



REVIEW ESSAY

“It’s About Time!”: Reflections on Wes Studi and the Current Zeitgeist of Indigenous Mainstream Cinema

The career trajectory of Cherokee actor Wes Studi doesn’t fit the mould of the usual A-list celebrity. Born in Cherokee County in 1947, he exclusively spoke the Cherokee language until he had to go to school aged 5. Even when Studi came home from school speaking the English language, his grandmother would refuse to let him speak it in the house (Te Ao). When he was 17, Studi signed up to fight for the United States in the Vietnam War. His experiences there shaped his politics and the way that he has presented himself to the world ever since. Taking part in the military campaigns that relocated villagers in Vietnam reminded Studi of his own Cherokee history – The Trail of Tears. Post-war, this led to Studi joining the American Indian Movement. He was arrested at the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 alongside two other activists-turned-actors – Dennis Banks and Russell Means. This was also a momentous year in Indigenous cinematic history. Native American civil rights activist Sacheen Littlefeather declined Marlon Brando’s Oscar for Best Actor in *The Godfather* due to the racist and

inaccurate portrayals of Native Americans in Hollywood.

During the 1970's, few Indigenous actors could be seen on the big screen. Jay Silverheels playing Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957), Chief Dan George known for *Little Big Man* (1970) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and Will Sampson, best known for Chief Bromden in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), were the exceptions. These were the only notable Native actors whom Studi had to look up to before his eventual decision to begin acting in his early 30s. Impersonating Native Americans through the act of redfacing was still commonplace when he had his break in a 1984 theatrical adaptation of *Black Elk Speaks*. The star of this production was non-Native David Carradine, in redface. Despite the ongoing harmful practices that took key roles away from Indigenous actors and perpetuated negative stereotypes, Studi was afforded this breakout opportunity by another co-star, Will Sampson, who was tipped in previews as "America's most recognised Indian actor" (Trammell). The 1984 production was staged by the American Indian Theatre Company, and, in the previous year, Sampson had created the American Indian Registry for the Performing Arts (Michener). This had a major impact on the careers of actors such as Studi, providing opportunities that improved representations of Indigeneity at a period in Hollywood when Native actors were still actively excluded.

Powwow Highway (1989) was Studi's Hollywood breakthrough in the late 1980s. He played the minor role of Buff, a Vietnam veteran who seems primarily focused on getting laid. Studi's arrival in Hollywood paralleled another significant milestone for Indigenous mainstream cinema as *Powwow Highway* was the first major release to forefront a cast of Indigenous actors with a narrative focus including themes of survivance, land sovereignty, and set in a contemporary setting as opposed to the Hollywood comfort zone that situates Indigenous existence prior to the 20th century (Cobb). Nor was there a sense of victimry throughout the film, instead using humour as a successful tool to convey the resilient and determined nature of the Indigenous cast and their characters.

A common notion about Indigeneity in mainstream cinema is that interest comes and goes. The early 1990s were certainly a flash-point for Indigenous presence on the big screen. Studi's next role (credited simply as "The Toughest Pawnee") was in one of the most celebrated films in cinematic history - *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Despite seven Academy Awards, *Dances with Wolves* remains heavily criticised and widely mocked



by Indigenous circles. Protagonist John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) can be associated with the concept of the “white saviour,” the Pawnee are portrayed in a terrorising one-dimensional manner, and the film’s ending subscribes to the racist trope of the “vanishing race,” popularised by 19th-century photographer Edward Curtis. However, in the context of *Dances with Wolves*’ place in cinematic history, Studi contends that this was in fact a good time to be a Native actor (HDNET - *Dances*). Costner’s production did provide many Indigenous actors with roles, Lakota and Pawnee languages were used effectively, and the sheer success of the film created a platform for numerous emerging Indigenous actors at the time including Studi, Tantoo Cardinal, and Graeme Greene, who received an Oscar nomination for his performance.

Studi’s career continued to gain momentum during the early 1990s, starring in Michael Mann’s adaptation of the James Fenimore Cooper novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). Similar criticism can be levelled at *The Last of the Mohicans* as *Dances with Wolves*: the narrative centres non-Indigenous characters and plot, concludes with the character Chingachgook (Russell Means) identifying as the “last Mohican” which can be considered another allusion to the “vanishing race,” and includes yet more depictions of tired cinematic tropes of savagery. Equally, however, Mann’s production once again created many roles for Indigenous actors, used various tribal languages (Mohawk, Cherokee, Delaware), and unlike *Dances with Wolves*, Studi’s character was given a name. Playing the Huron antagonist, Studi offers a terrifying and nuanced performance as the violent and vengeful Magua.

These preceding roles in significant Hollywood blockbusters led Studi to his first lead role, this time not based in fiction - as the Apache leader Geronimo. Although *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993) was based loosely upon a historic narrative, the script took many liberties (which is at least acknowledged by the word “legend” in the film’s title), focused heavily on the United States army’s perspective, and perpetuated many stereotypes. Although in reality Geronimo did spend the latter years of his life imprisoned and dislocated from his Apache homelands, the final scenes depict an imprisoned Geronimo riding on a steam train into the horizon. Hollywood repeatedly persisted with reinforcing the “vanishing race” myth during the early 1990s, as if it was simply a filmic trope, and without recognition of the harm that this continues

to cause Indigenous audiences.

