Native American Women as Palimpsestic Apparitions in Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu’s *The Revenant*

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Palimpsest—a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain... something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form.[.] (Oxford Languages; emphasis mine)

Apparition—a ghost or ghostlike image of a person[.] (Oxford Languages)

1 In musing on the concepts of palimpsest and apparition as defined in the epigraphs above and in relation to the ongoing representation of Indigenous women in film and in Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu’s *The Revenant* (2015), an intriguing overlap of imagery emerges.¹ One of ghostly haunting, the surfacing and resurfacing of unsettled spirits disturbed and in need of our attention, held in a space they cannot completely escape. Working upon and against the palimpsest of the Western, Iñárritu’s mythic retelling of the Hugh Glass story revises and critiques the grand narratives of American exceptionalism born of the frontier. It highlights the violence bred of racism that weaves throughout the history of westward expansion, undercuts the genre’s tendency towards white privilege through multi-lingual narratives, and centers a counter-narrative focused on Indigenous families and women. Within this revision, Iñárritu’s Native female characters, the protagonist Hugh Glass’s wife (Grace Dove) and Powaqa (Melaw Nakehk’o), shoulder the burden of eliding the Celluloid Maiden, a tenacious tropic inscription, from the Western film palimpsest. The revisionism is complicated by Iñárritu’s inclusion of a literal palimpsestic apparition of the trope through Grace Dove’s character and through his structural decisions in telling their stories. Thus, the palimpsest continues its apparitional bleed-through, forcing us to consider the tenacity and residual power of the trope, and whether realistic portrayals of Native women and their families over-write it. Ultimately, it begs us to ponder Iñárritu’s intention.
This question of over-writing or erasing the trope at this moment in the twenty-first century—a time of national reflection on the destructive legacy of white privilege—is important. As is the question of why the Celluloid Maiden trope haunts us still. This essay seeks to explore these questions by reading The Revenant within the context of the Celluloid Maiden trope as outlined in my book Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film, which elucidates its longevity and work as a palimpsest: “[T]he ambivalence ingrained in the figure allows it to continue as a palimpsest—a textual body erased and rewritten to fit each generation’s idea of its place in American history and its image of the role of the Native American woman within that history” (Marubbio 220). My emphasis on the Celluloid Maiden trope neither negates in its exclusion the exceptional analytical work already done by and about the film, nor does it regressively move backwards the very real revisions that have taken place in the twenty-first-century Western. Rather, I see it as extending the activism Iñárritu, his production team, consultants, and actors set in motion to address the inaccuracies of film depictions of Native American/First Nations peoples and to create a space for dialog and change (Whale; Murphy; Schilling; Wohlberg). Ultimately, this essay explores the hegemonic power of cinematic tropes in residual form.

1. Background and Context on The Revenant

The Revenant is a survivalist narrative based on the legendary Hugh Glass. As Jon Coleman’s historical archeology of his life and the era uncover, there are only a few facts we can rely on: Glass joined General William Ashley’s expedition in 1823 as part of a fur trading venture looking for new trapping routes in the Upper Missouri River area (3); he survived an attack on the expedition by the Arikara who were protecting their position as middlemen in the trade economy of the region (4); he lived for about a year with the Pawnee (44); he was mauled by a bear in the summer of 1823 (3); abandoned by his colleagues, he recovered and made it to Fort Kiowa 200 miles away(3); and he was killed by the Arikara in 1833 (15). According to Coleman, it is precisely because of how little we know that the legend emerged and flourished into mythic proportions. Michael Punke revived the story in 2002 with The Revenant A Novel of Revenge. Inspired by Punke’s novel, Mark Smith wrote the screenplay that became the basis for his collaboration with Iñárritu in 2011 (Bloomenthal). In all cases, the mythologizing of Hugh Glass’s story relies on three aspects embedded in the traditional Western: the frontiersman who helps open the West for expansion, the violence of the western frontier and its Indians, and the power of nature itself to forge the American man. Many of the narratives minimize or exclude the history of interracial families, Native American perspectives, and the experience of Native women; these omissions are what Iñárritu’s version brings to the mythic retelling.

