

"You have stolen everything from us": Progressive Perspectives in *The Revenant*

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From the jarring lyrics of “What Made the Red Man Red?” to the failed attempts at sympathetic storylines, the depiction of Native Americans in popular film is a narrative wrought with controversy. Scholarly attention on this issue has increased in the past few decades, and it is now almost common knowledge that Hollywood has created an Indian that never existed. The white man who scourged tribal lands, destroyed Native culture, and hunted America’s indigenous people to near extinction has had the power to define Native American identity since they first arrived in the New World. In turn, public opinion has been shaped by the common narrative threaded through popular stereotypes. Although indigenous voices have seemed lost in the flurry of media, in the past few decades, some Native Americans have begun producing films that provide more realistic portraits of Native persons and cultures. In addition, more non-Native filmmakers have begun to work alongside Native Americans to change the inaccurate representation of indigenous people in the media. One such film is the recent *The Revenant*. The 2015 film, while not free of stereotypes altogether, nonetheless provides a more nuanced representation of Native Americans than many of the films of the past.

To understand the monumental impact of *The Revenant* on the history of Native American representation, one must first grasp the common stereotypes found in some of America’s most beloved films. The Hollywood Western, Disney classics, and modern films have all erred in their depictions of Native peoples by adhering to conventional beliefs about indigenous identity. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick has studied these stereotypes extensively. She finds they derive largely from early European explorers’ “stories of wild savages that fit neatly into the preconceived notions the Europeans had of what a savage would be” (1). In fact, because the United States sought to create a sense of nationalism, the American Indian’s story had to be changed. As Gretchen Bataille and Charles Silet argue in *Pretend Indians*, “one could not wipe out a noble race without justification, and so the bloodthirsty noble savage was created... White Americans could become savage, too, to crush savagism to save civilization” (xxi). In a sense, the myth known as Hollywood’s Indian was created to cope with the nation’s guilt and to create a counter narrative that could combat the history of Native American genocide.

These stereotypes, then, are vital to the way the American Indian is viewed today. They are embedded in our very culture. Indian princesses, bloodthirsty savages, noble warriors, stoic men, and lustful squaws – the list goes on and on. The Western, for example, is rife with inaccurate portrayals of Native characters. In John Ford’s *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards and Martin Pawley set out on a mission to rescue Ethan’s niece from the

Comanche. Along the way, the two meet a Comanche woman named Look, who is traded to the men in exchange for other goods. Elisa Marubbio analyzes Look's function as a squaw in the film in *Killing the Indian Maiden*. Look "occupies the position of a racial scapegoat for both white male and female frustration" (Marubbio 154). She is characterized as a "comic buffoon" (Preistley), and follows Martin around in the hopes of being a good wife and consummating their marriage. Instead, she is met with violence and is treated "as an unwanted piece of property...[attacked] because [Martin] is frustrated he married the wrong woman" (Marrubio 155). The film justifies violence towards the clueless, voiceless character on the basis of her identity as a squaw.

Despite arguments to the contrary, this pattern of representation continues even into the 1990s. Walt Disney's *Pocahontas* is arguably the most famous Indian Princess. Unfortunately, the Disney portrayal is anchored in stereotypes, not history. Indeed, a wealth of scholars, including Cornel Pewewardy, Tarrell Portman and Roger Herring, Karenne Wood, Jeff Berglund, and Marrubio – just to name a few – find virtually no factual connections between Disney's animation and the true story of Pocahontas. In the 1600s, the famous "princess" was kidnapped by Samuel Argall and taken to Jamestown. Wood points out "although her father paid the ransom the English demanded, they refused to return her" (75). Instead, she was married off to John Rolfe and shipped to England where she died around twenty years of age. Berglund argues the animated classic serves to assuage cultural guilt. The magic of Disney "is a disappearing act. Add the right elements, create distractions, play into the audience's needs, and 'poof', genocide and the enduring trauma of conquest vanishes" (50).

