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Indigenous Voices Reshaping Cinema: Native American Representation in Dances with Wolves (1990) and Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher (2021)

Abstract

"...*Dances with Wolves* created a watershed" and "...no western has had such a powerful impact" –-Angela Aleiss. More than thirty years have passed since the release of the film Dances with Wolves (1990), and since then, there have been shifts in public opinion and government policies. Sports franchises are parting ways with former idols, and the US government has allocated substantial financial resources towards providing healthcare, among other endeavors. Against this backdrop, the present research project seeks to investigate how, if at all, the representation of Native Americans in the American film industry has changed since 1990. To address this inquiry, a comparative analysis approach is adopted, drawing on the films *Dances with Wolves* and Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher (2021). The two key areas of examination comprise the on-screen portrayal of stereotypical character types and the off-screen employment practices.

Scholars and activists have argued that the cinematic representation of Native Americans has traditionally been confined to stereotypical characters, which have been deemed harmful to the Native American population's identity. While both films still employ such character types,

the filmmakers of "Montford" utilize narrative techniques to mitigate, subvert, and identify these representations. With respect to hiring practices, a small increase in the number of Native Americans employed in roles involving creative control has been observed. Nevertheless, the most noteworthy and observable transformation within the American film industry has been the substantial rise in the number of film production companies owned and operated by Native Americans and tribal entities.

Introduction

> *"It gives me pleasure to announce to Congress that the benevolent policy of the Government, steadily pursued for nearly thirty years, in relation to the removal of the Indians beyond the white settlements is approaching to a happy consummation. Two important tribes have accepted the provision made for their removal at the last session of Congress, and it is believed that their example will induce the remaining tribes also to seek the same obvious advantages…The present policy of the Government is but a continuation of the same progressive change by a milder process. The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the Eastern States were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites…"*
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> -U.S. President Andrew Jackson, December 6, 1830.

The absolute annihilation of the Native American population was, at times, the explicit goal of the U.S. government and those who sought the advantages of governmental policies like the Homestead Act of 1862. During this period, myths of so-called unholy savages circulated amongst those involved with the westward expansion. From the spoken word, transmitted through oral stories, these troublesome stereotypes[1] became widely circulated through books, wild west shows, and eventually the movies. From its inception, the American film industry has utilized these character types and continued to represent the Native American population in such

[1] A stereotype is defined by Merriam-Webster as something conforming to a fixed pattern. The Canadian government's Media Smart website defines movie stereotypes as "simple, one-dimensional portrayals of people—usually based on sex, race, religion, profession or age (Movies—The Concerns, 2017)

a way that, as Jackson stated, "...make[s] room for the whites…" In the early years of cinema, imagery of Native Americans was utilized for the monetary gains of white filmmakers. For instance, in *The Daughters of Dawn* (1921) director Norbert Myles employed an entirely Native American cast with nearly 300 actors (Franklin). Nevertheless, the film maintains an overly romanticized portrayal of those represented in the film. Further supporting the idea is how Native Americans rarely received offers outside of acting roles and, as will be discussed later, this trend continues in contemporary filmmaking. However, for the last 31-year period, a significant increase in Native American film production companies steered me to the following research question: How, if at all, has the American film industry altered its relationship with Native Americans over the last 31 years?

From a sociological point of view, the change in Native American representation since 1990 has been minimal. However, in my examination of these films there appears to be an observable and measurable change. In support of this thesis, this research pursues two approaches aimed at understanding how Native American representation within the American film industry has changed and if a change has occurred, identifying those areas. To begin with, this paper utilizes a comparative analysis approach and examines two movies produced within the American film industry and is done so for a basis of understanding how and what change has occurred. These films include the following. 1) *Dances with Wolves* (1990, Costner), 2) *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* (2021, Frankowski). The second approach is through the statistical analysis of each film's hiring practices based on available data. This area specifically examines those key roles with direct creative control over the film's production. These include positions both in front of and behind the camera. Since representation behind the camera may affect the product created, this second approach remains a crucial factor. Through the examination of these two approaches, my goal is to gain an understanding of representation in

front of the camera, based on the level of usage and how stereotypes are employed within products of the American film industry.

Selection of films: While national opinion and policy have continued to shift over time, I believe the impact of films like *Dances with Wolves* has aided public awareness. The shift in general national awareness and policies that followed the film constitutes the most significant reason for selecting this film. In 1991, after significant box office and industry-wide success, *Dances with Wolves* was nominated for 12 Academy Awards and received seven. As described in a Native American online news source, Indian Country Today, a 2018 article by Dr. Angela Aleiss[2] states, "...*Dances with Wolves* created a watershed" and "...no western has had such a powerful impact." While it is unknown if the film directly affected policymakers, the immediate years after its release saw significant policy changes. An example of these policy shifts is represented in U.S. President George H.W. Bush's renaming of Custer's National Monument to Little Bighorn National Monument in 1993. However, before the renaming of Little BigHorn, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was passed (Aleiss, 2009 Pg. 141), putting an end to grave openings and body removal for so-called government activities. Then in 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act provided healthcare legislation for all registered members of the 574 federally recognized Indigenous tribes. Within this legislation, Native American households earning less than 300% of the federal poverty line can receive universal healthcare at no cost. These contemporary U.S. government policies are vastly different from the former policies that worked up to and including the annihilation of the Native American population.

