

# **I'm Not Nobody: *Dead Man*, Double Negatives, and Transcending Stereotypes of Native Americans**

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Jim Jarmusch's 1995 film *Dead Man* incorporates conventional stereotypes of Native Americans. Happily, the stereotypes invoked are primarily positive. For example, rather than be portrayed as a savage who threatens the white hero, the principal Native American character Nobody (Gary Farmer) serves as a healer and guide as well as the means through which the white character fulfills his destiny. Likewise, and in a manner reminiscent of Rousseau,<sup>1</sup> Jarmusch depicts Nobody, and Native Americans generally, as more attuned to their surroundings and more enlightened (and happy) than their white counterparts. Certainly, by portraying Native American characters and society in positive terms, and juxtaposing them to degenerate white characters and culture, Jarmusch offers an effective critique of modern "civil" society. However, to do justice to Native American individuals and cultures, and not just simply use them as a means to the end of social critique, one has to do more than invoke stereotypes. Arguably, one has to present Native American individuals and their respective traditions precisely as individuals, not as stereotypes. And with the exception of films written and produced by Native Americans themselves, little of this occurs in the American cinematic tradition.

In his essay "Savage Nations: Native Americans and the Western," Michael Valdez Moses asserts that Jarmusch's *Dead Man* is one rare example. He argues that in addition to portraying Native Americans in more sympathetic terms than his cinematic predecessors, Jarmusch "reverses historical and cinematic stereotypes" (Moses 282). Indeed, he contends that Jarmusch dispenses with "types" (Moses 287) and instead portrays Native Americans truly as individuals. While I do not agree that *Dead Man* transcends traditional stereotypes, I shall attempt, in the context of this essay, to extend Moses' argument by explaining how the film invokes then destabilizes stereotypes, a subversive technique that creates space for the emergence and appreciation of individual identities. Specifically, I shall discuss how the assignment of self-refuting proper names to certain characters frustrates the attribution of stereotypical properties to them and in doing so encourages the audience to focus on the special traits of the individual

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<sup>1</sup> See Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men" in *The Basic Political Writings*. Trans. Donald Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987. Here, Rousseau describes "savage man" (41) as possessing a "robust and nearly inalterable temperament" (40) in contrast to modern individuals who are prone to ill health and often become "dissolute" (44) because they have "abandon[ed] themselves to excesses" (43). Rather than compete with others over items they perceive as necessary, individuals in the state of nature instead display natural "pity" (55) and an "innate repugnance to seeing [their] fellow men suffer" (53). In short, Rousseau sees natural man as frequently more civil than his modern counterpart. With its horrifying portrayal of the town of Machine and its uncivil inhabitants, Jarmusch's film articulates the same sentiment.

presented. Particular attention will be paid to the Native American character Nobody; however, limited consideration will also be given to the hero William Blake (Johnny Depp). With respect to my theoretical framework, I shall draw primarily from the work of the existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and his notion of *negativités*, namely, how the negative nature of consciousness establishes an ontological foundation for individual dissociation from socially established or conventionally assigned identities.

Before we direct our attention to the film, we need to discuss Sartre's theory of personal identity. Sartre, as you know, is an existentialist. As such, he argues against traditional essentialist philosophies or philosophies that assert that existence is secondary to or determined by antecedent structures or essences. Such structures include God as a determining force in the universe and the subconscious as a determining agent in the individual psyche. With respect to personal identity, Sartre is emphatic that there is no innate self or eternal soul. In his view, there is no core aspect of identity that is immune to socio-historical influence. Rather, he argues that personal identity develops over time and through experience. He asserts personal identity is mutable and can be shaped by individual choice.

According to Sartre, when individuals arrive on the scene they do not have any identity. They are individuals to be sure. They are biologically unique; however, they do not have a self in a psychological sense. To have a self in a psychological sense means to have a reflective sense of one's self, namely, to have an idea of oneself as a being with a specific history, definite physical characteristics and emotional tendencies, as well as distinct values and beliefs. For Sartre, the self is a conceptual figure, a psychological construct that presumes the existence of a physical individual with certain cognitive abilities. It is a concept that presumes and refers to a materially existing person, but is not in itself material.

As Sartre indicates in *Being and Nothingness*, personal identity is a strange something that's built, among other things, on nothing. As indicated previously, when individuals arrive on the scene they do not have selves; however, they do have consciousness. Consciousness is a necessary condition of selfhood and it has an important, albeit enigmatic, nature: it is negative. Indeed, Sartre is famous, or perhaps infamous, for characterizing consciousness as a "nothingness" (16). To say that consciousness is a nothingness is not to deny its existence. Instead, it is to say that in order for objective awareness to exist consciousness must be distinct from that of which it is aware. Consciousness is not nothing; it is simply not a thing in an objective sense. As Sartre explains, in order to have consciousness of something, consciousness cannot be coincidental with that something. Consciousness itself provides a good example. Think about what you were just thinking. The consciousness that is now doing the thinking is not coincidental with the mental state that has become the object of thought. As Sartre rightly notes, there is a fundamental rift between subjective consciousness (the process of thinking) and its objective content (objects of thought).