Iñárritu’s strategy, which reflects a current blossoming of Westerns by women or focusing on women and including more substantial and realistic portrayals of Native Americans, has long roots in the early eras of film and in the revisionist Western. The interracial family emerges as a primary narrative in silent period Indian films such as The Squaw Man (1914) and as secondary narratives in revisionist Westerns like Broken Arrow (1950), Little Big Man (1970), and Jeremiah Johnson (1972). As the work of both Hearne and Marubbio have explicated, these films offer sympathetic portrayals of Native experience from a white male perspective. And in some cases, such as Last Train...
to Gun Hill (1959), they illustrate the very real sexual violence experienced by Native women (Marubbio 80-82). Iñárritu maintains the primarily white male space of the traditional Western/mountain man evident in Smith’s 2010 screenplay but reshapes it extensively by including Indigenous captivity and family revenge narratives. He Indigenizes this space further by privileging the Native family through his two female characters—Glass’s wife and Powaqa. Both women are strong, are forces to be reckoned with, and are well loved by their families. In fact, they are what drive the male characters’ actions throughout. This powerful scaffolding built upon Indigenous women and families should, theoretically, reframe the space—write anew on the palimpsest a Western indicative of multicultural historical reality. The film does all of this to a very great degree. But what of those spaces where the apparition seems to bleed through the palimpsest?

2. The Celluloid Maiden Trope

Iñárritu’s apparition—Huge Glass’ wife—and to a much lesser degree Powaqa reflect the historical impact of a popular trope in A-list Westerns, the Celluloid Maiden—the Native women who “enables, helps, loves, or aligns herself with a white European American colonizer and dies as a result of that choice” (Marubbio ix). Expanding on the work of Bird, Green, Kilpatrick, and others on the representation of Native women in art and film, Killing the Indian Maiden analyzes the trend of killing off the young woman across 34 A-list films. The book maps the trope’s different manifestations—the archetype Celluloid Princess (1909-1925; 1950-59), the Sexualized Maiden (1925-1960s), the Hybrid Princess (1960s—) to uncover its complexity and ongoing cultural use (Marubbio). The strength of the trope resides in its amalgamation of recognizable stereotypes of Native women—the violent avenger, the princess, the innately sexualized woman, the child of nature—into a highly focused figure whose complexity and “power [as a] cultural icon” deepens and strengthens its symbolic meaning over time (Marubbio 15). Killing the Indian Maiden argues that the impact of violence against Native women in Hollywood film narratives, and particularly the Western, emerged through this trope as a reflection of American cultural assumptions about rights of conquest mixed with ambiguity and fear in relation to interracial mixing, Native Americans, and women. The figure’s continual death across one hundred years of cinematic depictions frames film as a palimpsest upon which continued violence is rewritten to fit the political/social attitudes of an era, and in so doing validates the ongoing violence against Indigenous women. How the woman’s story emerges and is framed continually reminds us of the violence against Indigenous women that continues both in film and in daily life, and which is often retold through others’ voices and framing. Herein lies the palimpsestic apparition aspect: while the Celluloid Maiden has diminished in screen time and use, she still surfaces in shades or reflections in media; cultural attachment to the trope is seen literally played out on Indigenous women. The problem is so acute that Indigenous women filmmakers like Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers (Blackfoot and Sámi) and Steffany Suttle (Lummi) have responded with pointed films addressing the trope itself and, in the case of Tailfeathers, enacting the trope from an Indigenous perspective as an act of retribution against the violence.

Though he works against such readings or embedded ideologies through depictions that are less romanticized than in many mainstream Westerns, Iñárritu’s primary
Native women, intentionally or not, reflect characteristics of the trope. Glass’s wife is connected to nature, is married to the white hero, and is killed by white soldiers who slaughter the village. Powaqa is the daughter of a war chief, is sexualized through her brutal abduction and repeatedly raped by white men, and is ultimately a deadly threat. What differentiates these two women is how Iñárritu represents them: Glass’s wife is nameless and a ghost, a memory, and a voice associated with images of trees and nature. Powaqa, on the other hand, is named, her sexualization is clearly not due to her inherent race but to white colonial violence, and she does not die. These differences are important and, coupled with the cinematic approach to filming their scenes and positioning their stories, place the two depictions in representational tension with each other as two competing discourses—one the legacy of the metanarrative of the genre itself, the other a revisionist holding-accountable.

3. The Palimpsestic Ghosts

Iñárritu sets his Indigenous agenda in the first moments of the film with a panning left shot of the sleeping Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio), his young son (Isaiah Tootoosis), and then his wife. Through the pan left, we are clued into the revisionist difference in reading the film—one that takes us backward in time (visually left) and through a different reading lens. The traditional male point-of-view of the Western, illustrated by the opening shot of the white hero, is expanded and shifted by the inclusion of his Pawnee family. The seven opening shots move rapidly from the sleeping family to a landscape shot of a tree under which his son and wife play, to close-up shots of his son’s and his wife’s faces, to a village on fire, to Glass cradling his injured son in the wreckage of the burned-out village, and finally to a close-up of Glass’s face. Glass’s voice-over narration across the scenes, in which he tells his son not to give up, sets the tempo and representational strategy for future scenes with his wife. All are either filmed as memories or visions, using diffused color pallets, and including a younger, healthier Glass or as low-angle shots of trees and the sky, accompanied by voice-over narration by Glass, Hawk (Forest Goodluck), or Glass’s wife.