[2] Dr. Angela Aleiss is a professor of film studies, and has published multiple books on Native American representation within the American film industry.

As a contemporary example, and one that employed many Native American filmmakers, *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* represents the second film for analysis. Intending to understand how the film industry has altered its relationship over the last thirty-year period, I selected to examine a contemporary film that boasted its inclusion of more than 200 Native American cast and crew members (http://www.chickasawrancher.com). Additionally, the film's production company is the Native-owned Chickasaw Nation Productions. In a preliminary assessment of this film, these factors stood out as representing something distinctive when compared to other productions created within the American film industry. That being said, an observable weakness with this research remains its limited scope. While this work is not an exhaustive examination of a larger cross-section of films, I believe it opens the door to future work and conversation.

Following this introduction, five main sections of the research will provide further examination of these topics. In the following section, a specific subset of Native American stereotypical representations will receive brief descriptions as it will lay the framework for evaluating these films. The stereotypes selected for examination relate to the representations portrayed in these films. Following the breakdown of these stereotypes, a two-section analysis, one for each film, will contribute to an examination of on-screen portrayals and highlight how these ideas are represented in each film. In the fourth section, an analysis of employment practices aims to understand how representation behind the camera may influence representation in front of the camera. Lastly, the final topic discussed in this research is to offer some significant information about why representation in film matters and how continued utilization of historical stereotypes are potentially damaging to those who identify with these fictional ideas.

Framing Historical Stereotypes for Film Evaluations

To lay the foundation for the case of stereotypical representation utilized in these films, I must first lay out the framework of these ideas. To do this, I have selected to provide a brief overview of each character type and provide background information from those scholars, film or otherwise, that have contributed to these ideas. Throughout American film history, filmmakers have repeatedly utilized numerous oversimplified examples of Native American stereotypes that are problematic in their presentation. Several of these stereotypes are utilized in contemporary films. For example, in Disney's film, The Lone Ranger (2013), Johnny Depp portrays a fictional Comanche character. The process of granting white actors a role outside of their race is known as "whitewashing," also known as, in this case, acting in red face.

Before I lay the framework for these stereotypes, it is worth mentioning that the presented stereotypes in this project are, but a fraction of the overall representations utilized within the American film industry. Furthermore, I find it significant to clearly state that these stereotypes were not created by the American film industry. More exactly, these ideas were initially created through literary works, photography, wild west shows, and various forms of oral tradition. In some cases, these stereotypes were constructed as colonizing tools utilized as justification for murder. It is through film and live shows that these stereotypes have gained a visual representation. The principal error within these stereotypes is they paint Native Americans as being the same one-dimensional characters. In one way or another, these stereotypes have been utilized to paint an inaccurate portrayal of the relationship between the white colonizers and Native Americans. "While Native American community members have tried to amend and correct them, these stereotypes still inform popular culture and curricula" (Raheja, 2013 Pg. 222). While these stereotypical representations remain numerous in their presentation, the

remaining portion of this section will examine those examples that correlate with the two selected films.

In their book, *Killing the Indian Maiden* (2009), M. Elise Marubbio extensively examines the representation of Native American women as portrayed in films. Within this book, Marubbio identifies the representative idea they refer to as the Celluloid Princess. One of the most cited and recognizable examples of this stereotype comes from Disney's animated film Pocahontas (1995). This idea is represented when a Native American woman falls in love with a member of the invading white colonizers, and who works to bridge the relationship between the two groups. It is the sexualization of the exotic other that propels the white male character into a relationship with the Celluloid Princess (Marubbio, 43). It is the Celluloid Princess who suffers the most and commonly dies as a direct result of the relationship. In one way, this suffering is most often initiated after the two engage in an intimate affair and the white male is forced to end the relationship(Marubbio, 43).

The idea that Native warriors have been and are frequently employed by all levels of criminal activities is an idea that has its roots in how white Euro-Americans viewed the Indigenous population and utilized it as justification for murder. Having permeated many aspects of American life, the idea of the Native warriors can be viewed in numerous entertainment industries. Specifically, within the American film industry, this idea is represented by the stereotypical characteristics of the bloodthirsty warrior/savage. "The bloodthirsty warrior is a vicious, animalistic beast, attacking white men and kidnapping white children" (Boyd, 106). These "savages" are presented as cold, heartless animals that possess only one goal, assailing the white man. "Especially in Western films, the bloodthirsty, war-crazed Indian has been Hollywood's stock and trade" (Rollins and O'Connor 33).

Contrasting to the idea of the bloodthirsty warrior is that of the noble/spiritual medicine man. This character type is frequently depicted as the extreme opposite of the savage warrior and is characterized by their belief in working with the invading white colonizers. These magic-wielding characters are portrayed as serving no higher purpose than guiding the white character on their journey. This literary trick, in presenting a noble character, is counterbalanced with a version of the plain old savage (Rollins et al., 2009 pg.160). Often depicted as observing whiteness as a holy form of existence, these characters select to align themselves with the white colonizer because they represent the spiritual guidance sought to unite the two groups of people. Through the teachings of the "esoteric secrets" of tribal life, the white warrior is often elevated spiritually and depicted as the savior of the tribe.

