

Cruelty and Violence in the Borderlands: Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant*

Cara Anne Kinnally

Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu's (2015) Oscar-winning film *The Revenant* fictionalizes the true-life story of frontiersman Hugh Glass and his struggle to survive after being severely mauled by a grizzly bear and left for dead, without a gun or any other weapons, in the wilderness of U.S.-controlled northern Louisiana Territory (present-day South Dakota) in 1823.¹ Like other westerns, the film builds up the myth of the self-sufficient, resourceful, and bold mountain man of U.S. folklore, here instantiated by the character of Glass.² Glass is unequivocally the hero and the focus of the film. But *The Revenant* differs from more paradigmatic western films, which often celebrated westward expansion as a civilizing force that opposed the "savage" wilderness of the frontier, by instead critiquing many parts of this process.³ When compared to the historical archive of documents related to Glass's life and Michael Punke's novel *The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge* (2002), on which the film is loosely based, Iñárritu's version of Glass's life story deviates in important ways. Only in the film, for example, does Glass marry a Pawnee woman and have a son with her. Only in the film does Glass murder a military officer in order to defend his son during an attack on the Pawnee village in which they live. And only in the film do we see the kidnapping and rape of a Sahnish (Arikara)⁴ woman, which provokes the Sahnish to violently resist the incursion of white men into the region.⁵ These changes highlight the violence involved in modern nation-building,

including ethnic genocide, dispossession, forced displacement, sexual violence, exploitation of natural resources, and the establishment of the geopolitical and ethnoracial borders that helped to create a national “us” and an othered “them” and that disrupt Indigenous communities that do not adhere to these imposed new borders.

Íñárritu’s choice to make these and other changes to Glass’s life story—to make Glass’s relationship with the Indigenous communities in the region a central focus of the film—turns viewers’ eyes, if only momentarily, to the margins of the settler nation-state and the Indigenous peoples who lived there during a foundational moment in U.S. history: the so-called exploration and settlement of the West, a process in which emergent capitalist enterprises, namely, fur trapping, were heavily involved, with the support of the U.S. government. In portraying a key period in U.S. nation formation, while simultaneously highlighting the violence against Indigenous communities that characterized that period, the film explores how the subalternization of certain people and groups is a product of modern capitalist nation-state formation. In this sense, the film comments on the contested construction of geopolitical, linguistic, racial, and cultural borders, the lasting implications of the construction of such borders, and how modern nation-states—and their borders—are built on and through physical and epistemological violence and colonization.

I thus begin by examining *The Revenant* as a border film by exploring how the film creates a space of geopolitical ambiguity and cultural, racial, and linguistic mixing—all traits broadly associated with the idea of a borderland. However, as I will subsequently discuss, the film emphasizes not only the existence of this borderland but also the processes by which the modern U.S. nation-state creates borderlands and border dwellers. This process is characterized by and realized through cruelty and violence, which, according to Latin American cultural critic Jean Franco, are co-opted, rationalized, and openly embraced by nation-states as necessary methods that will ultimately help to create a cohesive and “modern” nation. I end by considering the transnational aspects of Íñárritu’s cinematic oeuvre as a whole and explore what it might mean to understand Íñárritu himself as a type of border crosser, as other critics have suggested. While recent research on Íñárritu tends to examine him solely in the context of international and independent art house cinema or U.S. film history, to do so means to ignore the important ways in which his present-day work is connected to his past films and influenced by his development within the Mexican film industry. Reading *The Revenant* within Mexican as well as U.S. film history thus offers a more nuanced perspective on how Íñárritu is influenced by and immersed within both Mexican and U.S. culture. I will discuss how Íñárritu’s use of certain formulae of both the western genre and what historian Dominique

Brégent-Heald identifies as “borderland films” undercut some of the larger and more radical decolonial potentials of the film. Ultimately, despite its attempts to represent the complexities of settler colonialism and the violence inherent to colonization, *The Revenant* remains a settler film that privileges the point of view of white settlers in the film and the experiences of white audiences in the theater.

A revenant is a person who comes back from the dead—a zombie-like figure who returns to the world of the living. In this manner, the film itself is also a revenant, raising questions from the past about xenophobia, racism, white nationalism, and imperialism that continue to live on and haunt the United States in the twenty-first century. In considering the impact of this film on present-day audiences, this article interprets *The Revenant* as a commentary as much about the present and future of the United States as about its past. I examine the film not for its historical accuracy but for the ways it retells history, which have implications for how we talk about history, the nation, and national identity in the present.

The Revenant as Border Film

In her now classic *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999), Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa explored and described the significance of borders and borderlands:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (25, emphasis in the original)

Anzaldúa deliberately reclaims these stigmatized, denigrated, and ostracized categories of identification as sources of resistance, power, and productive creativity. Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking work highlights that borders and borderlands are not just physical spaces or geopolitical regions. They are also socially constructed and discursive spaces that highlight immense disparities and define the limits of belonging.

The very first scenes of *The Revenant* show a space strikingly similar to Anzaldúa’s descriptions. The first images show Hugh Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio), the main character in the film, together with his Pawnee wife (Grace Dove) and their young son, who is smiling broadly. Glass’s first

words, however, whispered hoarsely in Pawnee in a voice-over, "It's okay, son. ... I know you want this to be over," jar with these happy images, warning viewers of what is to come. Only a few seconds later, a white man in a military uniform burns a Pawnee earthen house while Glass's son appears in the foreground, looking directly at the camera. The young boy's expression is blank, emotionless, seemingly in shock. His hair is tousled, and his face is dirty, with the suggestion of burn marks on his cheeks. This is followed by an image of Glass cradling his son amidst the burning wreckage of what appears to be an entire Pawnee village. "As long as you can still grab a breath, you fight. You breathe. ... Keep breathing," Glass says in another voice-over in Pawnee. In these brief, dream-like first scenes of the film, we see the annihilation of the village and the fracturing of Glass's family.

Shortly after these first scenes, we are in the present of the film's narrative. It is 1823, in unorganized Louisiana territory, and another scene of horror awaits us: bloody beaver carcasses, stripped of their pelts, litter the scene. This is the campsite of an outfit of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. The general destruction of the environment—dead animals, felled trees, land stripped of its vegetation, smoke and ash—is coupled with a sense of tension and imminent danger. Captain Henry (Domhnall Gleeson), the leader of this fur-trapping company, urges his men to work quickly and finish preparing their last haul of beaver pelts. Only a few minutes later, Sahnish warriors rain down flaming arrows on the unprepared trappers and begin a seemingly merciless massacre. The film shows the chaos of the attack in gory detail as Henry's men struggle to make it to the boat and escape. Later, we learn that thirty-three of the men in the trapping party have been killed. The small party of about ten men who escape, including Glass and his now teenage son, Hawk (Forrest Goodluck), flee down the river as smoke curls in the air and vultures circle over the remnants of their now completely destroyed campsite. However, as the scene closes, the camera shifts to the Sahnish perspective as it shows them wailing in grief over their own dead. From their dialogue, we learn that the attack was motivated not by the desire to steal beaver pelts, as proposed by men in Glass's group, but by the search for chief's daughter, Powaga (Melaw Nakehk'o), who has been kidnapped by white men, thus "making clear that what has motivated the attack is not warlike aggression (as camera work at the beginning of the attack suggests), but the search for a lost child," a theme that finds its double in Glass's loss of his own son later in the film (Tierney, 2018, 164).

