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## Native Americans and the Western: A History of Oppression

Haidyn Harvey

Pepperdine University, [haidyn.harvey@pepperdine.edu](mailto:haidyn.harvey@pepperdine.edu)

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*Native Americans and the Western: A History of Oppression*

by Haidyn Harvey

The Western—it's as American as apple pie. It's a genre of nostalgia, adventure and the romanticized past. Always situated on the wide expanses and dusty horizons west of the Mississippi river, Westerns center around the do-it-yourself kind of justice carried out by bounty hunters, cowboys and even the lonely outlaw. The genre tells stories of the bravery and grit required to survive in the wild and uncivilized world just out of reach of the lawmakers back east. Most importantly, the Western is a genre of fear: fear of death, fear of the land and fear of fellow man. These overarching themes of paranoia coupled with expansive backdrops and historical settings make the Western the perfect canvas to explore race relations in America, both in the past and present. Specifically, there is much to learn from the legends of the open range about the way settlers treated Native Americans. From the silent era through today, the way Westerns portray Native Americans reveals a shift in attitudes toward our Native neighbors. *The Covered Wagon*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and *Wind River* perfectly exemplify the United States' changing biases toward Native Americans.

Westerns typically take place in the years immediately after the Civil War and often focus on stories about establishing law and order in a lawless land. Westerns also practice revisionist storytelling, meaning they revise the historical time period they are built upon, applying the culture and beliefs of the time the film was produced and using American history to discuss modern beliefs. Portrayals of Native Americans and how they were treated are a product of the time the film was made, allowing modern-day audiences to observe the oppression of Native Americans

over time. Film scholar Peter Yacavone writes, “The social and economic factors informing the racial representation of Native Americans in Westerns were widespread across the Classical Hollywood film; no Hollywood genre was innocent, although Westerns, as generally blunt instruments of the American pioneer identity, were perhaps the most explicit purveyors of this institutional bigotry.”<sup>1</sup>

There are hundreds of films one could study to better understand the complex relationship between the white man and the Native American over the course of American history. For example, John Wayne’s exceptionally racist film *The Searchers* and Kevin Costner’s more progressive *Dances with Wolves* each offer a wealth of insight. However, *The Covered Wagon*, *Josey Wales* and *Wind River* together offer a broad overview of changes in the genre over time.

Before analyzing the specifics of each film, it is important to discuss the historical narrowness of Native American portrayals in Westerns. Native Americans have traditionally been depicted one of two ways: either as a savage or a stoic nobleman. Film scholar Michael Hilger analyzes these one-dimensional portrayals:

With a disregard for historical accuracy similar to that of the editor, directors of the Westerns have used images of the Savage or the Noble Red Man to show the superiority of their heroes, or to comment on political, social and moral issues of their day. These images force Native American characters into a circle where they are ultimately too bad or too good to be believable fictional characters—a circle in which they also are only vehicles for contrast to white heroes of the Westerns and the values of white culture.<sup>2</sup>

The blatant racism responsible for the depiction of the Savage and the overt pity behind the Noble Indian stereotype both lack the imagination and respect required to accurately portray the fully developed and intricate cultures of Native Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Yacavone, ‘Free from the Blessings of Civilization’: Native Americans in *Stagecoach* (1939) and Other John Ford Westerns, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman: Images of Native Americans in Film* (2002), 1.

*The Covered Wagon*, directed by James Cruze, was released in 1923 and is remembered as the Western genre's first epic film. The silent film follows the stories of settlers traveling west in a large wagon caravan headed for Oregon. A love triangle develops between a young woman named Molly and two of the men traveling with her. Along the way, the settlers must endure harsh conditions, food shortages and violent attacks from Native Americans.