Similar to the nobleman, the image of the stoic Indian has been observed in motion pictures since its beginning and has remained a common stereotype. Johanna Feier wrote, "...warring American Indians were noted for their sternness, which popular culture interpreted as a sign of stoicism and lack of emotion"(pg.12) These silent, grim, humorless representations are, as Feier wrote, a "dehumanization… because it presents them as…machines." The stoic presentation of Native Americans is believed to have grown from the work of photographer Edward Curtis. Throughout his work, it is rare for his Native American subjects to display anything other than an emotionless expression. The Library of Congress houses thousands of his photos and has achieved significant circulation, perpetuating these dehumanizing images. The detail of Edward Curtis's work is important to note because there is an argument that his work influenced early cinema and how Native Americans were presented (Block & Red Corn, 2011). And yet, even though this stereotype misrepresents Native Americans, its usage persists.

Opposing the images of the bloodthirsty savage, Native Americans are commonly presented as weak and inferior human beings with limited resources to support themselves. Through a sympathetic view, the White Savior is frequently utilized as a form of protection from other white colonizers. Aligning themselves with Native tribes, the white savior comes to their aid when other colonizers determine they must be moved or eradicated. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the white savior engages in an intimate relationship with the Celluloid Princess. In this way, the White Savior is looked upon by the tribespeople to bridge the gap between the imperial colonizers and the Native American tribes. From the Nabb Research Center's online exhibit of Native American Representation in Visual Media, they state "The White Savior Complex proposes that when a group of non-white people is faced with oppression or dangerous threats, the only person who are powerful enough to pull them out of their miseries is a white man."

Another prevailing stereotype related to the white colonizer is the idea known as "going native." This term represents the idea of a white character leaving the safety of their community to completely assimilate into tribal life. While many of these examples depict the white character as consciously making this decision, outsiders are often convinced they were kidnapped or poisoned into joining. As a result, the tribe is attacked by outside forces, usually the U.S. Army or militia. Upon their assimilation into the tribe, they commonly believe they are experiencing a more divine or wholesome life. This further perpetuates the distinct othering presented in the American film industry and one that describes Native Americans as being inferior to their white colonizers. Another aspect of this stereotype is when the tribespeople aids their new white member in attacking and/or repelling the advances of their previous society, usually to their own demise.

The last stereotype framed in this section of the paper is that of the “half-breed” character. This is a character type who typically struggles with the turmoil of representing both their white and indigenous cultures. A character that is hated by both groups for having, in part, an association with the other. In some cases, these characters are often viewed by both groups as being untrustworthy, thieves, or disloyal. Alternatively, some stories also present ideas that these characters possess the noblest qualities of both races. In the book by Jenni Calder, There Must Be a Lone Ranger, she writes “being a half-breed means he has the edge over red and white.”

This fractional list of all portrayed Native American stereotypes, commonly utilized in the American film industry, was selected for inclusion due to their connection to the examined films. This is not an exhaustive list or description of each. From here, I will build upon these ideas in the following sections where my goal is to highlight how these ideas are employed.

Dances with Wolves (1990)

Synopsis: Dances with Wolves, a 1990 film directed by Kevin Costner and based on Michael Blake’s literary work, tells the story of Lt. John J Dunbar, a decorated Civil War veteran who is sent to Fort Sedgewick at the edge of the frontier.

Upon his arrival, Dunbar discovers the post abandoned. However, as he rehabilitates the fort, Dunbar encounters several members of the Lakota and remains cautious of their interactions. After meeting Stands With A Fist, a white woman who was raised by the Lakota, Kicking Bird, a spiritual tribal leader, guides Dunbar on his journey to become fully embraced by the tribe.

Dunbar's newfound freedom is threatened when new soldiers arrive and he is taken into custody for his supposed crimes. The Lakota tribe comes to his aid and rescues him, but Dunbar

and Stands With A Fist ultimately decide to leave before the army arrives and to avoid any further conflict.

After its release in 1990, *Dances with Wolves* rapidly became one of the most well-known films of the period. Having been nominated for twelve Academy Awards, filmmakers received seven wins including best picture, and was the first Western to receive the honor since Cimarron (1931). At the time, film critic Tom Matthews wrote in Boxoffice magazine, "No doubt destined to do for the Native American what 'Roots' did for the African American slave, this movie is determined to challenge the cruel Indian stereotypes from Ford's day, and in the end, it gives us a rare, sympathetic look at a culture about to [be] annihilated." The idea of a "sympathetic look" may have even gone as far as influencing national policy because, on December 10, 1990, U.S. President George H.W. Bush renamed Custer National Monument to Little Bighorn National Monument in recognition of both the U.S. Army soldiers and Native Americans that fought at the battle of Little Bighorn. In The Washington Post, Paul Valentine wrote "... '*Dances with Wolves*' has become an important psychological purgative for white America. We have finally expelled from our imagery the traditional Hollywood Indian -- the shiftless savage who can't hold his liquor -- and replaced him with the more complex and authentic characters of Costner's story." And yet, while both Mattews and Valentine believe the film distances itself from historically inaccurate stereotypes, it remains filled with and built around these ideas. The rest of this section examines the stereotypes connected with each character and provides direct examples of the listed stereotypes.