These first scenes of the film situate viewers in a geopolitical and cultural space of transition that echoes classic definitions and descriptions of frontiers and borderlands, including that of Anzaldúa: violence is rampant, ambiguity reigns, and imposed, unnatural boundaries upend communities. For example, from the perspective of Western

settlers, fur trappers, and other agents of national expansion, the film takes place in an undefined geopolitical territory or space in transition. The fur trappers are in U.S. territory officially defined as unorganized territory, which means that the U.S. government had only transient control.⁶ These sorts of territories had only vaguely drawn boundaries “that were never intended as definitive borders at all” (Hubbard, 2014, 123). Furthermore, Canadians and U.S. Americans had long disputed who had the rights to the northern parts of the Louisiana Territory as well as the rights to trap there.⁷ From the perspective of white settlers, which is the perspective privileged in the film, it is a space of blurry and porous boundaries, not tightly controlled by any government.

It was at least in part the geopolitical ambiguity of the unorganized territories of the West—the uncertainty of settler/national boundaries or sometimes simply the refusal to acknowledge national boundaries as well as the lack of governing bodies to restrict movement across regional and national boundaries—that encouraged white trappers to move into the territory during this time period. Trappers were attracted to the so-called frontier because for many of them it represented the potential for various types of freedom: economic independence, self-determination, unrestricted movement, and liberation from (some) restrictive social, moral, and political systems of rule. In reality, this potential, especially for economic independence and self-determination, remained unrealized for the vast majority of fur trappers.⁸ Yet the geopolitical ambiguity of the territory is what attracted and permitted the incursion of these fur trappers into the terrain, and this is what sets the scene for the film and for Glass’s story. Of course, to understand the land in this fashion relies on a denial of the past and present inhabitation of the land by Indigenous communities and their accompanying rights to it and privileges and legitimates Western invention and imposition of geopolitical boundaries.

As in Anzaldúa’s borderlands, multiple communities, cultures, and languages also converge in this space. Just in the first two scenes described above, Pawnee and Sahnish speak in their native languages, and white and Black fur trappers speak in English. Later in the film, there are also French-speaking traders in the area, and other Indigenous communities are mentioned as presences in the region, although they never appear on-screen. Glass and his son perhaps best represent the mixture of cultures, national identities, and languages that are in the process of transformation. His son is half Pawnee and half white, and Glass and his son speak in both English and Pawnee to one another. Later, other multilingual characters appear, such as the Sahnish chief Elk Dog (Duane Howard), who also understands French. Indeed, although it is important to once again note that the film privileges the perspective of white settlers by making Glass the hero, it also shows some of the ways in which both Indigenous and white settler cultures and ways of life are

being transformed through the interactions among white settlers and Indigenous communities in this context.

As is obvious from the very first scenes of the film, there is the constant threat and use of physical violence in the encounters between the different communities and groups in this territory. The battle scene that initiates the film is a fictionalization of an actual conflict between Sahnish and fur traders led by William H. Ashley. This bloody clash was the start of (what would eventually be called) the Arikara War, which included U.S. military intervention on behalf of Ashley's Rocky Mountain Fur Company. In fact, this was the first significant military confrontation between the U.S. Army and a Western Plains Indigenous community.⁹ Historians have also understood this specific altercation as symbolically important, as it marked a "turning point in Arikara relations" with whites (Parks, 2001, 367), with the Sahnish (Arikara) acquiring "a reputation for being hostile and treacherous to Whites" as a result (367)—a denomination we should rightly question and criticize but that nonetheless speaks to a change in the view and treatment of the Sahnish on the part of the U.S. government as well as white traders.¹⁰ While sources written by white settlers and fur traders from the period disagreed on the cause of the altercation between the Sahnish and the fur traders,¹¹ however, the film is clear: the kidnapping of Powaga, the chief's daughter, sets the entire narrative of the film in motion, once again emphasizing the violence that is an essential component of the encounter between communities and cultures. The Sahnish attack the fur trappers because they are searching for Powaga and know she has been kidnapped by white men. Later, we see she is held captive and raped by French traders. This is important because, as Franco (2013) suggests, sexual violence is one of the most powerful forms of violence, as it is both a form of torture and a symbolic weapon; it is therefore a declaration of extreme authority (15). When used as a mass weapon against an entire community, sexual crimes work to incite terror not only in the women being raped but also in the community to which those women belong. Mass rape, as Franco explains, is "a social warning to everyone, an act of power, and discipline, a sign of masculine, brutal, natural, social and political power, and an invasion of the public space" (16–17).

The inclusion of Powaga is an interesting deviation from the novel, in which no such character appears and there is no mention of rape as a provocation for the conflict between the Sahnish and the fur traders. At first glance, it seems a bit closer to contemporary Sahnish memory of the battle, which explains that the conflict was initiated when "a member of the Ashley expedition snuck into the Arikara villages looking for women" (Yellow Bird, 2017, 386).¹² But importantly, *lñárritu's* portrayal also deviates from this history of the event by displacing the sexual violence onto the French traders. Glass and his group of fur traders are

therefore portrayed as innocent and unsuspecting victims of a case of mistaken identity and a seemingly undeserved and brutal attack. In fact, in the film, Glass even helps to rescue Powaga from the French traders, thus further cementing his virtue. Powaga's kidnapping and rape represent the physical violence that was part of the colonization of the Americas and reveal how such violence was also used as a symbolic weapon against Indigenous communities. But the emphasis on Glass's innocence reinforces the representation of Glass as the unblemished hero savior, a point I will return to and discuss in greater detail later.

There are other sorts of dangers that lurk in this borderland besides just physical and symbolic violence, however. It appears, for example, that the humanity of many white characters is threatened with collapse in this terrain. This threat makes itself apparent when these characters cease to recognize and value the lives of their fellow human beings or fail to acknowledge other people as human beings. After Glass is mauled by a grizzly bear, for example, Captain Henry, the leader of the now decimated fur-trapping party, decides that the group cannot continue with Glass so incapacitated, so he leaves him behind with two fellow white trappers, John Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy) and Jim Bridger (Will Poulter), as well as Glass's son, Hawk, with the orders that they are to care for Glass "until the end" and give him a Christian burial. Fitzgerald, the film's clear antagonist, grows restless when Glass continues to cling to life and attempts to kill him so they can pack up and move on. When Hawk discovers Fitzgerald in the act, Fitzgerald then murders Hawk instead. As his son dies, Glass helplessly looks on, frothing in rage but unable to move or even talk due to his injuries. Fitzgerald then convinces Bridger that they must leave Glass behind, telling him (falsely) that Arikara are about to attack their camp; Fitzgerald argues that their lives are worth more than that of Glass, who they both assume will die anyway. For the two and a half hours that the film lasts, we watch Glass grunt his way through the stunningly beautiful wilderness, facing obstacle after obstacle: his mangled body is thrown through raging white water on the frigid river, and he plummets off a high cliff, endures blizzards and freezing temperatures, and narrowly escapes several close encounters with hostile Sahnish. He also faces the limits of his own humanity and the existential threat of becoming nonhuman. He literally digs himself out of his own grave (where he was thrown by Fitzgerald) and then lumbers his way to Fort Kiowa, wearing the fur of the dead grizzly for warmth and almost transforming into an animal himself along the way. On the edge of starvation, he tears apart a raw fish and, at one point, a raw buffalo liver with his bare teeth. Like an animal, he is unable to speak beyond guttural groans because of a deep gash to his throat. Thus, the human/nonhuman divide emerges as one more borderland that Glass must negotiate and traverse.