Studi has reflected on his career in many interviews over the years, and in a 2022 discussion with Moana Maniapoto, he acknowledged that he had been cast in many films that continued to recycle the harmful depictions that were prominent throughout 20th- century cinema, particularly in the western genre (Te Ao). *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Geronimo: An American Legend* all rely on a sense of tragedy, portraying Natives as fearful or childlike beings, and locate Indigeneity as a historic notion and not as a multitude of vibrant contemporary cultures. Studi states that when he acted in these types of tragic productions, he aimed to base his characters in a sense of the reality (Te Ao), bringing nuance and humanity into his performances that renders a sense of survivance, the continued presence over absence.

The problematic legacy of these films remain, but Studi's career hasn't solely been clad in the figurative "leathers and feathers." Working with Mann on *The Last of the Mohicans* led to Studi securing a supporting role in the director's subsequent release, *Heat* (1995). Playing Detective Casals, Studi wasn't playing a role where his Indigenous identity was fundamental to the plot. Nor was he cast in an ethnically ambiguous way, which many other Native actors have attested to being a necessity in their search to find roles in a Hollywood that has actively erased Indigeneity from the silver screen for most of the 20th century. This ethnic ambiguity certainly did come into play, however, with another of Studi's roles post-*The Last of the Mohicans* in the filmic adaptation of the popular Japanese video game series, *Street Fighter* (1994), as the original antagonist from the first game - Sagat. Neither of these roles follow Indigenous narratives or have significant Indigenous presence in the writers' rooms or casts, but instead show that Studi and other Native actors had the potential to conduct themselves like others in the film industry - simply as actors and not just specifically Native American actors.

Studi's involvement in significant moments of cinematic history continued when he performed in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), which is still the highest grossing film of all-time, fifteen years after its release. Essentially a space western, *Avatar* discusses similar themes of genocidal threat to Indigenous communities, but instead the Native placeholders are the blue skinned fantastical alien humanoids known as the Na'vi. The film's analogy of an Indigenous-Settler encounter isn't subtle. Similar to *Dance with Wolves*, it takes a white saviour to "go Native" and save them, in this instance the John



Dunbar-type is the character Jake Sully.

The sheer success of *Avatar* underscores a sentiment that cinema-going audiences in the early 21st century still desired narratives that, while sympathetic to colonised peoples, continue to perpetuate Indigenous victimry. Equally, *Avatar* serves as a critique of the destruction of land for resources and of the continued imperialist actions of the United States government in general, adding to the complex and confused storytelling of the film. Box-office figures aside, *Avatar* continues to receive mixed reception from film critics and academics. *the1491s*, a Native American sketch comedy group that went onto create *Reservation Dogs*, famously mocked and ridiculed *Avatar* in a YouTube parody titled "The Avatars".

Studi's role in the production of *Avatar* was significant. Alongside playing the Omaticaya clan chief Eytukan (who dies onscreen - another trope of Indigenous victimry perpetuated by Hollywood), he helped Paul Frommer in the development of the fictional Na'vi language. His experience and knowledge for this task came from the languages he had learnt for previous roles - Pawnee for *Dances with Wolves*, Wyandot (Huron) for *The Last of the Mohicans*, Apache for *Geronimo: An American Legend*. Cherokee, of course, is also the first language Studi spoke, before English.

The trajectory of Studi's acting career correlates with gradual improvements for the Native American experience in Hollywood. In many Westerns from the period colloquially known as the "Golden Age" from 1930s-1960s, any Natives who were cast in productions were usually extras, uncredited, and attention to detail for costuming and language was less than accurate. One way of combatting this racism at the time was for any Native actors with lines in the film to speak simply in gibberish or deliberately mock the non-Native actor/character unbeknownst to them. One such example is translated by Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond in his documentary *Reel Injun* (2009). In *A Distant Trumpet* (1964), when responding to a cavalry officer played by Troy Donahue who threatens death upon him and his community, an uncredited Navajo actor who was playing an Apache chief responds to the officer: 'Just like a snake, you'll be crawling in your own shit' (LorberFilms). Donahue had no idea what the Navajo actor had said to him and continued with his dialogue from the script.