With few exceptions, this film is primarily presented through the perspective of Lieutenant John Dunbar, as portrayed by Kevin Costner, who is renamed *Dances with Wolves* once the tribe embraces him as a member. The perspective of Dunbar is noteworthy because it

represents the invitation for the audience members to become spectators, if not participants, in the depicted representations. That said, Dunbar's character correlates with several previously discussed stereotypes. More than anything else, Dunbar is representative of the white savior. After working to open lines of communication with the Lakota tribe, Dunbar pursues the Lakota way of life, with Kicking Bird remaining encouraged by his presence. As the white savior, Dunbar embraces the Lakota lifestyle, weds Stands with Fists, and nearly abandons Fort Sedgwick altogether to live full-time with the Lakota tribe. By the end of the film, Dunbar speaks almost exclusively in the Lakota language and incorporates traditional Native American regalia into daily clothing. After returning to Fort Sedgwick to reclaim his journal, which contains his unified experience, Dunbar is mistaken for a tribal member and attacked by the occupying U.S. soldiers. Upon regaining consciousness, Dunbar speaks to the soldiers in the Lakota language, representing his further transition into the Indigenous culture, known as going native.

Dunbar, having secured his place within the tribe as indicated by their willingness to send a war party to release him, believes the US military will continue to track him and hold him responsible for the various military crimes he committed as a soldier at Fort Sedgwick. Based on what he believes is in the most beneficial interest of the tribe, Dunbar and Stands with Fists leave the tribe behind in hopes of rejoining white society and convincing them to alter their relationship with Native Americans. Through the process of abandoning the Lakota tribe, Stands with Fists leaves behind the family who raised her from childhood and further represents how the celluloid princess is frequently the one who experiences a more considerable degree of pain within the relationship. Dunbar's act of sacrifice, the utilization of his privileged position within white society, and his vehement desire to convince other white settlers into altering their view of

Native Americans are further representative of the white savior stereotype. Through the perspective of John Dunbar, the audience is invited to participate in the going native process and celebrate Dunbar's 'selfless' deeds as the white savior.

Stands with Fists, as portrayed by Mary McDonell, represents at least two of the previously mentioned stereotypes, the celluloid princess and going native. Viewers watch the story unfold of how Stands with Fists, a white settler child, runs away during an attack on her family's settlement and it is assumed that all other family members are murdered during the attack. After running away and enduring the attack, Stands with Fists is discovered by Kicking Bird and taken as a member of his family. As indicated in a conversation between Kicking Bird and Black Shawl, portrayed by Tantoo Cardinal, Kicking Bird must decide when the mourning period for Stands with Fists is complete because, as his daughter, it is his responsibility. In her need for survival, Stands with Fists adapts to her new family and the Lakota way of life. This adaptation includes the use of the Lakota language and limited use of the English language, as indicated by her struggle to communicate with John Dunbar during his first verbally communicative meeting with Kicking Bird. From the Euro-American perspective, Stands With Fist represents the *Going Native* stereotype. While this argument may receive opposition because it is assumed that Stands with Fists does not actively select to leave behind her white identity and join the Natives for a more wholesome life, this perspective lays the groundwork for how this character equally represents the celluloid princess. Through her juvenile defiance of an elderly tribe member, Stands with Fists gained the respect of tribal members and earned her Lakota name. Through her embrace of the learned culture, the tribe's subsequent acceptance of her as a member of Kicking Bird and Black Shawl's family, and as a tribal member, in numerous ways, Stands with Fists represents a Lakota woman. In addition to identifying her character as

representative of the going native stereotype, her sympathy for and alignment with John Dunbar further represents her character as the celluloid princess.

During the sequence of shots where Stands with Fists' white family is murdered by Pawnee warriors, the stereotypical representation of the bloodthirsty warrior is on display. As a significant plot point, this attack represents the principal reason for how Stands with Fists, as a white settler child, is later discovered by Kicking Bird and raised as a member of the tribe. After telling the Pawnee warriors to flee the area, a warrior gathers a tomahawk from his gear and hurls it into the back of a fleeing settler. Subsequently, the warriors assault the remaining settlers, and it is assumed that all remaining family members were killed except for Stands with Fists. Additionally, the Pawnee warriors make four unique appearances throughout the film, with the central focus placed on Toughest Pawnee, portrayed by Wes Studi. These warriors were responsible for the attack and murder of Stands with Fists' white family, the attack and murder of Timmons, the attack on the Lakota tribe, and the tracking of Native Americans as enlisted soldiers in the U.S. Army. Comparing the presentation of the Pawnee warriors to that of the Lakota tribe, the difference is substantial. The distinction between these two tribes allows the audience to maintain a sympathetic view of the Lakota and merciless anger toward the Pawnee warriors. Presenting these warriors in such a manner draws a connection to the bloodthirsty warrior stereotype.

Kicking Bird, as portrayed by Graham Greene, represents the inquisitive spiritual leader that remains hopeful of opening lines of communication with the invading white settlers. Throughout the film, and initially with the aid of Stands with Fists, Kicking Bird meaningfully communicates with John Dunbar. After some time, the interactions between Kicking Bird and John Dunbar grew beyond their formal relationship and, after the marriage of Dunbar and Stands

with Fists, developed into a family bond. Convincing the rest of the tribespeople of Dunbar's importance, Kicking Bird's character remains a representation of the spiritual medicine man. Throughout the film, Kicking Bird focuses almost exclusively on his relationship with Dunbar and accompanies him through his journey, which leads to his inclusion in the Lakota tribe.

