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

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Abstract

In 2015, film critic Angela Aleiss wrote that "Dances with Wolves created a watershed... no Western has had such a powerful impact." More than thirty years have passed since the release of the film Dances with Wolves in 1990, and since then, there have been significant shifts in public opinion and government policies regarding Indigenous rights and representation. Sports franchises are parting ways with former idols, and the US government has allocated substantial financial resources for providing healthcare to Indigenous communities, among other endeavors. Against this shifting cultural 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, I adopt a comparative analysis approach, drawing on the films Dances with Wolves and Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher (2021). The two key areas of examination are the on-screen portrayal of stereotypical character types and the off-screen employment practices of production companies. Scholars and activists have argued that the cinematic representation of Native Americans has traditionally been confined to that of stereotypical characters, which has been deemed harmful to the Native American population's perceived identity. While both films 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 occurred over time. Overall, 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.

1. 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..." —U.S. President Andrew Jackson, December 6, 1830.

**Tom Farrenkopf (tomf@uoregon.edu) graduated in 2023 with a Bachelor of Science in Cinema Studies, accompanied by a minor in Sociology. Their capstone undergraduate research project, titled "Indigenous Voices Reshaping Cinema: Native American Representation in Dances with Wolves (1990) and Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher (2021)," explores the portrayal of Native Americans in film. Tom conducted this research under the guidance and mentorship of Dr. Ari Purnama, Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies. Building on their achievements, Tom has been accepted into the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, where they have been honored as a 2023 Shriram Fellow. With an ultimate ambition of attaining a doctorate in the cinematic arts, Tom aspires to contribute to academia as a professor of cinema studies.*

The comprehensive eradication of the Native American populace constituted, on certain occasions, an overt objective pursued by the United States government and its constituents, who sought to capitalize on governmental initiatives to displace Indigenous people, notably exemplified by the Homestead Act of 1862. During this period, myths of so-called unholy savages circulated amongst those involved with the westward expansion effort. From spoken word, transmitted through oral stories, this troublesome stereotype[1] became widely circulated through books, wild west shows, and eventually, full-length movies. From its inception, the American film industry has utilized these character types and continued to represent the Native American population in such 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 2014). Nevertheless, the film maintains an overly the romanticized portrayal of those Indigenous characters represented. Furthermore, Native Americans rarely received production offers outside of acting roles, and, as I will discuss later, this trend continues in contemporary filmmaking. However, over the last 31 years, a significant increase in Native American film production companies raises the following question: *How, if at all, has the American film industry altered its relationship with Native Americans between 1990 and 2021?*

In the study that follows, five main subareas of research will provide further examination of these topics. First, I describe a specific subset of Native American stereotypical representations in order to lay the framework for evaluating *Dances with Wolves* and *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*. The stereotypes selected for examination relate to the representations portrayed in these films. Following the breakdown of these stereotypes, a two-part 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 why representation in film matters and how the continued utilization of historical stereotypes is potentially damaging to those Indigenous viewers who identify with these fictional ideas.

2. Methodology

Through a comparative examination of modern and historic films featuring Indigenous characters and themes, there appears to occur an observable and measurable change related to the degree of Indigenous representation. My research takes both qualitative and quantitative approaches to understanding whether and how Native American representation within the American film industry has changed.

To begin with, this paper utilizes a comparative analysis approach by examining two movies produced within the American film industry in order to understand what change has occurred and how. The films analyzed are *Dances with Wolves* (Costner 1990) and *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* (Frankowski 2021).

While national opinion and policy have continued to shift over time, the impact of films like *Dances with Wolves* has aided public awareness of Indigenous issues. The shift in general national awareness and governmental policies that followed the film constitutes the most significant reason for selecting this film. In 1991, after significant box office and industry-

[1] Onscreen portrayals of stereotypical characters are characterized as simplified and one-dimensional representations of individuals or groups that conform to fixed patterns based on attributes such as sex, race, religion, profession, or age.

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 2015 article by Dr. Angela Aleiss[2] states, "*Dances with Wolves* created a watershed… no western has had such a powerful impact." While it cannot be definitively proven whether the film directly affected policymakers, the immediate years after its release saw significant policy changes. For instance, in 1993, U.S. President George H.W. Bush renamed Custer's National Monument to Little Bighorn National Monument., in 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act provided healthcare access for all registered members of the 574 federally recognized Indigenous tribes. Within this legislation, Native American households earning less than 300 percent of the federal poverty line were eligible to receive universal healthcare at no cost. These contemporary U.S. government policies represent a significant change in priorities from the former policies that worked up to and included the expulsion, "civilization," and annihilation of the Native American population.

Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher is the second film selected for qualitative analysis. Intending to understand how the film industry has altered its relationship with Indigenous cultures over the last thirty-year period, I elected to examine a contemporary film that boasted its inclusion of more than 200 Native American cast and crew members. 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 distinctive when compared with other productions created within the American film industry.

An observable weakness of this research method is its limited scope. While this work is nowhere near an exhaustive examination of a larger cross-section of films, it opens the door to future dialogue and investigation.

The second approach involves the statistical analysis of each film's hiring practices. My analysis specifically examines those key roles with direct creative control over the film's production, including positions both in front of and behind the camera. Since representation behind the camera may significantly affect the product created, this second approach identifies a crucial factor. Production companies require a substantial amount of labor 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 a "line." In this instance, 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 2016, 6). For the purposes of this research, above-the-line positions include the following creative positions: director, writer, producer, casting director, cinematographer, and principal cast. It is 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, I have analyzed publicly available information on each production team member, if available, to determine each member's nationality or status as a recognized Native American or First Nation citizen of one of the 574 federally recognized tribes. This information is publicly available on an array of sites such as IMDB, individual portfolio sites, or film credits. For example, I accessed Robyn Elliot's information through the Chickasaw Nation legislative department website. In the case of Lucy Tennessee Cole, a screenwriter for *Montford*, there is no publicly available information; thus, they represent an unknown

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

portion of this sample. To further break down these groups, I elected to look at the top ten acting roles from each film, as shown in their respective credit sequences. In conjunction with the six creative directing roles, I examined a total of 16 positions for *Dances with Wolves* and 17 for *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*.

Overall, this unit of measure is limited in that it maintains the U.S. government's power of determination and overlooks those who do not fall within the established classification. Of paramount importance to this research is the recognition that the publicly available information utilized for each individual, where applicable, strictly adheres to the classification of membership in a federally recognized tribe and is comprehensively included as such. This approach ensures the accuracy and validity of the data used in the study, thereby upholding the integrity and credibility of the findings. By meticulously adhering to the recognition of federal tribal affiliations, the research maintains a rigorous and principled stance, safeguarding against misrepresentations and misconceptions that may arise in the absence of such precise classification.

Through the utilization of these two approaches, my goal is to gain an understanding of Indigenous cinematic representation based on the qualities of each.

3. Framing Historical Stereotypes for Film Evaluations

To lay the foundation for the cases of stereotypical representation utilized in these films, I must first establish the framework of these ideas. To this end, I have elected to provide a brief overview of each stereotypical character type and provide background information from those scholars—in film or otherwise—that have contributed to these ideas. Throughout American film history, filmmakers have repeatedly utilized numerous oversimplified Native American stereotypes that are problematic in their presentation. Several of these stereotypes are utilized in contemporary films. For example, in the Disney 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," or, in this case, acting in "redface."

Before I lay the framework for these stereotypes, it is worth mentioning that the stereotypes presented in this project constitute 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 typically not created by the American film industry. More exactly, many of 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. However, it is through film and live shows that these stereotypes have gained a visual representation.

The principal error within these stereotypes is that they brand all Native Americans as 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. As one scholar writes, "[w]hile Native American community members have tried to amend and correct them, these stereotypes still inform popular culture and curricula" (Raheja 2013, 222). While these stereotypical representations remain numerous in their presentation, this study will examine those examples that correlate with the two selected films.

In the 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 a representative idea that 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 stereotype is realized when a Native American woman falls in love with a member of a group of invading white colonizers and works to bridge the gap 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 2009, 43), and 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 2009, 43).