Iñárritu situates his viewers in the first scenes in a geopolitical,

linguistic, and cultural borderland while also emphasizing the destruction that accompanies the creation of a nation-state and its associated territorial possessions. But it is also a temporal threshold in U.S. history that defined the nation and its boundaries. The fact that *Iñárritu* uses the first scenes of the film to highlight the environmental destruction of the fur trappers and the violence (military, psychological, environmental, and sexual) that accompanied them, for example, is significant because the fur trade played a major role in the settlement and expansion of the United States and in the establishment of its boundaries (Dolin, 2010, xvi). It also paved the way for a complete cultural and economic transformation of the region. The real-life Andrew Henry, who appears as the captain of Glass's group in the film, helped lay the groundwork, along with his partner William H. Ashley, for the commercial exploitation of the region through the development of the rendezvous system, in which fur trappers "stayed in or near the Rockies year round and met each summer at predetermined locations to sell their furs and purchase supplies from company representatives" (226).¹³ The fur trade thereby represents an emergent capitalism and its associated notions of private property ownership and resource extraction.¹⁴ Furthermore, as we also see in the film, these private capitalist ventures were supported, often militarily, by the U.S. government.

In *The Revenant*, we therefore witness a key moment in U.S. history, on the verge of a radical change in how white settlers and capitalists, with the support of the U.S. government, would come to understand nature and the land as resources to be exploited until exhaustion. Trappers, for example, would eventually hunt the beaver to near extinction.¹⁵ The establishment of the fur trade and especially of the rendezvous system also signaled a cultural change, as white trappers now remained in the region year-round and began to make their home there. These "mountain men," as they were frequently called, traded and interacted with Indigenous communities and often married and had children with Indigenous women, thus forever altering Indigenous cultures and communities (Dolin, 2010, 228). Where trappers went, so-called settlers soon followed, bringing other sorts of violence against Indigenous communities. It is important to also note that these changes were not one-sided, and the "growth of a mutual dependency between Indian and European trader[s] at the economic level could not help but engender a significant cultural exchange as well" (Van Kirk, 1980, 3).¹⁶ Glass's union with a Pawnee woman, for example, is symbolically important, as it represents what was happening in the region at this time, as Indigenous communities and white settlers became more and more intertwined through the spread of the fur trade, which relied on both force/violence (as discussed above) and intercultural exchange and intermarriage.¹⁷ Indeed, as historians have shown, intermarriage, primarily between

Indigenous women and white men, was “not only a result of the scarcity of European women, but also an integral part of the fur trade. Based, as the trade was, on a commodity exchange between two culturally distinct groups of people, it engendered a mutually dependent economic relationship” (Ens and Sawchuk, 2015, 44).¹⁸

Íñárritu’s portrayal of this foundational moment in the fur trade, one of the early attempts by the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to establish a presence in the region, emphasizes that this is not only a geopolitical borderland but also a temporally situated one: a moment of economic, political, and cultural transformation. These first two scenes of the film highlight the interconnectedness of military forces into the area (the burning of the Pawnee village by a white man in a military uniform) and economic and cultural forces in the area (the trappers, their exploitation of the land, and the sexual violence aimed at Indigenous communities as well as Indigenous dispossession of lands and resources).¹⁹ However, they also reveal one of the larger themes of the film: that this is depicting not only “Westward expansion” but also a new and distinctly *modern* form of colonialism. As historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) has shown, “The form of colonialism that the Indigenous peoples of North American have experienced was modern from the beginning: the expansion of European corporations, backed by government armies, into foreign areas, with subsequent appropriation of lands and resources” (6). Íñárritu thus uses the first scenes of his film to underscore the intimate connections between the nation-state, emergent private capitalist enterprises, exploitation, dispossession, and genocide.

As my discussion demonstrates, *The Revenant* presents us with a borderland in multiple senses. It is a geopolitical buffer zone, literally unorganized territory that was still somewhat geopolitically ambiguous for settlers in 1823. It is a zone of cultural, linguistic, and racial contact and hybridity, represented most clearly through Glass’s son, who is bilingual and biracial. In essence, *The Revenant* puts on display a space of violent discord that makes its characters question not only the humanity of others but also their own humanity. And the film takes place during a watershed moment that marks a moment of immense cultural, economic, psychological, political, and epistemological change and violence for Indigenous communities. The characters therefore appear to be in a border-like space that is geopolitically ambiguous and economically and culturally in a process of transition. The supposed “openness” of this space—again, only from the perspective of white settlers—has often been understood in the popular imagination in the United States as permitting and fostering economic and individual freedom (at least for white men). However, in these scenes, the film questions this romanticized and historically inaccurate image of the frontier through its focus on the massive losses of life—both Indigenous

and white, both human and animal—that were an essential part of the fur trade and Westward expansion.²⁰

Łńárritu's focus on the destruction and violence that accompanied the fur trade and its agents calls our attention to the ways in which the fur trade, a critical force in U.S. expansion, also helped to create and establish boundaries. The film goes back to this moment in U.S. history in order to show how the fur trade, as an agent of the modern, imperialist nation-state, was not pushing against borders but in fact established these borders and defined the communities that lived within them as "border dwellers." In other words, as I will explore next, *The Revenant* not only takes place in a borderland but also shows how borders were and are made: through the violence of the modern nation-state.

Cruel Borderlands

In her recent book *Cruel Modernity*, Latin American cultural critic Jean Franco (2013) ponders how the quest for the modern nation-state, contrary to popular narratives of nation formation, enabled and instituted—rather than counteracted—cruelty and violence. The nation-state, she argues, has established itself as a cohesive and distinctly modern entity by simultaneously working to distinguish itself and its citizenry from the groups, communities, and individuals whom it does not consider part of the nation—those who are made to not belong because they are supposedly neither modern nor civilized. In other words, Franco shows that barbarism, savagery, and cruelty are neither premodern nor antithetical to civilization and modernity; they are a product of modernity. As Franco discusses, modernity and the quest for the modern nation-state have authorized state-sponsored violence and the creation of communities that do not receive the social, political, and economic tools that will allow them to thrive as full human beings and as full members of the settler nation-state. This is what she calls the "cruelty" of modernity: the nation-state actively creates marginalized communities, initiates programs of violence against those communities that deprive them of the resources they need in order to be part of the modern nation, and then blames, criminalizes, and punishes those communities, often violently, for not being part of the "modern" nation.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler (2016) similarly discusses exactly how we recognize—or fail to recognize—living human beings as lives that are grievable and thus livable. According to Butler, not all lives are understood or portrayed as equally deserving of protection from destruction and violence, or what she calls "precarious life":

[P]recisely because each body finds itself potentially threatened by others who are, by definition, precarious as well, forms of domination follow. ... [T]he shared

condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as “destructible” and “ungrievable.” Such populations are “lose-able,” or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as being already lost or forfeited; they are cast as threats to human life as we know it rather than as living populations in need of protection from illegitimate state violence, famine, or pandemics. Consequently, when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of “the living.” (31)

As both Franco and Butler show, the modern nation-state depends on the creation of this “other,” this “nonlife,” in order to define itself and those it considers its citizens, through contrast, as modern, civilized, and fully functioning members of its community who are deserving of protection and who are grievable and, therefore, valued and valuable lives.