The rift between individual consciousness and the world of which it is aware is a focal point for Sartre because it has a number of important ramifications. Most

importantly, it is the basis for human freedom. Indeed, Sartre states that it is the negative nature of consciousness that allows it to “dissociat[e]...from the causal series which constitutes being” (58). This “nihilating withdrawal” (Sartre 58) creates a “rupture in determinism” (Sartre 70) that establishes the “possibility...[of] freedom” (Sartre 60). Consciousness represents a new causal factor that emerges in the context of being, one whose emergence changes everything by creating the opportunity for humans to reflexively grasp (i.e., know) and intentionally influence, the world in which they find themselves. The negative nature of consciousness is also the basis for existential alienation or “anguish” (Sartre 71). Sartre argues that because our consciousness forever separates from that of which we are aware, it condemns subjective consciousness, the center of our being, to perpetual estrangement. For this reason Sartre states, “human reality...therefore is by nature unhappy” (140). For present purposes, the negative nature of consciousness is significant, because it creates a permanent rift between the individual and her self, a rift that makes redefinition of self a practical possibility.

But how do we get selves in the first place? According to Sartre, personal identity emerges within a social context. He makes it clear in *Being and Nothingness* that while individuals can develop to a point where they can intentionally shape their own identities, they do not create them on their own. Instead, it is through interaction with others that the individual develops self-consciousness, and correspondingly a self. According to Sartre, individual identity develops initially through the spontaneous and uncritical assimilation (and later through more critical and creative appropriation) of the characterizations of self that other people provide. Personality identity emerges in early childhood and an individual’s caregivers are the most influential when it comes to the development of his or her identity. For example, if a child’s caregivers consistently characterize her as smart and applaud her for her intelligence, it is likely that she will begin to conceive of herself as bright. Importantly, the development of personal identity does not conclude in late childhood or even late adolescence. Instead, it is constantly refashioned throughout one’s lifetime. Thus, regardless of whether the Other is as immediate as a parent, or as amorphous as popular culture or what Heidegger would call “the they” (149), Sartre states, “being-with-others [is] a necessary condition of my being-for-self” (322).

As Sartre explains, selves develop in a socio-linguistic or dialogic context and have definitive properties. Importantly, selves are complex. Though individuals normally refer to their selves in the singular, it is more accurate to say that a given person’s self operates as a placeholder for a host of terms or traits. A sort of amalgam, one’s self is a composite conceptual entity that undergoes change, but remains recognizable and consistent by virtue of its association with a particular biological individual and because of the fact that it is a composite that doesn’t normally undergo wholesale change. Individual components change while others remain constant. This creates sufficient continuity for the maintenance of identity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of the complex and paradoxical nature of identity, see David Hume’s “Of Personal Identity” in *Journey Through the Landscape of Philosophy*, ed. Jack Bowen, New York: Pearson, 2008. Here, Hume affirms the notion of personal identity as a sort of placeholder when he states that the “self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference” (101). Moreover, he corroborates Sartre’s claim that we are never entirely coincidental with

Individuals also have an unusual relationship to their own selves. Having a self is advantageous to an individual because it gives her a standard by which to measure and sort options. As such it helps with decision-making. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how one would make many decisions without one. As such, a self is, or at least can be, an instrument of freedom. At the same time, by virtue of the “duality [at] the foundation” (Sartre 131) of individual consciousness, the individual is never coincidental with the self that she is. As Sartre states, “this self with its historical content is the essence of [the individual]” (72); however, by virtue of the negative nature of consciousness, it is “always separated by a nothingness from [this] essence” (72). Paradoxically, consciousness is nothing other than the self that it is, and at the same time is not that self. As Sartre states, consciousness’s lack of coincidence with anything produces the strange situation where “the Me-as-Object-for-Myself is a Me which is not Me” (Sartre 365). Moreover, because other people shape our identities, our identities can be not only sources of irritation, but also oppression.