Another stereotypical idea—that Native warriors have been and are frequently engaged in all levels of criminal activities—has its roots in how white Euro-Americans viewed the Indigenous population and utilized their criminalization as justification for murder. Having permeated many aspects of American life, the idea of Native "warriors" is reflected in numerous entertainment industries. Specifically, within the American film industry, this idea is represented by the stereotypical characteristics of the bloodthirsty warrior/savage: "[t]he bloodthirsty warrior is a vicious, animalistic beast, attacking white men and kidnapping white children" (Boyd 2015, 106). These "savages" are presented as cold, heartless animals that possess only one goal: assailing the white man. The idea that "[e]specially in Western films, the bloodthirsty, war-crazed Indian has been Hollywood's stock and trade" (Rollins and O'Connor 2002, 33) highlights a prevailing stereotype prevalent in cinematic depictions of Indigenous peoples. The work of Rollins and O'Connor underscores the longstanding presence of such harmful stereotypes in the film industry and emphasizes the need for critical examination and revision of these portrayals to foster more authentic and respectful representations of Indigenous cultures.

Contrasting 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—presenting a noble Indigenous character—is counterbalanced with a version of the plain old savage (Rollins et al. 2009, 160). Often depicted as observing whiteness as a holy form of existence, these characters elect to align themselves with the white colonizer and represent the spiritual guiding force that seeks 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.

The image of the Stoic Indian has been observed in motion pictures since their inception and has remained a common stereotype. As Johanna Feier writes, "warring American Indians were noted for their sternness, which popular culture interpreted as a sign of stoicism and lack of emotion" (2011, 12). These silent, grim, humorless representations is, as Feier argues, a form of "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 works, it is rare for his Native American subjects to display anything other than a vacant, emotionless expression. The Library of Congress houses thousands of his photos and has achieved significant circulation, perpetuating these mostly one-dimensional images. The character of Edward Curtis's work is important to note because some argue that his work influenced early cinema and how Native Americans were presented (Block & Red Corn 2011). And yet, though this stereotype misrepresents Native Americans, its usage persists.

Opposing the images of the Bloodthirsty Warrior, Native Americans are elsewhere

presented as weak and inferior human beings with limited resources with which to support themselves. Through a sympathetic view, the White Savior is frequently utilized as a form of protection from other white colonizers. Aligning themself with Native tribes, the White Savior comes to their aid when other colonizers determine that these tribes 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 entrusted by the tribespeople to bridge the gap between the imperial colonizers and the Native American tribes.

The Nabb Research Center's online exhibit on Native American Representation in Visual Media posits that the concept of the "White Savior Complex" asserts that in scenarios where non-white groups face oppression or perilous threats, the narrative depicts a white individual as the only figure capable of rescuing them from their adversities. This perpetuates the notion of white superiority and benevolence, positioning white characters as the ultimate saviors and reinforcing racial hierarchies. Such portrayals have been criticized for their reductionist and patronizing approach, as they marginalize and undermine the agency and resilience of marginalized communities, including Native Americans.

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. Upon their assimilation into the tribe, characters who have “gone native” commonly believe they are experiencing a more divine or wholesome life. While many of the films that employ this stereotype depict the white character as consciously making this decision, outsiders are often convinced that characters who “went native” were kidnapped or forced into joining the tribe. As a result, the tribe is often attacked by outside forces, usually the U.S. Army or a white militia. This further perpetuates the distinct attitude in the American film industry that Native Americans are inferior to white colonizers. Another aspect of this stereotype is realized when the tribespeople aid their new white member in attacking and/or repelling the advances of their previous society, usually to their own demise, highlighting the expendability of Indigenous characters.

The Half-Breed character constitutes another significant stereotype worth exploring. Typically depicted as an individual grappling with the challenge of reconciling their dual identities—being both white and Indigenous—the Half-Breed character faces animosity from both cultural groups due to their association with the other. They are often viewed with suspicion and distrust, considered untrustworthy, thieves, or disloyal by both communities.

On the other hand, some narratives also present the notion that these characters possess the finest qualities of both races, potentially embodying a blend of noble attributes. In the book "There Must Be a Lone Ranger," Jenni Calder encapsulates this stereotype by asserting that being a Half-Breed confers a distinct advantage over both Indigenous and white individuals. This implies that such characters are somehow positioned within an advantageous middle ground, suggesting that they possess unique strengths arising from both sides of their dual heritage.

This selection of Native American stereotypes commonly utilized in the American film industry was chosen for inclusion due to its connection to the films *Dances with Wolves* and *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*. This does not constitute an exhaustive list or description of the existing stereotypes associated with Indigeneity; however, it provides vital framing and context for the films’ analysis. From here, I will build upon these ideas in order to explain how they are employed in cinema.