In the beginning of the film, a council of Native Americans convenes to discuss their plans to murder any white man with a plow. The title card reads, "The pale face who comes with this evil medicine [plow] must be slain—or the Red Man perishes." Throughout the rest of the movie, the settlers are attacked at random by the Natives. On Molly's wedding day, she is shot in the chest by a Native's arrow. This marks the beginning of the film's climactic battle scene. The Natives attack all the wagons, light them on fire and murder many of the men. In the end, however, the settlers conquer the Natives and carry on toward California and Oregon for their gold and their land, continuing the development of the country. At the conclusion of the film, Molly lives happily with the man of her choosing and there is no further mention of the Natives or the impact of the settlers' plow on the Native American way of life. This limitation of the Natives to an act of violence illustrates Hilger's commentary on the way Native American attacks are expressed as a threat to progress: "A staple of the Western is, of course, the excitement and cruelty of an attack by hostile warriors. Often a minor part of the whole plot, the attack is central to the portrayal of the Savage, and the theme of the Native American as a threat to progress or western expansion."<sup>3</sup>

*The Covered Wagon*, released just thirty-three years after the Wounded Knee Massacre, depicts Native Americans as simply the enemy. While the Natives do have a motive for their attacks—protecting their land and way of life—their story never goes past the point of evoking

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<sup>3</sup> Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman*, 25.

terror and violence. The only times they are featured in the film is to serve as an obstacle to the settlers: to kill them, threaten them, or merely inconvenience them. The Native Americans are not portrayed as human beings in this film—they exist on the periphery of the story, only fulfilling a narrative device by acting as the enemy.

At one point in the film, the settlers must cross a river in their wagons. The Native Americans offer to ferry the settlers over for ten dollars a wagon. The settlers refuse, believing the Natives are taking advantage of them. After much dispute, a few of the settlers use the ferry to cross the river. When the Natives ask for their money, the settlers shoot them instead. The filmmakers seem to offer no commentary on their characters' actions, neither condemning nor sympathizing with the settlers. Not only is this scene a moment of cruel violence, it exemplifies the way white society dismantled Native American economies and quality of life. The consequences of this can be seen in later films. The ease with which the settlers take advantage of Native American life and business perfectly illustrates the case that Barry Keith Grant makes about the treatment of Natives:

The view of Indians as savage and uncivilized was repeated in early films and crystalised the image of “Indians” as dangerous and unacceptable to the normative lives of European immigrants whose lives appeared in films to be more valuable than those of the indigenous people they were colonizing. Mainstream films featuring Indians have been glacially slow in changing any part of this running narrative of conquest.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Covered Wagon*, one character has two Native wives whom he mocks by giving them ridiculous names. This degrading kind of humor negatively influences the way audiences understand Native American culture, allowing for prejudices to flourish and continue. Film scholar Edward Buscombe makes the point that misportraying people fictionally leads to false impressions

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<sup>4</sup> Barry Keith Grant, *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film* (2007), 202.

with genuine social consequences: “Where do white people’s ideas about Indians come from? Undoubtedly, the most pervasive and potent contemporary source is the cinema.”<sup>5</sup>

The repeated image of the Savage or useless Indian is tragic because it perpetuates oppressive biases toward Native Americans. Yacavone blames box office success for the harmful stereotypes: “[B]ecause the ‘Indian attack’ in *The Covered Wagon* contributed to its success, the system demanded endless reproduction of the same. That demand continued for at least four decades before becoming too ‘questionable’ for mainstream audiences.”<sup>6</sup>

*The Outlaw Josey Wales*, directed by and starring Clint Eastwood, premiered in 1976. *Josey Wales* is the story of a farmer who joins a Confederate guerrilla unit after his family is murdered by Union soldiers. When the war ends, everyone in the unit is murdered except Josey because he refused to surrender to the Union. Josey goes west to escape the Union and the bounty hunters thirsty for the price on his head. Along the way, he must defeat those who wish him harm and help those in need of protection. He makes a few friends, including a Native American woman named Little Moonlight and a Native man named Lone Watie, who, like Josey, lost his family to cruel white men.