While Franco focuses specifically on the Latin American context, *The Revenant* highlights how the modern nation-state of the United States is similarly founded on a relationship of cruelty and the creation of the barbarian “other” as well as the “benevolent civilizer.” In doing so, the film prompts viewers to question how violence and cruelty have been used and justified by the nation-state and how the modern nation-state has created, not reacted against, borders that differentiate between “us” and “them,” between “civilized” and “savage,” between “modern” and “barbaric,” and between grievable lives and ungrievable nonlives. Indeed, this is what borders do: they make visible the disparities and inequities that are integral—not antithetical—to modern nation formation. It is precisely in the spaces in which diverse communities come into contact with one another—borders and borderlands—that these inequities are most visible and palpable.

In the film, for example, the close relationship between Glass and Hawk invites viewers to consider how some lives become defined as (potential) citizens, while others are defined as nonlives, as perpetual border dwellers who can never live within or become part of the nation. In showing how these identities are constructed, however, the film also reveals the fragility of these dichotomies. Borders need to be enforced only if there is uncertainty about those borders, if the line between communities or nations and between “us” and “them” is unstable or not immediately obvious or intuitive. It is important to note once again that Iñárritu chose to make the relationship between Glass and Hawk a focus

of the film. This is a major change from both Punke's novel, in which Glass does not even have a son, and an earlier version of the screenplay, in which Glass's son is already dead when the film begins (Smith, 2016). *Íñárritu's* decision to focus on this father-son relationship brings to the forefront a questioning of the ways in which border dwellers—that is, those who exist outside of or on the extreme fringes of the national community—become understood and defined by the nation-state as nonlives and in contrast to other lives that are valued, valuable, and included unambiguously as part of the nation-state.

From the very beginning of the film, Glass and Hawk appear as sorts of border dwellers in Anzaldúa's terms—the "half dead," the "half-breed," "the queer, the troublesome"—who make us question the processes by which one becomes defined as such (Anzaldúa, 1999, 25). Glass is, of course, literally the half dead: he emerges from his own grave with half-rotted flesh, staggering his way back to the land of the living. But Glass and Hawk are also border dwellers in other senses. Glass, we learn further along in the film, had lived in a Pawnee village, adapted to their culture, learned the language, and married a Pawnee woman. Glass and Hawk, as previously mentioned, speak in both English and Pawnee to one another in the film. They are both culturally mixed and, in the case of Hawk, biracial. Hawk and Glass are marked from the very beginning of the film as different and as suspicious because of their connections to more than one culture and community. After the fight with the Sahnish, for example, Fitzgerald questions Glass's loyalty to the white trappers because it is rumored (and we see it is true) that Glass killed a white U.S. Army lieutenant during the attack on the Pawnee village. Fitzgerald taunts him: "Is that what you did? Shot one of your own to save this little dog right here?," referring to Hawk. When Hawk tries to defend his father, a fight ensues, and Glass reprimands his son, reminding him that he needs to learn to keep his mouth shut and be "invisible" in order to survive in the white man's world. "They just see the color of your face," he yells at his son. Glass's remarks to his son make clear how his son's Pawnee parentage will mark him as a dangerous "other"—and thus more vulnerable and precarious—in the white man's world. Fitzgerald's comments demonstrate a certain level of recognition that Hawk is "living" (a dog, after all, is a living animal), yet they also register the fact Hawk's life is not valued or valuable or not recognizable as grievable in the same way as that of a white man. Glass's remarks similarly indicate that Hawk's only choice is to be invisible and to be "unrecognized" as a fully valued and valuable life because, if visible, he is only understood by men like Fitzgerald then as also disposable. Hawk's Indigeneity, even when mixed with whiteness, makes him unrecognizable. But Glass—and maybe even Fitzgerald himself—is also on uncertain footing.

Like Anzaldúa's border dwellers, Glass and Hawk (and even Fitzgerald) trouble the supposedly clear binaries between "us" and "them" that a border seeks to establish and maintain. How is it that Glass, for example, might be transformed, through exposure to Indigenous culture and language, into a dangerous "other," as Fitzgerald suggests, but Hawk can never seemingly be transformed into a non-"savage," can never be part of Fitzgerald's "us"? Is this difference defined culturally? Biologically? Legally? How can two men from the very same family have such different limitations to their identity? The film shows that some borders are porous, but only for certain people. Glass, for example, is doubly dangerous not only because he can pass between "us" and "them" but also because, in doing so, he reveals that the differences between "us" and "them" are not very stable. This racial delineation is what Fitzgerald seems to be questioning and also trying to establish when he asks how Glass could choose to kill "one of his own"—white people—over his son, who is not, using Fitzgerald's logic, "one of his own." Fitzgerald works to establish a biological racial dichotomy that will distinguish himself (also a border dweller) just as much as Glass as part of the same (white) group, in contrast with those who are not white. His questioning of Glass's own racial or cultural loyalties thereby highlights how whiteness is in the process of being defined, always relying on a contrast to non-whiteness or racialized otherness. Fitzgerald's comment emphasizes how Glass, even when he is almost literally transformed into a wild animal, as previously mentioned, is able to cross that border, which is permeable for him, and come back to being a fully valued (white) human life. For others, however, that border is not open or porous. Glass's son, for example, will always be seen by men like Fitzgerald as dwelling on the side of the nonhuman; he will always be on the level of a not fully valued life.

Hawk's mixed parentage is significant because it ultimately brings up questions about national and communal belonging for culturally and/or racially mixed groups and the limits of whiteness and citizenship. And indeed, it is worth noting that the early decades of the nineteenth century were a period of transformation in the ways in which racial identities, especially for people of mixed Indigenous and European parentage, would come to be understood in the United States (Ens and Sawchuk, 2015, 20–21). By the late 1820s, U.S.-American "attitudes towards Indians and the 'mixed-bloods' [those of both Indigenous and European heritage] shifted from a positive belief in their capabilities and potential for civilization to one of reservation and finally to discouragement over their lack of progress" (21). And by mid-century, the prevailing attitude in U.S.-American culture was that if someone possessed some Indigenous blood, he or she was unambiguously Indigenous and therefore uncivilized and uncivilizable (22). In other words, this was a period during which it

was being decided not only who was Indigenous but also who was white and how to understand those people and communities who are mixed race as different than white communities. We see these ideas being articulated in the film. Hawk is defined in contrast to Glass, who, even though he may traverse social, racial, and cultural boundaries, ultimately is still permitted to be “one of us.” Glass’s whiteness remains intact and is brought into focus even more when contrasted with his own son’s *lack* of whiteness. The movie thereby dramatizes the development of a clear boundary between whiteness and Indigeneity and of the place of both white border dwellers (like Glass and Fitzgerald) and racially ambiguous border dwellers (like Hawk) in the world created by the new nation-state. Race and racism are another product of colonization and the border building inherent to modern nation-state formation.