4. Dances with Wolves (1990)

Dances with Wolves, a 1990 film directed by Kevin Costner and based on Michael Blake's literary work of the same name, tells the story of Lieutenant John Dunbar, a decorated Civil War veteran who is sent to Fort Sedgewick at the edge of the North American 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 Dunbar meets Stands With A Fist, a white woman who was raised by the Lakota, Kicking Bird, her adoptive father and 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 abandoning his post at Fort Sedgwick. The Lakota tribe comes to Dunbar's aid and rescues him, upon which Dunbar and Stands With A Fist decide to leave before the army arrives to avoid any further conflict.

After its release in 1990, *Dances with Wolves* rapidly became one of the best-known films of the period. Nominated for 12 Academy Awards, the film ultimately received seven, 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 film's so-called "sympathetic look" at Indigenous characters may even have gone as far as influencing national policy: on December 10, 1990, U.S. President George H.W. Bush renamed the former Custer National Monument as 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 Matthews and Valentine argue that the film distances itself from historically inaccurate stereotypes of the day, it remains filled with and built around these ideas, even if they ostensibly appear more "sympathetic." The remainder of this section will explore the generic stereotypes connected with each character in the film.

With few exceptions, *Dances with Wolves* is primarily presented through the perspective of Lieutenant John Dunbar—played by Kevin Costner—who is renamed *Dances with Wolves* once the tribe embraces him as a member. This use of perspective is noteworthy because it represents an 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; namely, 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. As the White Savior, Dunbar embraces the Lakota lifestyle, weds Stands With A Fist, 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 his daily dress. After returning to Fort Sedgwick to reclaim his journal, which narrativizes his entire 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 deeper transition into the Indigenous culture, or his "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 military crime of abandoning his post. Believing it is in the best interest of the tribe, Dunbar and Stands With A Fist leave the tribe behind in hopes of rejoining white society and convincing other colonizers to build a relationship with Native Americans. Dunbar's act of sacrifice, the utilization of his privileged position within white society, and his vehement desire to convince other white settlers to alter their view of Native Americans are further representative of the White Savior stereotype. Through adopting 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 A Fist, as portrayed by Mary McDonell, represents at least two of the previously mentioned stereotypes: the Celluloid Princess and "going native." Viewers watch as Stands With A Fist, originally the child of white settlers, runs away during an attack on her family's settlement; it is assumed that all other family members are murdered during the attack. After surviving the attack, Stands With A Fist is discovered by Kicking Bird and taken in as a member of his family. As she begins to accept her dramatically changed living situation, Stands With A Fist 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 A Fist also represents the "going native" stereotype. While this argument may receive opposition because it is assumed that Stands With A Fist does not actively elect to leave behind her white identity and join the Lakota for a more wholesome life, it can be reciprocally argued, then, that her character equally represents the Celluloid Princess. Through her juvenile defiance of an elderly tribe member, Stands With A Fist gained the respect of tribal members and earned her Lakota name. Through Stands With A Fist's willingness to embrace her newly learned culture and the tribe's subsequent acceptance of her as a member of Kicking Bird and Black Shawl's family and of the tribe, in numerous ways, though she is racially white, Stands With A Fist represents a Lakota woman. In addition to representing the "going native" stereotype, her sympathy for and alignment with John Dunbar dually defines her character as the Celluloid Princess.

During the sequence of shots where Stands With A Fist's white family is murdered by Pawnee warriors, the stereotypical representation of the Bloodthirsty Warrior is placed on display. As a significant plot point, this attack represents the principal reason as to why Stands With A Fist becomes dispersed and is later discovered by Kicking Bird and raised as a member of the Lakota tribe. After telling the Pawnee warriors to flee the area, a warrior gathers a tomahawk from his waist and hurls it into the back of a fleeing settler. Subsequently, the warriors assault the remaining settlers, and it is assumed that all other remaining family members are killed. Later, the Pawnee warriors make four unique appearances throughout the film, with the central focus placed on Toughest Pawnee, portrayed by Wes Studi. These warriors are responsible for the attack and murder of Stands With A Fist's 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 with 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; even if it is not levied toward the "primary" tribe in the film, the archetype still exists.