There are a total of six scenes in which his wife visually appears. Two are memory sequences like the set noted above that provide more background on Glass’s past family life and the massacre of their Pawnee village by U.S. military (Williams). Four are visions: two within larger memories and two separated from memory. The visions—one of a small bird escaping the breast of his recently killed wife (presumably her spirit); two in which she hovers over him as an apparition; and the final in which she walks off into the trees and he is left breathing as the screen goes black—all indicate her power as a spirit and a guide. These are pivotal scenes in the narrative, key choices the production makes to provide historical relevance, Indigenous experience, and a spiritual presence to an otherwise bleak condemnation of the destructive forces of the American and French fur trade on Indigenous cultures and the environment.

Iñárritu’s depiction of Glass’s wife eerily appears as a direct filmic descendent of the Hybrid Princess figure of the late 1960s-1970s—“who plays a small, but symbolically and metaphorically essential role in the revisionist Western’s deconstruction and reconstruction of the myth of the frontier” (Marubbio 169). As does The Revenant, the revisionist Westerns of the 1970s reflect the political activism and societal attitudes of their time and engage in rethinking the genre’s pro-nationalistic representation of the
West. They rework the classic Western portrayal of “whites as representatives of civilization and the Indians as barbarians” by reconsidering the “impact of westward expansion on Native Americans” (Kasdan and Tavernetti 121-36; 121). A number of these films reframe the Celluloid Maiden trope to reflect the milieu of the era. In these films, the Hybrid Princess figure is provided very little screen time; however, her connection to an alternative cultural worldview is quintessential in shifting the hero away from what is depicted as a degraded American culture toward a stable Native family environment (Marubbio 168-170). Represented as intimately tied to nature, connected visually and metaphorically to the landscape, and sometimes as a ghost, the complex cultural work this rendition of the Celluloid Maiden does initiates the “white hero’s moment of rebirth and self-awakening and his emergence as an amalgamation of both worlds whose roots are formed in Native America” (Marubbio 169). As chapter five, “Free Love and Violence: Going Native with the Celluloid Maiden in the 1970s,” makes clear, the figure acts as the linchpin in the “hero’s balance between insanity and sanity, savagery and civility”—a tenuous position brought on by his cultural identity crises, ethical choices, or marginal positioning (184). She is the source of stability and comfort that helps sway the hero away from his own culture into the embrace of nature and Native culture. While her death catapults the white hero into a state of mental disintegration during which he physically and psychologically retreats into the wilderness, her memory will empower his recovery (Marubbio 167-195).

10 Iñárritu capitalizes on these representational codes through two primary strategies: Glass’s wife’s connection to nature and her depiction as a ghost or spirit. Early on he links Glass’s wife visually and metonymically to the large tree of the opening scenes. Later and in the diegetic and saturated color of the present, high-angle shots of trees framing the sky will be accompanied by her words in Pawnee: “When there is a storm and as you stand in front of a tree... If you look at the branches, you swear it will fall. But if you watch the trunk, you will see its stability.” Additionally, in a key scene after his mauling by the bear and as Hawk repeats his mother’s words, a point-of-view shot from Glass’s perspective shows his wife hovering over him in the tree canopy. This sequence metonymically connects the adage to the trees, the sky, and Glass’s wife. Repeatedly throughout the film, single low-angle shots of the trees are used with and without the adage to signal her presence or to import coming danger. Her voice poetically floats across wide shots of nature in its greatest beauty and power, still relatively unmarred by western contact; it gives him strength to travel through it and legitimacy to remain in it. Her presence as a spiritual essence of Nature keeps her husband from going insane with grief and the need for vengeance, from regressing into complete madness. Like the Hybrid Princess figures of the 1970s films, her presence helps him live long enough to understand his Pawnee friend Hikuc’s (Arthur Red Cloud) words of wisdom that “revenge is in the hands of the creator.” As he physically becomes more animalistic, she keeps his soul human. She has brought him into nature as a part of it, not as a force against it. It is at this point that she leaves him—turns away from him and walks into the woods. We are not privy to what this abandonment ultimately means but it seems to signal that her work is done, her spirit appeased.