The film accomplishes this task through invoking another stereotype. In addition to perpetuating the myth of the Indian princess, *Pocahontas* reinforces the stereotype of a stoic, savage Indian through the portrayal of Kocoum. He is reserved and nearly emotionless through most of the film, which are contributing factors toward Pocahontas's decision to dismiss him as suitor. When he tries to kill John Smith, Kocoum is shot and killed. While his death is mourned briefly, it is also justified by the need for Smith to live in order for the love story to continue. This romantic backdrop "[diverts] attention from serious issues, such as the killing of Kocoum, [who is] the only person at all to die in the film's eighty-eight minutes" (Berglund 51). The audience feels little to no discomfort about his death due to his characterization. In sum, the beloved Disney classic is a prominent example of whitewashed history and America's continued attempts to ignore the atrocities committed against Native peoples.

Disney's treatment of Native Americans is a continued subject of scholarship. Its 1953 version of *Peter Pan* has been decried for its racist depiction of tribal members. In David Martinez's review of the early film, he writes, "my jaw hit the ground when I heard [What Made the Red Man Red?] and saw those 'redskins' hopping around and making fools of themselves" (40). The 2015 live action remake, *Pan*, moved away from the red-toned animated Indians. However, it did so through the problematic practice of whitewashing. Principally, the white actress Rooney Mara plays the character of Tiger Lily. Whitewashing has been a typical practice in Hollywood since the earliest days of films, and Native Americans are not its only victims. As Boyd asserts, "by casting white people over Indians consistently, Hollywood sends a clear message about whom they value" (108).

Tiger Lily is already a painful reminder of past racism for tribes across the United States. Whitewashing her character continues to demean the indigenous experience through reinforcing how little their culture is respected. Indeed, Nicolas Rosenthal supports this assertion in his research about native actors in Hollywood. He stresses, “it is difficult to imagine another ethnic group being caricatured and mocked the way that Indians are every day...through film, television, and literature...Indians in Hollywood [struggle] to change filmic representations” (347). Without tribal members telling their own story, it is impossible to represent indigenous identity accurately.

Hollywood’s errors do not end here. Also in 2015, Adam Sandler released his Western parody, *The Ridiculous Six* on Netflix. Although leery of taking on the project, Native American actors were promised that producers “had hired a cultural consultant and efforts would be made for a tasteful representation of Natives” (Schilling). Unfortunately, they quickly found Sandler’s film has no regard for accuracy in the portrayal of Native customs and therefore no respect for indigenous culture and tradition. The filmmaker’s use of humiliating Indian stereotypes led to approximately a dozen Native American actors and actresses and the cultural advisor walking off the set. The film is rampant with culturally inappropriate jokes. For example, women fit the role of the stereotypical squaw. In one scene, “Never Wears Bra” exits her tepee and speaks to Tommy, the lead character played by Sandler: “I had a dream about you last night, White Knife,” but it was “not nice dream. In dream you naughty. You naughty, White Knife” (*The Ridiculous Six*). Not only is she sexualized in this scene, but it is also implied she is unintelligent due to her broken English. Allison Young, one of the many Native Americans to walk off set, sums up the film quite well through her comment: “Nothing has changed. We are still just Hollywood Indians” (Schilling).

By the end of 2015, it is easy to see why many Native Americans share Young’s sentiments. However, Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* offers something much different than the preceding films. In a just under three hours, it presents a complex and enlightened narrative that tells a different tale. Although it is not a primarily Native American film, the importance of tribal people to the narrative deserves scholarly attention. The film takes great care to present culturally accurate depictions and showcases the languages of both the Arikara and Pawnee tribes. In addition, it combats long-standing stereotypes about indigenous people by putting Native American actors front and center to tell their own story.