Kicking Bird, 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—initially with the aid of Stands With A Fist —Kicking Bird meaningfully communicates with John Dunbar. After some time, the interactions between Kicking Bird and John Dunbar grow beyond their formal relationship and, after the marriage of Dunbar and Stands With A Fist, develop into a family bond. Serving the role of convincing the rest of the tribespeople of Dunbar's perceived significance, 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 throughout his journey, which ultimately leads to Dunbar's inclusion in the Lakota tribe.

Portrayed by Rodney Grant, Wind In His Hair makes a significant character transition throughout the story. Early in the film, Wind In His Hair is reluctant about 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 archetype 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 wavers 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 U.S. Army soldiers as they transport Dunbar to stand trial for abandoning his post.

Lastly, it is significant to identify the balance is created by the portrayal of these stereotypes. Each discussed stereotype is either unequivocally representative of the idea, as with the Pawnee, who are portrayed as bloodthirsty and ruthless warriors, or attempts to undermine the stereotype through minor variations, as with Stands With A Fist, who takes on the role of Celluloid Princess, even though she is white. These variations present the opportunity for additional conversations about how variant attributes—such as the character's race—may aid the overall subversion of stereotypes. However, although the identified characters do not fit neatly into each of the connected stereotypes, these representations, I argue, remain examples of these character types.

5. Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher (2021)

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 a book of the same name. The film focuses on several key periods during Montford's life and explores how each impacts the arc of his story. Initially, the film begins during a period of considerable hardship for 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. Following the downfall of the Confederate States of America, Montford, the protagonist, finds himself largely unscathed by the U.S. Army and is afforded the opportunity to expand his cattle empire. Although the state of Kansas did contribute troops to the Union cause, the film indicates that the Chickasaw Nation has chosen to align with the Confederacy as a consequence of a prior Union record of broken treaties. Throughout the film, there are several key moments when various attacks on Montford's home and ranch take place, including one by 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 a mission of traveling to Florida in hopes of arguing for their release. Before his departure—and after the arrival of his English biological father, who had remained

absent for most of his life—Montford is forced to grapple with a paternal relationship he ardently opposes. Recognizing the value of his father's presence at the Florida fort, Montford allows his father to accompany him on his journey and embraces their newfound relationship.

Here, I identify and draw connections to several observable stereotypes in *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*. These include that of the Half-Breed, the White Savior, the Stoic Indian, and the Plains Indian. The remaining stereotypes explored in this essay—those of the Celluloid Princess, "going native," the Bloodthirsty Warrior, and the spiritual Medicine Man—are not portrayed within this film. Rather, 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, through the interpretation of Chickasaw Nation Productions, has now gained visual representation. This film represents a contemporary example of Native American filmmaking and appeared apt for comparative analysis due to the similarities it shares with *Dances with Wolves*. For example, both films are of the Western genre, situated within the Central Great Plains, and include significant interactions between U.S. 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. The literary narrative upon which the film was based was initially published by Neil R. Johnson, Montford's grandson, in 1960, and a mere 1,000 copies of the book were printed at the time. Neil Johnson's grandson, C. Neil Kingsly, expanded on his grandfather's work and published a revised copy that has since been widely circulated. In 2020, Johnson was inducted into the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum's Hall of Great Westerners, and the film was released a year later.

