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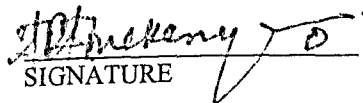
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A Revolutionary Western:
Assassin's Creed III and Visual Depictions of American Indians

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Abstract

“A Revolutionary Western” and its digital component, “Non-Native Warpaint,” examine the portrayals of American Indians in film and television programs set in the American Revolution, as well as related depictions in the video game *Assassin’s Creed III*. The historical context of American Indians in the American Revolution is explored alongside media studies that analyze representations of American Indians in Westerns. This study fills a gap in the scholarship on portrayals of American Indians in media set during the American Revolution and integrates games into the discussion. From D.W. Griffith’s “America” in 1924 to Craig Silverstein’s “Turn: Washington’s Spies” on AMC from 2014-2017, American Indians fill only the roles of minor, supporting characters and were most often cast as antagonists. The antagonist roles almost without exception fulfill the “Bad Indian” stereotypes of Native Americans, and the protagonist roles nearly always embody the “Good Indian” stereotypes. Also important is that the vast majority of works do not include American Indians; out of forty-four items of visual media reviewed, only eight have a meaningful level of American Indian representation, and only four of those eight have significant amounts of these depictions. The rule is erasure of Native American existence and participation in the American Revolution, and the exceptions are mostly villainous representations in minor roles. The only Native character that fulfills a leading role as a main character is Ratonnhaké:ton of the Kanien’kehá:ka nation, and this takes place in the *Assassin’s Creed III* video game. This thesis argues that *Assassin’s Creed III* is a revolutionary Western due to the main character’s membership in the Kanien’kehá:ka nation and the foregrounding of the negative situations people of color dealt with during the American Revolution.

Keywords: American Indian, Native American, Media Studies, Game Studies, Westerns, *Assassin’s Creed*, American Revolution

Introduction

The history of American Indians at the time of the American Revolution is highly complex.¹ It is difficult to generalize the thoughts and actions of American Indians during the period, as well as to generalize its perceived significance to Native Americans. There were a great many nations which all reacted and became involved (or didn't) in the ways that made the most sense to them. In addition, personal autonomy was generally respected to a high degree in these nations. Individuals and small groups could and often did choose courses of action which did not match with the decisions made by the senior leadership of the nation.² Many nations sided with the British Crown while some sided with the colonial rebels, and others attempted to remain neutral; some peoples, to greater or lesser degrees, pursued all three of these strategies as they adapted to rapidly changing circumstances. It is for these reasons, perhaps, that the central role of American Indians in the American Revolution is an under-studied aspect of the Revolutionary War era. As a consequence, popular culture and popular media have filled in the gaps—for better or for worse.

¹ This author is a white male historian who is aware of the issues inherent in writing about those who are not white nor male. This thesis is consciously not an attempt to speak for Native American people of any gender, to replace their voices, or claim authority over their affairs. This work of research and analysis advocates for authentic, respectful portrayals of American Indians in popular media, and attempts to amplify Native American voices where possible.

² This level of respect for individual autonomy in American Indian society is well documented in several historians' works on the history of American Indians, including the following: Robert Baird, "Indian Leaders," in *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 161; Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 54-5, 57, 89, 138, 258-62, 271; Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 2, 21-2, 32-3, 44-5, 53, 66, 100, 110, 165-6, 180, 192-3; Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 237-242, 261, 263, 268, 274, 278-81, 286-9, 295-6, 300-1, 304, 383-4.

Using the documented history the participation of American Indians in the American Revolution as a backdrop, this thesis examines the stereotypes of Native Americans created by European Americans in television and film and how Ubisoft's video game *Assassin's Creed III* (*ACIII*) interacted with the preceding subjects. Examined here are comparisons of *ACIII*'s portrayal of American Indians to traditional portrayals in film and television and explorations of how the new medium of computer games affects this portrayal. As one of the most recent depictions of American Indians in popular media, and perhaps the most detailed portrayal of American Indians in computer and video games to date, *ACIII* deserves to be examined with both the historical record and traditional portrayals of American Indians informing the lens. Ubisoft makes claims to historical truth in its product description: "There's the American Revolution you know from history books. And then there's the revolution you'll be fighting, set in a world that's far more realistic, gritty, and alive than any history book ever could be."³ The sales figures of *ACIII*, as well as the release of a remastered version seven years after it was first launched, indicate its popularity and its importance to popular culture and popular history.⁴ It is necessary

³ "Assassin's Creed 3," Ubisoft, nd., accessed June 26th, 2019, <https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/assassins-creed-3/>

⁴ According to market monitor VGChartz.com, while only 5.5% of all console owners worldwide purchased *Assassin's Creed III*, a full 40.8% of all console owners in the United States purchased the game; both worldwide and in the United States, *ACIII* was the 3rd best selling game of 2012: <http://www.vgchartz.com/yearly/2012/Global/> and <http://www.vgchartz.com/yearly/2012/USA/>. Press releases from *ACIII*'s publisher Ubisoft from fiscal year 2012-2013 report 12.5 million units of *ACIII* selling worldwide, revenue from the third quarter when *ACIII* released doubled the company's revenue from the combined previous two quarters, and *ACIII* outsold the previous *Assassin's Creed* game, *Revelations*, by 70%: https://ubistatic19-a.akamaihd.net/comsite_common/en-US/images/Ubisoft%20FY13%20earnings%20English%20finalC_tcm99-97146_tcm99-196733-32.pdf, and https://ubistatic19-a.akamaihd.net/comsite_common/en-US/images/Ubisoft%20Q3%20FY13%20English_tcm99-82637_tcm99-196733-32.pdf.

to begin this analysis with an examination of the ways in which American Indians have been portrayed in historical narratives about the Revolutionary War.

Since Columbus' first encounter with the New World and through the present day, American Indians have been (and remain) the subject of stereotypes created by the colonizing Europeans and European Americans.⁵ These stereotypes have been used by the colonizers and European Americans to frame Native Americans as whatever the colonizers needed them to be and to help define the European and European American identity, in much the same style as Orientalism.⁶ Both Orientalism and stereotypes of American Indians have been used to justify the genocide and exploitation of the peoples targeted by these concepts. Some of the uses of American Indians as symbols have included enhancing superiority of white men to justify the repression and extirpation of American Indians, and "to comment on contemporary political issues or to serve the needs of the western genre."⁷ In nearly all cases of representations of American Indians on screen in works set during the American Revolution, the stereotypes negatively depict American Indians even if they were presented in what was thought to be a positive light by the creators of the works.

Two broad stereotypes dominate the visual depiction of American Indians. The first version of American Indian stereotypes is the "bad Indian" who is a threat to the white hero, the "law and order" of white civilization, or the "purity" of white women. The second form of

⁵ Elise M. Marubbio, *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film*. (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 4; Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978); FitzGerald, Michael Ray. *Native Americans on Network TV: Stereotypes, Myths, and the "Good Indian."* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 8.

⁶ Berkhofer, xv-xvi.

⁷ FitzGerald, 8. Michael Hilger, *The American Indian in Film* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1986), 1.

stereotype is the “good Indian” who helps the white hero in his imperial mission or allows his people to be removed from impeding “progress,” or impeding westward expansion of the United States. One subtype of the “good Indian” is the “Noble Savage” which is portrayed as an innately good human being due to a lack of the corrupting influence of civilization. This is a romanticized image of American Indians, inaccurate like the rest. These stereotypes include villains, subservient friends or sidekicks, “enforcers” of the imperial culture and power, hapless victims of progress, sexual temptresses who can destroy the white hero, or the pure, innocent angels of the North American continent who will be metaphorically conquered just like the land itself.⁸ These stereotypes have infused nearly all films and television programs that have portrayed American Indians, with a few exceptions that attempted to portray Native Americans as three-dimensional human beings, such as the 1990-1995 CBS series *Northern Exposure*, and the growing number of films written, directed, or produced by Native Americans, such as the 1998 *Smoke Signals*.⁹

Standard Westerns, the most common place one will find depictions of American Indians, portray a European American perspective on the Frontier. Their focus is on a white Western hero archetype with supporting minor characters of various ethnicities.¹⁰ In standard Westerns, American Indians occupy minor roles as either “bad Indian” antagonists or “good Indian” protagonists. In both cases, actions taken by the white Western hero against the supporting characters are depicted as justified, even if an outside view would define them as injustices inflicted upon them. *ACIII*, however, deviates from all of these standard elements. The protagonist is a man of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation rather than the usual white man utilized by

⁸ FitzGerald, 8. Marubbio, 7-8.

⁹ FitzGerald, 12. Chris Eyre, *Smoke Signals*, Miramax, 1998.

