions” of him are merely symptoms of her own incomplete repression and failed coping mechanism, her choice to share her husband and/or daughter’s delusion of an intact family unit under attack from external forces.

The inclusion of characters that are revealed to be the psychological projections of other characters is a recurring motif in Lynch’s film work, dating back to his first feature. The act of filicide that precipitates the introduction of BOB has a precedent in Lynch’s first film, *Eraserhead*, in which a tiny woman known as the “Lady in the Radiator” appears in order to assuage the guilt of Henry Spencer, the film’s protagonist, after he chooses to kill his grotesquely deformed infant child. The lyrics of the song that she sings directly to Henry assure him that “everything’s better in heaven.”

While Lynch’s first feature depicts a killer who invents his own guardian angel, the Lynchian theme of assuaging guilt through escapist delusions is fleshed out more ambitiously in 1997’s *Lost Highway* and 2001’s *Mulholland Drive*. Substantial portions of both films are comprised of their protagonists’ extended delusions, in which they create new identities for themselves and their lovers, negating the fact that they have killed their lovers in reality. Like *Twin Peaks*, all of Lynch’s feature films revolve around
characters that are haunted by something. From the unearthly wailing of Henry’s grotesque offspring in *Eraserhead*, to the pale figure who intimidates the protagonist of *Lost Highway* by inexplicably violating spatial and temporal law, ghostliness pervades Lynch’s *ouevre*. While guilt is a fairly broad and universal theme, the experimental and nonliteral ways Lynch conveys that psychic state in his films distinguishes his take on it. Lynch often waits until the final act of his films to complicate the audience’s perception of his protagonists by revealing the moral offenses they have committed. In doing so, he partially blurs the distinctions between good and evil so often expressed as reductive binaries in American cinema.

Upon careful consideration, then, the seemingly bizarre presence of BOB fits seamlessly into two recognizable templates. As I’ve argued, he represents a televisual update of a centuries-old facet of American discourse, a spectral Native American linked to violence and boundary violation. But he is also a distinctly Lynchian figure in that he signals a character’s inability to engage with guilt, a character the audience will feel unsettled for having identified with. While the unsettling figures that haunt Lynch’s films are frequently figments of an individual character’s imagination, Lynch’s only notable foray into the more populist medium of television depicts an unsettling figure that is a figment of the collective American imagination. While Lynch’s films document the mental gymnastics that individuals perform to protect themselves from memories of past crimes, *Twin Peaks* represents that process unfolding on both a micro and macro level. The killer deflects blame onto a lame duck culprit that is all too familiar from our nation’s collective attempts to do the same.
CONCLUSION

Lynch seems to run into trouble only when his movies seem to the viewer to want to have a point—i.e., when they set the viewer up to expect some kind of coherent connection between plot elements—and then fail to deliver any such point.

—David Foster Wallace, “David Lynch Keeps His Head”

Paul Coughlin argues that David Lynch’s works recall past frameworks of representation as a means of “actively criticizing the past to facilitate a greater understanding of the limitations of many of its representations” (310). For example, says Coughlin, Blue Velvet’s insertion of scenes of brutal depravity into conventional images from 1950’s sitcom emphasizes the intentional blind spots of those whitewashed conventions. “Lynch is parodying and criticizing these representations,” Coughlin concludes, “by reassembling them and infiltrating them with elements that expose their frameworks as ultimately inadequate” (305). Coughlin contextualizes Frank Booth’s otherwise unexplained depravity and one-dimensionality as an exaggerated means of balancing “frameworks that implicitly declare that perversity, absurdity and irrational excess do not even exist” (307).

What frameworks could BOB’s depravity and one-dimensionality potentially complicate? Beyond sharing the same director and screenwriter, Blue Velvet and Twin Peaks often draw comparisons from critics due to their similar admixture of unassuming small-town Americana, and seedy, vice-ridden underworlds. For Coughlin, Lynch’s
emphasis on those underworlds is intended to expose the attempts of reductive frameworks to conveniently remove those aspects of society from their conceptions of America. The main plot of *Twin Peaks*, the shocking murder of prom queen Laura Palmer, certainly complicates the eponymous town’s outward appearance of a quiet community of upstanding, wholesome neighbors. For the viewer and protagonist alike, the discovery of Laura’s body is an initial point of inquiry into a journey that very slowly destroys the deceptively simple façade of an uneventful town filled with uncomplicated people. The subsequent, slow revelation of Laura’s secret double life is a microcosmic rendering of the fact that the entire town is filled with secret double lives. When combined with Twin Peaks’ evocation of nondescript small-town Americana, this duplicity appears to symbolize the schizophrenia of American social life.