In *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher,* my analysis of the cinematic portrayal of Native Americans indicates that some of the previously mentioned stereotypical representations are utilized. However, it also appears that the filmmakers were conscious of these forms of representation and addressed these stereotypes by calling them out directly. One such stereotype is that of the Half-Breed. While this stereotype is historically prevalent in many American films, in *Montford*, the Half-Breed identity accurately represents an aspect of Montford Johnson's identity, and filmmakers explicitly draw attention to its existence. Approximately 13 minutes into the movie, filmmakers directly acknowledge the Half-Breed stereotype through an interaction between Montford and Sargent Richter. Speaking to Lieutenant Richard Pratt, Sargent Richter indicates Montford, "This is the Half-Breed I told you about." While Montford exhibits disgust for his English father, his character is not fraught with inner turmoil about his multicultural background. He embraces this identity, as it allows him to navigate both cultures effectively. These characteristics are observed through Montford's interactions with Lt. Pratt and Sgt. Richter 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 the story goes, 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 Boggy's controversial return to Kansas, the reunion between Boggy and his son is bitter, as Montford elected 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 in hopes of aiding in the release of the prisoners. During a conversation between Montford and Boggy prior to their departure, Boggy mentions a personal relationship with a U.S. Senator and the fact that the Senator "owes him substantially." To Montford's disgust, Boggy raises this notion again while aboard a train bound for Blue Springs. Upon their arrival to 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 an empathetic rejection, the Johnsons walk beyond the gates of Fort Marion to find a local building in flames. With flames erupting, Montford, Boggy, and Sargent Richter run inside to help evacuate those in need. During this scene, Sargent Richter lures Montford into an enclosed room, locking him inside as the building continues to burn. Upon the realization that Montford remained in 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 is safely distinguished with the aid of the imprisoned Cheyenne men, Senator Garland arrives at Fort Marion and works to release the prisoners. While it is unclear as to whether Senator Garland's presence affects 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 there is an argument in opposition to this idea—namely that Boggy is not a principal character—during his presence onscreen, 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, incorporating an impressive level of emotional depth through both the script and the acting direction. There is a reasonable argument that the sternness Montford displays is representative of the Stoic Indian stereotype. However, I argue that the depth of his character withdraws him from this category. Montford's display of sternness is primarily shown during his interactions with those he views as disrespectful, perceived or otherwise. The two primary examples of Montford's stoicism are his interactions with Sargent Richter and those with his father. However, 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 releasing his friends from a military prison and, while there, narrowly survives a fire after pulling people to safety. These examples show Montford's emotional depth and are the basis for the argument that invoking the Stoic Indian stereotype is an inaccurate—or, at least, incomplete—way to describe Montford's characterization in this film.

At the 45-minute mark, however, the film reintroduces the Stoic Indian stereotype during Montford's interaction with tribal Chiefs. In this particular 33-second shot sequence, one of the assembled Chiefs stoically responds to Montford's request to guide his cattle through their lands. Throughout the meeting, all seven Chiefs maintain the appearance of the Stoic Indian, reinforcing this stereotype. The rhythmic pace of the verbal communication of the responding Chief further accentuates the stoic demeanor. Although this approach may have been intended to streamline the narrative for clarity, it nevertheless perpetuates the Stoic Indian stereotype. This reductionist portrayal

oversimplifies the multifaceted nature of Indigenous cultures and communication styles, reducing it to a single, static representation. While the filmmakers may have intended to facilitate storytelling efficiency, the usage of the Stoic Indian stereotype in this sequence evokes an oversimplified depiction of Indigenous peoples, warranting critical examination and discussion.

Chickasaw, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Kiowa are just a few of the numerous Native American tribes filmmakers draw from throughout the film. In addition to Montford, a member of the Chickasaw, another noteworthy representation is that of his Cheyenne friend, Rising Wolf. Common to many films that utilize Native American representations is the Plains Indian stereotype. This aspect of the story is significant to recognize because, as 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" (Wishart 2011). Hailing from another tribe of the Great Plains, Rising Wolf makes several appearances throughout the film, wearing clothing like Montford, sans headdresses and breastplates.

While the Plains Indian approach will generate interest from viewers, its usage, like that of 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—fall within the Great Plains region of the United States. Furthermore, all tribes depicted in this film, whether directly or through dialogue, are understood to have lived within the Great Plains area. The historical accuracy of these inclusions is thus important to the subversion of the Plains Indian stereotype.

6. Employment Practices and the Line

Through the evaluation of each film's cinematic portrayal of Native Americans, there is reason to believe that some change has occurred within the American film industry over the intermediate 31-year period. One circumstance that may have influenced this shift is off-screen representation, as representation matters in all aspects of media production.

To this end, *Dances with Wolves* employed no Indigenous crew members to fill the above-the-line positions. However, in front of the camera, half of all principal roles in *Dances with Wolves* were portrayed by Native American or First Nation actors. In total, 31.25 percent of the above-the-line positions in this film were filled by Native American and First Nation actors, though they remained limited to on-screen positions. Meanwhile, 100 percent of creative direction roles and 68.75 percent of total roles went to non-native cast and crew members (Figure 1).