¹⁰ Marubbio, 18-19.

classic Westerns. American Indians occupy fleshed-out protagonist character roles instead of only two-dimensional stereotypical roles. The main character's position as a member of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation centers the narrative on the American Indian perspective, rather than the European American perspective. Ubisoft foregrounds negative actions against people of color as injustices that the player should object to, as opposed to justified incidents the white Western hero ought to have performed. The written half of this thesis asserts that *ACIII* improved upon historical visual portrayals of American Indians; the digital component of this thesis directly analyzes those visual portrayals as a body of work.¹¹ In contrast to traditional stereotypical portrayals of American Indians in film and television, *ACIII* is indeed revolutionary—and thus might be characterized as a revolutionary Western.

Historiography of American Indians in the American Revolution

The American Revolution is undoubtedly one of the most popular topics of study by American historians, both for those who are writing academic history and popular history. Americans have shown a strong interest in the topic in the past few decades as the scholarship on the topic has expanded. Historians have examined American Indians' involvement with and reactions to the era of the American Revolution in depth from a number of different angles. Barbara Graymont, C. G. Calloway, Leonard J. Sadosky, Joseph T. Glatthaar Ray Raphael, and James Kirby Martin have all made significant contributions to this important aspect of United States history studying groups of nations, individual societies, and inter-societal relations, all during the era of the American Revolutionary War.¹² There are many different ways of approaching the Native Americans' reactions and decision-making processes during the American Revolution, especially when one considers how many different Native American

¹¹ The digital portion can be found at nonnativewarpaint.wordpress.com

¹² All of the mentioned historians will be discussed in more detail in the historiography section.

nations there were representing a wide array of cultural norms and an even greater number of individuals who were all pursuing their own agendas.¹³ Through trade, diplomacy, intermarriage, education, and warfare, the Native American nations interacted on a daily basis with the Europeans who inhabited their lands, and historians have used many of these varied lenses to examine the exchanges.

The books included as part of this historiography all share a common emphasis with regard to the larger themes of this study. All are linked by how they detail American Indian agency during the eighteenth century, and specifically how Native Americans acted in response to the nascent United States, the British crown, colonists inhabiting North America, and the related conflicts of the eighteenth century, from the French and Indian War to the Revolutionary War. This period is often portrayed as a single era by films and television shows due to the interconnectedness of events, and the work of historians often flows along similar lines.

Leonard J. Sadosky's *Revolutionary Negotiations* traces the parallel rise of the fledgling United States and the simultaneous fall of American Indian nations struggling to adapt to dramatically changing circumstances.¹⁴ Using the lens of diplomatic negotiations to connect the interactions of individual people, small groups, and whole societies, Sadosky found that there

¹³ Rebecca Beatrice Brooks, "Who Fought in the Revolutionary War?" *History of Massachusetts Blog*, November 17, 2017, <https://historyofmassachusetts.org/who-fought-revolutionary-war/>, and "Native Americans in the Revolutionary War," *History of Massachusetts Blog*, November 15, 2018, <https://historyofmassachusetts.org/native-americans-revolutionary-war/>. At least 22 Native nations took part in the Revolutionary War: Abenaki (Abnaki), Catawba (Iswa), Cayuga (Gayogohó:no'), Chickasaw, Cherokee (Tsalagihi Ayeli), Choctaw (Chahta), Muscogree (Creek), Lenni Lenape, Miami (Myaamia), Maliseet (Wolastoqiyik), Micmac (Mi'kmaq), Mohawk (Kanien'kehá:ka), Oneida (Onyota'a:ka), Onondaga (Onoñda'gega'), Passamaquoddy (Peskotomuhkati), Penobscot, Potawami (Bodéwademi), Stockbridge-Mohican, Shawnee, Seneca (Onödowa'ga), Tuscarora (Skarù:rę'), Wyandot.

¹⁴ Leonard J. Sadosky, *Revolutionary Negotiations: Indians, Empires, and Diplomats in the Founding of America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

was a complex network of interactions between British colonists and Native American peoples that changed significantly over time. Effective communication was difficult, strenuous and time consuming, and fraught with “misunderstandings and misrepresentations, both intentional and unintentional” that contributed to the conflicts that would take place in the American Revolution and beyond.¹⁵

Sadosky tellingly opened his narrative by describing the journey of Alexander Cuming, a minor British noble who conducted unofficial diplomacy with the diverse Cherokee peoples on his own initiative, unsanctioned by the British government. Cuming found a somewhat similar opportunist in Moitoy, a Cherokee leader eager to consolidate and broaden his own power with European support. Cuming and Moitoy worked together to declare Moitoy the “Emperor of the Cherokee” to bring diverse Cherokee villages, each their own independent but loosely affiliated polity, under a more unified control—a control which Cuming imagined he would ultimately have control over and be able to profit from when he presented Moitoy’s diplomatic efforts to the British government. Unfortunately for Cuming, the British Indian agents did not know what to make of Cuming’s improvised diplomacy or Moitoy’s unplanned visit to London; Cuming would die impoverished, unrecognized, and without his coveted position as the appointed delegate for Indian affairs in the Cherokee’s region. The Cherokee, on the other hand, adapted to the choices that they had made after meeting Cuming, and at least for a time retained more of the centralized political structure introduced by Moitoy and Cuming.

Native Americans were active participants in every diplomatic process between their own peoples and the Europeans even if they were frequently deceived and harmed by the process. The British government utilized the “myth of Iroquois suzerainty over a host of ‘conquered’ Indian

¹⁵ Sadosky, 16.

communities” to gain legal title to lands they coveted; the Iroquois used that same myth to ensure the safety and integrity of their own lands and peoples.¹⁶

Ultimately, Sadosky finds that “in the early eighteenth century... in the affairs between metropolitan, settler, and indigenous communities, domination took a backseat to negotiation. A century later, the opposite would be the case.”¹⁷ The diplomatic engagements between the Native Americans and settlers would take on a different character with the creation of the United States as a new nation. According to Sadosky’s analysis, whereas the British government generally treated the American Indian nations as lesser subjects of the British empire who were nonetheless worthy of at least a modicum of respect, the American patriots with few exceptions dealt with the native nations as opponents who needed to be kept at bay while the war with the mother country was prosecuted. After the war, the United States were especially united in their belief that the Native Americans were occupying land that rightfully belonged to the new nation by virtue of the Treaty of Paris with Great Britain, even if the British government was merely ceding their authority to govern those lands rather than a claim of ownership over those lands still inhabited by American Indian nations. Sadosky’s detailed account of the diplomatic exchanges between Native American nations and the European and American states is an excellent resource for comparison of other depictions of the interactions of American Indians and Europeans.

Rather than looking at relations between the Europeans and Native Americans through a high-level diplomatic lens, in *A People’s History of the American Revolution*, Ray Raphael examines how people other than the elite classes during the American Revolution dealt with the

¹⁶ Sadosky, 35-6.

¹⁷ Sadosky, 16.

circumstances and people around them.¹⁸ Examining the Western Abenakis, the Iroquois, the Delaware and Shawnee, the Cherokee, the Catawbas, and the Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles, Raphael finds that the circumstances of the American Revolution impacted each group differently. The various native peoples reacted to their unique circumstances in different ways, according to their cultures and the personalities of their leaders. Each group experienced different results to their efforts in the short term while all suffering similarly at the hands of the United States and its citizens in the long term.

Raphael made special note of a few Europeans who dealt fairly with the American Indians and even attempted to represent their interests to their fellow Europeans in a more effective way than most Native Americans were permitted, such as Colonel George Morgan, who was Agent for Indian Affairs for the Continental Congress.¹⁹ Raphael details how Morgan, who came to be known as “Taimenand, the affable one” to the Native Americans in the area for his demeanor and his stance against violence towards American Indians, was labeled a Tory and arrested due to the dislike of his peaceful policies by the Patriots. The overwhelming pressure of attitudes and greed from settlers and government officials alike resulted in much more being demanded of the tribal peoples than was given in return.

On the side of the American Indians, Raphael described the decisions they made in as great detail as can be summoned with the surviving sources. He revealed strong evidence of concern, strategic planning, and intelligent discussion among peoples with shared governance responsibilities over their societies. These discussions often had more than one strongly-argued perspective, and the resulting arguments not uncommonly resulted in schisms of varying severity

¹⁸ Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution* (New York: Perennial, 2002).

¹⁹ Raphael, 267-73.

in these societies. The Iroquois are perhaps the largest example as the Six Nations split themselves into two sides under the pressure of the American Revolution, with four nations siding with the British and two nations siding with the rebel colonists. The Americans would send 4,500 soldiers under General John Sullivan in 1779 to burn out the Iroquois heartland in New York due to so many Iroquois taking up the British cause.²⁰ The Cherokee present a similar result, but perhaps more personal at the same time; the faction of Cherokee that wished to physically resist the aggressions of Americans splintered away and became known as the Chickamaugas when the prevailing opinion among the Cherokee was to accommodate the whites rather than resist.²¹

In all cases, Raphael shows how individuals acting in their own self-interest, or in what they believed to be the interests of their people, changed the course of events in more dramatic ways than the traditional top-down histories of statesmen and generals might allow for. Raphael says, “although the involvement of ordinary people in the actual rebellion was of great historical import, we should not allow high drama to eclipse the participation of common folk on all levels.”²² Raphael’s study reveals that responses among American Indian communities to the chaos of the American Revolution were varied, meaningful to those who took action, and impactful for the people affected.

