

After "Killers of the Flower Moon," There Are Many More Indigenous Stories to Be Told

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[Yahoo News](#) By STEPHEN CARR HAMPTON, August 09, 2023

Guest Opinion. *In May, at the Cannes Film Festival press conference after the debut of Killers of the Flower Moon, Lily Gladstone (Blackfeet/Nimíipuu) sat, in measured grace, alongside Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert DeNiro, and Martin Scorsese, speaking as an Indigenous woman in a place traditionally held by white males.*

Measured grace is the term she used to describe Mollie Burkhart, the Osage woman she plays – a mother who watched her mother and sisters die around her, all in suspicious circumstances, while Mollie suspected her husband’s involvement. The film examines the Osage murders of the 1920s, in which dozens of tribal members were murdered for their oil rights by their white relatives or trustees. Scorsese describes the film as an exploration of trust and betrayal, both between spouses and between white society and the rest of America. The film lays bare widespread greed and white supremacy, causing Scorsese to explain that it is not a “whodunnit,” but a “who didn’t do it.”

At the microphone, Gladstone minced no words. After describing the importance of turning “the big lens” onto the Osage murders, she asked, “Why the hell does the world not know about these things? Our communities always have.” Gladstone’s question was not just for filmmakers, but for historians, novelists, book publishers, textbook writers, teachers, and politicians.

There was one more individual on the dais at the press conference, Osage Chief Standing Bear. He described how Scorsese’s consultation with the tribe evolved into collaboration, creating a partnership that restored lost trust. Scorsese and DiCaprio explained how, in working with the tribe, they revised the script to tell the story from the perspective of Gladstone’s Mollie. DiCaprio, originally cast to play an FBI hero, instead plays Mollie’s husband. Thus, for possibly the first time in a big Hollywood production, Natives became the protagonists of their own story.

Besides exemplifying new standards for consultation and collaboration with tribes, for how to tell Indigenous stories, for replacing white savior narratives with Indigenous voices, the film also demonstrates that there are stories from Native America, largely untold or erased outside of their communities, that can speak to a larger audience, to everyone as individuals in a diverse society.

Videos of Gladstone, already widely known for a beloved cameo in the series *Reservation Dogs*, went viral across Indian Country. Regarding the coming film, many Natives were cautiously optimistic. Hollywood’s relationship with Native America is particularly ugly, and still lags far behind its gradual improvement with other marginalized peoples. Until now, for example, Natives had few equivalents of *Selma*, *Twelve Years A Slave*, or *Hidden Figures*, or even historical fiction such as *The Color Purple*, *Moonlight*, and *The Help*. We do have an entire genre of films, Westerns, that normalize ethnic cleansing and portray Natives as wild savages or bumbling sidekicks.

The paucity of films that offer a truly Native perspective from a Native lead character is shocking. *The Searchers* showed that a white man can become as savage as an Indian, *Little Big Man* put the Sand Creek massacre on the big screen, *Dances with Wolves* illustrated a range of human emotions in Natives, and *Wind River* accurately portrays several contemporary Native issues. While these were all significant steps, none of these films center Native agency, and they all have white leads. *Smoke Signals* is an exception, though it would not generally be considered a major motion picture. *The Last of the Mohicans* is non-fiction written for a white audience, portraying Natives as going extinct. *Geronimo: An American Legend* failed to collaborate with the tribe or use Native writers. Lacking this input, it became a predictable and boring tale relying only on the information coming from US officials at the time.

There is no shortage of potential material for the big screen. The Trail of Tears, the Plains wars, the saga of Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce, and the Long Walk of the Navajo all offer a canvas that would make Tarantino

drool, and relationships that would attract the pen of Shonda Rhimes. Just the Navajo taking refuge at Fortress Rock in Canyon de Chelly is an epic American drama. Yet these stories are invariably told – if they are told at all – from the perspective of colonizers, or presented as distant backstories, shadows in a prehistoric mist. Yet, if told from a Native perspective, with the richness of Native backstories and relationships, they would not only fill a hole in erased history but offer opportunities for education, understanding, and inspiration. They also offer opportunities for collaborations with Native writers and filmmakers.

We could go well beyond the 1800s into the past or present. For example, the story of the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving could be retold from the perspective of Massasoit, the Great Sachem of the Wampanoag, who diplomatically manipulated the Pilgrims on multiple occasions. His political maneuverings are well-known in the academic literature but unknown to the American public. There are dinner table stabbings, bloody flags, calculation and deceit from a death bed, and a wedding imbued with political import.

Imagine a retelling of the story of Sacajawea, a missing Indigenous teen girl, set in the present. Abducted at Three Forks (still a town today) and then trafficked to another man looking for work, she discovers some frackers headed to her remote hometown and gets him a job with them, so they inadvertently return her home.

There is a whole continent full of untold history buried under layers of stereotypes and caricatures. There is the Pueblo Revolt, Tecumseh's efforts to form a united front, the life and death of Zintkala Nuni (Lost Bird), Ishi's life in Berkeley, and the occupation of Alcatraz. Our communities know these stories of desperation, survival, perseverance, hope, trust, and resilience.

Lily Gladstone, later in that same press conference, described how the cast and crew, together with the Osage, immersed themselves in the story, allowing it to find them and change the script. Scorsese echoed her, saying that each meeting with the tribe “grounded me” and “re-oriented me as to what we're doing here on earth.” The good news is that there are more opportunities, for there are so many more stories to be told.

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