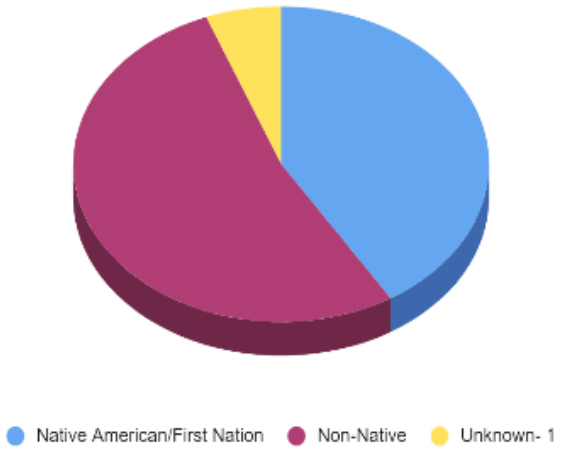

Figure 1. *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher,* creative directing and acting roles.

Comparatively, in *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher,* half of all creative directing positions were filled by Native American and First Nation filmmakers. These include authors Neil R. Johnson and C. Neil Kingsley, both direct

descendants of Montford T. Johnson, and executive producer Robyn Elliott. Of the top 10 listed performers, four of the on-screen positions were filled by Native American actors. In total, 41 percent of all above-the-line positions were filled by Native Americans, with 53 percent filled by non-Native people (Figure 1).

While this analysis is limited to that of two films, it lays 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. However, there is more research to be completed on how off-screen representation influences a film and the portrayal of Native Americans within.

7. The Significance of Identifying with Portrayed Representations

Representation in all stages of media matters, according to numerous scholars from various backgrounds. Dr. Kevin Leo Yabut Nadal, a distinguished psychology professor and a leading researcher in microaggressions and traumatic stress, is one such scholar. In Nadal's article "Why Representation Matters and Why It's Still Not Enough," published in the online media outlet *Psychology Today*, Nadal states that "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 one's place in the world (Aitken & Zonn 1994, 6). Representation in film matters because, as a factor influencing how children view their racial makeup, it provides visual examples of individuals with characteristics similar to or the same as their own.

Throughout this paper, the comprehensive analysis of stereotypes and employment practices within the American film industry has yielded illustrative instances of how representation is shaped and manifested. Moreover, it is crucial to underscore that attaining positive and authentic forms of representation holds equal significance to, if not more significance than, simply achieving a numerical increase in representation alone. The endeavor to portray diverse and multifaceted perspectives in the realm of cinema goes beyond mere numerical representation—rather, the quality and authenticity of these portrayals play a pivotal role in dispelling harmful stereotypes and fostering an inclusive and culturally enriched cinematic landscape. In a communication research experiment, Dr. Markus Appel and Dr. Silvana Weber examined how participants responded after observing stereotypical characters in movies. Their study "Do Mass Mediated Stereotypes Harm Members of Negatively Stereotyped Groups? A Meta-Analytical Review on Media-Generated Stereotype Threat and Stereotype Lift" delved into the impact of media-generated stereotype threat and stereotype lift on individuals (Appel & Weber 2017). The researchers explored the potential harm that mass-mediated stereotypes may inflict on members of negatively stereotyped groups, shedding light on the crucial issue of stereotypical representations in media and their effects on perceptions and attitudes. Stereotype threat theory is the idea that an individual's actions are influenced by known stereotypes about their race or ethnic background. This means that 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, which summarizes the statistics from 2021. Published on an annual basis by the University of California, Los Angeles Sociology Department, this comprehensive report examines the demographic breakdown of those working within

the Hollywood industry and utilizes different master class statuses and job functions for categorization. While the following statistics represent an examination of the Hollywood system and do not reflect the entire American film industry, Hollywood is the most comprehensive system of film production companies in the world and thus makes for a strong case study. Of the 252 lead acting roles listed in the report, only one Native American actor made the list. When the analysis is expanded to include all acting roles—increasing the combined number of positions to 1,944—a total of 21 positions (14 male, seven female) went to Native American actors. Of the 252 films examined for the 2021 year, 143 of the film directors were white men, compared with just two Native American directors (one male, one female). Lastly, for the total year, 67.7 percent of all credited film writers were white, compared with only two Native American film writers, or 0.8 percent.