Published in 1972, and infused with racial insensitivity with uses of the term “red man” and similar others, Barbara Graymont’s *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* packs just under three hundred pages with a stunning amount of detail down to the level of individual

²⁰ Raphael, 254.

²¹ Raphael, 286-7.

²² Raphael, 382.

participants in the American Revolution.²³ The book details efforts by British and American commissioners to the Iroquois to influence the tribes; efforts by Anglican and Puritan ministers to influence the tribes; and especially the actions—and where possible, the actual words—of American Indians themselves. All perspectives are woven together in a sweeping historical analysis to tell the devastating experience of the Iroquois people before, during, and after the American revolution.

Graymont declares her work to be simultaneously an ethnohistory and a military history, and both purposes are satisfyingly fulfilled in her work. The inner cultural workings and ideas that fueled the Iroquois decision-making process of the era are described in detail, given the lack of written documents produced by Native Americans themselves. Their counterparts (and sometimes relatives), the appointed agents of the competing colonial sides, are also permitted to tell their stories in full. In addition, Graymont discusses the gritty technical details of troop movements, the decisions of commanders, and battle plans and results.

As the first modern attempt and one of the only books taking a detailed look at the Iroquois during the American Revolution, Graymont's work is thoroughly useful to this study. The causes and effects of the split of the League of Six Nations, the agency the American Indians exercised throughout the entire period, the cultural basis for the decisions made by the Iroquois, and occasions where individuals made decisions that differed from that of their nation are all described in detail. Although impacted heavily by the events of the American Revolution, Graymont effectively describes the capabilities of the Iroquois and how they acted in what they perceived to be the best interests of themselves as individuals and in the best interests of their

²³ Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1972).

peoples, collectively.²⁴ There are examples of individuals or small groups of American Indians making decisions contrary to those made by their leaders, up to the triple separation of the Onondaga people in which a third were pro-American, a third were pro-British, and a third wanted to remain neutral, and the roughly complete split of the Six Nations as a whole with Oneida and Tuscarora leaders choosing the American side in opposition to the rest of the League.²⁵

There are issues with Graymont's work, however. When the British achieved their primary goal of diplomacy with the Iroquois—the recruiting of the Seneca and western American Indians to active participation in their war with the Americans—it was at a conference in July of 1777. The British coupled the giving of large quantities of gifts with free liquor and a reminder of the original treaty with the King of England that the Iroquois had agreed to long ago, appealing “to both avarice and honor—with a heavy emphasis on the former.”²⁶ In accusing the Native Americans of greed, Graymont is ignoring a cultural feature of Iroquois society that she describes previously in her work. Graymont notes in a section regarding American diplomacy with the Iroquois, in which they discover to their surprise that a financial commitment to gifts and other economic features of friendly societies is all but required for an alliance with the American Indians, how “among Indians, the chiefs were generally the poorest of men because they were always helping those in need. It was expected. Were not the white men's chiefs as generous as their own? Certainly they were far richer and more powerful.”²⁷ Graymont's description of avarice on the part of the Iroquois is actually a cultural expectation of generosity

²⁴ Graymont, 2, 52-3, 98.

²⁵ Graymont, 192.

²⁶ Graymont, 122.

²⁷ Graymont, 89-90.

from one's authority figures, according to her own work. If someone claims to be powerful enough to make decisions for the people, they also need to be able to financially support some members of the tribe. Financial success and generosity is a sign of capability and a reason to respect someone's authority. The giving of gifts by British diplomats seeking to lead Native Americans fit perfectly into the cultural expectations of the North American nations; rather than being greedy or avaricious, the Iroquois perceived these gifts to be an appropriate proof of strength and quality leadership on the part of the British crown.²⁸

Despite this misjudgment, Graymont's work is fair to both sides of the conflict. Each side's white and Native American soldiers committed atrocities and Graymont describes both in equal terms. Attention is paid to both sides' diplomatic goals and efforts, military goals and efforts, and perspectives of the situation. Graymont presents a story of rebellious American children, tyrannical British despots, and American Indians who, though they may be caught in the middle, nonetheless charted their own course in spite of the best efforts of the British and Americans to make the decisions for them.

In a similar vein to Graymont but writing some thirty years later, Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin took a more focused approach when writing on the Oneida nation, a part of the Iroquois Six Nations, in *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution*. Glatthaar and Martin emphasize the Oneida people's strategizing and policymaking during the

²⁸ Bernard W. Sheehan, "The Famous Hair Buyer General': Henry Hamilton, George Rogers Clark, and the American Indian," *Indiana Magazine of History* 79, no. 1 (1983): 9. Henry Hamilton, the British Lieutenant Governor and Superintendent of Indian Affairs at Fort Detroit, is reported to have been so familiar with American Indian culture that he personally danced and sang in "no less than half a dozen" Native ceremonies declaring war on the rebel colonists. He is also described as having "discerned the importance of ceremonial gift-giving" among Native Americans, supporting the idea that formalized gift-giving was an accepted and expected cultural component in some American Indian societies.

era of the American Revolution. Important elements regarding the treatment of the Oneida by the United States, individual states, and American citizens before, during, and after the Revolution feature prominently in this work. More important to this study, however, are the details regarding the Oneida nation's agency as they chose sides in the European American, European, and American Indian conflict.

Starting their analysis with the Oneida's early contact with Europeans and how their interactions, and involvement in the European wars drove the warrior class to a position of prominence in Oneida society, Glatthaar and Martin explain other changes to Oneida society as they engaged with European traders, settlers, and soldiers over time. Following this is the development of the Oneida's friendship with the colonists as more important than their relationship to the British crown, and then their involvement in the Revolutionary War on the American side, against the other major Iroquois nations. This friendship is not without reservation, as Glatthaar and Martin describe how the Oneida were so upset by the Sullivan expedition that destroyed so many Iroquois homes and food that their support for the Americans faltered.²⁹ This was the best chance for the British and the Mohawk (Kanien'kehá:ka) under Thayendanegea, Joseph Brant, to convince the Oneida to change sides, but the Oneida nation as a whole decided it was best for them to stay allied with the Americans.³⁰ This decision to remain in

²⁹ Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* (Hill and Wang: New York, 2006); 248-52.

³⁰ Graymont, 104-116, 166, 180, 235, 251-2. Glatthaar and Martin, 286, 298-9. Sadosky, 134, 137-8. Thayendanegea, known to Europeans and Euro-Americans as Joseph Brant, was a prominent and influential leader of the Kanien'kehá:ka people. Thayendanegea was so determined to help his people reclaim their ancestral lands from the colonists that he attempted to continue waging war with the United States even after Britain signed the peace treaty ending the Revolutionary War. This peace treaty, in the eyes of the United States and Britain, ceded all claim and control over Native American lands to the United States. When Thayendanegea

the American camp almost resulted in an Oneida-Mohawk war after the British sued for peace with the fledgling United States, but Joseph Brant, advocating for this war, could not convince enough people to support him in his punitive expedition against the Oneida.³¹ Throughout the book, the Oneida nation's objectives and strategy take center stage as this complex, interconnected people worked as hard as they could to preserve their way of life, their foreign and domestic relationships, and their lives. The same cannot be said of the following work.

Contrasting all of the previous scholarship is Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*.³² All of the previously addressed scholars have spent significant effort to show respect for American Indian culture and to treat Native Americans as whole human beings and Native nations as legitimate societies, as evidenced by the Indian Defense League of America naming Barbara Graymont an honorary member.³³ Conversely, Dunbar-Ortiz claims that documenting and appreciating the attempts of Native Americans to engage in dialogue with the European colonists is “masking reality with justifications and rationalizations—in short, apologies for one-sided robbery and murder.”³⁴ Further, Dunbar-Ortiz makes the claim that respecting the agency of Native Americans makes “the casualties of colonialism responsible for their own demise.”³⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz instead chooses to mostly ignore the actions, agency, and internal policymaking of American Indians, which feature so prominently in the preceding scholarly works, in favor of focusing on the genocidal actions of

realized he would not convince enough Native nations to join his war effort, he lead his people to lands in Canada rather than attempt to live amongst his enemies in the United States.

³¹ Glatthaar and Martin, 286.

³² Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

³³ Graymont, copyright page.

³⁴ Dunbar-Ortiz, 5.

³⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz, 5.

the Europeans and colonists. While it is important to document these genocidal actions in detail so that they may be honestly addressed, this imbalance is disappointing.