*The Outlaw Josey Wales* is considered by Hilger to be an “anti-Western.”<sup>7</sup> An anti-Western communicates critical views of American values within the framework of the old West. The anti-Western became popular in the 1970s, a decade well-acquainted with ideals of equality and social justice. As film critic Robert C. Sickels said of *Josey Wales*, “the subcharacters, as well as the main character, have been updated and revised for a 1970s audience well versed in the discussion

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Buscombe, *'Injuns!' Native Americans in the Movies*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Yacavone, *'Free from the Blessings of Civilization'*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman*, 178.

of Civil Rights that had dominated public discourse since the early 1960s.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike the films before it, *Josey Wales* offers a nuanced and realistic portrayal of Native Americans. Although the Native characters in this film still seem to be categorized as either Savages or Noblemen, at least they have an active role in the story. These characters have speaking lines, backgrounds and personal goals. While they may not be main characters, they do have a significant part in the telling of the story. Sickels argues that the story would have never happened without these Native characters when he makes the case that “Little Moonlight and Lone Watie are integral parts of Josey Wales's narrative; without their invaluable help, Josey would have surely been killed.”<sup>9</sup>

Lone Watie, who becomes Josey's good friend and sidekick, seems to fit into the Noble Indian category, always saving Josey when he needs it the most. He appears to have conformed to the white man's ways, sporting a top hat and a nice overcoat. He tells Josey, “I'm an Indian all right, but here in the nation they call us a civilized tribe because we're so easy to sneak up on.” It is through this kind of characterization that *The Outlaw Josey Wales* takes a much more sympathetic approach to depicting Native Americans than *The Covered Wagon*. Similarly, *Josey Wales* depicts even the Savage Indian with more respect and sensitivity. Josey must confront the Native American warrior Ten Bears. While Ten Bears has a reputation for being a great fighter, the film does not portray him as a vicious and senseless killer. Instead, as Sickels points out, “Josey knows that worthy foes, as well as friends, come in all ethnicities and genders. He knows of Ten Bears's reputation and enters their meeting with respect.”<sup>10</sup> Clint Eastwood skillfully portrays Natives as human beings worthy of respect both in fear and in friendship. In fact, Hilger believes

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<sup>8</sup> Robert C. Sickels, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 220.

<sup>9</sup> Sickels, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 224.

<sup>10</sup> Sickels, 225.

that “Ten Bears, Little Moonlight and Lone Watie are among the most rounded, least stereotypical Native American characters in the Westerns.”<sup>11</sup> While *Josey Wales* offers a more realistic portrayal of Native Americans as human beings, however, it still keeps its Native characters within the confines of the Savage and the Nobleman.

Josey treats his Native companions with honor; others around him do not. In one scene, a man refuses to do business with two Natives trying to sell him fur. They depend on him for income, but he demands more fur than they can provide. Instead of buying their furs, he sends them away with beers. Once again, we see how settlers have taken advantage of Native American economies and quality of life by manipulating Natives with things like alcohol.

Later in the film, two white men attempt to rape Little Moonlight, but Josey intervenes and saves her. *The Outlaw Josey Wales* reflects our society’s growing respect for Native Americans by giving its Native characters a voice. At the same time, the film critiques America’s past sins by showing the cruel way others treated Native Americans. In this film, almost all the savagery is done by white men. In fact, the only characters as noble and brave as Josey are the Native Americans. However, the film offers its Native characters a voice only within the tired Noble stereotype. People in real life are more complex than what the viewer experiences here. While the Native characters’ noble acts carry much of the plot, it is still Josey Wales who is the hero in the end.

*Wind River*, written and directed by Taylor Sheridan, premiered in 2017. After a young Native American girl’s body is discovered at Wind River Reservation, expert tracker Cory Lambert and rookie FBI agent Jane Banner work together to find out who murdered the young girl. *Wind River* might more accurately be described as a Neo-Western. Because it takes place in

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<sup>11</sup> Hilger, *From Savage to Nobleman*, 185.

present day, it does not practice revisionist storytelling, but it does show the consequences of the actions we have seen over and over again in Western films. *Wind River* reveals the poverty and despair found on Indian reservations: the result of displacement, a dismantled economy and substance abuse. All the wrongs we have seen done to Native Americans in Western films throughout the years come to fruition in *Wind River*. Martin, the father of the murdered girl, discusses losing his daughter as well as losing his son to drugs. He tells Cory, “Drugs is his family now. He’s gone too.”