Through its questioning of the racial and cultural liminality of Glass and Hawk, the film emphasizes the ways in which borderlands—geopolitical as well as social, cultural, and racial—become defined as spaces of savagery and barbarism, always in contrast with white American “civilization.” The film also highlights, however, how this supposed lack of civilization in Indigenous communities is manufactured *by* and not the antithesis to the modern nation-state. The violence of the Sahnish, for example, is shown in the film to be the direct result of the territorial encroachment of white men. In fact, the film shows that the U.S. nation-state was never intended to support or include the Indigenous communities as meaningful actors in the first place; its success is instead dependent on the *exclusion* of Indigenous peoples from its community. For example, the fur trappers exploit the land for beaver pelts. Sahnish then use the beaver pelts taken from the fur trappers to trade with the Frenchmen for horses so that they can continue to search for Powaga, who, unbeknownst to the Sahnish, is actually being held captive by the very French traders with whom they are trading. The game, in other words, is rigged from the start. The Sahnish’s motivation to trade with the Frenchmen is driven by a need artificially created and controlled by the Frenchmen: they kidnapped Powaga, which makes the Sahnish need to trade with them to get horses to search for her, but there is no hope of finding her since the Frenchmen already have her, thus indefinitely prolonging this trade circle. The French traders provoke Sahnish into violence, profit off the beaver pelts that the Sahnish take from the fur trappers, and, in the process, create the means by which the Sahnish become defined as brutal and violent since they are the ones attacking the fur trappers and supposedly stealing the pelts (even though the beaver pelts are natural resources to which Sahnish should have legal rights). The Sahnish serve only to transmit goods within this emergent capitalist system from one group of white men to the next, without ever profiting themselves, by offering their own bodies, not to mention the

natural resources of their lands, as collateral for a loan that will never be delivered. In the eyes of the white men, the Sahnish's resistance to this invasion of their land and communities simply justifies further violence against and subjugation of the Sahnish. If they do not fight back, they lose everything—the goods that are stolen, the natural resources that are destroyed, their culture, and their future existence itself (represented through the kidnapped Powaga, daughter of Elk Dog and metaphorically serving as the future generations of Sahnish). And if they do fight back, as we see in the film and as happened in real life, they risk losing what political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1994) called the “right to have rights”—that is, they become defined as antithetical to the new nation-state and therefore lose their very right to have any rights at all within the new system. As mentioned earlier, the real-life confrontation between Sahnish and fur trappers that inspired the film led to the Sahnish being labeled “hostile” and therefore deserving of violent intervention and subjugation by the U.S. military. This, in its most essential form, is what Franco calls “cruel modernity.”

In this way, the film shows how certain communities are not included as part of the modern nation-state. But more profoundly, it shows that the modern nation-state cannot be formed without also creating groups that exist only to be excluded from the nation. In order for these capitalist enterprises to be successful, for example, they depend on the exploitation of natural resources, which in turn relies on the elimination (including removal or simply denial of the existence) of Indigenous communities and/or a disavowal of the rights of Indigenous communities to these resources. As a metonym for U.S. colonization, these interactions between white men and Sahnish represent a dark truth about U.S. history and, more broadly, settler colonialism: the goal of settler colonialism is the elimination, not incorporation, of Indigenous populations. Furthermore, the project of settler colonialism “is not limited to governmental policy but rather involves all kinds of agencies, voluntary militias, and the settlers themselves acting on their own” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, 10). By situating *The Revenant* in such a pivotal moment in U.S. and American history and one in which it is not primarily the military but rather private capitalist enterprises and individual settlers who work as agents of U.S. settler colonialism, Iñárritu highlights the numerous methods by which settler colonialism works to institutionalize violence over both Indigenous people and the land. It is significant, for example, that he introduces the character of Powaga because her kidnapping and rape illustrate how settler colonialism “requires violence or the threat of violence to attain its goals” (8). While we do see examples of military violence in the film (the burning of the Pawnee village and the murder of Glass's wife, for example), Iñárritu's decision to portray Powaga's kidnapping as a catalyst for most of the violence in the film emphasizes

how other forces are also involved in and dependent on the masculinist violence of settler colonialism.

Mexican Film and the Limits of Hollywood Westerns

Glass's somewhat ambiguous position between cultures mirrors Iñárritu's own circumstances, as another border crosser of sorts, formed by both Mexican and U.S. cultures and film industries. Although originally from Mexico, Iñárritu now resides primarily in the United States, and most of his more recent films were produced by specialty houses within Hollywood studios; *The Revenant* was his first film with a major studio, Twentieth Century Fox (Tierney, 2018, 165). Nonetheless, many of his films, even those made primarily in English and for international audiences and Hollywood, such as *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006),²¹ still speak from a place of difference within the United States and Hollywood, as they problematize the stability of national borders and the divisions between the so-called First World and Third World (Tierney, 2009, 103). Iñárritu enjoys an international renown that is largely unprecedented for a Mexican filmmaker, with the noted exceptions of directors Alfonso Cuarón and Guillermo del Toro, together dubbed the "three amigos," or "tres mosqueteros," for their international revitalization of Mexican film (Shaw, 2013, 3). Like Cuarón and del Toro, Iñárritu has not abandoned his Mexican roots but rather worked to create connections between Mexican and U.S. cinemas by providing continued support for other Mexican filmmakers and by using his international fame to work as an advocate and ambassador for the Mexican film industry (2). As Shaw (2013) shows in her in-depth study of the oeuvre of all three directors, Iñárritu, Cuarón, and del Toro have continually "crossed linguistic, national, and generic borders, cutting through traditional divisions created by [national] film markets" (2).

The Revenant should be understood as a product of both Hollywood and the Mexican film industry and one that works to appeal to a broad international audience by engaging with multiple cinematic genres and eschewing more revolutionary political messages. Iñárritu's international success can be understood as part of a larger trend in late twentieth-century Latin American cinema in which films, many of which were transnational productions, were geared toward not only national audiences but also, maybe even primarily in many cases, international audiences.²² Indeed, as Paul A. Schroeder Rodríguez (2016) explains, while cultural nationalism was still prevalent in many Latin American films of the 1990s, the broader "tendency was for filmmakers to create transnational products through casting, setting, narrative, and aesthetic choices that facilitate the films' marketing to international audiences and help satisfy the differing economic and political interests of the coproducing parties" (247). Iñárritu's films are no exception. In his earlier

films made in Mexico, such as *Amores perros* (2000), Iñárritu capitalized on the changing Mexican film production market, making savvy use of both private funding (in the past, Mexican film had been financed largely by the Mexican government) and carefully designed marketing, working to appeal both to international film festivals and “to the culture of consumption that overtook Mexican culture in the neoliberal period” (Sánchez Prado, 2014, 173). Sánchez Prado (2014) argues that Iñárritu’s early successes were in fact made possible by the erosion of political imperatives in Mexican film during the neoliberal era (176).

A large part of Iñárritu’s success comes from his ability to create films that can be understood in diverse ways for audiences in different locales and contexts, appealing to both local and international audiences and in this sense “traveling” easily across borders. *The Revenant*, for example, garnered huge box office revenues and critical acclaim not only in North America but also across the globe.²³ But, as Sánchez Prado explains, Iñárritu’s successes in Mexico and now as a “global auteur” have also come from his ability to toe the line “between progressive cultural forms and conservative political ideologies,” thereby appealing to elite intellectuals and progressives at international film festivals as well as more conservative middle to upper classes (the main theatergoing audience in Mexico in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries) (173). Sánchez Prado asserts that the success of *Amores perros*, Iñárritu’s first big international hit, for example, is in part due to the “ideological undecidability of the film, which allows for plausible readings in different parts of the ideological spectrum” (175), thereby appealing to both a more conservative middle-class audience as well as attendees at international film festivals who were searching for political redemption in so-called Third World cinema (178). In other words, Iñárritu’s films made in Mexico, such as *Amores perros*, became successful in part because of their ambiguity, especially concerning political content (or lack thereof). *The Revenant* continues this proclivity. Part of the international success of the film, I suggest, is due to the fact that it engages with multiple cinematic genres and is influenced by multiple national cinematic contexts. As I will discuss, his engagement with classic Hollywood genres ultimately undermines (or at the very least dilutes) many of the more decolonial political messages I have already highlighted in the film.