Allowing Native Americans to play leading roles is not common, but *The Revenant*’s team hoped to change that. Their attention to casting is a break away from whitewashing practices seen in films like *Pan*. Indeed, the cast is made up of a wealth of first nation actors, including Duane Howard as Elk Dog; Forrest Goodluck as Hawk; Arthur Redcloud as Hikuc; Melaw Nakehk’o as Powaqqa; and Grace Dove as Glass’s late wife (“*The Revenant: Full Cast and Crew*”). This list does not include the numerous Native American extras cast to play Arikara or Pawnee tribal members. Lee Schweninger, author of *Imagic Moments: Indigenous North American Film*, offers commentary about the importance of self-representation when indigenous characters are used in film. His idea is simple: “self-representation is a form of resistance and is necessarily a fundamental aspect of Indigenous film. Naturally, a commitment to self-representation mandates that

Indigenous roles be played by Indigenous people” (Schweninger 7). If a film strives to present an accurate portrayal of Native Americans, then those very people should be a part of the film. Without being able to tell their story with their own voices, tribal customs will continue to be misrepresented. In *The Revenant*, the indigenous cast clearly displays the film’s mission of authenticity in cultural depictions by casting an array of actors and actresses from different tribal backgrounds.

The culture of different tribes is also a hot topic in academia. Indeed, Native American studies scholars have long discussed the issue of cultural generalization. Michelle Raheja argues that many of the stereotypical images associated with the American Indian “are predicated on a persistent ignorance about the richness and diversity of Native American communities” (222). Bataille and Silet agree in *Pretend Indians*, asserting that the image of the Indian is based on the Plains tribes. Hollywood effectively “produced the homogenized Native American, devoid of tribal characteristics or regional differences. As long as an actor wore fringed pants and spoke with a halting accent he was Indian” (Bataille & Silet xxiii). This has produced what Kilpatrick refers to as “a very confused image of American Indians” (178) and what Schweninger refers to as “reductive renditions and misunderstandings” (3). The plethora of stereotypes about Native culture has been shaped by what LeAnne Howe, et. al. dubs “the rich cultural assemblage of uncritical assumptions...provided by popular media” (ix). As an Oscar nominated film that received immense attention in the press, *The Revenant* could have easily fallen in line with its predecessors. However, the production team was well aware of the wealth of issues surrounding cultural inaccuracies; therefore, a mission for authenticity remained one of the main focuses of the film.

To accomplish this task, filmmakers worked with a variety of cultural consultants, including a member of the Arikara tribe, Loren Yellowbird. He ensured that all Native American language spoken was nothing short of authentic. In the past, native culture has been disrespected by the generalization of the “more than 600 Native American societies which were speaking over two hundred different languages” (Vrasidas 64), practicing different customs, and wearing distinct garments. The film’s production designer, Jack Fisk combatted this by “[spending] a personal record [of] 16 months on the project, during which he built a working fort and several Native American villages” (Turitz). The costume designer, Jacqueline West, is described as “a devoted student of Native American history and customs” (Turitz). She strove to look for individual differences in each tribe’s traditional dress in order to respect and celebrate their culture’s unique history. Additionally, Craig Falcon – a member of both the Blackfeet and White Clay tribes - worked as the leading cultural advisor and spent a year working with lead actors such as Leonardo DeCaprio and Tom Hardy. The Banff Centre reported that Falcon was happily surprised with how important his feedback became to the film’s team. He consulted on nearly every element of *The Revenant*, including “the style of warrior paint on the film’s horses...costumes and set designers” (Murphy). This mission for authenticity is what led to Leo Killsback to refer to *The Revenant* as “a game changer.”

Native language was another key element in the film. It has been established that Hollywood has often generalized indigenous languages. Additionally, however, the industry also created an imaginary dialect that has continued even into modern film. The

University of Michigan's Barbra Meek completed an extensive study of what she dubs "Hollywood Injun English" (93) or HIE. Within her research, she found "when fictional utterances of Indians have been commented on, such terms such as 'whooping,' 'grunting,' and 'primitive' have been used to describe them...silence has also figured prominently" (94). However, little attention has been given to the artificial language of HIE. Phrases associated with this dialect are not hard to bring to mind; they include "Me smoke-um peacepipe," "How!" or "many moons." In regards to the grammatical structure, Meek asserts it "parallels quite closely with 'foreigner talk'" (96) or baby talk. *The Ridiculous Six's* Never Wears Bra, mentioned earlier, exhibits HIE quite clearly. It is a language that "tangibly marks American Indians as different, even foreign" (110). HIE casts indigenous people as the other, further ostracizing their culture and value to society.