One such example in Dunbar-Ortiz' work is her discussion of the Pequot War. In approximately two pages, she devotes exactly two sentences to the actions of the Pequot people. These are: "A single violent incident triggered a devastating Puritan war against the Pequots in what the colony's annals and subsequent history texts call the Pequot War," and: "The Pequots responded by attacking English settlements, including Fort Saybrook in Connecticut."³⁶ The "single violent incident" was an action by the Pequot; Dunbar-Ortiz does her readers a disservice by failing to describe the incident and who was responsible. Moreover, her study lacks description of Pequot interests and plans as affected by the presence and interactions with the Europeans, and any detail at all about the actions of the Pequots against the Europeans. For someone as interested in the resistance against colonization as Dunbar-Ortiz claims to be, the lack of description of Native American resistance is striking, especially when contrasted with other scholars who paint a more complete and nuanced picture of events that not only credit American Indians with making strong strategic decisions but also with impressive capabilities. In fact, by not paying homage to the efforts of the Pequots to keep their people and way of life safe from the Europeans, Dunbar-Ortiz writes a book that is in many ways like the films and television shows that portray Native Americans as cardboard cutout villains, as mere pop-out targets for the white "heroes" to shoot down.

In nearly all of the above scholarship, the humanity, diversity, and agency of American Indians is highlighted through the documentation of Native nations and peoples working to navigate the turbulent era of the American Revolution. These historians have created powerful

³⁶ Dunbar-Ortiz, 62.

works portraying the events of the American Revolution from the perspective of American Indian nations. These histories throw into sharp relief aspects of the people and the era that have been overlooked in traditional historical analyses of early America. Whereas the scholarly literature depicts the important role of American Indians in the Revolutionary War, the same cannot be said for movies and other popular media.

Visual Representations of American Indians

An early work on representations of American Indians was Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr.'s *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. Berkhofer examines the use of language in European cultures to refer to American Indians and how the words used affected the images and symbols created.³⁷ He explores how European identity shifts when viewed in opposition to Asia, Africa, and America, and how these evolutions of European identity and created images of other peoples changed European and European American identities in the minds of the people who claimed those identities.³⁸ In addition, Berkhofer suggests people of other cultures so portrayed may have also thought of themselves differently as a result of how they were depicted and treated by the Europeans, even to the point of being “forced” to embody the constructed image because of the pervasiveness of European culture and its effects on non-European societies.³⁹

³⁷ This level of respect for individual autonomy in American Indian society is well documented in several historians' works on the history of American Indians, including the following: Robert Baird, “Indian Leaders,” in *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 161; Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 54-5, 57, 89, 138, 258-62, 271; Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 2, 21-2, 32-3, 44-5, 53, 66, 100, 110, 165-6, 180, 192-3; Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution* (New York: Perennial, 2002), 237-242, 261, 263, 268, 274, 278-81, 286-9, 295-6, 300-1, 304, 383-4.

³⁸ Berkhofer, xvi, 23-25, 71-2.

³⁹ Berkhofer, 195.

The single most important media studies book to this project is Michael Ray FitzGerald's *Native Americans on Network TV: Stereotypes, Myths, and the "Good Indian."*⁴⁰ Published in 2013, FitzGerald puts together one of the newest and most complete discussions of trends and theories about representations of American Indians in the popular culture of the United States, even though he only applies his study to network television Westerns. Although none of the subjects under consideration by FitzGerald are directly connected to the American Revolution, the discussion of representations of American Indians are relevant to my analysis of *ACIII*. *Native Americans on Network TV* examines the effects of political and cultural influences in the United States on the representations of American Indians in the various eras under consideration. FitzGerald breaks down a number of models of misrepresentation of Native Americans in the media of the United States, utilizing media studies theories, stereotypical misrepresentations of American Indians, and real examples of the use of these faulty portrayals in Western-genre television shows. In this regard, FitzGerald's analysis provides a substantive background for my study.

In his book, FitzGerald incorporates decades of media theory, debate, and philosophy. He cites thinkers such as Edward Said, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Noam Chomsky, Edward S. Herman, Edward Bernays, the Frankfurt school of media studies, and others to build a picture of the structure and properties of media representations of minority groups. FitzGerald then applies the framework to American Indians specifically.⁴¹ Building off of Cedric Clark's 1969 work on the four stages of minority representation in mass media (non-recognition, ridicule, regulation, respect), FitzGerald asserts that "the more prominent the Indian character is in any

⁴⁰ Michael Ray FitzGerald, *Native Americans on Network TV: Stereotypes, Myths, and the "Good Indian"* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

⁴¹ FitzGerald, 15-23.

given program, the more likely he (rarely if ever a she) is to be depicted as a Regulator.”⁴²

According to Clark and FitzGerald, “regulators” are subaltern characters that support and promote the norms of the dominant culture.⁴³ This role of enforcer/regulator is pertinent to this study due to how commonplace it is in the Western genre, according to FitzGerald, and also to how Ratonnhaké:ton embodies the role of enforcer, which will be discussed in a later section.

According to FitzGerald, the creation of the “Good Indian” and “Bad Indian” stereotypes can be traced back to the time of the Spanish subjugating the Caribbean in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and their interaction with the Native Americans who lived there. Even though the Caribs were likely a subset of Arawaks, the Caribs were perceived by the Spanish to be much fiercer and to be cannibals, compared with the “gentle and generous to a fault” Arawaks.⁴⁴ FitzGerald describes this initial division of indigenous peoples in the minds of Europeans to be that of “friendlies” and “hostiles,” and that this perceived good-bad duality would become more widespread after the Spanish conquest, culminating in the widely-recognized “bloodthirsty savage” and “noble savage” tropes. FitzGerald notes that the depiction of an American Indian is “often simultaneously” fulfilling of both tropes.⁴⁵

Another misrepresentation of American Indians, according to FitzGerald, are “presumed hypermasculine qualities” that supposedly differentiate them from Europeans, and which European Americans desired to appropriate for themselves to prove their superiority to “effete Europeans.”⁴⁶ These perceptions of Native American hypermasculinity find expressions in

⁴² Cedric Clark, "Television and social controls: Some observations on the portrayals of ethnic minorities," *Television Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1969): 18-22. FitzGerald, 12, 44.

⁴³ FitzGerald, 12.

⁴⁴ FitzGerald, 9.

⁴⁵ FitzGerald, 9.

⁴⁶ FitzGerald, 8.

physically powerful white men who have been toughened by their contact with American Indians or the harsh “frontier” lands in which they live; sometimes these white men would be “half-breed” characters, such as the titular characters of the 1953 John Wayne film *Hondo* and the 1993-2001 CBS show *Walker, Texas Ranger* with Chuck Norris, for whom their “‘Indian skills’ were a bonus” to their already superhuman white American abilities.⁴⁷

Engaging with the subject from a gendered perspective, Elise M. Marubbio approaches portrayals of American Indians in Western-genre films as cultural texts, focusing on the depiction of American Indian women in her book *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film*.⁴⁸ What Marubbio finds is that women fulfill the same dichotomous roles of “Good Indian” and “Bad Indian” but the portrayals heavily invoke gender. Terming this symbolic female figure the “Celluloid Maiden,” she can be split into the “Celluloid Princess” form in which she aligns with the “noble savage” trope and the regulator archetype, and the “Sexualized Maiden” figure that aligns with the “ignoble savage” trope.⁴⁹

Marubbio’s Celluloid Princess typically becomes involved with the white hero, providing him with a means to merge with the “savage” frontier and emerge, metamorphosed, into the hybrid form with which he can conquer all resistance; Marubbio says he “replaces the Indian either symbolically or physically, through violence.”⁵⁰ A trait that many of the Celluloid Princesses share is their deaths, portrayed as a tragedy, which Marubbio declares must occur because she “transgresses taboos against interracial mixing and must pay the price with her life,” in the minds of those European Americans who write these stories about American Indian

⁴⁷ FitzGerald, 49.

⁴⁸ Marubbio, ix-x.

⁴⁹ Marubbio, 5-7.

⁵⁰ Marubbio, 6-7.

people.⁵¹ The explanation for the nature of the figure, and why she must be killed, is that such characters “reflect the social, political, and moral attitudes toward Native Americans and interracial mixing and the national identity of the cultural moment that reproduced the figure.”⁵²

A concept central to this thesis is Marubbio’s suggestion that United States popular culture has a way of reinventing the national mythology, the Western, to fit contemporary issues and audiences. Marubbio lists a handful of films from 2003-2005 and notes “most of these films revise the western genre either through location or through a focus on alternative heroes and storytelling.”⁵³ This is similar to FitzGerald’s contention that American Indians are used as symbols in varying ways to fill contemporaneous societal needs. Marubbio argues that Westerns have indeed changed positively over the decades, but “the core treatment of the Native American has not changed in any substantial way.”⁵⁴ Some of these updates take the Western into a different setting, or “a focus on alternate heroes and storytelling.”⁵⁵ FitzGerald asserts that the Western genre is the foundation myth of the United States, and Marubbio contends that the Western is similarly “bound to America’s image of itself as a nation.”⁵⁶ As important as the American Revolution has been to the course of world history, and to modern producers and consumers of popular history in the United States, it is logical to import the Revolutionary War narrative and historical backdrop into the national mythology of the Western. Marubbio cites the importation of the Western into a science fiction spacefaring future setting in *Firefly* (2005); this operation in reverse easily fits the Western into the American Revolution.

