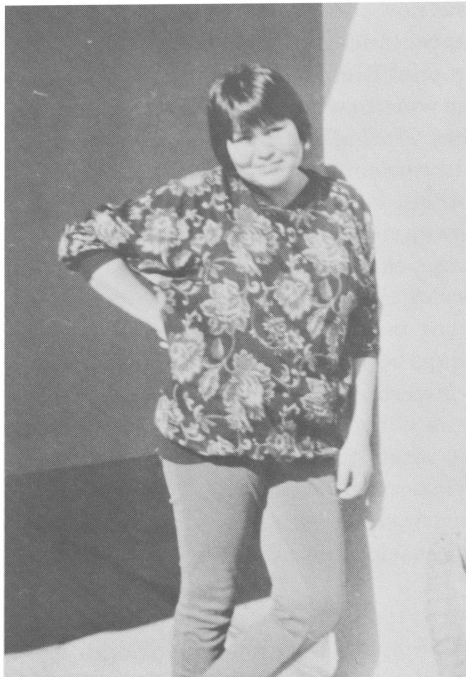


An Interview with Geraldine Keams

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When Geraldine Keams visited Iowa State University for the annual Symposium on the American Indian in 1983, I had the opportunity to interview her. The tape remained untranscribed until we met again in California during the fall of 1986, more than three years later. Geri and I discussed the directions her life had taken since our initial meeting, and we both agreed that her comments made in 1983 were still relevant. The interview is printed below in full, and some contemporary comments about her life bring the interview up to date.

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In 1983 Keams was best known for her role as the Indian woman in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Today her roles are far more varied. Although she is still acting, and lives in Hollywood, she is telling traditional Navajo stories at museums throughout the southwest and California, she is a political activist, she is writing poetry and giving readings, and she is an aspiring screen writer.

Keams was born on the Navajo reservation in Castle Butte, Arizona, and was influenced by her grandmother, a well-known weaver. She heard and learned the traditional stories and later learned to weave. After college, she studied acting and performed with the Lee Strasberg School and Cafe LaMama in New York, but today she is spending more time behind the camera than in front of it. She was a consultant on *Broken Rainbow*, the documentary film which analyzes the Hopi-Navajo land dispute, but now she is anxious to get back to her dream to produce her own film. Acceptance into the Writers Guild of America West and the production of a pilot film have moved her closer to her full-length film about an Indian woman who comes to Los Angeles from the reservation. Keams describes *Trail of Pollen* as a comedy adventure story. Rather than viewing the contemporary urban situation for American Indians as dismal and without hope, Keams can laugh at the incongruities. The ability of the protagonist to cope with the “characters” found in Los Angeles provides the humor of her film.

As co-founder of the Big Mountain Support Group of Los Angeles, Keams has spent much of her time speaking to church groups and educational groups about the conflicts among the Hopi, Navajo, and the United States government over the parcel of reservation land at Big Mountain. She is political, and her politics are broadly based. She is concerned about reservation issues, but she is also “tired of eighty years of Hollywood’s interpretation of what Indians are.” In this attitude, her views today are consistent with those expressed three years ago about the lack of success for minorities and women in the entertainment industry.

She is consistent too in her reverence for the beliefs she learned from her grandmother about her role as an Indian woman. In one of her poems, Keams writes about the peace that she has gained from tradition:

Weaving my thoughts
Listening to time as it passes slowly in front of me
Softly so I can see the me I have learned to be
I sat weaving, ever so carefully
Weaving my life back into order.

GB: Tell me something about your background, how you grew up and where you went to school.

GK: I grew up both on and off the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, and I had a traditional upbringing from going home on weekends to my grandmother. I also went to boarding schools and public schools. I went to about twelve different schools before I graduated from high school, so I had a lot of different kinds of experiences as far as going