The Revenant, on the other hand, features prominent use of authentic Native American languages. In fact, the opening scene is voiced entirely in Pawnee. The significance of an opening scene being in an indigenous language is monumental, as the first shot sets the tone for the film. Furthermore, this is not the only time Native language is used. Instead, it is evident throughout the film, with viewers hearing a mix of Pawnee and Arikara. This is a remarkable difference from films of the past, which have either entirely misrepresented tribal languages as complete gibberish or reduced it to primitive grunts. In the film, both the Pawnee and Arikara are given back the power of their language and culture. The use of Native language in the film is associated with positive qualities such as morality and understanding, versus the corruption and violence that often accompanies the use of either French or English. For example, members of a band of Arikara referred to as "the Ree," are searching for their leader's daughter, Powaga. Along the way, they approach a gang of French trappers to trade pelts in exchange for guns and horses, which will help them find and rescue Powaga. At first, the Arikara Chief, Elk Dog, communicates with the French men through a translator. The men patronize him, asking for a "woman with big tits" (*The Revenant*). Elk Dog suddenly switches from using Arikara to French, delivering one of the most powerful quotes of the film: "You all have stolen everything from us. Everything! The land, the animals" (*The Revenant*). The significance here is found in that *The Revenant* moves away from characterizing Native Americans as silent and incapable of communicating with Europeans. Instead, it showcases their intelligence and understanding of the power of language.

The most important aspect of the film is its direct and clear message against cinematic stereotypes. Examples are not difficult to find. Hugh Glass, the film's main character, carries within him serious trauma. The audience is given flashes of his experiences through a series of dream sequences Glass falls into throughout the course of the film. In the opening scene, Glass is seen in peaceful slumber with his wife and son, Hawk, both of which are Pawnee. The scene then cuts to an image of Glass walking toward his wobbly toddler as he plays under a solitary tree, while his wife smiles at him. Suddenly, a violent interruption occurs; the next cut shows Glass's son staring into the camera, blood on his face, as his family's hut burns behind him. Shifting again, we see Glass holding his son's limp body in the midst of destruction. Their entire village has been burned. Glass pleads with his son in Pawnee to stay with him.

The next dream sequence occurs after a white man murders Hawk. As Glass sets out to enact revenge, he begins to dream again, this time of a meteor. As the meteor falls behind the horizon, Glass turns to find a hill of bison skulls, similar to the famous photographs taken in the 1800s by white hunters. The scene then transitions to images of army men ransacking a Pawnee village. This flashback shows Glass raising his gun to an officer, a pair of hands covered in blood, before finally cutting to Glass's wife's bloodied body in a river. Symbolism plays a key role in the second dream sequence. The meteor can be seen as a destructive disruption, much like the white man was to Native peoples across North and South America. Just as the meteor destroys upon impact, so does the white man. He comes to kill and ravage the land; he is an unwanted intruder. Additionally, instead of ignoring the genocide of Native Americans, the film makes a point to emphasize it through images of trauma. It is clear Glass and Hawk have experienced something horrific. Both men are deeply affected by the violence their family experienced at the hands of white intruders. In turn, the audience is disturbed by such acts and, consequently, is able to see the history of manifest destiny in a harsh, revealing light.