⁵¹ Marubbio, 7.

⁵² Marubbio, 8.

⁵³ Marubbio, 228.

⁵⁴ Marubbio, 228.

⁵⁵ Marubbio, 228.

⁵⁶ FitzGerald, 11. Marubbio, 4.

Other media studies on the topic of representations of American Indians influence this thesis but primarily act as foundational works for the above cited scholars or support the assertions and conclusions of the above works. For example, Michael Hilger brings supporting perspective and evidence for the usage of American Indians as symbols, and concrete negative stereotypes and portrayals of American Indians by popular media in the United States in *The American Indian in Film*.⁵⁷ In *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, the editor S. Elizabeth Bird brings together a diverse set of essays on the topic of representations of American Indians. These writings address authenticity of images of American Indians, power relationships, the use of language to marginalize American Indians, and gendered approaches to portraying Native Americans.⁵⁸

ACIII: A Revolutionary Western

Perhaps the earliest cinematic representation of the American Revolution was D. W. Griffith's *1776, or The Hessian Renegades* in 1909, and the interest has continued at least through AMC's television drama series, *Turn: Washington's Spies*, which played for four seasons between 2013 and 2017. A number of films and television shows throughout the past century have based their stories in the time of the American Revolution.⁵⁹ Many of these works

⁵⁷ Michael Hilger, *The American Indian in Film* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.), 1-5.

⁵⁸ S. Elizabeth Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 7-10.

⁵⁹ These are discussed in more depth on the website that is the digital portion of this thesis. It can be found here: nonnativewarpaint.wordpress.com. The list of visual media includes: D. W. Griffith, *1776, or, the Hessian Renegades*, 1909, and *America, or, Love and Sacrifice*, 1924; John Ford, *Drums Along the Mohawk*, Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox, 1939; Frank Lloyd, *The Howards of Virginia*, Columbia Pictures, 1940; John Sturges, *The Scarlet Coat*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1955; Robert Stevenson, *Johnny Tremain*, Walt Disney Productions, 1957; John Farrow, *John Paul Jones*, Samuel Bronston Productions, 1959; Guy Hamilton, *The Devil's Disciple*, Hill-Hecht-Lancaster Productions, 1959; Jean Dréville, *Lafayette*, Les Films Copernic, 1963; Peter Gayle and Harve Bennett, *The Young Rebels*, Screen Gems Television, 1970-1971; Peter H. Hunt, *1776*, Columbia Pictures, 1972; Fielder Cook, *Valley Forge*, Clarion Productions,

have not asked serious questions of the history, as described by Cotton Seiler: “The list of fictional and documentary films and television programs about the American Revolution is relatively short and, with a few exceptions, not terribly distinguished.”⁶⁰ In particular, there are few portrayals of Native Americans in these visual works. Michael Ray FitzGerald has described the absence of attention on Native Americans as a “a lie by omission that implies that they simply do not—or perhaps should not—exist.”⁶¹ This is somewhat surprising due to the development of subjects studied by historians rooted in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which lead to the growth of a knowledge base about Native Americans in general. Many of these written histories discuss how the various native peoples were affected by and interacted with the chaotic time period of the American Revolution.⁶² It is in spite of the length of time the

1975; Lee H. Katzin, *The Bastard*, Universal Television, 1978; Russ Mayberry, *The Rebels*, Universal Television, 1979; Sidney Hayers, *The Seekers*, Universal Television, 1979; Buzz Kulik, *George Washington*, MGM/UA Television, 1984; Hugh Hudson, *Revolution*, Goldcrest Films International, 1985; William A. Graham, *George Washington II: The Forging of a Nation*, MGM/UA Television, 1986; Delbert Mann, *April Morning*, Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, 1988; Lisa Bourgojian, *The American Revolution* (1994, A&E Television Networks); Stephen Surjik, *Mary Silliman’s War*, Citadel Films, 1994; J. Christian Ingvordsen, *The Little Patriot: Sign of the Otter*, Shapiro-Glickenhau Entertainment, 1995; *Benedict Arnold: Triumph and Treason*, A&E Networks, 1995; Roland Emmerich, *The Patriot*, Columbia Pictures, 2000; Robert Harmon, *The Crossing*, A&E Networks, 2000; Tom Hurwitz, *Something More at Stake: Saratoga*, United States National Park Service, 2002; Mikael Salomon, *Benedict Arnold: A Question of Honor*, A&E Networks, 2003; Michael Maliani, Kevin O’Donnell, and Andy Heyward, *Liberty’s Kids: Established 1776*, DIC Entertainment, 2002-2003; Kevin R. Hershberger, *Yorktown: Battle for Victory*, LionHeart Filmworks, 2007; Tom Hooper, *John Adams*, HBO Films, 2008; Chris Weatherhead, *All for Liberty*, Coral Gate Media, 2009; Craig Silverstein, *Turn: Washington’s Spies*, AMC Studios, 2014-2017; Chad Burns, *Beyond the Mask*, Burns Family Studios, 2015; Kari Skogland, *Sons of Liberty*, A&E Studios, 2015; Kevin R. Hershberger, *Legends and Lies: The Patriots*, Life of O’Reilly Productions, 2016.

⁶⁰ Cotton Seiler, “The American Revolution,” in *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film: How the Movies Portrayed the American Past*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 50.

⁶¹ Michael Ray FitzGerald, *Native Americans on Network TV: Stereotypes, Myths, and the “Good Indian”* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 10.

⁶² Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Joseph T.

scholarship has been available and the amount of information explored by historians that these popular history visual media products ignore the participation of American Indians in the events of the American Revolution.

To assist readers who may not be familiar with video gaming in general or the *Assassin's Creed* franchise in particular, it is necessary to provide details about the structural elements of the game under examination. *ACIII* is a third-person stealth action-adventure game in the parlance of the game industry. Third-person refers to the perspective of the majority of gameplay, watching from outside the character being controlled as they are directed to move about the world and interact with it by the player.⁶³ While this element may make it more difficult to experience the game's events from the first-person perspective, it does help to reinforce the identity of the game's protagonist for the player by keeping Ratonhnhaké:ton in the player's view at all times. Stealth games often have an emphasis on negative consequences if the character is detected by opponents. The *Assassin's Creed* series is somewhat unique through the use of what Ubisoft calls its "social stealth" system, through which the character can blend in with ordinary townsfolk to remain hidden from opponents. The series also has heavy use of "parkour" elements, or "free-running," through which the character can rapidly traverse the world in unexpected ways, such as through the canopy of the forest, across rooftops, and even

Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1972); Francis P. Jennings, ed., "The American Indian and the American Revolution: Papers written for a conference of the Newberry Library Center for the History of the American Indian, 21-22 February 1975," Chicago: Newberry Library, 1983; Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution* (New York: Perennial, 2002); Leonard J. Sadosky, *Revolutionary Negotiations: Indians, Empires, and Diplomats in the Founding of America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

⁶³ Due to the nature of the game, in which the player is observing complex movements around the character's environment, a first-person perspective would be unwieldy and limiting, even frustrating, leading Ubisoft to choose the third-person perspective.

through homes, jumping into one window and out another. The “action-adventure” portion of the game’s genre is most relevant to this thesis due to how it ties into the Western genre, and the heavy emphasis on violence that both genres are known for.

The protagonist of *ACIII* (who goes by the name Connor, though his birth name is Ratonnhaké:ton) is a man who is of half-Kanien'kehá:ka and half-British heritage, and the player controls many of his actions from the age of five to thirty-five. He is depicted as raised by his Kanien'kehá:ka family and then he chooses to become involved in the affairs of the British and the colonial rebels. For much of the game, he works with George Washington and other notable rebel figures, but he makes the choice to go his own way after Ratonnhaké:ton discovers that Washington was responsible for the Sullivan Expedition and the burning of many Iroquois villages in the Mohawk Valley. Is Ratonnhaké:ton a “good Indian” for choosing to work with the “good guys?” Is he a “bad Indian” for committing, at the hands of the player, the violence required of the game’s genre, or for working for an African American (Achilles Davenport, the free African American man who trains him) against one or another faction of white people? Does the videogame *ACIII* fit into the Western genre of movies and television at all? To answer these questions, the story of *ACIII* must be recounted and examined.