11 As Michelle Raheja points out, in western visual culture the “image of the ghostly Indian [has circulated] as a figment of an American imagination invested in Native Americans as spectral entities of a tragic and mostly elided past within a broader field of historical amnesia” (Raheja 3). In Indigenous films such as Older Than America, Kissed by Lightning, and Quati Quati, spirits guide the primary character in righting a wrong,
acquiring needed knowledge, or rising to action. Iñárritu employs both understandings of spirit or ghost in Grace Dove’s character: she guides Glass toward a reconciliation of his anger against Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy) for killing Hawk; and her presence in Glass’s visions and memories ensure that the audience does not embrace historic amnesia about Indigenous genocide. There are two repeated visions that exemplify this last point. In each the sequence shifts from memories of her and the village massacre to shots of Glass walking toward a mountain of skulls. The shots seem to both document the massacre and prophesy the inevitable genocide of Indigenous people and animals by westerners; in this context they remind the viewer of the real stories that are often silenced. In fact, her ghost stands in as a revenant. One might assume that the term refers to Hugh Glass who at least four times seems, according to one non-scholarly definition of the term, to be “an animated corps... returned from the grace in order to terrorize the living” (Wikipedia). Such a reading is viable considering that the screenplay was inspired by Michael Punke’s The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge and the title reflects that contribution. However, her ghost also calls to mind a more general definition: “one who returns after death or a long absence,” which connects more clearly to the Native sense of a spirit or apparition having a purpose to right a wrong (Meriam Webster, “Revenant”). She is a revenant returned to guide Glass and, importantly, to remind the viewer of her people’s story.

Her people’s story encompasses the experience of Indigenous peoples at the hands of colonialism. Her relative anonymity, while problematic in other ways, allows her to function as a revenant relaying a general Indigenous testimonial. Through her scenes we witness what many tribes endured during the process of settler colonialism: the burning of villages, death at the hands of military, and the slaughter of women and children. Cultural, physical, and spiritual genocide are played out economically as memory and are personalized through her presence in the film and her connection to the hero. However, if we read her scenes only as seen through Glass’ memories then we run the risk of reducing them to cinematic moments of what Renato Rosaldo termed imperialist nostalgia—romanticizing and mourning what we have destroyed through colonialism (69-70). Iñárritu mitigates this reduction by including a scene of a massacred village that Fitzgerald and Bridger (Will Poulter) come across during their trek to catch up with their party. All that remains is an old woman and wild pigs. According to Fitzgerald, it is probably Captain Leavenworth’s work. This scene reinforces the Glass family narrative as part of the larger experience of colonialism and violence enacted against Indigenous peoples by settler-nations.

While Iñárritu’s ghost reminds us of our past, his character Powaqa brings colonial sexual racism’s violent reality into the present. Like an apparition, she enters the film only as a name, a reason for Arikara vengeance, a hint at a larger story in the second scene of the film. Moving us into the narrative present, the second scene viscerally depicts the 1823 Arikara attack on Captain Andrew Henry’s fur camp (Coleman 3-4). It is unexpected and reminiscent of past cinematic strategies of depicting a particular stereotype of Indian savagery out of historical context—warriors riding the ridge around the camp, arrows slicing through the air, whooping men emerging out of the landscape wielding hatchets and knives, and the merciless slaughter of a seemingly innocent camp. The Americans’ assumption is that they are after the furs. Iñárritu never clarifies if the Arikara are retaliating on that count, but another possibility arises when the Arikara war-chief Elk Dog (Duane Howard) states, “My daughter Powaqa is not here.” The Arikara will relentlessly search for Powaqa until the final scenes of the
film and this, coupled with their path of destruction through trapper camps, suggests her abduction. Iñárritu provides the audience with alternative possibilities for her disappearance in scenes where Indigenous women are shown working in the camps processing furs, living near or around forts, and or drinking with white men. Thus, the film’s editing promotes a level of ambiguity surrounding Powaqa’s fate until near the end of the film. The French have just hung Hikuc, and Glass is approaching their camp. There men are drinking and singing; one French trapper demands, “Bring me the girl.” The camera cuts to a medium shot of Powaqa curled in fetal position on the ground. She is force-marched, hands bound, to where the horses are tethered; and then she is raped. Only now is it clear that she was abducted into sexual slavery.

By including alternatives to Powaqa’s story by way of the Glass family’s narrative and the scenes of Indigenous women with white trappers and soldiers, Iñárritu offers a nuanced depiction and critique of the era. At the same time, and as with Glass’s wife, Powaqa’s story emerges through shades of the Celluloid Maiden trope, which validates such violence toward Indigenous women and promotes the idea that they were spoils of conquest. Iñárritu, I argue, does this in order to deconstruct them, to call our attention to them. The power and ambiguity of Powaqa’s character and story recall the dual attributes of the Celluloid Maiden. In a superficial reading Powaqa’s representation triggers cultural cinematic memories of the Princess figure; she is a war-chief’s daughter, she aligns herself to a degree with Glass in order to escape, and she spares him. Deeper readings filtered through Iñárritu’s ambiguity around her story tease out the Sexualized Maiden—“a highly effective representation of America’s psychological reaction to race, unbridled sexuality, and powerful women” (Marubbio 16). The fundamental characteristics of the Sexualized Maiden revolve around inherent and potentially deadly sexuality, which surfaces as reminders of her moral and social depravity and validates violence against her (16). Unlike these women, the knife wielding Powaqa is not sexually aggressive, but she is fearsome. In the three scenes in which she is physically present her only line is: “I’ll cut off your balls.” With one scene and a single statement, Iñárritu suggestively and economically portrays Powaqa as a deadly threat to white men. But, importantly and ultimately, Iñárritu refuses to cast Powaqa as a Sexualized Maiden; she and her father spare Glass—and she does not die. Rather, she rides out of the film in dignity and with her family in the second to last scene of the film.