As portrayed by Rodney Grant, Wind In His Hair makes a significant character transition throughout the story. During the initial parts of the film, Wind In His Hair remains reluctant to the idea of communicating with the white soldier and coordinates an attack on Fort Sedgwick to steal Cisco, Dunbar's horse. About 47 minutes into the film, Wind In His Hair represents the stoic warrior as he confronts Dunbar in an act of intimidation. Thrusting his weapon into the ground at Dunbar's feet, he yells "I am not afraid of you!" As the film progresses, the stoicism of Wind In His Hair transitions as he eventually embraces Dunbar as a member of the tribe. This transition causes Wind In His Hair to lead a war party against the US Army soldiers as they transport Dunbar to stand trial for abandoning his post.

Lastly, it is significant to identify the balance which exists through the portrayal of these stereotypes. Each discussed stereotype is either unequivocally representative of the idea, such as with the Pawnee warriors, or attempts to undermine the stereotype through minor variations, as with Stands with Fists, representing the Celluloid Princess even though she is white. These variations present the opportunity for additional conversations about how attributes, such as the character's race, may aid the overall subversion of the stereotype(s). Therefore, even though the identified characters do not fit neatly into each of the connected stereotypes, these representations, I argue, remain examples of these character types.

Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher (2021)

Synopsis: Inspired by the literary work of Neil Johnson and C. Neil Kingsly, and based on the life of Montford Thomas Johnson, a Chickasaw cattle entrepreneur, *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* is a film adaptation of the book. The film's scope focuses on several key periods during Montford's life and how each impacted the arc of his story. Initially, the film begins during a period of considerable hardship experienced by Montford, his family, and his indigenous neighbors during the civil war. With only a sole head of cattle left to his name, Montford must find a way to take care of his family. After the defeat of the Confederate states, Monford is mostly left alone by the US Army and allowed to grow his cattle empire. Throughout the film, there are several key moments when various attacks take place on Montford's home and ranch, including hired outlaws directed to complete the dirty work of Sargent Richter. After the capture of a beloved Indigenous friend, along with many others, Montford is faced with traveling to Florida in hopes of gaining their release. Before his departure, and after the arrival of his English biological father who remained absent for most of his life, Montford is faced with a relationship he ardently opposes. Recognizing the value of his father's presence at the Florida fort, Montford allows him to accompany him along his journey and embraces him as his father.

This section identifies and draws connections to several observable stereotypes in *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*. These include the half-breed, the white savior, the stoic Indian, and the Plains Indian. Through careful consideration of the remaining stereotypes, as previously discussed, specifically that of the celluloid princess, going native, the bloodthirsty warrior, and the spiritual medicine man, these representations are not portrayed within this film. Comparatively, filmmakers utilized available screen time to develop the presented characters and avoided one-dimensional representations.

Having been passed down from generation to generation, the story of Montford Thomas Johnson, with the work of Chickasaw Nation Productions, has now gained visual representation. This film represents a contemporary example of Native American filmmaking and one that captured my attention due to the similarities it shares with *Dances with Wolves*. For example, both films are of the Western genre and set within the Central Great Plains; both include significant interactions between U.S. Military soldiers and the Indigenous population. Furthermore, both films are set in similar periods, with Montford set in the 1840s and *Dances with Wolves* set in the 1860s. However, unlike *Dances with Wolves*, *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* is primarily told from the Native American point of view. The story of Montford Johnson is one that is regionally recognized and shared widely. In 2020, Johnson was inducted into the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum's Hall of Great Westerners, with the film being released a year later. The literary work, of the same title, was initially published by Neil R. Johnson, Montford's grandson, in 1960 and a mere 1,000 copies of the book were printed at that time. Neil Johnson's grandson, C. Neil Kingsly, expanded on his grandfather's work and published a revised copy that has been widely circulated. Drawing specific connections to the setting, location, and character types, *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* was selected for comparative analysis, Next, I provide my examination of Montford and its use of stereotypical representation.

In *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, my observation of the cinematic portal of Native Americans is that some of the previously mentioned stereotypical representations are utilized. However, I believe filmmakers were consciously aware of these forms of representation and addressed the idea by calling it out directly. One stereotype previously addressed is that of the "half-breed." While this stereotype is historically prevalent in many American films, in

Montford the half-breed identity represents an accurate aspect of Montford Johnson's life, and filmmakers explicitly draw attention to its existence. Approximately 13 minutes into the movie, filmmakers identify Montford and the half-breed idea through an interaction between Montford and Sargent Richter. Speaking to Lieutenant Richard Pratt, Sargent Richter states, as they approach Montford, "This is the half-breed I told you about." While Montford displays disgust for his English father, his character is not constructed with inner turmoil about his multicultural background. He embraces this identity as it allows him to navigate both cultures effectively. These actions are observed through his interactions at Fort Sill and during his meeting with the Native American Chiefs before the cattle drive.