We meet the main character when he is a young boy, playing in the forest with other Kanien'kehá:ka youth, where he is verbally and physically assaulted by Charles Lee and other white men who demand to know where his village is. Ratonnhaké:ton does not provide them with any information and is knocked out with the butt of a musket for his bravery. When he awakens, he finds his village in flames; he rushes to the scene and discovers his mother trapped in a burning building. Unable to save her, she dies. The story skips some years and returns to a teenage Ratonnhaké:ton. The player learns how to control the character while performing tasks

in the wilderness such as hunting, trapping, and running through the canopy of the forest. He comes to decide that his village elders are wrong for not doing more to protect their people; he leaves the village to seek revenge for his mother's death and to secure his people's future. Although Ratonnhaké:ton's initial personal goal is to seek revenge for the destruction of his village and the murder of his mother at the hands of British colonists and thereby secure safety for the Kanien'kehá:ka people, he soon decides as part of the Ubisoft-written narrative that the best way for him to accomplish those goals is to work with the "Patriots," the rebellious colonists, in working against the "tyranny" of the British crown. Ratonnhaké:ton and the player are present at the Boston Massacre, which is portrayed as being an event manipulated by British characters (Haytham Kenway, Charles Lee, and company) so that they may use the chaos to take greater control over the colonies. These British characters then frame Ratonnhaké:ton for starting the violence. Through his need for protection from prosecution, Ratonnhaké:ton comes into contact with those who are struggling against the British crown.

The first "founding father" that Ratonnhaké:ton finds himself taking orders from is Samuel Adams, who provides exposition on the rightness of the rebel cause and the wrongness of the British cause, and Connor is soon involved in the Boston Tea Party. The situation of a member of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation assisting the British colonists, some of whom historically dressed up in what they perceived to be a Mohawk style, throw the king's tea into the Boston harbor is not commented upon inside the game.

Ratonnhaké:ton begins his pursuit of Kenway and Lee's associate William Johnson, whom Ratonnhaké:ton murders to prevent him from purchasing Kanien'kehá:ka land. At the Battle of Bunker Hill, Ratonnhaké:ton assassinates the commander of the British forces, John Pitcairn. The motivation for the assassination is Ratonnhaké:ton's belief that Pitcairn intended

to kill Samuel Adams and John Hancock. The next Kenway and Lee associate Ratonhnhaké:ton targets is Thomas Hickey for plotting to assassinate George Washington; both are arrested during the fight, however, and Hickey is freed through the influence of Kenway and Lee while they frame Ratonhnhaké:ton for the assassination plot. At the planned execution of Ratonhnhaké:ton, Achilles Davenport rescues him, and Ratonhnhaké:ton then murders Hickey in the midst of his renewed attempt to assassinate Washington. George Washington agrees to meet with Ratonhnhaké:ton and asks his help in recovering goods belonging to the Continental Army that have been stolen by Benjamin Church. In the pursuit, Ratonhnhaké:ton runs into his father, Haytham Kenway, who is also in pursuit of Church, and the two decide upon a truce for the duration of recovering the goods and murdering Church. They accomplish their mission and return to George Washington.

During this three-way meeting, it is revealed that it was Washington that ordered the removal of Ratonhnhaké:ton's people from the Mohawk Valley due to their support for the British over the rebel colonists; it is Washington that is responsible for the historical Sullivan Expedition and the burning of more than forty Kanien'kehá:ka villages and the destruction of all their stored winter food. Ratonhnhaké:ton tells Washington that he will no longer serve the rebel cause and goes to protect his people from the Continental Army. He arrives to find his village safe, but that the warriors have gone to intercept the army before it can reach the village. Ratonhnhaké:ton convinces the warriors to turn back in order to avoid bloodshed, but his childhood friend Kanen'tó:kon has been turned against him by Charles Lee. The pair fight, forcing Ratonhnhaké:ton to kill him.

Now empowered by an additional personal loss, Western-genre-hero style, Ratonhnhaké:ton goes to kill Lee. He is intercepted by his father Haytham who attempts to stop

the attack, and Ratonhnhaké:ton murders him as well during a fight; not even family ties will prevent the Western hero from dispensing justice as he sees fit. During a long, chaotic chase, both Lee and Ratonhnhaké:ton are severely wounded. The pair find themselves in a pub where they share a drink and Ratonhnhaké:ton then stabs Lee to death.

After some healing time, Ratonhnhaké:ton returns to his village and finds his people gone. An outdoorsman tells him that their land was sold by the United States government to settlers in order to cover war debts. Ratonhnhaké:ton travels back to New York, witnessing the last of British authority leave the new nation; the last British soldiers embark on ships and depart for home. Simultaneously, Ratonhnhaké:ton witnesses an auction of enslaved people on the docks, calling to mind a quote spoken by Ratonhnhaké:ton in the cinematic release trailer for *ACIII*. The trailer depicts a battle between the British army and the Continental Army in which the rebels are beaten back by cannon fire and volleyed musket fire. Ratonhnhaké:ton leaps into action and turns the tide of battle single-handedly in the favor of the rebels. He says the only clear words in the entire cinematic: “I watched them fight and die in the name of freedom. They speak of liberty and justice, but for who?”⁶⁴ This emphasis on the ambiguities surrounding the traditional European American narrative of the Revolutionary War and the foregrounding of injustices inflicted upon people of color during that era are not common features of Westerns.

Although *ACIII* takes place in the late colonial period of United States history and in the Northeastern region of the nation, *ACIII* is a Western in important ways. Film historian Tim Dirks says the Western genre “often portrays the conquest of the wilderness and the subordination of nature, in the name of civilization, or the confiscation of the territorial rights of

⁶⁴ Ubisoft North America, “Assassin’s Creed III: E3 Cinematic Trailer,” YouTube, June 4th, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nL6chDa7T8Q>

the original inhabitants of the frontier,” and Westerns often possess a plot of “the classic, simple goal of maintaining law and order on the frontier in a fast-paced action story.” Westerns frequently possess an “archetypal conflict” such as “good vs. bad, virtue vs. evil... new arrivals vs. Native Americans (inhumanely portrayed as savage Indians), settlers vs. Indians... civilization vs. wilderness or lawlessness... villains vs. heroes...” An additional list of “typical elements in westerns” contains “hostile elements (often Native Americans),” “violence and human massacres, horses,” “shoot-outs and showdowns,” “posses in pursuit, barroom brawls, ‘search and destroy’ plots, breathtaking settings and open landscapes...”⁶⁵ One of the common characteristics of a Western is that it takes place on the border between “civilization” and the “frontier,” where “savage” violence by the white hero who is in some way himself a mixture of the “civilized” world and the “savage” world is acceptable to help “civilize” the “savage” frontier. According to Elise M. Marubbio,

the West offers a culturally sanctioned area in which the white western hero temporarily transgresses the line between civilization and savagery as he sets into motion the former and conquers the latter. This transgression molds his character, making him the quintessential icon of progress and colonial prowess.⁶⁶

The classic Western, then, is a morality tale centered over the control of the land. The vehicle for the resolution of the morality tale is violence aimed at American Indians or European American outlaws, and the perpetrator of the violence is a white male portrayed as a hero.⁶⁷ There is a large area in *ACIII* that links together the towns and other points of interest; the developers named it “The Frontier.” The “Frontier” is the place where Ratonhnhaké:ton creates what is called the

⁶⁵ All of this paragraph’s preceding quoted or referenced information can be found at the same webpage: Tim Dirks, “Western Films Part 1,” [filmsite.org](https://www.filmsite.org/westernfilms.html), accessed June 20th, 2019, <https://www.filmsite.org/westernfilms.html>.

⁶⁶ Marubbio, 18-19.

⁶⁷ FitzGerald, 214-15.

“homestead” by dispensing frontier justice, vigilante justice, on those he deems to be evildoers and saving people who are in need of help. In this way he recruits people to live and work in this homestead, creating a western-style settlement, a western-style civilization. Through this creation of civilization, he makes of himself a “quintessential icon of progress and colonial prowess,” on land that would likely be Iroquois territory due to its proximity to his ancestral Kanien'kehá:ka homeland.⁶⁸

ACIII contains all of the essential elements of a Western, though some are in a modified form. Ratonnhaké:ton finds himself at the center of a contest over control of the British colonies of North America, as well as the surrounding lands, such as those inhabited by the Kanien'kehá:ka people, to which Ratonnhaké:ton belongs. The sides of the morality tale in *ACIII* are the “tyranny” of the British government and the “liberty” of the rebel colonists who call themselves Patriots. Ratonnhaké:ton believes it is in the best interests of his people to work for and alongside the rebel colonial power. One of the agents of British tyranny as presented in the game, Charles Lee, becomes the personal focus of Ratonnhaké:ton’s Western genre vigilante justice. By extension, all British soldiers in North America are similarly valid targets for murder by Ratonnhaké:ton, according to the game’s structures, as the “outlaws” of the story.