Iñárritu initiates an interesting move by wielding the Celluloid Maiden trope as a tool for highlighting issues of violence toward Indigenous women. Both Glass’s wife and Powaqa are victims of racialized violence, the presence and purpose of which are facilitated through the recognizable aspects of the trope. As Killing the Indian Maiden traces, while each generation of media has maneuvered the trope to fit the political and social milieu of the period, it remains a solidly entrenched vehicle through which colonialism and racism are enacted on the body of the Indigenous woman. The trope’s deep ties to American identity politics and white, male privilege result in “a racial formation that reinforces cultural narratives of nation building and national identity” (Marubbio 21). And as the study uncovers in chapters 5 and 6, which deal with the 1960s-90s, seemingly unable to revise the trope to fit into historical moments of political anti-racist activism or multiculturalism, directors have simply silenced Native women characters through minimal screen-time, lack of name, or lack of voice. Iñárritu follows this strategy to a degree as discussed above and through his decision to cut many of Powaqa’s scenes (Wohlberg). Yet his manipulation of the trope strategically
calls attention to its cinematic legacy and contemporary manifestations. This strategy worked; many initial Indigenous reviewers connected most directly to Powaqa’s experience. Filmmaker Chris_T, for example, blogs that

[T]he story of Elk Dog searching for his daughter who has been taken by settlers rang true to me. This day and age, there is a considerable push to draw attention to the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada and the USA, and the Revenant was showing the roots of this modern problem. The attitudes dates back to the days of trappers seeing our women as another commodity to trade and abuse. (sic)

In an editorial in *Indian Country Today*, Sasha LaPointe (Nooksack) captures the power of such imagery as lived reality in her response to Powaqa’s rape. She explains the processes she and friends went through, which for LaPointe included “PTSD” reactions and the need for catharsis, which the group found by re-watching Powaqa’s powerful scene:

[We realize facing that scene was facing in a mirror held up to ourselves. It was seeing the reality of our own trauma, the ways we have endured it. The ways we have survived it. It’s suddenly much bigger than myself. It’s bigger than my friend.

It isn’t simply the connection to assault, to sexual violence that we share, but rather the portrayal of violence against indigenous women captured in just a few short seconds on the screen. (LaPointe)

The sexual racism exhibited toward Native women by the French and American men in *The Revenant*, as LaPointe makes clear, does continue today politically, socially, and jurisprudentially, and is based in the attitudes of the past as Chris_T noted. In reflecting on numbers leading up to or concurrent with the film’s release, in the United States between 1992-2000, the number of violent victimizations of Native American women was over 80/1000, which is higher than for “all other races” (Perry V). The National Congress of American Indians reported that Native women are “2.5 times as likely to experience violent crimes—and at least 2 times more likely to experience rape or sexual assault crimes—compared to all other races” (2). In Canada 1017 First Nation women went missing or were murdered between 1980 and 2012 (RCMP 3). By 2015 this number had risen to 1,181 and may be as high as 4000 (Vieria). In relation to these statistics, the deeply disturbing findings of the 2004 Amnesty International Report “Stolen Sisters” noted that “perpetrators of violence against women and those in the criminal justice system” believe that First Nations “women are responsible for violence committed against them” (110). The sobering truth is that these numbers continue to rise.

Native Studies Scholar Leo Killsback (Cheyenne) points out in his 2016 review that Powaqa’s character takes a stand against this legacy:

Powaq is a paragon of justice and becomes a hero in her own right. With the help of Glass, she is able to inflict a swift and just punishment upon one of her persecutors and escapes captivity. The sequence emphasizes—in a manner that few Indian-themed films have done before—that kidnapping trafficking, and violating Indian women is a crime, immoral, and is to be met with swift and severe punishment.

For these reviewers, Powaqa ultimately represents the empowerment of Indigenous people against such violence. As Killsback explains, Iñárritu has created a character that single handedly dismantles the stereotypes reinforced by earlier films that exploit Indian women as easy prey for sexual violence. Moreover, her story represents the roots of the persisting social and jurisdictional problems of
violence against American Indian women, as well as the tragedies of the missing and murdered Indigenous women of Canada.

