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From Wild West Shows to ‘Killers of the Flower Moon,’ Revisit the History of Native Americans on the Silver Screen

How American Indians in Hollywood have gone from stereotypes to starring roles

A sampling of Native representation in the films (clockwise from top left) *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), *War Party* (1988), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *The Revenant* (2015), *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Dances With Wolves* (1990) Illustration by Meilan Solly

Sandra Hale Schulman

Even when Hollywood has tried to do right by Native Americans, it has largely failed.

"I have been personally victimized by *Dances with Wolves*," says Cass Gardiner, a curator for the Native Cinema Showcase at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. "The inaccurate perceptions films like that have created are something that we, as contemporary Indigenous peoples, have to live with and fight against."

The 1990 film from director-star Kevin Costner employed top Native talent—Floyd Red Crow Westerman, Tantoo Cardinal, Graham Greene, Rodney Grant—and portrayed tribal life realistically. Its sweeping scope led to glory at the Academy Awards, where it won Best Picture. But the narrative focuses on a white U.S. Army officer making friends with local Sioux, only to fall in love with a white woman raised by the tribe. The couple then flee to live life in exile to "save" the Sioux, an ending that rings hollow on a deeper analysis.

Dances With Wolves was in its own way an attempt to respond to decades of Native misrepresentation on film. From the medium's earliest commercial days in the 1900s, filmmakers, many of them European immigrants, did not reflect any truths about Indigenous communities. Most reservations were closed off and struggling for much of the early part of the century; what little knowledge these filmmakers would have had was mostly about Native Americans being "hostiles" to the white settlers.

This month, Martin Scorsese's big-budget film *Killers of the Flower Moon* hits theaters and inverts the longstanding narrative. Premiering first on the big screen and later streaming on Apple TV+, the movie enters a cinematic conversation with its predecessors, but in new and provocative ways. To better understand where *Killers of the Flower Moon* fits into the long history of Native representation in mainstream movies, let's look back at how we got here.

In the last decade of the 19th century, public entertainment featured Native Americans as talent. Buffalo Bill's "Wild West" shows employed Sitting Bull and brought him and other Native Americans, along with horses and buffalo, to Europe. As the movie industry coalesced, Native Americans were presented as more of a documentary subject. Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope captured Lakota Indians in 1894 reenacting a ghost dance at a "Wild West" show.

In 1914, influential filmmaker D.W. Griffith featured the "hostile savage" stereotype in his *The Battle at Elderbush Gulch.* Red Indians—as they were referred to in the film—surround a family and threaten their lives until the white cavalry comes to their aid. Film writer Chris Dashiell says that "the Indians were most often … a backdrop to the drama of the white frontier people trying to make a new life. The attack of the Indians was a scary and exciting spectacle for audiences. Of all the scenes in westerns featuring Indians, this was the most typical—an aggression resisted by heroic settlers, or soldiers, climaxing with a great slaughter of Indian warriors."

The western genre became synonymous with this trope, perhaps best epitomized by John Ford's *The Searchers.* In the 1956 movie, John Wayne is at his most racist and macho when he "finishes the job" by shooting an Indian already in his grave.

The true Native experience—a story of massacres, forced relocations, disease wiping out tribes—was buried in these films in the name of Manifest Destiny:

the idea that white settler Americans were divinely ordained to move west and take over the entire continent of North America.

In this postwar period, the heyday of the western, Native Americans were relegated to reservations, still struggling for rights such as having any political influence, owning a business outside the reservation and buying property. While better taught as a breakthrough for African American civil rights, the passage of the Voting Rights Act also gave Native Americans the right to vote in every state. With passage of the more defined Indian Civil Rights Act in 1968, Native Americans pressed for more realistic and historical media representation without fear of reprisal.

In 1970, a more realistic and empathetic view of Indigenous Americans began to be portrayed on the big screen, in part because they were involved in the filmmaking process.

That year, *Soldier Blue*, billed by the studio as “the Most Savage Film in History!,” put forth an allegory of the Vietnam War, as a soldier enlisted to slaughter Native Americans realizes the true horror of an invader army killing people on the very land they are from. Much like the contemporary opposition to the Vietnam War, the fictional soldier’s rebellion and protest based on his firsthand experience is complex and met with resistance. The film starred Candice Bergen as a white woman who lived among the Cheyenne and Peter Strauss as the soldier who becomes involved with Bergen (in an uncomfortable romance) and then horrified as he begins to see the Army’s atrocities through Bergen’s eyes.