Sheridan is able to vividly portray reservation life because he lived near one and spent a significant amount of time within the community. Journalist Gwilym Mumford discusses Sheridan’s portrayal, writing, “having enjoyed a close association with Native American groups for decades, he was keen for their presence in *Wind River* not to act as a backdrop for the film, their culture cherry picked as set dressing for a conventional crime drama.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Wind River*, Native American characters are finally able to rise out of the confines of the Savage or Noble stereotypes. The Native characters in this film are as human and diverse as anyone else, boasting quirks and traits that could never be filed under one of two categories. They interact with the world, sharing friendships and relationships with people of all ethnicities. Their traditions are depicted with honor rather than being mocked as they often have been in the past.

However, Native Americans still linger on the periphery of their own story. While Sheridan does skillfully capture life on a reservation, something peculiar stands out about his film. *Wind River* is about Cory and Jane, two white people, helping the Native Americans, similar to *Josey Wales*. Filmmakers have shifted from portraying Natives as the enemy to now portraying them as the victim, but still, they are not the hero. The Native characters in this film must rely on the white

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<sup>12</sup> Gwilym Mumford, *The Guardian* (September 2017), 1.

heroes to deliver them from their suffering. This lack of agency is perfectly illustrated when Martin asks Cory to find his daughter's killer. He tells him, "Now get off my porch and go do it." It is not Martin who claims his agency and seeks justice for the murder of his daughter. Instead, the role belongs to Cory. Somehow, modern movies are still robbing Natives of their own story. Because film still controls the image of Native Americans in society, flawed portrayals of characters like Martin can lead to real social consequences. Author Michelle H. Raheja argues that continuous false portrayals of Native Americans allows their oppression to continue by influencing attitudes outside their communities: "Film and visual culture have provided the primary representational field on which Native American images have been displayed to dominant culture audiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."<sup>13</sup>

While *Wind River* leaves room for improvement, it is a big step forward from the bigoted characterization of Native Americans in *The Covered Wagon*. *Wind River* gives Native Americans their own story about a Native American girl, her family and their community. The film boldly reveals the consequences of white men's sin and does not attempt to sugarcoat the wrongs done.

The opening title card in *The Covered Wagon* reads, "The blood of America is the blood of pioneers—the blood of lion-hearted men and women who carved a splendid civilization out of an uncharted wilderness." At the end of *Wind River*, Cory finds the killer and tells him, "My family's people were forced here. Stuck here for a century. That snow and silence, it's the only thing that hasn't been taken from them. So, what'd you take?"

The ideas communicated in these two quotes could not be more different. The first disregards Native Americans and preaches that the West was an unclaimed region developed by the perseverance of settlers. The second recognizes that the West was in fact already someone's

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<sup>13</sup> Raheja, Michelle H., *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (2010), 4.

home, and that this home was stolen from them. There is a rich history of oppression, prejudice and injustice in the years spanning between these two films. This becomes obvious as we watch the Native American story and representation evolve in Westerns from the silent era until now. *The Covered Wagon*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and *Wind River* illustrate a slowly growing respect for Native American communities in the different ways they depict their Native characters and environments. The first step in repentance is recognizing the importance of accurate portrayals in film. Native characters deserve the time, attention and nuance given to their co-stars. Films have power that extends far beyond their 120 minutes of screen time, and filmmakers have a long way to go in righting their wrongs. The blood of America is the blood of lion-hearted men and women who carved a splendid civilization out of an uncharted wilderness—the blood of Natives. That’s a story still waiting to be told.

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