20 Both Glass’s wife and Powaqa experience horrific violence, but reviewers focus on the latter in part because of her story’s contemporary feel, what Indigenous filmmaker/photographer Pamela Peters calls “Indigenous realism,” the concept that a lived reality in one time/space affects future generations in the same place (Personal interview).

4. Reflection

21 The perspectives noted above from these early reviews deserves our deepest consideration because they are not tempered by a long period of reflection and discursive analysis. Killsback’s, Chris_T’s and LaPointe’s represent the initial reaction to a film within the first month of its premier. The visceral reactions to Powaqa’s and Elk Dog’s stories are clearly connected immediately to ongoing experiences of current Indigenous families and women in both Canada and the United States. By Indigenizing and feminizing the narrative through filmic testimonials that ring true to Indigenous viewers, murdered and missing women for example, Iñárritu critiques many of the generic structures that continually promote nation-building narratives through western ideologies about conquest of land, racializing stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, and violence against Indigenous women. His choice to add Indigenous women and the family units to the Hugh Glass story goes far in moving toward an Indigenous reality, as does the addition of the Arikara and Pawnee languages, cultural specificity, and period realism. Indigenous reviewers praised Iñárritu for these aspects of the film (Kearns, Murphy), for his inclusion of “Indigenous actors and… stunt guys” (Wolhberg), going so far as to indicate that it set “a new bar in filmmaking” in “fairly representing Indians” (Killsback).

22 To a greater degree than did past Celluloid Indian Maiden films, The Revenant provides Indigenous realism and glimpses of Indigenous experiences during the colonialisit process, but it does so primarily through male Indian characters. Most of Powaqa’s story unfolds through her father’s visual narrative; Hikuc also shares with Glass that “I lost my family too. Sioux killed my people.” Within the gender hierarchy of the Western, this strategy provides space and power for a sub-narrative about the ramifications of colonialism and westward expansion on women and Indigenous families. While the audience is provided few to no happy memories through these family narratives, they are offered a glimpse into the roles and importance of women in Indigenous societies and the extent to which family will go to recover and avenge their kin. Additionally, Iñárritu deconstructs the stoic and violent Indian warrior stereotype by foregrounding the Indigenous man as an intimate part of the family narrative and as driven by a need for family. Family is what keeps Glass balanced, drives Elk Dog’s quest, and spurs Hikuc “south to find more Pawnee.” Women center these men’s lives. Iñárritu infers through the massacre scenes and the violence of the trapper’s world that without the family, Indigenous cultures would degenerate or die out. They are the civilizing force within a landscape made savage through the male paradigms of capitalism (the fur trade), colonialism (the forts, troops, and liquidation of animals and people), and warfare. This is a powerful aspect of Iñárritu’s revision. As Melaw Nakehk’o points out however, “It is a man’s story” (Wohlberg) and this coupled with the succintness of the women’s scenes results in this viewer’s grasping at Powaqa’s
sharply jarring or Glass’s wife’s visually lyrical moments in which they enact their experience.

These abbreviated moments then take on cinematic weight—they do cultural work that forces us to consider, on the one hand, the historical harm caused by tropes such as the Celluloid Maiden and ongoing violence toward women, and on the other, how romantically tied our filmic language is to the trope’s powerful nostalgic appeal. Iñárritu chooses to include two Indigenous families’ stories that are punctuated by scenes of the two women as bookends to a primarily male narrative. Powaqa’s leads viewers toward contemporary accountability regarding violence against Indigenous women; Glass’s wife’s returns viewers to ancient depictions of Native women as symbolic of the land itself and the motivation that sways the hero away from white society, thus resurrecting the Celluloid Maiden. Both narratives underscore family bonds and revenge as retribution for violating family. But while one relies on realistic violence in the narrative present for its weight and legitimacy, the other relies on visions and memory, nostalgic myths of the vanishing Indian, and tropic ghosts inscribed in the landscape itself. The narrative threads run parallel but aren’t dialogically connected. The cinematic weight of these moments is unequal. As a result, the more visceral narratives of violence, nature, and survival dominate cinematic memory. They in turn pull us away from the presence of the palimpsestic ghosts discussed throughout this paper and ultimately from the Indigenous perspective and require that we contemplate carefully what Iñárritu is doing.