The Revenant shares much in common with the western (a point I will return to momentarily),²⁴ but I am especially interested in the commonalities it has with what Dominique Brégent-Heald (2015) terms “borderland films,” a subgenre of the western that emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century. Such films were set “in the northern or southern perimeters of the United States” (3). The setting for such films was chosen purposefully, Brégent-Heald contends, because “it offered a

dynamic narrative and visual device through which to articulate notions of crossing, transition, and in-betweenness" (3). The setting could change the content of the film as well as the ways in which viewers understood it because borderland settings "functioned as sites for intercultural encounters and social (racial and gendered) interactions, as zones of human and animal mobility, and for transboundary commerce and trade" (3). Moreover, the frontier setting conveyed "the complex processes revolving around the creation and/or maintenance of boundaries, demarcations, and divisions between the land and its people" (3). The borderland film's setting is also essential because it "created complex and paradoxical spaces to explore the social constructions of nation, race, and gender in North America's borderland regions but ultimately expressed broader anxieties over maintaining gendered, racial and national boundaries during the early twentieth century" (3). Borderland or frontier settings thus "provided a diegetic space to explore the various tensions and contradictions occurring within the American cinema and North American society and culture at a particular historic moment" (5). Such understanding of these spaces as "borderlands" of course relies on and privileges a white settler perspective, and the description of borderlands as spaces of anxiety regrading national, ethnic, and gender boundaries assumes an audience that will identify more closely with a white settler perspective.

Brégent-Heald (2015) also emphasizes that borderland films were politically flexible.²⁵ Filmmakers chose borderland spaces, which were ubiquitously portrayed as permeable, open, ambiguous, and "wild," in order to question national boundaries—the limits of masculinity, femininity, whiteness, and civilization—but also, quite often, in order to ultimately reinforce those same boundaries (14). Borderland films could thus be used for a variety of political purposes and social commentaries, as they both "reinforced and challenged the dominant myths about Mexico and Canada, as well as the borders each nation shares with the United States" (9).

Similar to the films discussed by Brégent-Heald, *The Revenant's* setting is essential to understanding the film and its deeper commentaries. The film, for example, uses the borderland setting in order to explore tensions about the creation of the nation, the boundaries of citizenship, and the history of exclusion that is foundational to the modern U.S. nation. In this sense, *The Revenant* is as much about the present as the past—about how national (U.S.) identity has been imagined and defined and the lasting legacy of those flawed imaginings. But perhaps even more important, the film, like those discussed by Brégent-Heald, is ultimately politically ambiguous. For example, Lléárritu's reliance on (or at the very least engagement with) classic frontier mythology—most notably the white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-gendered male hero who is also

independent and resourceful and lives outside the confines of an unjust or corrupt society while adhering to his own (better) moral compass—allows for this flexibility. On the one hand, Iñárritu's choice to make this a narrative in which Glass is driven to revenge his son's murder places Indigenous genocide at the forefront of the film. But on the other hand, the film is ultimately still told from the white man's perspective, with little screen time devoted to individual Indigenous characters (they are almost always in groups), little development of Indigenous characters, and no deep exploration of the culture and history of the Pawnee or Sahnish (the two Indigenous communities represented in the film). It is emblematic that the film was billed as featuring DiCaprio and Hardy. Furthermore, the film recycles two trite and problematic themes in U.S. culture: the white man as enlightened avenger of Indigenous genocide and Indigenous communities as a part of the U.S.-American past, not present or future, with the death of his son. The Indigenous American—and his inevitable elimination—comes to represent not Indigenous history and culture but the triumph of the hero and the nation, defined as *not* Indigenous but white. As Armando José Prats (2002) explains in his study of what he calls the "Indian Western," Indigenous characters are present in such films only to be rendered *absent* (2), thus reinforcing the image of the white man as the torchbearer of true American culture and justice.²⁶ *The Revenant* replicates this pattern. As Mary Louise Pratt (2017) summarizes, the "movie itself is a revenant, replaying an exhausted white man frontier fantasy in an ecology that is rapidly dissolving as the planet warms" (G169).

If, as Brégent-Heald (2015) persuasively argues, one of the central purposes of borderland films is to actually explore the tensions and contradictions in the present-day North American society in which the film is *made* (not set) (5), then the depictions of Glass and Fitzgerald might be understood as reflecting, perhaps unwittingly, a significant contradiction in the twenty-first-century United States: while many white U.S. Americans might harshly criticize individual racists (like Fitzgerald) or isolated cases of blatant racism, they remain largely silent on the much larger and more profound questions of systemic racism and colonialism. Similarly, the film depicts racism as an aberration of "heroic" Americans (Glass could not be overtly racist and also the hero) and largely overlooks Glass's own complicity in the project of U.S. settler colonialism as part of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Iñárritu's choice to portray Glass as a non-racist white man who embraces Pawnee culture and seeks revenge against the blatantly racist Fitzgerald sustains the belief that "true" Americans, like the cultured non-Indigenous audience members who presumably sympathize with Glass, were (and are) non-racist egalitarians. Fitzgerald does serve as a counterpoint, but Glass's ability to seemingly overcome racism and prejudice makes it seem like racism

is an individual choice—and one that “true” U.S. Americans, like Glass, have always rejected. The film thereby masks the systemic ways in which racism and colonialism worked and continue to work in the United States.

In sum, *The Revenant*, like many of Iñárritu’s earlier films—products of Mexico’s neoliberal era that were geared at broader markets—continues to be a similarly politically ambiguous film that ultimately satiates non-Indigenous viewers without making them think too deeply about their own complicity in systemic forms of oppression and inequality. This ambiguity makes it appealing to conservative white audiences who wish to simply participate in a consumer culture (supposedly) void of politics (or perhaps, in the United States, even celebrate their “heritage,” represented by Glass and DiCaprio) and also to intellectuals and art house moviegoers who want to see something more revolutionary in Iñárritu’s supposed revitalization of the western genre. When we consider Iñárritu’s film as a product not only of Hollywood but also of the neoliberal era in Mexico, we can see how Iñárritu is a savvy border crosser, working within multiple genres, appealing to diverse audiences, and ultimately avoiding more revolutionary political content precisely so that the film will appeal to multiple audiences in different national contexts. The film, in other words, gestures toward and engages with but ultimately stops short of the sort of more radical decolonial thinking that Anzaldúa does in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

Anzaldúa roots her discussion of borderlands in the physical space of the U.S.-Mexico border, but her work has been understood primarily as an exploration of identity, especially as her work contributes to anti-racist, feminist, and queer discussions and theorizations of identity and the self. However, more recent scholarship seeks to understand her writings as speaking to much broader decolonial or anticolonial concerns. AnaLouise Keating (2005), for example, explores Anzaldúa’s ideas about *nepantla*—a Nahuatl term Anzaldúa uses to indicate “temporal, spatial, psychic, and/or intellectual point(s) of liminality and potential transformation”—as a philosophy of alliance-building and coalition building centered around social justice (1). According to Keating, Anzaldúa’s discussion of *nepantla* and *nepantleras* is more than just an exploration of identity; it also offers instructions for how to enact change in the world and how to be an activist for social justice through alliance building (7–8). Michael Hames-García (2000) similarly explores how Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands/*la frontera* might be understood as a forward-looking alternative to nationalism—and, specifically for Anzaldúa, an alternative to Chicano cultural nationalism (103); the ramifications of her philosophical interventions thus move beyond questions of personal identity and the geopolitical context of the U.S.-Mexico borderland (104). As both Keating and Hames-García elucidate, Anzaldúa’s work can be understood as a questioning of stable

national imaginaries but also as a philosophical blueprint for activism that moves beyond national boundaries, nationalist concepts of territoriality and gatekeeping, and national(ist) mythologies and that works to bridge communities and move toward social justice for a variety of diverse but sometimes unconnected communities. Anzaldúa's work on borderlands is thus simultaneously a decolonial philosophical text, a call to decolonial action, and an enactment of that philosophy and action in its own pages, as it works to decolonize Western-centric ways of knowing, writing, and thinking.