Ratonnhaké:ton occupies the space of a Western genre hero in *ACIII*, which would ordinarily be a white man in a classic Western. Although there are strong surface elements of Kanien'kehá:ka or Mohawk nation identity in Ratonnhaké:ton’s portrayal, on a deeper reading he truly represents the traditional white hero of the classic Western. Ratonnhaké:ton embodies

⁶⁸ Jon Blyth, “Assassin’s Creed 3 hands-on: three hours as a mass-murdering Mohawk town-planner,” Official Xbox Magazine UK, October 27, 2012, accessed August 1, 2019 on the Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121228222928/http://www.oxm.co.uk/47062/previews/assassins-creed-3-hands-on-three-hours-as-a-mass-murdering-mohawk-town-planner/>

the regulator/enforcer role of minority representation in media as described by FitzGerald. This includes the hypermasculine, superheroic qualities that FitzGerald notes in the other “half breed” heroes of Westerns, *Hondo* and *Walker, Texas Ranger*, through Ratonhnhaké:ton’s assistance of the rebel, “Patriot” side in their conflict with British authority, and by following the orders of Samuel Adams and George Washington.⁶⁹ FitzGerald also notes that portrayals of Native American characters “often simultaneously” embody the noble savage and ignoble savage stereotypes.⁷⁰ Ratonhnhaké:ton embodies these tropes through his frequent acts of violence while also playing the role of the hero by saving colonists who are in trouble. In addition, Ratonhnhaké:ton builds his “homestead,” which furthers the settlement of Kanien’kehá:ka lands by European American colonists under his direction. Ratonhnhaké:ton, matching Berkhofer’s prediction, takes on the identity of “savage Indian,” as created by Europeans, to achieve his frontier vigilante justice.⁷¹ Ratonhnhaké:ton embodies the entire list of characteristics of Western heroes as described by film historian Tim Dirks, who says they are most often

masculine persons of integrity and principle - courageous, moral, tough, solid and self-sufficient, maverick characters... possessing an independent and honorable attitude (but often characterized as slow-talking). The Western hero could usually stand alone and face danger on his own, against the forces of lawlessness... with an expert display of his physical skills (roping, gun-play, horse-handling, pioneering abilities, etc.).⁷²

Ratonhnhaké:ton is highly principled and honest to a fault, even though he is a maverick and leaves his people to follow his own initiative. He does speak slowly, even during intense scenes, which is part of stereotypical portrayals of American Indians as well. He almost always acts alone and his physical skills are important to the character of Ratonhnhaké:ton and the outcome

⁶⁹ FitzGerald, 8, 45, 49, 175, 191-2, 200.

⁷⁰ FitzGerald, 9, 28.

⁷¹ Berkhofer, 195.

⁷² Tim Dirks, “Westerns Films Part 1,” [filmsite.org](https://www.filmsite.org/westernfilms.html), accessed June 20th, 2019, <https://www.filmsite.org/westernfilms.html>.

of the story, including the use of rope and guns, riding horses, and frontier hunting and trapping skills.

There are two meta-layers on top of the historical gameplay that support the idea of Ratonhnhaké:ton fills the role of the white Western hero archetype in the Western that is *ACIII*. The first meta-layer is a science fiction story in which two fictional modern-day groups, the Assassins and the Templars, are fighting each other to decide if the world will be free or controlled in a totalitarian style. The science-fiction story explains the experiencing of history such that, through a technology called the “animus,” modern-day people can relive their ancestors’ memories. The character in *ACIII* that is reliving the memories of his ancestor Ratonhnhaké:ton is Desmond Miles, a man who is depicted as white, and his part is played by a white voice actor. This first layer begins the submersion of a Native American identity into a white identity: Desmond Miles, accessing Ratonhnhaké:ton’s genetic memories of the time period surrounding the Revolutionary War, is portrayed as a white man technologically putting on an American Indian ancestor’s persona.

The second layer is that the intended audience, the player most frequently imagined as playing *ACIII* by the developers at Ubisoft, is the white male of the United States, for whom the established mythology of the American Revolution is a positive narrative.⁷³ These two layers of white control over Ratonhnhaké:ton’s actions, from the fictional Desmond Miles and Ubisoft’s imagined most-common-customer, help to solidify the half-British, half-Kanien’kehá:ka character as occupying the role of the white Western hero of the narrative.

⁷³ Adrienne Shaw, “The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in *Assassin’s Creed III*,” *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9, no. 14 (2015): 4-24, <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/157/185>

However, despite all of the above, *ACIII* is a revolutionary Western. It would have been all too easy for Ubisoft to follow in the footsteps of previous Westerns and popular history works on the Revolutionary War to whitewash the story of *ACIII*, with little to no mention of Native Americans at all. Ratonhnhaké:ton's narrative status as a member of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation helps the player, who is presumed to be white, appreciate the American Indian perspective and the ultimate tragedy of the ending; Ratonhnhaké:ton cannot change history and save his people from liars, murderers, and thieves, and they will lose their land to encroaching settlers and the United States government. One recent reviewer of the game called it "the 'Hamilton' of video games," saying

[I]ts approach to the American Revolutionary War is still really novel for a video game... Like Hamilton, it was history made immediate... Playing as a... Native American assassin with a Black mentor, caught in a war between Americans and British with no good outcome for his people either way, is still a fascinating take on that philosophical idea. It's morally ambiguous just like America itself was right from the start!⁷⁴

This sentiment is echoed by another reviewer who says *ACIII* is "radical in theme, repeatedly emphasizing that a man of Connor's background and skin color would lose out in the new country."⁷⁵ This tragic ending which Ubisoft does not shy away from, and their humanization of at least one member of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation, Ratonhnhaké:ton, are a large part of what makes *ACIII* a revolutionary western.

ACIII can be situated among other games set in different historical periods. A core mechanic of *Sid Meier's Colonization* (1994 and 2008) is the treatment of indigenous peoples as

⁷⁴ Jordan Minor, "'Assassin's Creed III' Is Still the 'Hamilton' of Video Games," geek.com, May 30, 2019, <https://www.geek.com/games/assassins-creed-iii-is-still-the-hamilton-of-video-games-1789103/>

⁷⁵ Stephen Totilo, "The Controversial Assassin's Creed III Is More Impressive in 2019," Kotaku, March 29, 2019, <https://kotaku.com/the-controversial-assassin-s-creed-iii-is-more-impressi-1833676354>

obstacles for the player to overcome in their imperialistic and colonialistic ambitions. In *Age of Empires III* (2005), players had to wait a full year after release for the inclusion of Native nations. This expansion pack for the game was called “*The WarChiefs*” (2006), and it allows players to assume the role of the Aztec, Iroquois, and Sioux nations. However, *Age of Empires* is a western-style contest-of-civilizations wargame, projecting attributes of western imperialism onto Indigenous peoples simply by including them. In the *Turok* game series (1997-2008) the Native American main character is merely an action hero with very little depth of narrative or humanization. *Turok* not only places the Native American character in an imagined, ahistorical past fighting dinosaurs, but depicts American Indians only as superhuman, hypermasculine combatants. The *Mortal Kombat* fighting game series (1992-2019) includes one Native American character, Nightwolf, which has been strongly criticized for its stereotypical portrayal of American Indians.⁷⁶ What makes *ACIII* stand apart from these other games is the developers’ choice from the beginning to put the Kanien'kehá:ka people in the front and center protagonist role, as respectfully as they could for the genre of game they were producing. The stereotypical “Hollywood Indian” was intentionally avoided by the game’s creators. Ubisoft consulted with Kanien'kehá:ka cultural experts, Akwiratékha Martin and Teiowí:sonte Thomas Deer, and an on-staff historian, Maxime Durand, to ensure that they portrayed the Kanien'kehá:ka people as respectfully and authentically as possible.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Chad Hunter, “The 15 Most Stereotypical Characters in Video Games,” *Complex*, May 9, 2012, accessed November 25, 2019. <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2012/05/the-15-most-stereotypical-characters-in-video-games/>. Jeff Rubin and Owen Parsons, “The Dorklyst: The 7 Most Stereotypical Native American Characters in Fighting Game History,” *Dorkly*, May 12, 2011. <http://www.dorkly.com/post/15651/the-7-most-stereotypical-native-americans-in-fighting-game-history/page:3>

⁷⁷ Michael Venables, “The Awesome Mohawk Teacher and Consultant Behind Ratonhnhaké:ton,” *Forbes*, November 25, 2012, accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelvenables/2012/11/25/the-consultants-behind->

Conclusion

ACIII is a revolutionary Western. Ratonhnhaké:ton, playing the role of the archetypal white Western hero, uses vigilante justice on the frontier to achieve his own vengeance for an attack upon his village, his people, and the death of his mother. However, in stark contrast to the classic Western, the positioning of Ratonhnhaké:ton as the protagonist brings issues of the history of American Indians to the foreground. Ubisoft went much further than what had been done before in visual representations of American Indians in the United States, yet still presented a problematic image of an American Indian. The creators of *ACIII* were respectful of Kanien'kehá:ka culture, but also portrayed an American Indian as a mass murderer.