Next, an examination of Montford's father, Charles "Boggy" Johnson, reveals the white savior stereotype. As described in the story, Charles Johnson abandoned his family while Montford and his sister, Adelaide, were still young. Despite this situation, Montford survived his youth and built a substantial cattle empire. Upon his controversial return to Kansas, the reunion between Boggy and his son remained bitter as Montford selected to merely regard him as the person who abandoned his family. Following the imprisonment of several Cheyenne men, Montford, Boggy, and Montford's son, Edward Bryant Johnson, set out for Fort Marion in Saint Augustine, Florida. During a conversation between Montford and Boggy, prior to their departure, Boggy mentions a personal relationship with a U.S. Senator and the fact the Senator "owes him substantially." To Montford's disgust, Boggy mentions this notion again while aboard a train bound for Blue Springs. Upon their arrival at Fort Marion, Boggy takes over the conversation with Lt. Pratt and informs him of his relationship with both U.S. Senator Augustus Hill Garland of Arkansas and President Rutherford B. Hayes. After pleading their case to Lt. Pratt and receiving his empathetic rejection, the Johnsons walk beyond the gates of Fort Marion to find a

local building in flames. With flames erupting, Montford and Boggy, along with Sargent Richter run inside to help evacuate those in need. During this period, Sargent Richter lures Montford into an enclosed room, locking him inside as the building continues to burn. Upon the realization that Montford was not clear of the burning building, Boggy dashes into the flames in hopes of retrieving his son. After locating Montford in the sealed room, Boggy throws him over his shoulder and transports him out, effectively saving his life. The following morning, after the building fire was safely distinguished with the aid of the imprisoned Cheyenne men, Senator Garland arrives at Fort Marion and works to release the prisoners. While the film remains unclear as to if Senator Garland's presence affected the prisoners' status, Boggy utilizes all viable options to assist them. These two examples, saving Montford's life and the utilization of personal privilege in an attempt to free the Native American prisoners, are representative characteristics of the white savior. While I believe there is an argument in opposition to this idea, mostly that Boggy is not representative of a principal character, during his presence he makes a concerted effort to symbolize the white savior.

Throughout the movie, filmmakers were successful in their presentation of multi-dimensional Native American characters, working within a broad range of emotional depth in what I believe to be a result of both the script and the acting direction. There is a reasonable argument that the sternness Montford displays are representative of the stoic Indian stereotype. However, I argue the depth of his character withdraws him from this category. Montford's display of sterness is primarily shown during his interactions with those he viewed as disrespectful, perceived or otherwise. The two primary examples are his interactions with Sargent Richter, and his father. Montford's sternness is subverted by the inclusion of stories about his charitable giving, and heroic deeds. When an unknown cousin shows up to the

Johnson ranch, with seven children in tow, Montford and his wife welcome the family into their home. Additionally, Montford travels to Florida in hopes of having his friends released from a military prison and, while there, narrowly survives a fire after pulling people to safety. These examples show Montford's character depth and is why I argue the stoic Indianstereotype is inaccurate.

At the 45-minute mark, the stoic Indian stereotype appears during Montford's meeting with the tribal Chiefs. During this 33-second shot sequence, one of the gathered Chiefs responds to Montford's request to herd his cattle through their lands. With no less than seven Chiefs present during the meeting, all maintain the appearance of the stoic Indian. This is further highlighted by the rhythmic pace utilized during the verbal communication of the responding Chief. Furthermore, the clothing utilized by each Chief is different from all others, maintaining a unique look, and clearly delineating between tribes. Filmmakers employed this technique to reduce the potential for audience confusion. Representing several nations and languages, along with customs and traditions, this overly simplified sequence is mostly filled with non-verbal communication and is collapsed into a few spoken sentences. With this sequence version, the audience understands Montford's request and clearly understands the costs associated with an affirmative response. I argue the use of this stereotype was to simplify this portion of the story, and it feels like the stoic Indian.

Chickasaw, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Kiowa, to name a few, are the numerous Native American representations filmmakers employed throughout the film. In addition to Montford as a member of the Chickasaw, another noteworthy representation is that of his Cheyenne friend, Rising Wolf. Common to many films that display Native American representations is the Plains Indian stereotype. This aspect of the story is significant to recognize because, as David Wishart

states, "...the Hollywood Indian from the 1920s through the 1980s was more likely to resemble a Plains Indian than any other, largely because the American audience quickly grew accustomed to the exotic look of Plains headdresses and breastplates." Representing another tribe from the Great Plains, Rising Wolf makes several appearances throughout the film, wearing clothing like Montford and absent headdresses and breastplates. While the Plains Indian approach will generate interest from viewers, its usage, like the half-breed stereotype, is historically accurate in the case of *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*. The current Chickasaw Nation reservation, located south of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and Johnson's primary home, located in Council Grove, Kansas, are both located within the Great Plains region of the United States. Furthermore, all tribes depicted in this film, or connected through conversation, are all understood to have lived within the Great Plains. The historical accuracy of this point is important to the subversion of the Plains Indian stereotype.

Employment Practices & The Line

Through the evaluation of each film's cinematic portrayal of Native Americans, there is reason to believe some change has occurred within the American film industry over the preceding thirty-year period. One existing circumstance that potentially influenced this shift is examined through the lens of off-screen representation. As will be discussed in the subsequent section, representation matters in all forms of media, including cinema. Production companies generate a substantial amount of work on the opposite side of the camera and employ hundreds of workers to complete various tasks during the production process. One way to categorize crew members is to divide them into two district groups referenced by their place above or below the line. In this way, the term "line" references the distinction between those who maintain creative control of the film's ultimate product (above-the-line), and those completing tasks to fulfill the

vision of filmmakers (below-the-line) (Clevé, pg.6). For this research, above-the-line positions include the following creative positions: director, writer, producer, casting director, cinematographer, and principal cast. The examination of this specific set of functions identifies those crew members who maintained control of the film's production process. It is equally significant to note this distinction because Chickasaw Nation Productions, the production company for *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, states on their website that over 200 Native American cast and crew members worked on the film[1]. Additionally, in some of the succeeding information, I have utilized publicly available information on each individual, if available, to determine the nationality or status as a recognized Native American or First Nation citizen. In this way, "recognized" refers to the 574 federally recognized tribes. This unit of measure is problematic in that it maintains the U.S. government's power of determination and limits those who do not fall within the established classification. Most important to this research is the understanding that the publicly available information utilized for each individual, if necessary, falls within the classification of a federally recognized tribe and is included as such. This information is publicly available on an array of sites such as IMDB, individual portfolio sites, and/or included in their respective films. For example, Robyn Elliot's information was collected through the Chickasaw Nation legislative department website, Chickasaw.net. In the case of Lucy Tennessee Cole, screenwriter for Montford, there is no publicly available information and represents the unknown portion of this sample.