Combatting the idea of savagery and perpetuating truth remains a focus of *The Revenant*, even outside of the dream sequences. After Glass is mauled by a bear and left for dead by his fellow trappers, he must journey across the harsh wilderness to find his son's murderer. However, his wounds prevent him from moving quickly and his health rapidly deteriorates. Just when he is on the verge of starvation, he meets a Pawnee man named Hikuc. Hikuc is feasting on a bison when Glass approaches him. By this point, he is weak and hungry with no means of defense. Instead of killing him, Hikuc shows generosity by offering him a piece of his meal. Glass shares that he has lost his family, and Hikuc sympathizes, stating "I lost my family too...I'm going south to find more Pawnee. My heart bleeds, but revenge is in the Creator's hands" (*The Revenant*). This creates an immediate bond between the two men and encourages the audience to sympathize with Hikuc. He then offers to take Glass with him, and the two men set out together to find shelter. Clearly, this man is no savage.

Hikuc also combats the idea of the stoic Indian. In the film's 156 minutes, Glass smiles one time, and it is with Hikuc. As the two men sit under a tree, snow begins to fall. Hikuc sticks out his tongue and begins to catch snowflakes. Glass smiles and begins to do the same; for just a moment, the audience gets a break from the harsh, raw reality of the film and instead relaxes as the two men laugh. The flurry soon turns to a blizzard, and Hikuc knows he must act quickly to protect Glass from the elements. In the midst of the storm, he builds a protective structure around Glass and cauterizes his wounds. There is no room in the shelter for Hikuc, so Glass is left alone for the night. When he wakes, he goes in search of his friend only to find him dead. Hikuc was hung by a band of French trappers. Around his neck is a sign that reads "On est tous des sauvages," which translates in English to "we are all savages." Though the French intended this to label all Native American people as savage, it actually has the opposite effect in the film; it creates irony. The audience knows the trappers have just hung a man who is good and kind. He cared for Glass and received nothing in return. Hikuc is no savage. Instead, the audience sees the true savagery lies within the French who murdered him; it lies with the white men who killed indigenous people simply because they could.

The stoic, savage nature of white men continues to be explored in other ways. The depiction of the film's antagonist, John Fitzgerald, is prominently negative – and for good reason. He uses numerous racial slurs in reference to both the Pawnee and Arikara. For example, he speaks about Hawk in the most demeaning ways possible, referring to him as a “half breed,” “little dog,” and “little bitch” (*The Revenant*). He tries to provoke an altercation with Hawk, in which Glass quickly intercedes. Glass silences his son to keep him safe, reminding him “they don't hear your voice. They just see the color of your face” (*The Revenant*). Glass is fighting to keep his son alive, and the pain behind his words is evident. After Fitzgerald murders Hawk in cold blood, he ventures off to catch up with the rest of the trappers. His racial slurs continue, as he refers to the Arikara as “fucking tree niggers” (*The Revenant*). When he and a fellow trapper come across an Indian village that has been ransacked, he is apathetic about the dead bodies of women and children strewn across the remains of the encampment. He justifies the violence, exclaiming, “look at ‘em, always stealing our shit” (*The Revenant*). When he is killed by a band of Arikara at the end of the film, the audience feels little to no remorse because of his characterization as a cold, savage monster.

Native and white men are not the only people to receive attention in the film. Indigenous women also play a key role. Clearly, Glass's late wife is a major component because he severs himself from the white community after her death, working only to get the money needed to provide for his son and keep him safe from another attack. In addition, the daughter of the Arikara Chief, Powaga, tells the story of Native American women. The same band of French trappers that kills Hikuc, kidnap her. And it is Powaga for whom the Arikara are searching. Powaga's father's mission to find her parallels Glass's mission to avenge his son. Therefore, Powaga is a central character in the film. Her depiction works to combat the stereotype of the sexualized maiden by flipping the narrative that has long dominated Hollywood film. The band of trappers that holds her captive continually abuses and rapes Powaga. This differs from the narrative that indigenous men sought out and raped white women. However, Powaga serves another important purpose. Powaga is a character with whom Sasha LaPointe, a contemporary member of the Nooksack Tribe, connected deeply. In a heartfelt article published by Indian Country Media Network, LaPointe shares Powaga's rape scene brought her to her knees. Upon reading the English translation “Bring me the girl,” LaPointe writes she “[doesn't] remember much after that...[she] exited the living room” and was found by a friend “trembling over the sink, face streaked in tears.”