While *The Revenant* certainly questions many national(ized) mythologies, ultimately it falls short of the more profound decolonial action and thinking that we see in Anzaldúa, or what influential Latin American cultural theorist Walter D. Mignolo (2000) calls *border knowledge* or *border thinking*—knowledge “conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system” (11). Border knowledge, he explains, absorbs and displaces “hegemonic forms of knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern” (12). It makes visible the existence of forms of knowledge that are alternatives to those forms of Western-centric knowledge produced in and through colonialism and also reveals the ways in which alternative forms of knowledge from the margins of the “modern” world have been subalternized and, often, deemed as non-knowledge through the processes of colonization. According to Mignolo, border thinking becomes an essential epistemology “to delink and decolonize knowledge and, in the process, to build decolonial histories, restoring the dignity that the Western idea of universal history took away from millions of people” (x). *The Revenant*, in contrast, ultimately reinscribes the story within dominant Western-centric history, ways of storytelling (the western film genre, for example), and, thus, epistemologies. The frontier in *The Revenant* remains, as in a frontier western,²⁷ a mythical place of “rebirth” for Glass (and the audience); in one scene, Glass even literally appears to be “birthed” from a dead horse carcass, wriggling out naked, headfirst, from between folds of pink flesh. The frontier similarly continues to be represented as a place that generates the frontiersman, the archetypically heroic white man who, as the enlightened avenger of Indigenous genocide, is once again exceptional and superior (to the racist French traders, for example). And the image of the frontier as a space of hypermasculine violence persists, erasing (through the death of Glass's wife, who appears in the film only in blurry flashbacks) the important role that women, particularly Indigenous women, played in the development of the fur trade and in the new communities and circuits of economic and cultural exchange that were developing in the early nineteenth century in this region.

At the very end of the film, after a lengthy, grunt-filled, and bloody confrontation with Fitzgerald, Glass finally gets the upper hand and has

the chance to avenge his son's death. As Glass, his eyes bulging, chokes his nemesis, Fitzgerald recognizes his end is coming and remarks to Glass: "You came all this way just for your revenge, huh? Well you enjoy it, Glass, 'cause there ain't nothin' gonna bring your boy back." Fitzgerald's words seem to have the desired effect. Instead of finishing him off, Glass pushes Fitzgerald's body into the stream, and we see him float a few hundred feet downstream, only to be picked up by the Sahnish, who are waiting to kill him. The ending displaces the violence onto the Sahnish, while the audience, I believe, is cajoled into admiring how Glass is able to preserve his humanity—that is, his refusal to ultimately commit murder signals his return to "civilization" after his confrontation with the "wild." By making the Sahnish the enactor of the vengeance that the audience craves, the film re-enshrines the civilized, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, male savior at the center of U.S. history.

Even if there is a critique of the inherent cruelty of nation-state formation and border building in the film, as I have discussed here, the film's celebration of Glass once again undermines much of that potential criticism because the audience ultimately applauds his triumph, which is really the triumph of "civilization." The film certainly laments the violence of colonialism and its effects on Indigenous communities, but two of the clearest representations of such violence, the death of his wife and son, are already part of the past. Glass's wife is already dead when the film starts, and Hawk dies soon after. The film focuses not on their lives but on how their deaths haunt him. Seen in this light, Fitzgerald's final words to Glass, "ain't nothin' gonna bring your boy back," seem to hold a double meaning. The film asks Glass (and the audience) to accept Hawk's death—and the colonial history that it represents—as already over and done. Yet, as the works of Anzaldúa, Mignolo, Dunbar-Ortiz, and many others make clear, colonialism is neither a single event nor solely a state-sponsored military endeavor relegated to the past; it is an entire way of viewing and understanding the world that persists into our present.

Like Glass's gnarled body, racism, xenophobia, and nativism are also revenants, continually brought back from the dead, constantly revived. Iñárritu's film might be understood as an attempt to remake the western and revive the genre—his own sort of metacinematic revenant, perhaps. He does in many respects provoke careful viewers to rethink U.S. history, and the ways in which border making, genocide, environmental destruction, and colonialism have been not only present in the United States but also essential for its foundation. He engages with the processes of settler colonialism and the construction of borderlands and how these narratives inform our understandings of U.S. history. But ultimately, the colonialist narrative of the white savior still shines through. The heroic white man, inheritor of an Indigenous past (but not future), remains the focus and the perspective with which viewers are led to

identify. The film therefore highlights how even in challenging settler colonialism and Euro-centric forms of knowledge, we often unwittingly replicate those same forms by continuing to work within them. This, perhaps, is the final revenant in the film: the enduring colonial legacies that continue to stagger back to life, time after time.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use the terms "America" and "American" to refer to all of the Americas, not just the United States of America. I use the term "U.S." or "U.S.-American" as adjectives when referring to the United States and "U.S. Americans" to refer to its citizens. I use the specific names of the Native nations and the names they use for self-identification among their people whenever possible and appropriate but also use the term "Indigenous" when speaking about broader experiences and the connections between various Native communities. I avoid excessive use of quotation marks around such words as "settlers," "explorers," "modern," "civilized," "barbaric," and so on, unless specifically seeking to emphasize the constructed and artificial nature of these categories, but I urge readers to nonetheless recognize the problematic nature of such Euro-centric terms.

2. According to historian Eric Jay Dolin (2010), two stereotypes or images of the mountain man dominate history and popular culture. The first is the romantic hero, a man "who ventured boldly and even joyfully into the uncharted wilderness, and who relied on his strength, resourcefulness, and courage to confront and in many cases surmount manifold obstacles" (252). The second also emphasizes the mountain man's bravery and adventurousness but sees him as someone who has rejected civilization (252). It was commonly believed, according to Dolin, that such a type of renegade had "abandoned all moral constraints to pursue a licentious, lawless life, which physically and mentally transformed him into little more than a savage" (252).

3. According to film studies critic Edward Buscombe (1996), one of the defining characteristics of the western film genre is that it is set on the frontier, which is portrayed as "the dividing line between white civilization and its opposite, 'savagery'" (286). This struggle between civilization and savagery is the main conflict of the traditional western film, and the endings frequently celebrate the "triumph" of civilization, even if some also lament the supposedly necessary losses of Indigenous lives and cultures (286).