Tewa and Diné filmmaker and academic Beverly R. Singer has noted that tribal languages are an aspect of cultural sovereignty (2). One facet of Studi's career that differs to that of the uncredited Apache chief is that more care was being made by filmmakers in the late 1980s and early 1990s to ensure the authentic use of language. Although Studi was not Pawnee, Huron, or Apache, he and his co-stars took the time to learn these languages. Undoubtedly, any community members or language speakers would have been delighted to hear their language used correctly onscreen after years gibberish spoken by non-Native actors in redface. And even though none of Studi's major Hollywood roles granted him the opportunity to play a Cherokee, he does speak lines of his Native tongue in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Language revitalisation efforts have only become increasingly prominent across North America in recent years. Communities, schools, and museums are all making positive moves to assure that future generations have the opportunities to connect with their culture through language. Even production companies such as Disney are assisting in these efforts by dubbing many of their films into Indigenous languages, starting in 2021 with *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977) into Navajo, *Bambi* (1942) into Arapaho, *Moana* (2016) into Māori and Hawaiian, and *Prey* (2022) into Comanche. In late October 2024, following these previous efforts of retrospective dubbing, Disney announced in anticipation of *Moana 2* (2024) that it would be the "first studio in the world to release the original voice cast version and the Indigenous language version [of a film] simultaneously in cinemas across Aotearoa New Zealand" (Hatch). The version titled *Moana 2 Reo Māori* (2024) is scheduled to be released on November 28th, 2024, alongside the English-language version. This marks a positive transition for the mainstream the film industry and its impact on supporting the survival and restoration of Indigenous languages. Although Studi was not involved in any of these projects or their dubbings, his presence in mainstream cinema productions that have depicted Indigenous language accurately is one of many factors that has led to positive actions such as these being taken within the film industry.

In retrospect, it can be argued that Studi's biggest accolade as an actor marked the beginning of a zeitgeist moment for Native American actors and filmmakers. In 2019, Studi received an Academy Honorary Award, an Oscar. Presented by fellow *Hostiles* (2017) actor, Christian Bale, Studi received the Oscar statuette at the Governors Awards on the back of a Lifetime Achievement in Film after starring in over 30 feature



films and “in recognition of the power and craft he brings to his indelible film portrayals and for his steadfast support of the Native American community” (Studi). He introduced his acceptance speech by stating, “It’s about time” (Studi). Since the first Academy Awards in 1929, it took ninety years for an Indigenous Native American actor to win an Oscar. Studi is still the first and only Native recipient to date.

Since Studi’s recognition, multiple major mainstream film and television releases with either a significant Indigenous cast, writers’ room, or narrative presence have gone on to be widely recognised and praised including *Prey* (2022), *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), *Dark Winds* (2022-), *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023), with Studi starring in the latter. His role as Bucky in *Reservation Dogs* is analogous with his current role in the Indigenous mainstream and the progress that has been made in onscreen depictions of Indigeneity. Playing an elder/uncle figure to the Rez Dogs, Bucky is played as a witty, wise, and humorous person with a particular interest in string theory. He is open and accepting of the younger generation stating pronouns (“Come and Get Your Love” 04:55), helps to break a curse for the Rez Dogs by using the song *Free Fallin’* by Tom Petty as a chant all the while making up with an old friend (“Run” 19:30), and takes the character Cheese on a camping trip with the other uncles to open up about how he feels, and they all end up working on their emotional intelligence together (“Frankfurter Sandwich” 17:00).

This is the guiding elder statesman role that Studi today sees himself performing in the wider industry of Indigenous filmmaking. He hopes that his long and successful career in mainstream cinema can help pave the way for future generations of Native actors, in the same way that the likes of Sampson, Silverheels, and Chief George did for himself (HDNET - Cinema). He has also noted that, at this later stage of his career, Studi hopes to assist in the development of Native American filmmaking and improving the wider representation of Indigeneity whilst forging a new generation of filmmakers who will be as celebrated as Steven Spielberg or James Cameron (Matthews).

Studi’s impact on Indigenous mainstream cinema flows from the past to the present and into the future. This review has only been able to focus on a few highlights of an illustrious career. Other major releases that Studi performed in and that have not been

discussed here include *The Doors* (1991), *Deep Rising* (1998), *Mystery Men* (1999), *The New World* (2005), *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (2014), and *Soul* (2020). All of them could be analysed in equal measure for their representations of Indigeneity, or the opportunity afforded to Studi to play a role where his ethnicity doesn't come into play. Another more contemporary role which aligns with the current zeitgeist is his voice-acting part for the character Sunny in the hit Netflix children's series, *Spirit Rangers* (2022-2024).

It is also worth noting and recognising his role in independent cinema, working with the likes of Indigenous directors such as Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho) and Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa/Choctaw). He has been able to balance roles throughout his career, marking his presence in the mainstream while affording lesser known and upcoming independent directors with his time and effort. One example of this careful balance can be found when he was simultaneously working on *Avatar* and Kevin Willmott's *The Only Good Indian* in 2009. He has also continued to seek roles with other Indigenous directors, such as working with Sterlin Harjo (Seminole) on the major Emmy-nominated series, *Reservation Dogs*.

Studi is the embodiment of Indigenous survivance. He has maintained a presence for himself in an industry that has previously persisted in sparse and problematic representations of Indigeneity. All the while, he has maintained his credibility and that he is a Cherokee first, American later (Kennedy). His highly deserved recognition and continued hard work in the industry marks a bright future of Indigenous actors and filmmakers alike. It's about time.

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