Within the broader 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 were Shenandoah Film and Video, Na Maka O Ka Aina, and Turtle Island Productions L.L.C. Since 1990, the total number of Native American production companies has increased by 225 percent; one such emerging enterprise is Chickasaw Nation Productions, which opened in 2009. More recently, Camel Rock Studios surfaced in the year 2020. Following the transformation of the antiquated and disused Camel Rock Casino, the Tesuque Pueblo successfully inaugurated a vast 75,000-square-foot movie studio, complemented by an extensive 17,000 acres of backlot production space. Notably, Camel Rock Studios distinguishes itself not solely as the pioneering Native American studio but also as one of the most substantial companies exclusively committed to the pursuit of cinema production worldwide. Others include 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.

8. Conclusion

When considering the two selected films, *Dances with Wolves* and *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, I identify a considerable difference in the usage and employment of Native American stereotypes between the two. However, the filmmakers of both movies utilized a subset of the discussed stereotypes within their character representations. The story of *Dances with Wolves* centers around 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 exploration of the Half-Breed in *Montford* and the significant transition Wind In His Hair undergoes as he bonds with Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* are both representative of stereotype subversion. In considering the on-screen presentation of Indigenous characters, it becomes evident that neither film is clean from featuring stereotypical portrayals. However, *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher* appears to adopt a more deliberate and thoughtful approach to the utilization of these stereotypes. Feier (2011, 160) aptly summarizes the efforts of Native American filmmakers in challenging and subverting the long-standing images that have plagued America's original inhabitants for centuries. Through their cinematic endeavors, these filmmakers strive to introduce complex and multifaceted on-screen

characters that authentically represent the diversity inherent within Native American communities. The aforementioned filmmakers intentionally draw attention to the existence of these stereotypes and, in so doing, endeavor to dismantle and dissolve these limiting ideas through the careful development of characters.

The approach taken towards the portrayal of character types in films is often influenced by the individuals entrusted with the task of storytelling. A comprehensive assessment of the employment practices within production companies, both above- and below-the-line, reveals a notable racial disparity among the professionals involved in the creation of these cinematic works. For instance, *Dances with Wolves* did not employ any Native Americans in above-the-line 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 and authenticity of their voices. Comparatively, in *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, many behind-the-scenes positions were also filled by non-Native crew members. However, the film was inspired by a Chickasaw author, created by 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 in the *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*'s production process, the nexus of control over the telling of these Indigenous stories has shifted when compared with *Dances with Wolves*.

It is important to note that the inclusion of storytellers and filmmakers is not a perfect counterbalance for those sections of the industry that engage in 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, while authentic Indigenous perspectives are increasingly incorporated, stereotypical portrayals are still utilized in America's most prominent film productions in Hollywood. An illustrative case in point can be observed in Disney's 2013 film *The Lone Ranger*, wherein Johnny Depp's costume involves the contentious practice of "redface" to embody a character purportedly representing the Crow and Cree nationalities. Such instances exemplify the persistence of harmful practices that undermine the strides towards authentic and respectful representation of Indigenous cultures within the film industry.

Through an examination of UCLA's 2022 Hollywood Diversity Report, it is clear that Native American actors, writers, and directors remain significantly underrepresented as compared to their white counterparts. As an alternative to the Hollywood system, Native American filmmakers have created numerous film production companies and taken on various roles in the film production process. Furthermore, through the creation of these organizations, Indigenous people can increasingly control who works on their productions and how their demographic is represented onscreen, as in the instance of Chickasaw Nation Productions.

Therefore, over the 31 years elapsed between *Dances with Wolves* and *Montford: The Chickasaw Rancher*, there lies a measurable change in Native American representation within the American film industry. While I have consistently maintained that this work is a limited case study, I also argue that there is sufficient evidence to signify a shift in representation. Whether looking to Chickasaw Nation Productions' calculated decision to employ and subvert the on-screen utilization of over-simplified, stereotypical Indigenous representations or the considerable industry growth in Indigenous-owned and operated film production companies, the shift of narrative control away from white Hollywood and into the hands of Indigenous filmmakers signals

that the American film industry has altered its relationship with Native Americans since 1990 and may well continue to do so. Apart from conducting a more exhaustive examination of the cinematic works generated during this temporal span, it becomes imperative to persistently monitor the unfolding transformations within the American film industry. This analytical pursuit is essential to comprehend the influence exerted on the representation of Indigenous filmmakers. By systematically observing the evolving patterns, one can discern the nuanced impacts on the portrayal and visibility of Indigenous voices in the realm of cinema. Such an approach will facilitate a more profound understanding of the dynamics shaping the presence and contributions of Indigenous creators within the film landscape.

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