4. "Arikara" is the term used throughout the film and in much of the history of this time period. However, "Sahnish," meaning "the original people from whom all other tribes sprang," is the term used among the community to refer to themselves and the preferred term of identification (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, 2023). Accordingly, I use "Sahnish," the preferred term, throughout this article.

5. In an interview with *Script* magazine, the original screenwriter for the film, Mark L. Smith, states that Iñárritu was heavily involved in the rewriting of *The Revenant* and initiated and had the final say on many of the significant plot changes from what appears in Punke's novel and in the historical record. Smith notes that Iñárritu "added personal thematic aspects that meant a lot to him... [such as] the clash of cultures between the Native Americans and the trappers." The biggest change, however, according to Smith, had to do with Glass's son. In

the original screenplay, Glass's son dies before the film begins, and in the novel, Glass does not have a son.

6. An "unorganized" territory means that it had no territorial government that functioned systematically on a day-to-day basis. See Hubbard (2014, chapter 5) for a history and discussion of the evolution of geopolitical boundaries of the territories and states that would eventually come to form the United States of America.

7. See Dolin (2010, chapters 11 and 12) and Meinig (1993, chapter 4) for more information on the complexity of the negotiation over the border between Canada and the United States as well as the rights for traders and settlers to move across national borders.

8. For example, this potential freedom remained unrealized for the "hired trapper," who was paid a set wage and outfitted by the fur company but in return had to bring as many pelts as possible to his employer, thereby remaining essentially an indentured servant to the fur-trapping companies for whom he worked (Dolin, 2010, 227). Even those who were not hired trappers found it difficult to get ahead, as those who were outfitted by the fur companies but who did not receive a wage from them were often forced to sell their pelts solely to that company and at a price set by the company (227). Those truly "free" trappers, who outfitted themselves and enjoyed complete freedom to trap wherever they wanted and sell the pelts wherever and to whomever they desired, often struggled to make a living as a trapper as well. At the "rendezvous," a yearly gathering organized by the fur companies during which time the fur trappers could sell their pelts and buy goods, trappers were often enticed into spending far more on whiskey, women, and goods sold at exorbitantly inflated prices set by the fur companies than they could make selling their pelts, thereby locking many men into a system of debt (226–29).

9. See Nester (2001) for more detailed history of the confrontation and the significance of the Arikara War as the first significant military confrontation between the U.S. military and a Western Plains Indigenous community.

10. See Yellow Bird (2017, 390–91) and Krause (2018, 370–72) for a discussion of problematic Euro-centric framing of the Sahnish as "hostile" by both whites from that time period as well as more contemporary white historians.

11. It should be noted that even very biased sources seemed to agree that the Sahnish attack on the fur traders was not a complete surprise to the fur trappers (as depicted in the film), as interactions had been tense even before this battle. See Krause (2018, 368–70) for a discussion of this uncertainty regarding the cause of the conflict in Euro-American, ethnocentric histories of the conflict and for a discussion of how even more contemporary historians and anthropologists have disregarded Sahnish sources and relied on biased, unreliable, and ethnocentric Euro-American sources for their understanding of the causes of the conflict between Ashley's outfit and the Sahnish.

12. Historians and anthropologists agree that a man in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company (Glass's group in the film) most likely did indeed provoke the attack through some sort of sexual wrongdoing or misunderstanding with a Sahnish woman. Krause explains that "the most probable immediate cause [of the conflict] was, as the Arikara claim, a misunderstanding of the custom of wife lending as a form of hospitality" (368). This is supported by other anthropologists and

historians, such as Nester (2001, 140–41), as well as by the Sahnish themselves (Yellow Bird, 2017, 386). There may have been other factors contributing to the conflict as well (see Nester, 2001, 135–40).

13. See also Meinig (1993, 71) for a brief discussion of the importance of the rendezvous system.

14. For example, see Goetzmann's (1966) discussion of mountain men as "expectant capitalists" (106–8).

15. See Dolin (2010, chapter 14) for further discussion of the devastation of the beaver population in the U.S. West during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

16. For more on the complex relationships of power and cultural and economic exchange that accompanied marriages between Europeans and Indigenous women (or women of mixed Indigenous and European heritage), see Van Kirk (1980, 28–52).

17. The Métis community was formed in large part through the commingling of whites and Indigenous communities, forming their own new and unique community and culture. As Michel Hogue (2015) explains, Métis "were marked by their distinctive language, dress, artistic traditions, and religious practices, by their occupational identities as key players in the fur and provisions trade, and by their expansive kinship networks" (3–4). While the Métis played a key role in the fur trade and represent many of the ways in which the fur trade brought diverse communities together, the film does not represent this community in the film.

18. As Ens and Sawchuk (2015) further explain, Indigenous women played a key role in the development and establishment of the fur trade industry and, through intermarriage, in their own changing Indigenous communities: "Fur traders wintering in the Indian country found that marriage to an Indian woman not only cemented trade ties, but also provided the trader with a much-needed source of labour. The Indian woman familiarized the fur trader with the customs and language of her tribe and performed important domestic tasks, such as providing him with moccasins, snowshoes, canoes, dressed furs, and food. In return, the Indian woman increased her prestige, as she became a source of technology and goods for her band" (44–45).

19. As historian William H. Goetzmann (1966) succinctly explained, "The triumph of the American fur trade was thus self-consciously seen as the triumph of American enterprise itself, and with it automatically came settlement, and, it was assumed, sooner or later—and this was important—the dominion of free economic and political institutions" (108).

20. Fur trappers themselves were also largely understood as disposable bodies. Dolin (2010), for example, notes the astonishing death rates in this profession (252).

21. *21 Grams* and *Babel* were produced by independent film companies but distributed through specialty houses belonging to major Hollywood studios. *21 Grams* was distributed by Focus Features, which is owned by Universal Pictures. *Babel* was distributed by Paramount Vantage, a label of Paramount Pictures. In addition, both star major Hollywood actors, including Sean Penn, Naomi Watts, Brad Pitt, and Cate Blanchett.

22. See Noble's (2005, 93–94) brief discussion of this phenomenon. See also García Canclini (1997), which similarly laments the potential collapse of

regional Latin American film but also discusses the transnational aspects and potentials of twenty-first-century Latin American film.

23. See Lincoln (2016).

24. *The Revenant* has largely been understood by film critics in the United States, for example, as an engagement with or attempt to revitalize the western. For examples of criticism of the film as a western, see Lawrenson (2016), Zacharek (2016), or Murray (2016).

25. Many film critics would also argue that even the more traditional Hollywood western has always been more complex than is often assumed. For example, see Carter (2014, 4–6) for a discussion of the complexity of the western and the difficulties and dangers in trying to classify westerns into certain categories (“classical,” “revisionist,” etc.).

26. Prats (2002) explores the invisibility of the “Indian” in “Indian western” films. Indian westerns, he argues, “keep the Indian all but invisible, yet it must still ‘present’ him somehow—and with a purpose. It makes him *present* so that it may render him *absent*. Moreover, the conqueror must produce an Other whose destruction is not only assured but justified. The Indian’s absence is inevitable, foregone” (2, emphasis in the original).

27. A frontier western relates the “mythical narrative that portrays the historical frontier in the United States as the birthplace of American exceptionalism and superiority (Anderson, 1995, 19). Dolores Tierney (2018) also has an interesting reading of the film as a revisionist western, arguing that it “takes a revisionist position towards the history of the American West” by highlighting the imperialistic dimensions of “western expansion” (164).

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