into non-Indian situations and going back to being with the Navajos and going back and forth. I would always go back to my grandmother's and that is how I picked up the language and the Navajo ways, going back out there and herding sheep, doing chores, and taking care of the land. My grandmother lives on quite a bit of land and they are sheep herders. Navajos are sheep herders, and they plant corn, so there was always a lot of responsibility when I went home on weekends. I virtually had no social life unless I was into sports and that only happened at school. Being the oldest of nine kids, I was pushed into situations where I had to always be the responsible one, the one held accountable, and the one put in charge whenever the family had to go away. At a very early age of eight years old I was cooking for my other brothers and sisters and taking care of them and changing diapers and washing diapers, so I guess that is why I am thirty-one and I haven't had any kids. I haven't gotten married and I have already done all of it. Being the oldest of nine brothers and sisters, I did have a lot of responsibility and my family was always saying, "well, you aren't a kid." I never played with dolls, never got the chance to do what all other little girls did and when I went to school and read about Dick and Jane and Spot and Puff, it was a totally different world. I had no conception of the kind of world that a little white girl would have, and it just seemed so unreal to me and almost surreal. I didn't pay too much attention. I learned to read; I loved to read, but I had no idea about how Jane or Dick or some of these characters actually lived. I had no idea what it was. My favorite thing was reading. That is how I escaped from all the day-to-day life on a reservation and going to school out there and everything. It was my way of going off to another world of David Copperfield or Moby Dick and a lot of other adventure stories. I was about twelve years old, and I read everything I could lay my hands on and I did really well in school. I never had any trouble. As a matter of fact, I had teachers who saw me as being an exceptionally well-versed Navajo child. They constantly were putting challenges before me and they would even set aside special projects just for me after school to keep me going. Finally it was strongly suggested to my mother that I go off the reservation and go to public school, so she put me into public school when I was in about 7th or 8th grade and from there on through high school I was in public school. When I look back on my background or my life, it always seems like I was educating myself, always trying to learn how to read better, write better, or that kind of thing. What remained essentially just as important was what my grandmother would teach me. I had this desire to combine the written word with listening to what my elders had to say.

GB: How do you define your role now as a Navajo woman?

GK: In the Navajo way, women are the care takers. They are the care

takers of the tribe, they keep the bloodline moving. If something is going on with the people or the family, it is the woman who has to do something about it. They are the ones who are the lifeline of the tribe and women have a lot more to say and they have a lot more power and control over what actually happens because more women these days are actually supporting their families alone, single women, who have children. There are more and more Navajo women in leadership positions and all of a sudden after all these years of living in this world where we think the men knew what they were doing, now we are finding out that they don't and that they are ruining a lot of things in the world and our safety is being threatened in the world. Women bear children, and just in that experience alone they have an alliance with the earth and the earth being our mother, we being a mother. Just the whole idea of being a woman in terms of my Navajo background gives me a real feeling of independence. I was very independent as a child growing up and now being a woman I consider myself as thinking for myself, making decisions for a better life, always for a better life. My role as a Navajo woman is to try to make things better for my people in some ways and when I say "my people," it is not only for the Navajo but it is for human beings as well because we are all part of the same family which is on this earth. This earth is our mother, and we are responsible for her. That is really philosophical and it gets very metaphysical, but it is the lifeline of the way I live. It is like getting up every day and washing my face and brushing my teeth, it is just sort of that kind of knowledge. It is always a part of me. When you are growing up, you watch the women around you and they talk to you and they discipline you and they give you words of wisdom on these things and you integrate these things into your life and you are always conscious of it no matter what you do. Because of that and the accumulation of experiences over the years I am put into a situation as a woman to maintain that strength that our women have had over the years, the clanmothers, the medicine people. We are the new medicine people of tomorrow. People are preserving the old philosophy, and we are trying through films or through theatre, or through poetry or writing a novel to preserve that way of life which is being threatened now. We are trying to save that, and we feel the urgency.

GB: Given what is a very traditional philosophy of life combined with your choices to go into film, film making, and acting, have you found yourself psychologically compromised?

GK: Filmmaking and acting and that whole area of the arts is so new it hasn't really been touched upon or explored and so being Indian, being a woman, being involved in the filmmaking industry, there is a certain amount of difficulty in that. There is a certain amount of always feeling alone, always feeling this agony of bringing it all

together. I feel very good about women getting involved in filmmaking just in the last ten years, how women have permeated the filmmaking industry and video arts, both in the political structure and in the business management and marketing end of film making and video distribution. I derive power and energy from that knowledge. It gives me a chance, a chance to go on, to keep going on and I just hang in there and I hope that I will not give up and that soon other Indian people will join me, but as I say it is very difficult. For so long, Indians have given up their stories, they have given up their ceremonies, and they see it published in books and they see it in records and movies and they say, "I am not going to sacrifice my stories any more" and "I have been used and abused" and that kind of thing and they are very leery of the film world and they are very leery of anything that will record or duplicate or take their image away, like a camera or a picture. A lot of these technical products have been stigmatized, and Indian people don't feel like they want to be a part of it. People like myself go in there and we are trying to change this and go at it from the other angle, from the other side, saying if we don't document, if we don't preserve, then it is really going to be lost. From the other side, I am a product of that culture and that tradition and old way and I understand why a lot of people are the way they are and that they don't want to share real sensitive details about their culture and religion and the spiritual aspects, but yet they are more apt to listen to me now because they feel there is an urgency and that the only way to do it is through video or documenting on film or tape. There are people who are willing to listen a lot more these days.