By separating the narratives in approach and context, Iñárritu creates a western ontological dichotomy between the spiritual and the tangible: the unsubstantiated and the factual. This suggests to viewers that the ghost as represented by his wife is a product of Glass’s mind rather than reflective of an Indigenous ontology towards spirits. Edward Lawrence of *Sight and Sound* calls these scenes Glass’s “hallucinatory flashbacks,” exemplifying the disregard given by critics to the historical importance of these narrative sequences (Lawrence 25). His assumption makes western sense because she is only seen through Glass’s eyes. The important additions she brings to the film are less accessible as a tangible worldview due to their confinement to an apparition or revenant with only one repeated line. We lose her nurturing and Indigenous mode of teaching Hawk through lessons connected to nature, the realism of interracial marriages on the frontier, a sense of Indigenous spiritual traditions, and her mode of guiding Glass to knowledge.5 Including more Indigenous concepts of peoplehood through actions and stories would underscore the interconnection of the spiritual and physical reality to a Native worldview and cultural complex.6 But by including spirits only in connection to a dying man, by refusing Glass’s wife a name, and by depicting her as he does, Iñárritu ultimately seals her fate as an apparition, a remnant of the Celluloid Maiden, and a figment of the American imagination. She dissipates into the broader field of historical amnesia as a hallucination. Powaqa’s narrative, in contrast is more clearly connected to the historical reality of both Indigenous and settler-nation culture providing pan-cultural weight and value.

5. Conclusion

As I noted, Iñárritu works upon and against the palimpsest of the Western. The act of writing against the palimpsest provides latitude in telling the Hugh Glass story,
Indigenizing it, updating it, and holding it to a level of historical realism. This, in turn, allows Iñárritu to illustrate the disease brought to the land and its Indigenous people vis-à-vis western expansion, colonialism, and capitalism. It also provides room to underscore Indigenous families and their experiences. The film opens with the Glass family narrative scenes and then introduces Elk Dog’s family through his quest for Powaqa. It closes the complex double bookending with the Arikara family riding past Glass followed by a final set of sequences of Glass and his wife. As Glass’s wife walks off screen left, the camera cuts to Glass’s face and then to black, mirroring the opening shot of the film. The white protagonist is alone in the wilderness; the only sound is his breathing. Iñárritu’s bookending is a complex move that encapsulates the Western revenge drama within the Indigenous family narratives.

Technically this narrative device should privilege the Indigenous voice of the film and the women’s perspective. Certainly that would be the goal of writing against the palimpsest. Yet the majority of the film focuses on the white frontiersmen and their tenacity in surviving a hostile environment. This, too, is a result of writing on the palimpsest. Even when privileging an Indigenous narrative, The Revenant does so through the lens of the white narrator point-of-view, effectively reifying it within the genre and the Glass saga mythology. Initial Non-Native reviewers privilege the intense drama that surrounds glass and Fitzgerald and the others, and the visceral feel of their struggle with the land itself rather than the Native or family drama. Lawrenson calls the film “An astonishingly gripping, big-canvas tale of survival and revenge” (22), while Schaap heralds it a “film-making masterpiece… its sheer violence… matched only by the frightful deprivation Hugh Glass endures when he drags his bloody, broken self out of untrammeled wilderness” (9). The film’s revisionism deconstructs the mythic forging of the American West and its heroes over and through the bodies of Native Americans. And yet the violence and realism as seen through the white characters’ eyes is what predominates. Iñárritu’s dialectic discourse between his Indigenous and settler-nation narratives is ultimately unbalanced in terms of an Indigenous voice, resulting in the settler-nation perspective overshadowing the subtle Indigenous narrative.

Reviews by Indigenous viewers and actors also suggest an ambiguous relationship with the film. For those included thus far, the film is working against the history of the genre, while for others it is more of the same. Ryan McMahon bemoans the lack of speaking parts for Indigenous characters; Gyasi Ross (Blackfeet Nation), who generally praises the film, adds “Yet, it seems almost a conspiracy how little control, autonomy or voice Native people were given over our own lives in this film”; and Alex Jacobs (Mohawk) notes that “Some Native critics think we are still secondary elements with the same old plot devices, roles and minimal dialog, to quote my friend Ishkoten Dougi, ‘The only good Indian actors are acting as a dead Indian actors… I know where my heart is and I don’t want to be buried at Wounded Knee... again.’” These negative reviews along with the positive ones noted earlier suggest that the legacy of the genre’s tropes carry devastating weight.

Indeed, the trope’s weight is the cause of my own inquiry. My initial reaction to seeing the film in early 2016 echoed those cited in this essay; however, I immediately connected it to the Celluloid Maiden. I stepped away from writing about the film for several years to consider whether this was a direct relation to my personal connection to the Celluloid Indian Maiden or whether it signaled a deeper issue. Reflecting through the concept of palimpsest and apparitions allows a framing that moves past an initial
either/or response toward a deeper understanding of the very power of tropes in shaping ongoing trauma and power. It helps clarify why Grace Dove’s character is rarely discussed in depth while Powaqa’s is centered in dialogs about the representation of Indigenous women in the film. It also illuminates why the two characters cannot share the same historical space with equal cultural realism. The wounds of cultural appropriation of Indigenous culture, of ongoing stereotyping and romanticizing of Indigenous women, and of ongoing violence remain too raw. Approaching the trope through disconnected bits allows a respite of sorts, while consuming the entirety of its interwoven components may yet be too much for viewers as well, it would seem, Iñárritu.