Her reaction is not unwarranted. In the scene, the audience witnesses Powaga forced against the trunk of a tree, bent over, and violated. Rather than fighting back, Powaga stares into the distance face blank and eyes dead, “no Hollywood, choreographed rape scene. No big fighting, no shrieking, no scratching, no scrambling to get free” (LaPointe). Powaga knows her worth in the eyes of that man; she knows there is no hope for her. LaPointe goes on to say the film triggered a powerful response in her due to her own abuse and her awareness of the long list of Native women who are raped, assaulted, and murdered each year. She connects Powaga's treatment to the modern issues facing indigenous women today, including “the Highway of Tears, named after the many disappearances of women (mostly indigenous) reported along its vast expanse...the large number, the cases of assault against Native women” (LaPointe) that continue to go

unsolved. Powaga tells this story; she makes the audience fidget uncomfortably as they witness the atrocity of rape.

However, Powaga is not a victim. This is a point Gyasi Ross misses in her scathing review of the film. She asserts Powaga's rape simply reinforces that Hollywood "loves [Native women] to be helpless and needing white saving" (Ross). Ross's analysis is most likely rooted in the fact that it is Glass who initially frees Powaga. When he arrives in the French encampment, he witnesses the rape. Glass sneaks up behind the man, putting a knife to his throat. However, Glass leaves Powaga with that knife as he runs off to get a horse. Rather than following the white savior narrative and sweeping Powaga up to safety, Glass rides off, leaving Powaga to fend for herself. She threatens to castrate the French man and slits his throat. In fact, LaPointe and her group of friends found this scene empowering, with one of her friends exclaiming, "Sasha, it's okay, she got him. She castrated that French bastard. She got her revenge!" In addition, this is not the last the audience sees of Powaga. She returns in the end of the film, reunited with her tribe. At this point, Glass has just finished the climatic battle with Fitzgerald. He is left bloody, weak, and vulnerable. Powaga rides up, regal and tall on her horse. Indeed, the spatial dynamics reinforce her stature and superiority by literally elevating her above the white character. She has the opportunity to kill Glass, to unleash the fury of her people upon this white man. Instead, she chooses to ride on. The immense power given to Powaga here should not be ignored, as it is something few films have done before. Her people are powerful; she is a survivor and a beacon of hope for Native American women across the country.

Since the moment European explorers began their march of conquest across the Americas, indigenous people have watched their voices fade. *The Revenant*'s use of native actors, cultural advisors, and symbolic scenes has given that voice back. As a film that received a frenzy of media attention, as well as twelve Academy Award nominations, its deliberate choice to change the depiction of Native American people is unmatched by other movies of the same stature. Members of tribes across the United States were given a world stage to tell their own story, from their own perspective; additionally, accuracy was ensured by the advice of cultural advisors that truly understood indigenous traditions because both advisors are first nation members. The entire cast and crew was led by a director that crafted scenes for more than just entertainment value. The atrocity of Native American genocide is put front and center, forcing viewers to recognize America's ugly past. Stereotypes such as the stoic, savage Indian and the sexual, lustful squaw are unraveled.

Not only does the film work to change the way Native American history is viewed, but it also fosters discussion of contemporary issues facing indigenous people, such as the continued abuse of Native American women. *The Revenant* tells the stunning, yet heart-wrenching story of a man seeking revenge for what was taken from him; in the end, he does not take revenge but instead leaves it in the Creator's hands and moves on. The symbolic message underlying the entire film can be found here. Glass lost some; indigenous people lost it all. White people took everything from Native Americans – their families, their homes, their culture, their language. They received virtually no retribution, but instead were silenced and ignored by the masses. Their identity was distorted and subsequently defined by the American cinema. Despite all of this, Native people are here today. *The Revenant*, then, is also a film about survival, and not just the survival of Hugh

Glass. It is evident by now it is also the remarkable story of Native American survival. They are still here; they are still alive. Native voices are growing louder, a resounding chorus for the world to hear.

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