The importance of placing a Native American character as the central protagonist of the narrative cannot be overstated. With Ratonhnhaké:ton as the main character of *ACIII*, Ubisoft wrote a narrative that was centered on an American Indian rather than a narrative led by yet another white Western hero with a Native sidekick. In every other visual work reviewed for this project, the main character is white and all Native American characters involved in the story are minor, supporting characters; the story isn't about them. Outside of *ACIII*, American Indians only exist in the narrative to support the white hero's story arc rather than to be whole people in their own right. Placing an American Indian in the main character role foregrounds the agenda, agency, and values of the Native American, privileging them over the interests of the other characters of the story.

Unlike classic Westerns, Ubisoft made a concerted effort in *ACIII* to ensure the narrative adhered to accepted historical scholarship and that American Indians were represented

ratonhnhaketon/. Larry Frum, "American history unfolds in 'Assassin's Creed 3,'" *CNN Business*, October 19, 2012, accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/19/tech/gaming-gadgets/assassins-creed-3-history/index.html>.

authentically and respectfully. Ubisoft took the extra step of involving a historian and Kanien'kehá:ka cultural consultants to ensure that the historical narrative presented in the game abided by accepted historical scholarship and that the Kanien'kehá:ka people were represented respectfully and authentically, as the modern-day Kanien'kehá:ka would want them to be depicted. Early versions of *ACIII* had a scalping mechanic and representations of ceremonial masks used by the Kanien'kehá:ka nation, but these were removed at the recommendations of the cultural consultants. One consultant said, "to their credit, Ubisoft went above and beyond to ensure that the rich and distinct culture of the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Nation was accurately portrayed in the final product, to the best of their ability."⁷⁸

ACIII reflects newer thinking than classic Westerns. It could have been an entirely European and European American story with a thoroughly pro-United States position that included minorities only in subservient or negative roles, as had been seen in many previous Westerns. *ACIII* was instead created with newer historical scholarship and more modern societal influences in mind. Classic Westerns can overlook minority characters entirely, or if they do involve minorities, these characters are in secondary roles as "accessories" to the primary, white, characters.⁷⁹ While I argue Ratonhnhaké:ton fulfills the role of the white Western hero in the *ACIII* Western narrative, he is nonetheless portrayed by Ubisoft as a member of the Kanien'kehá:ka nation. Accompanying narrative devices force the player, presumed by Ubisoft to typically be a European American male, to consider United States history from the American

⁷⁸ Teiwí:sonte Thomas Deer, as quoted in Michael Venables, "The Awesome Mohawk Teacher and Consultant Behind Ratonhnhaké:ton," *Forbes*, November 25, 2012, accessed October 2, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelvenables/2012/11/25/the-consultants-behind-ratonhnhaketon/>.

⁷⁹ FitzGerald, 10.

Indian perspective. This is unique in list of visual sources evaluated here. One reviewer of *ACIII* said:

publishers from big video game companies are not known for subtlety or complexity of theme, and games set in America or tied to America's great military victories tend to wave the flag without pause... Fortunately, [*ACIII*] is refreshingly skeptical about the values fueling the Revolution while not knee-jerk anti-American either. The characters acknowledge the hypocrisy of freedom-loving Founding Fathers owning slaves just as they celebrate their resistance to non-democratic tyranny. Connor [Ratonhnhaké:ton]... is a man whose people will not win in the new America, and the game presents that painful truth not as a side note or history-textbook-footnote but as one of the main currents that pushes *ACIII*'s story along.⁸⁰

ACIII, a video game, a Western, makes clear that despite the values stated as the basis for the founding of the United States, many people of color will still experience injustice at the hands of the government and its white citizens. This is revolutionary.

Though Ubisoft did many positive things in *ACIII*, there were missed opportunities to produce a product that could have had an even greater impact on the representations of American Indians in visual media. In November of 2011, Ubisoft presented a survey to fans of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise of games. The survey was meant to find out what historical times, places, and themes generated the most interest to allow Ubisoft to create games that would produce greater sales figures. Eight options appeared on the survey, but at least one of the choices was more than a simple hypothetical. Already in development for two years when the survey was released and soon to be announced in February of 2012, *ACIII* was set in North America during the American Revolution. Ubisoft phrased the survey response that referred to *ACIII* in this way: "the confrontation between British colonists and [N]ative Americans during

⁸⁰ Stephen Totilo, "Assassin's Creed III: The Kotaku Review," Kotaku, October 31, 2012. <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2012/10/assassins-creed-iii-the-kotaku-review/>

The American Revolution.”⁸¹ In this survey Ubisoft’s focus was not the obvious conflict between European colonists and their mother country which features so prominently in more traditional visual depictions of the American Revolution. Instead, the survey’s focus was on the less represented conflict between the British Crown, the colonists, and the Indigenous peoples which took place at the same time. If they had followed the lines of the survey question, Ubisoft could have put the Kanien’kehá:ka nation’s perspective of the American Revolution front and center to capitalize on Ratonnhaké:ton as the main playable character.⁸² The scholarship of Zinn, Raphael, Graymont, Sadosky, and Glatthaar and Martin was there to support them in that endeavor. Unfortunately, the narrative of *ACIII* instead follows the standard history of the American Revolution.

Historical games as a genre have an opportunity available to them that they can exploit more powerfully than any other historical product, either popular or academic. This opportunity is the ability to enable the player to explore counterfactual history from a first-person perspective in order to highlight the principle of historical contingency and the importance of the agency of real historical actors.⁸³ By giving the player the agency to respond to situations and stimuli in the game world freely, historical games could mirror the agency of historical actors that lived in the past—and also emphasize the historical agency of those living in the present who will affect the

⁸¹ Tom Phillips, “Ubisoft surveys public on future Assassin’s Creed locations,” Eurogamer, 28 November 2011, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2011-11-28-ubisoft-survey-public-on-future-assassins-creed-locations>

⁸² Adrienne Shaw, “The Tyranny of Realism,” *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9 no. 14 (2015): 18-21.

⁸³ Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke, “What Does it Mean to Think Historically?” *Perspectives on History*, January 1, 2007, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2007/what-does-it-mean-to-think-historically>. Adrienne Shaw, “The Tyranny of Realism,” *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9, no. 14 (2015): 19-21. Accessed October 4, 2019. <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/157>

course of events. Combining this player agency with narrative opportunities to make choices that will change the flow of history inside the game is a fantastic opening for historians and players to explore what might have been, but wasn't. As Shaw says, "what if... the player were given the chance to explore what they might do when placed between the English and the colonists in late eighteenth-century New England? What would greater narrative agency... allow this game to communicate about being colonized?"⁸⁴ In the case of *ACIII* and the American Revolution, we might ask: what if Native peoples joined together with enslaved Africans to build a coalition and force the fledgling United States to acknowledge its wrongdoings and act honorably toward all the people of North America, without regard to skin color? What if a leader in the same vein as Wovoka, who inspired an American Indian anti-United States movement in the late 1800s, had appeared on the scene in the era of the American Revolution and helped to unite many of the Native nations to resist the colonization and genocide?⁸⁵ More simply, a game designer might ask what the player would do when faced with the real historical situation and allow the player to explore potential options from the Kanien'kehá:ka perspective, rather than the European American viewpoint.

Quiet but strengthening currents are changing the representations of Native Americans in visual media in the United States. Filmmakers from American Indian nations are a small but growing population who are insisting that their voices and perspectives be heard. Beverly R. Singer asserts that this is a necessary trend to reverse the damage that stereotypes of American Indians have caused Native Americans as well as other citizens of the United States.⁸⁶ Singer

⁸⁴ Shaw, 20-21.

⁸⁵ Michael Hittman and Don Lynch, *Wovoka and the Ghost Dance* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

⁸⁶ Beverly R. Singer, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

diplomatically says “this is not to say that whites cannot tell a good Native story, but until very recently whites—to the exclusion of Native people—have been the only people given the necessary support and recognition by society to tell Native stories.”⁸⁷ The argument Singer presents is that the common portrayal of American Indians in visual media is that of an unintelligent people in the past, and the best solution to overcome this problem is for American Indian filmmakers to tell more Native stories set in the present.⁸⁸

Singer notes how the work of individuals in the past made strong, positive impacts in the world of American Indians on film in the present. She describes the contributions of many Native Americans in the field of television and cinema. One such example is how Will Sampson, a famous American Indian actor who is a member of the Muscogee Creek from Oklahoma, “broke the ‘silent Indian’ stereotype and spoke as a human being. He opened the way to the kind of roles that Native American actors seek.”⁸⁹ Individual contributions like Sampson’s to the overall improvement of the way American Indians are represented in visual media in the United States are important to consider. In this case, if Ubisoft can lead the way with one game that improves upon how Native Americans have been represented, others can follow their example and take their efforts further. Non-Natives may be able to tell a good Native story, but American Indians likely will not be consistently represented respectfully until Native voices lead the way.

⁸⁷ Singer, 2.

⁸⁸ Singer, 1-2, 97.

⁸⁹ Singer, 21.

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