*Twin Peaks*, in other words, sees the American way of life as being characterized by a constant state of denial. This aspect of the series makes it consistent with Lynch’s feature film work, which often explores the lengths individuals go to in order to protect their delusional exculpations of guilt. Calvin Thomas, for example, interprets the first three quarters of *Mulholland Drive* as being the extended dream of a “morbidly depressed actress who is guilty of having hired a hit-man to murder her former lover” (82), in which her own “powerful feelings of guilt have been displaced onto other horrible, criminal, excremental figures that embody obscene or repulsive enjoyment” (83). BOB, whose silent grin suggests a sadistic enjoyment in his actions, exemplifies the type of figure Thomas describes.
Interpreting BOB as merely a construct dreamed up by Leland’s guilt-ridden imagination opens up the possibility that the show uses BOB to examine the manner in which white men of power discursively render other groups as “horrible, criminal, excremental figures,” in order to displace their own “powerful feelings of guilt” over their treatment of those groups. That is to say, Leland trumping up a story about a killer Indian ghost mirrors and elucidates the manner in which subaltern groups are unfairly vilified and treated as scapegoats in popular American discourse. The construct of the savage, barbaric, and debased Indian makes the spectral Native an appropriate choice for Leland to displace his own debased savagery and barbarism onto.

But the second season’s increasing preoccupation with Windom Earle’s eventually successful quest to reach the Black Lodge greatly undermines such a reading. As Keith Phipps observes, even though Ray Wise’s acting performance as Leland Palmer “plays it as if it might be in his head to the end,” this ambiguity is ultimately negated by the fact that “Twin Peaks wants us to buy into its woodsy-mystico mythology of good and evil” (“Twin Peaks: Episode 15/16”). The culmination of this trend is the series finale, in which Earle, Annie, and Cooper all enter the Black Lodge, proving its reality. The nature of Cooper’s fate, which has supplanted the identity of Laura’s killer as the primary unresolved question moving the story forward, confirms BOB’s reality as more than the ramblings of an insane killer. BOB’s use of Dale’s head to shatter the mirror he is housed in reinforces the notion that he is more than just a “reflection” of Leland’s inner depravity.
The ending of *Twin Peaks* thus breaks the mold that structures many of Lynch’s feature films. His films often depict an illusion as if it were reality, only to later reveal the illusory nature of the proceedings. By depicting the construction of the spectral Native as if it were a fact of reality, the series appears to set itself up for just such a Lynchian twist. But no such twist comes to pass. While *Fire Walk With Me*’s significantly darker characterization of Leland reestablishes a degree of ambiguity surrounding his mental state and morality, the conclusion of the far more popular television series doubles down on a reductive binary that locates evil and irrationality outside the mind of the white American patriarch, manifesting them in a familiar scapegoat from past American discourse.
NOTES

1 In Season Two, Episode Eleven, for example, Deputy Hawk describes the Black Lodge, an extra-dimensional location that BOB inhabits: “My people believe that the White Lodge is a place where the spirits that rule man and nature reside. There is also a legend of a place called the Black Lodge. The shadow self of the White Lodge. Legend says that every spirit must pass through there on the way to perfection. There, you will meet your own shadow self. My people call it The Dweller on the Threshold.” It is reasonable to infer that “my people” refers to his tribe, which, despite his referencing Blackfoot mysticism in a conversation about the existence of the human soul, is never overtly identified for the viewer.

2 In “The Postmodern Condition of Cinema in Hollywood Culture,” Eugenia Mircea selects Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001) as two of the three films that best exemplify postmodernism in film, arguing that Lynch’s disregard for narrative continuity is one feature of his “departure from conventional formulas and motifs that define the studio system/star system.”

3 This reading is consistent with Lynch’s frequent and prominent use of the MacGuffin, a cinematic plot device in which a goal or motivation that initially drives the protagonist, and thus provides the main thrust of the story’s entire first act, diminishes in importance as the “real” story unfolds. The anonymous videotapes in *Lost Highway*, the
severed ear in *Blue Velvet*, and the blue key in *Mulholland Drive* all possess an initial, seeming importance that recedes after a monumental shift in the story.


5 In an article title “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” David Foster Wallace links Pryor’s physical state to the film’s identity-blurring thematic concerns: “The dissonance between the palsied husk onscreen and the vibrant man in our memories means that what we see in *Lost Highway* both is and is not the ‘real’ Richard Pryor. His casting is thematically intriguing, then, but coldly, meanly so.”

6 Brian Dippie notes that “‘Mr. Cooper’s Indians’ became a nineteenth century synonym for any positive description” of Native Americans (23).

7 Even members of the show’s cast cited the film’s darkness as off-putting. Peggy Lipton, who played diner owner Norma Jennings, was quoted as saying of *Fire Walk*
With Me, “I didn’t see humanity in that film,” at a March 2013 retrospective of the series in Los Angeles.

8 The grotesque infant whose existence haunts Henry in Eraserhead equates supernatural horror with the daily concerns of childcare. Jeffrey’s discovery of the severed ear in Blue Velvet is precipitated by nothing more than a leisurely walk through his childhood neighborhood. The most outright frightening moment in Lynch’s filmography, the sudden appearance of a monstrous and deformed figure in Mulholland Drive, occurs in the nondescript location of a diner parking lot.

9 This is a reading that the show seems to increasingly encourage toward the end of the second season, as the Native mythology angle factors more heavily into the show’s main plotline. This trend culminates in Dale finally meeting BOB in a series finale that grants the spectral native more direct screen time than any other episode, long after his possession of Leland has ended.
WORKS CITED