The concept of a palimpsestic apparition provides a context through which to reflect on our cultural attachments to or inability to forego particular tropes and depictions of Indigenous women in film. As Steve Pavlik et al. point out in the introduction to Native Apparitions: Critical Perspectives on Hollywood’s Indians, the film industry’s legacy of portraying Native people creates “specters [that] haunt through stereotypical images and narratives that validate and celebrate American nation building, conquest, and violence toward Native peoples.... When internalized, they do the work of colonizing one’s spirit, mind, and body” (5). The authors go on to contrast this to “a Native understanding of apparition or spirit [that] refutes Hollywood’s specter of the Indian” in that spirits are seen as powers that need “to be administered to and cared for, so that at the very least they do no more harm” (5-6). Iñárritu’s The Revenant compels us to pay critical attention to the ongoing power of image, text, and meaning to haunt us. It is a powerful admonition that “Ignoring them can do great damage” (5-6).

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NOTES

1. Although its meaning is more global, for this essay I employ the term Indigenous in reference to Native Americans and First Nations peoples who are similarly affected by the history of stereotypes and racializing colonialist imagery. Native is often used in a similar manner, while Native American references peoples of the U.S., First Nations those in Canada, and Indian the same peoples, when pertinent to the Western genre’s context.

2. Mark L. Smith’s 2010 version of The Revenant screenplay privileges a white male perspective on the mountain man/western frontier narrative. He provides a traditional western depiction of Native American men as extremely savage warriors, with the exception of the Sioux who save and heal Glass (59-62, 65-70). While a Sioux woman nurses Glass, there are no other Native women in the narrative, and references to Glass’s family are minimal (26). According to Bloomenthal’s interview with Smith in 2016, the “personal thematic aspects... meant a lot to [Iñárritu]. He wanted to touch more upon the clash of cultures between the Native Americans and the trappers.”

3. Steffany Suttle’s Strong Hearts uses key scenes from many of the A-list Westerns analyzed in Killing the Indian Maiden and others to visually illustrate the powerful force of those representations on women. Her personal and fact-filled voice-over narrates images of the trope, underscoring the violence enacted on Native women. Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers A Red Girl’s Reasoning utilizes the naming strategies of silent Indian films centered on Indigenous female characters who fall in love with white characters, but reframes it as a contemporary femme fatale retaliation in which the primary motorcycle-riding detective tracks down and kills men who drug and rape Indigenous women.

4. According to Coleman, as part of the larger Arikara War of 1823, “the U.S. Army’s Sixth Infantry under Colonel Henry Leavenworth” was ordered to “move on the villages” with the aid of their Dakota and Lakota (Sioux) allies (90-1).

5. As both Sleeper-Smith’s and Van Kirk’s work on the era in which the film is set makes clear, inter-racial marriages between white men and Indigenous women were neither infrequent nor undesirable, providing status and influence in navigating the changing economic and political situation for their communities.

6. According to Holm et al, “Indigenous worldviews shape and are shaped by Peoplehood, which make up a complete system that accounts for particular social, cultural, political, economic, and ecological behaviors exhibited by groups of people indigenous to particular territories.” The four
key elements of Peoplehood—Language, Sacred History, Land/Territory, and Ceremony—form an intertwined matrix in which one element informs and is informed by the others.

ABSTRACTS

Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu’s mythic retelling of the Hugh Glass story revises and critiques the grand narratives of American exceptionalism born of the frontier. It highlights the violence bred of racism that weaves throughout the history of westward expansion, undercuts the genre’s tendency toward white privilege through multi-lingual narratives, and centers a counter-narrative focused on Indigenous families and women. Building from and reflecting on my earlier work in Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film, this essay reads the film’s representation of Native/First Nations women as palimpsestic apparitions of the Celluloid Indian Maiden trope that are both progressive and problematic in their ability to counter white hegemonic narratives of power and ongoing racism. This reading opens the dialogical tension between Iñárritu’s representation of his two primary Indigenous women—the “ghost” of Glass’ wife and Powaqa—allowing us to explore the hegemonic power of cinematic tropes in residual form. Ultimately, as Indigenous responses are brought to bear witness, we are asked to consider our ongoing attachment to particular tropes and depictions of Indigenous women even as we attempt to critique them.

INDEX

**Keywords:** Native American, First Nations, Indigenous, palimpsest, apparition, Celluloid Maiden, sexualized maiden, The Revenant, colonialism, Western, revisionist Western

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