Of course, here is our opportunity to get back to *Dead Man* and what it has to say about stereotypes and identity. *Dead Man* introduces audiences to Nobody when the main character William Blake is forced to flee the town of Machine after he shoots and kills a man and is himself shot. Wounded seriously, Blake falls off his horse and into the temporary oblivion of unconsciousness. When he wakes he finds himself in the care of a lone Native American man. Later, when Blake asks the name of his caretaker, he is perplexed with the response he hears: Nobody. Nobody is certainly somebody to Blake. Blake’s life depends on him. Blake then asks Nobody about his name. Nobody answers that he hasn’t always been called Nobody, but that he chose this name and “prefer[s]” it. Nobody explains that when he was young he was subject to ridicule because of his mixed lineage. His community made it clear to him that his mixed self was not desirable. Indeed, he says he was left alone much of the time. Later, as an adult, Nobody was subject to ridicule again when he returned to his nation after being abducted by soldiers and sold. He spent years abroad, including months being “paraded around” in a cage like a circus animal and was later placed in a “white man’s school.” When Nobody eventually returned to his people, they were incredulous at the stories he told and dubbed him “He Who Talks Loudly and Says Nothing.” Indignant at the name he was given and at his own people’s distrust of his words, he elected to live in exile and under a new name.

Nobody’s decision to change his name is significant for a couple of reasons. First, it clearly indicates Sartre’s claim: “I am the self which I [am] in the mode of not being it” (Sartre 68). Clearly, Nobody he feels a fundamental disconnect between his base sense of identity and his socially established self, and this disconnect makes his redefinition of self possible. The name Nobody disavows, He Who Talks Loudly and Says Nothing, does not

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our self, stating, “for my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble...I never catch myself at any time...[I] can never observe anything but the perception” (101). Of selves generally, Hume states that rather than be invariable (a prerequisite for true logical identity), “they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed one another...and are in perpetual flux and movement” (101). Because they contain nothing sufficiently “invariable and interrupted to justify our [logical] notion of identity” (103), he concludes by describing the self as a convenient “fiction” (103) produced through the action of the “imagination” (105) by virtue of customary association and for practical benefit.

capture all that he is. It derides his character by eliminating any value in his speech and implies an undesirable arrogance. It also impairs his agency by encouraging a negative social perception, one that might disincline people from granting him valuable opportunities. In a unique and ultimately liberating maneuver, Nobody trades one nothing for another when he adopts his new name. However, these two nothings are far from equivalent. For one, they are different by virtue of the fact that one is assigned by others from without, whereas the other is intentionally chosen. Nobody's decision to rename himself demonstrates that he is cognizant that he is not identical with his socially assigned identity. His action illustrates Sartre's assertion that we can "make [and remake] ourselves" (Sartre 101) and that we do so by virtue of the negative nature of consciousness. We seize the opportunity to create ourselves by rejecting the self that is given and asserting, "I am not that."

In his well-known article, "Brains in Vats," philosopher Hilary Putnam discusses what philosophers refer to as "self-refuting statements" (101). As he states, a self-refuting statement is a statement "whose truth imply [its] own falsity" (Putnam 101). Putnam states, "For example, 'I do not exist' is self-refuting if thought by me (for any 'me'). So, one can be certain one oneself exists if one thinks about it" (101). Putnam's discussion of self-refuting statements can be applied to *Dead Man*. In *Dead Man*, Jarmusch attributes self-refuting proper names to several of his characters, the most obvious being Nobody. Clearly, Nobody's statement, "I am Nobody" is a self-refuting statement. To make this assertion Nobody must be somebody. Therefore, Nobody is not Nobody. Thus, in the context of the narrative, Nobody seizes control of and affirms his identity by naming himself Nobody. At the same time, by naming himself Nobody, he maintains a certain ambiguity of character, thereby precluding the limiting of his identity through the ascription of specific linguistic properties associated with certain proper names (e.g. Faith, Prudence, Hope).

Of course, when we look at the narrative, we recall that Nobody is in fact not a real person. He is a character, a Native American character, and Jarmusch's decision to name him Nobody is significant in this respect as well. Before we know his name, Nobody is presented in a stereotypical fashion. He is in native dress (or what viewers have come to identify as traditional native dress) and adopts a stereotypical role for a Native American in a western, namely, he serves as a healer and guide. Top this stereotypical portrayal with some predictable "Indian" name and it would be easy for viewers to stop paying attention to Nobody and instead just see him in terms of his established role. Philosopher Jerome Stolnitz argues that we do this all the time. He argues that once an individual or entity has been identified by its proper name, we often stop looking at its properties and think of it only in terms of its placeholder or label and the value or use that label implies. As an example, Stolnitz discusses our ordinary perception of a pen, namely, the fact that the second most of us recognize a pen as a pen we stop seeing the specific pen and start using it. He states, "our perception is usually limited...Usually perception is...a rapid and momentary identification of the kind of thing it is and its uses...perception [is] economized...[and] it is astonishing how little of the world we really see. We read the labels on things to know how to act with regard to them, but we hardly see the things themselves" (Stolnitz 79).