GB: You have talked about how Clint Eastwood did listen and did allow you to help shape your own role in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. What are some of the compromises that you had to make, roles you had to play or things you had to do that were not so successful?

GK: *Josey Wales* was probably the most ideal situation I have ever been in. The other films, *Born to the Wind* and *The Legend of Walks-far-woman*, were very cliché-ridden, very typical Hollywood Indian scripts. They really simplified the life of the Indian family. There was really no story at all, no conflict, no reality; it was sort of like the Disneyland image of what an Indian family would live like in the 1800s and it is unrealistic in many ways. I have had to make compromises in my own mind, always just trying to think of ways that this could possibly change. With that hope I have played those roles where the women are shown as one dimensional, and the man's character is always a little more developed than the Indian woman's. The Indian woman is totally a cardboard figure, a shadow of the man. In reality the women are the lifeline of their people. They don't show that, so you do tend to have to compromise because you are faced with the fact that your agent calls you in and

you have to audition and if you get the job you make the money. Many different things are based on a system that has taken a hundred years to develop. It has taken all this time to say that this is an Indian woman, this is the way Indian people live. It has taken a hundred years of a certain kind of attitude that the public or Hollywood thinks the public would have about Indians. It is totally superficial, fabricated and without truth, but it doesn't change overnight. Raquel Welch played "wonderwoman" of the Indian nation, running through the village barefoot, racing against a man, running out in the forest, coming home with the deer. You know she is playing the man's role and in Indian society this doesn't happen. There was a very fine line, a fine bond between a man and a woman and their responsibility as members of a tribe. In those days people did have a very democratic way of running a tribe. Every tribe is considered a nation and every nation had its own cultural traits, the way they looked at the different sexes and responsibilities of the male and the female, but every single tribe believed that both sides had to equally join together in balance or there would be no life. You have to have a man and the woman and with that there is unity and balance and harmony in the world. In every single nation in this country that was the philosophy. There is distortion of that cultural reality by the Hollywood film industry.

GB: Tell me some things about the employment situation for American Indians in the film business. How many Indian people are really involved and how many should be?

GK: By any kind of percentage basis as far as the population of American Indians in this country is concerned, the number of individuals who have decided to become producers or directors or actors is very small. Because there has always been little hope, there has always been doubt that anything was ever possible. Who would ever dream of an Indian funding a big Hollywood production or who would ever dream of an Indian directing an Oscar-winning film? There are more Indian actors and actresses now, but directors are even fewer, producers even fewer, and writers, almost next to nothing. I think we need more writers. That is where I think the whole thing lies.

GB: One of the problems has been in casting of Indian parts in films. What are some examples?

GK: *Mystic Warrior* is the ultimate example. *Mystic Warrior* had a cast of 80 to 100 Indians, or maybe even more, a whole village. There are all Mexican people playing the parts. I know that *Mystic Warrior* did go through a lot of political problems because of the *Hanto Yo* issue. As a result of that, I think the producers were afraid of being threatened again and having to spend even more money, so they played it safe and they hired all Mexicans. What does that do for Indian people? Absolutely nothing. It sets us even farther back. It

makes some Indian people even more insecure.

GB: What is your fantasy film? If you could choose a film to either direct or write or act in, what would the subject or theme be?

GK: I would like to direct and I would like to help develop a couple of projects. My fantasy film, and I have always wanted to do it, would be to do the classic cowboy and Indian movie in reverse and do it all from the Indians' side. Have all the classic components of a western cowboy and Indian movie, but tell it from the Indian's point of view. The other one is to try to capture the essence of what Indian people were before the Europeans came. I know a lot of people have attempted to do the Indian movie of the century, to make the movie that will capture the spirituality of what the Indians feel about the land and the world and the universe and they want to be the one to capture the spirit of Crazy Horse or the essence of Sitting Bull. I think that would be a fantasy of mine, to do the Indian movie about some figure like Geronimo who everyone thinks was the most brutal savage or war-like man of all times and to actually see this man being a simple medicine man.

GB: What do you see for the future?

GK: As time goes on I really feel that we are the ones who have to change. We are the ones who have to be motivated to change things, otherwise they are never going to be done. When my grandmother said nobody else is going to do it for me except myself, I never realized that some day I would actually think of having to produce my own film out of a desperate cry to express some kind of truth. I realized that to complain and demonstrate, to tear down the system was not going to help, that that was only going to agitate and would not create solutions. It would only stir up the dust, and the dust will settle down almost in the same place. And then I heard about becoming a technical militant, and I wanted to find out more of what that meant. I finally realized that being a technical militant only meant getting off my behind to quit complaining and to do something about whatever it was that I was complaining about—to move my people ahead, to move myself ahead toward my vision of the future.