Director Ralph Nelson reached new levels of horror in his realistic depiction of war, and, as such, his film was edited and banned in some countries. The *New York Times* said that *Soldier Blue* “must be numbered among the most significant, the most brutal and liberating, the most honest American films ever made.”

Plains Cree activist Buffy Sainte-Marie, who was blacklisted for her Native rights activism, wrote the movie's title track and later said sardonically, "No one knows *Soldier Blue* in North America. I can guarantee you won't find three people in the U.S. who know it. It was taken out of the theaters after a few days. ... Why? What year did *Soldier Blue* come out? 1970? Oh, that'll be Richard Nixon."

Also released in 1970, *Little Big Man* features Dustin Hoffman, fresh off his star-making turns in *The Graduate* and *Midnight Cowboy*, as Jack Crabb, a white orphan raised by the Cheyenne in the late 19th century. Similar to *Soldier Blue*, it's a revisionist perspective on the Plains Indians.

Crabb marries a Cheyenne woman, only to witness her brutal murder by Custer's Seventh Cavalry. When he later becomes a scout for Custer, he sees the Cheyenne and Sioux exact their revenge at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. The film starred notable Native actor Chief Dan George and is strangely played as a black comedy. Reception to the film was positive, due to the likeability of Hoffman and the story told as the uneven memories of a 121-year-old man. Realistic battle scenes were still in short supply in mainstream cinema, so graphic scenes added to the sympathy and empathy for Native Americans. It also began to make film stars of Native actors.

In 1988's *War Party*, actor Billy Wirth, of Huron ancestry, starred as Sonny Crowkiller, a Blackfoot Indian boy who unwillingly gets thrown into a life-or-death situation when a mock cavalry vs. Indians entertainment battle turns deadly and he is forced to actually kill someone. He goes on the run with a friend, but when the pair attempt to surrender, they are shot down when they charge the police with a gun blazing.

Wirth revealed decades later when he screened a 35th-anniversary directors cut at the Native Reel Cinema Festival that the studio and director changed the ending to make the surrendering Indians the aggressors.

"It really changed the meaning," Wirth said at the screening. "They had recut the ending to where when we [Wirth and co-star Kevin Dillon] come down off Chief Mountain, and we know we're riding to the next plane of the spirit world, we make a conscious decision to charge the police but not fire a gun. [But] the cut that they released, they added a muzzle flash to Kevin's gun, then we charge like a bunch of crazy idiots."

Then came *Dances With Wolves*, which for a while was the standard-bearer for involving Native Americans in mainstream films that focused on their culture. This was in spite of its well-earned reputation of centering the White experience in a story featuring Native life. Similarly, 1992's *The Last of the Mohicans*, based on the James Fenimore Cooper novel, featured Native actors in leading roles, including Eric Schweig of the Inuvialuk tribe as Uncas and Oglala Lakota Russell Means as his father, Chingachgook.

For Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2015 award-winning film *The Revenant*, the Mexican director also hired cultural consultants and teamed up with linguists to incorporate authentic Arikara and Pawnee language. Secwepemc actress Grace Dove brings a strong spiritual element as the murdered wife of Leonardo DiCaprio's Hugh Glass, a fur trapper who witnesses a traumatic attack upon his family.

Looking back on more than 100 years of mainstream films that feature Native Americans, it's often painful and even traumatizing to see how easily tribes were lumped in together as nameless, faceless hostile "others" who were only a threat to be removed. Who invaded who? Making heroes of western actors only added to the problem and prolonged the type of film they starred in. It's only in the last few decades that mainstream films have owned up to the genre's discrimination.

One of the most anticipated films of the year, *Killers of the Flower Moon* has had a circuitous route to the big screen. Imperative Entertainment bought the rights to David Grann's then-forthcoming book of the same name in 2016, and Scorsese and DiCaprio signed on soon after. The plot centers around the Reign of Terror, when members of the Osage Nation were murdered by white prospectors eager to seize rights to the Osage's oil-enriched lands.