Ultimately, what Stolnitz says is true of our perception of pens is no less true of our perception of people. We frequently see people only in terms of their labels: cashier, lawyer, red-neck, Indian. However, in the case of Nobody, the assignment of a self-refuting proper name frustrates the labeling process. The self-refuting character of the name Nobody, and the fact we are repeatedly reminded of it throughout the film (through comedic lines of dialogue such as Blake responding, “I am with Nobody,” and later plaintively walking around calling, “Nobody, Nobody”) creates cognitive dissonance in viewers. The use of a self-refuting name confounds our understanding. It simultaneously keeps from moving off the name and getting anything from it. Stymied in this way, our attention must direct itself to the individual to whom the name refers. We must pay attention to him, to his words, his actions, his gestures, and relations. We must get to know Nobody rather than conceive of him in terms of his name. And as anyone who has seen the film knows, Nobody is a rich and unique character. His significance is made obvious not only through his unusual name and physical stature, but also by the volume and weight of his dialogue and his knowledge of art and culture. For example, unlike the “stupid fucking white man” to whom he repeatedly refers, Nobody not only knows of the poet William Blake, he can recite Blake’s poetry from memory. Nobody’s relevance is further reinforced by the essential role he plays in the survival, transformation, and spiritual deliverance of the film’s other William Blake.

As mentioned previously, Jarmusch assigns more than one character a self-refuting name. Indeed, he gives the main character William Blake one as well. Though his name contradicts itself in a different way than Nobody’s, the fact that both he and Nobody have self-refuting names is important to the extent it creates a parallelism between the two characters. This reinforces their unique connection to one another and their equal standing in the narrative. For present purposes, it demonstrates that Nobody has at least the same ontological status as his white counterpart. Unlike Nobody who chooses his name, Blake’s name is his given name. However, William Blake both is and is not William Blake. While his birth name is William Blake, he is not the famous poet and artist that Nobody thinks he is or who springs immediately to viewers’ minds. In the same way that Blake was surprised at the disclosure of Nobody’s name, Nobody is shocked to learn Blake’s. And while it is not clear that Nobody ever realizes that his companion is anyone other than the iconic author, both the audience and Blake immediately recognize that it is a case of mistaken identity. However, as time progresses, audiences bear witness to Blake’s transformation from an awkward accountant into a poet who “writes with a gun.” Where Blake begins by rejecting that he is *the* William Blake, he ends by rejecting his original identity and embracing a new one. Importantly, this new identity is motivated by Blake’s realization that he can be other than what he is. This is a prospect he discovers in the self-refuting nature of his name. It is made possible by the negative nature of individual consciousness, namely its ability dissociate from what it is. As Sartre states and Blake realizes, “I am not my past [self]...[precisely] because I was it” (170).

Ultimately, both Nobody’s and William Blake’s self-refuting names prompt heightened audience attention to their characters by virtue of the fact that we know they cannot be who they are. Like the koan “What’s the sound of one hand clapping?” that a

Zen master might use to confound a student's conventional awareness and awaken a higher level of understanding, the self-refuting names that Jarmusch assigns urge us to attend more closely to unique characters that he presents. While he begins by presenting them in stereotypical terms, audiences are quickly urged beyond this understanding through the unconventional names given the two primary characters. Consistent with Hans-Georg Gadamer's account of the "hermeneutic circle" (265), Jarmusch shows that understanding begins with "prejudices" (265), not necessarily in the form of intentional biases, but in the form of unconscious "prejudgments" or partial views. Gadamer states, "a person who is trying to understand...is always projecting" (267) and what individuals normally project are "habits of thought" (267) derived from their cultural milieu and the limited horizon of their own experience. As Gadamer explains, understanding both moves forward and can be stalled by these preliminary and necessarily limited projections. They are beneficial to the extent they facilitate our first encounter with that which is foreign to our experience; however, they can preclude the development of a more complete understanding if we fail to relinquish and revise them in response to actual contact with the new subject, or what Gadamer describes as "the things themselves" (267). As Gadamer states, "interpretation begins with foreconceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. The constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding...The only 'objectivity' here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning" (267) in actual experience.

By giving his characters self-refuting proper names, Jarmusch helps ensure the forward progress of our understanding. While he starts us off with a stereotypical Indian and a run-of-the-mill white man, he helps us see they are both far more than the sum of our initial perceptions and their unusual names. Like Sartre, Jarmusch illustrates that until the point at which one becomes a dead man, one exists in the mode of "surpass[ing] [one's] being" (Sartre 144) or a state of "denied identity" (Sartre 247). Like Blake himself, *Dead Man* brings its audience from innocence to experience, from incomplete understanding of self, to a realization of the incommensurability of individuals and their "constantly renewed obligation to [transcend] and remake the Self which [they are]" (Sartre 72).

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