To further break down the examination of these groups, I selected to look at the top ten listed acting roles, as shown in their respective film credits. In conjunction with the six creative directing roles, a total of sixteen positions were examined for *Dances with Wolves* and seventeen positions for *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*. *Dances with Wolves* employed no Indigenous

crew members to fill the above-the-line positions. In front of the camera, half of all principal roles were portrayed by Native American or First Nation actors. In total, 31.25% of the above-the-line positions were filled by Native American and First Nation actors, while remaining limited to on-screen positions. This compares to 100% of creative direction roles and 68.75% of total roles (fig 1.) going to non-native cast and crew members. Comparatively, in *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, half of all creative directing positions were filled by Native American and First Nation filmmakers. These include literary authors Neil R. Johnson and C. Neil Kingsley, both direct descendants of Montford T Johnson, and executive producer Robyn Elliott. Of the top ten listed performers, four of the on-screen positions were filled by Native American actors. In total, 41% of all above-the-line positions were filled by Native Americans, with 53% filled by non-Native people (fig 2.).

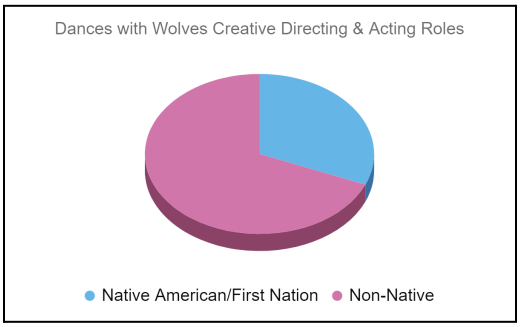

Figure 1

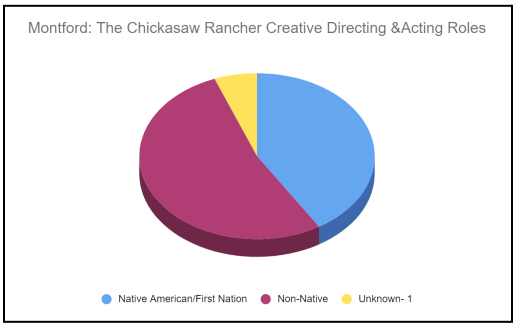

Figure 2

While this research is not an exhaustive analysis of all films over this period, it does lay the groundwork for further conversation and examination of industry hiring practices. If we accept the claim made by Chickasaw Nation Production, about their inclusion of more than 200 Native American cast and crew members, coupled with the previous examination of creative production roles, the numbers indicate a shift in off-screen representation. There is more research work to be completed on how off-screen representation influences a film and the portrayal of

Native Americans. On the surface, it appears as if those tasked with telling these stories have influenced how Native Americans are presented in movies.

The Significance of Identifying with Portrayed Representations

Representation in all forms of media matters and remains a point made by many scholars from various backgrounds. For example, Dr. Kevin Leo Yabut Nadal is a distinguished Psychology professor and a leading researcher in microaggressions and traumatic stress, as stated in his profile information. In Nadal's article titled "Why Representation Matters and Why It's Still Not Enough," published in the online Psychology Today, Nadal states "...representation can be helpful in reducing negative stereotypes about other groups." With an emphasis on the material conditions of social life, representation is a means of understanding our place in the world (Aitken & Zonn, page 6). Representation in film matters because as an influencing factor on how children view their racial makeup, it provides visual examples that claim to be similar or the same as their own. This fact is further represented through recent reaction videos of Black American children expressing their excitement during a preview of the upcoming film The Little Mermaid (2023), with one respondent exclaiming "She looks like me!" The American film industry has been dominated by white representation, and this includes many animated films. This shift in the presentation can provide additional images of influence to those who remain most receptive to these ideas. This is why representation in film matters.

Throughout this paper, the examination of stereotypes and employment practices within the American film industry has provided examples of how representation is created. Furthermore, gaining positive forms or representation is equally, if not more, important than representation alone. In a research experiment conducted by Dr. Markus Appel and Dr. Silvana Weber, they examined how participants responded after observing stereotypical characters in

movies. In their associated article, Appel and Weber state “Our meta-analytical findings are in support of stereotype threat theory, indicating that negative stereotypes and devaluing content in the media impair members of negatively stereotyped groups, whereas nonmembers are not affected.” Stereotype threat theory is the idea that an individual is influenced in their actions based on known stereotypes about their race or ethnic background. This means those identifying with the presented stereotypical representations are more likely to alter their behavior to avoid any association.