Initially DiCaprio was to portray Tom White, the federal agent from Washington, D.C. who arrives to solve the murders, but switched to the role of Ernest Burkhart, the nephew of rancher William Hale who comes to Oklahoma for work, as the script evolved. Burkhart and his relationship with his Osage wife, played by Blackfoot actor Lily Gladstone, are now at the core of the plot.

That script evolution came about after Scorsese and his team visited the Osage community in Pawhuska, Oklahoma, and realized he was making a white savior story focused on the precursor to the FBI rather than the human story of the people being murdered. The generosity and welcoming spirit of the Osage at several meetings and dinners convinced him to change the script.

Marianne Bower, a longtime researcher, historian and producer who has worked with Scorsese on many of his movies, recalls one of those early dinners early in production that she and Scorsese were invited to by the Osage community.

"They invited us to a dinner so that we could hear from them and hear their concerns. We arrived, and they were all there in their traditional clothing," she says. "It was a very moving evening, and they had put out this traditional meal for us. They got up and spoke and expressed their concern, told some stories of their own relatives as it relates to the story. At the end of the evening, after we had shared a meal and heard from them, they got up and they started giving us gifts. Then we all came to realize they are giving people. We used the gift-giving in the script—there's little details like that find their way in."

Chad Renfro, appointed by the Osage chief to serve as the nation's ambassador to the filmmakers, facilitated Scorsese's meeting to prove to him and his team how much the Osage cared about the project and to convince them to film there on site.

"We made sure as to the accuracy of the places of where it happened, and to be around our people, and to get firsthand knowledge of who we are, how we do things, and how generous we are, and how trusting we are," says Renfro, who believes this level of trust and involvement made all the difference. "I don't think it will be the historical case with this film that they took one consultant or two consultants and then went off to make the film. We had a very large part."

L to R: JaNae Collins, Lily Gladstone, Cara Jade Myers and Jillian Dion in *Killers of the Flower Moon* Apple TV+

While Renfro, himself an interior designer, was not involved as a set designer, he said the Osage museum and archives provided much of the set production.

“Going into it, we knew we would have to have people working with us who were of that culture,” says Bower. “I start my work once the draft of the script is in pretty good shape. Then I get a sense of the kind of the information that [Scorsese and co-screenwriter Eric Roth] were looking for related to Osage life, Osage customs. I went down to Oklahoma for the first time and started collecting as much research in the area as I could in terms of photographs.”

Beyond the look, the production team wanted authenticity in the actors.

“Marty said, ‘We need to [know] how people move, how people behave. We need to include Osage people to make sure people are behaving and saying things that would be appropriate for an Osage person,’” says Bower.

John Williams, a leader in the Osage Nation, served as a cultural consultant and became an important part of the team.

“I could just sit with him,” Bower says “and chat over aspects of the script or scenes, and he helped explain to me certain customs, what meaning was behind it, like certain funeral aspects or the wedding scene or baby-naming ceremonies, so that I really could understand those things. We were very lucky in that the Osage Nation has a very thriving language center, and they have codified their language, which could have been lost.”

The Covid-19 pandemic shut down production, an unexpected delay, but it allowed for Bower to conduct even more research.

Osage artist and designer Dante Biss-Grayson was brought in to help with the film’s authenticity. “I was hired on as an art consultant for canvas painting and pigments used in the homes and buildings,” he says. “Then I’m the Osage artist, I got to paint in a scene: a live, real-time painting. It was awesome to be on set. The camera was right in front of my face, but I’m painting, I’m just in my zone. But it shows the level of realism they went for.”

With *Killers of the Flower Moon* setting the bar so high, the future of mainstream Native representation in film looks to be on the rise.

"Being Indigenous or First Nations was not cool for a very long time," says Gardiner, the First Nations Canadian filmmaker. "A lot of my generation of First Nations people are the first of our families to think it's okay to call ourselves First Nations in public and represent and feel proud of that. Getting the right representation is really important. The zeitgeist has moved, and people are interested in Indigenous people."

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Sandra Hale Schulman, of Cherokee Nation descent, has been covering Native issues since 1994. The recipient of a Woody Guthrie Fellowship, she is the author of four books and the producer of four films on Native musicians. She has contributed to shows at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, the Grammy Museum and the Museum of Modern Art.

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