While the American film industry includes all states and production companies, this section will examine the 2022 Hollywood Diversity Report, representing the statistics from 2021. Published on an annual basis, by the UCLA Sociology Department, their comprehensive report examines the breakdown of those working within the Hollywood industry and utilizes different master class statuses and job functions for categorization. With Hollywood representing the most comprehensive system of film production companies in the world, it is only one portion of the American film industry. That being stated, the following statistics represent an examination of the Hollywood system and do not reflect the entire American film industry. Of the 252 lead acting roles listed in the report, only one Native American actor was selected to work in these positions. When we expand this idea to include all acting roles, jumping the combined number of positions to 1,944, a total of 21 positions (14 male, 7 female) went to Native American actors. With a total of 252 films examined for the 2021 year, 143 film directors were white men, compared to just two Native American directors (1 male, 1 female). Lastly, for the total year, 67.7% of all credited film writers were white, compared to two Native Americans, or 0.8%.

Within the larger American film industry, there remains another observable phenomenon related to Native American representation in film. Before the 1990 release of *Dances with*

Wolves, there were three operating Native American film production companies. These include Shenandoah Film and Video, Na Maka O Ka Aina, and Turtle Island Productions L.L.C. Since 1990, the total of Native American production companies has increased by 225%, including Chickasaw Nation Productions which opened in 2009. In 2020, the Tesuque Pueblo converted an outdated and unused gaming casino into a 75,000-square-foot movie studio, with another 17,000 acres of backlot production space. Camel Rock Studios is not only the first Native American studio, but it is also one of the world's most substantial spaces dedicated to cinema production. Other Native American film production companies include Native Spectrum (2020), Cherokee Nation Film Office (2019), Tule Films (2017), Indian Paintbrush (2006), Native American Media Alliance (2004), InterTribal Entertainment (2000), Vision Maker Media (1997), and Red Nation Celebration Institute (1995). As with Chickasaw Nation Productions and Camel Rock Studios, these companies perform a vast variety of roles within the American film industry.

Conclusion

When considering the two selected films, *Dances with Wolves* and *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, there is a considerable difference in the usage and employment of Native American stereotypes. However, the filmmakers of both movies utilized a subset of the discussed stereotypes as character representations. The story of *Dances with Wolves* was created with the idea of the White Savior, supported by the stories of the Celluloid Princess and the Noble Medicine Man. Comparatively, in *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, filmmakers employed character types like the Stoic Indian, and the White Savior, amongst others. This research identifies areas in both films where the employment of stereotypes is a direct attempt to subvert these representations. For example, the concept of the half-breed is directly addressed in Montford and the significant transition Wind in His Hair experiences as he bonds with Dunbar in

Dances with Wolves, which are both representatives of subversion. Therefore, as it relates to the on-screen presentation, neither film is void of these stereotypical characters, but *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* does appear to be more calculated in how these stereotypes are employed. “By subverting the images that have been plaguing America's original inhabitants for centuries Native American filmmakers present complex on-screen characters and facets of contemporary indigenous America which more adequately reflect the diversity of Native American communities” (Feier, 2011 Pg. 160). Filmmakers draw direct attention to the existence and attempt to dissolve these ideas through character development.

The decision in how these character types are implemented and displayed may be impacted by those responsible for telling the stories. When we examine the employment practices above and below-the-line, there seems to be a significant difference in those responsible for creating these films. For instance, Dance with Wolves did not employ any Native Americans in positions outside of acting roles. It is worth mentioning that while the Native American characters were depicted by Native American and First Nation actors, their absence from the creative decision-making princess limits the scope of their voice. Comparatively, in *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, many of these poisons were also filled by non-Native crew members. However, the film was inspired by a Chickasaw author, created by the Chickasaw Nation Productions, and overseen by executive producer Robyn Elliott, Cabinet Secretary of the Chickasaw Nation Department of Communication and Community Development. Additionally, if we accept the claim made by Chickasaw Nation Productions, about the inclusion of over 200 Native American cast and crew members that worked on *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, those with control over the telling of these stories have shifted when compared to *Dances with Wolves*. It is also important to note that the inclusion of these storytellers and filmmakers is not a

replacement for those sections of the industry that is responsible for the continued misrepresentation of Native Americans. Rather, this inclusion is a separate addition to the American film industry, allowing for the voices of others to be heard. This difference, while subtle, is significant because these stereotypical portrayals are still utilized in contemporary examples produced in America's most prominent film production areas like Hollywood.

Through an examination of UCLA's 2022 Hollywood Diversity Report, Native American actors, writers, and directors remain significantly underrepresented when compared to their white counterparts. As an alternative to the Hollywood system, Native American filmmakers have created and built numerous film production companies and have taken on various roles in the film production process. Furthermore, through the creation of these organizations, the company can control who works on their productions and potentially how they are represented through on-screen portrayal. These employment practices allow companies like Chickasaw Nation Productions to employ over 200 Native American cast and crew members on a project that alters how stereotypes are utilized in the story-telling process.

Therefore, over the 31 years between these two films, there lies a measurable change in Native American representation within the American film industry. While I have consistently maintained this work is not an exhaustive study of all films produced during this period, I argue there is enough evidence to signify a shift in representation. Whether it's the calculated decision on how to employ and subvert the on-screen utilization of over-simplified stereotypical representations of Native Americans, or the fact that there has been considerable growth in Native American-owned and operated film production companies, the shift in stories away from Hollywood and into the hands of Indigenous filmmakers represents one way the American film industry has altered its relationship with Native Americans since 1990.

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