

2024

## Film Review: Killers of the Flower Moon

Lina Tejeda  
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>

---

### Recommended Citation

Tejeda, Lina (2024) "Film Review: Killers of the Flower Moon," *History in the Making*. Vol. 17, Article 20.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol17/iss1/20>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

## Film Review: Killers of the Flower Moon

By Lina Tejeda

Killers of the Flower Moon, directed by Martin Scorsese, premiered in theaters across the nation on October 20, 2023. The release was heavily anticipated by many, from film aficionados excited to see Scorsese's latest film, but especially those in the Native American community due to its large Native American cast including: Lily Gladstone as Mollie Burkhart (1886-1937), Tantoo Cardinal as Lizzie Q (1848-1921), Mollie's mother, Cara Jade Myers as Anna, Janae Collins as Reta, Jillian Dion as Minnie, William Belleau as Henry Roan (1881-1923), Tatanka Means as John Wren, Yancey Red Corn as Chief Bonnicastle (1877-1923), and Talee Redcorn as Non-Hon-Zhin-Ga.

I never intended this film review of Killers of the Flower Moon to be solely just that. It is also important to note that some of the things I state in this review do not have sources because they come from my lived experiences as a Native community member who grew up on an Indian Reservation. A question I continuously asked was: who is this film for? Is this for the Osage People or for the greater Native American community? Although the film received the thumb of approval from the Osage Nation, I do not feel like it was *for* the Osage People, but for non-Native audiences.

Non-Natives have often not been taught the *real* histories of Native Peoples in the United States. Natives know about the violence; it was told to us in stories passed down from one generation to the next from our ancestors who lived it. It is helpful that non-Native audiences keep in mind that the time when this happened was not long ago: in the 1920s. Many of our grandparents were alive during this time. Considering my argument that this film is for a non-Native audience, I believe this

film is effective in teaching about the greed and violence committed against the Osage People.

In the film, Ernest Burkhart (1892-1986; played by DiCaprio) returned from war to Oklahoma and settled with his uncle William Hale (1874-1962; played by De Niro) who lived on the Osage reservation near Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the 1920s. Hale is presented as a friend and ally to the impressively wealthy Osage people, due to the discovery of oil on their land. In the first hour of the film, many non-Native settlers are seen living in Osage territory, exploiting the Osage people for their own monetary and material gain. The Osage people were not allowed to control their own money by law; thus, they needed a White sponsor to handle their oil headrights. According to the [osagenation-nsn.gov](https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov), “A ‘headright’ is the right to receive a quarterly distribution of funds derived from the Osage Mineral Estate.”<sup>1</sup>

Ernest met Mollie Kyle, one of four Osage sisters who have oil headrights, married her, and together they had three children. It is discovered throughout the film that Di Niro’s character, William, is in fact not a friend, but a money-hungry capitalist who will go to any lengths to get money into the hands of his White counterparts by way of strategically arranged marriages. William is responsible for orchestrating the killings of many Osage people so that their non-Osage sponsors and spouses could inherit their oil headrights.

After all the deaths in her community, Gladstone’s character, Mollie travels to Washington District of Columbia (DC) to involve the Bureau of Investigation (BoI). During this time, Mollie became sick with “wasting illness,” and began receiving injections of insulin from local doctors. DiCaprio’s character, Ernest, from the direction of his uncle William, begins to administer Mollie’s injections. William provided Ernest with a, to the viewer, unknown substance, that he was instructed Ernest to add to her insulin injections, “to keep her down”. Mollie became

---

<sup>1</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” Osage Nation, August 24, 2021, <https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov/who-we-are/minerals-council/frequently-asked-questions>.

increasingly suspicious of these injections, and when the BoI paid a visit to Mollie, they too became suspicious and took her to a hospital where she recovered. Meanwhile, as Mollie recovers in the hospital the BoI unravels the truth about Ernest and his uncle William. Ernest confesses to his crimes and testifies against his uncle with the hopes of salvaging any relationship with his wife and children. After the trial is complete, Ernest is allowed to meet with Mollie, where she confronts him and asks what he has been injecting her with, giving him one final chance to come clean. Ernest denies any foul play and Mollie leaves, later divorcing him.

The final scene is a radio show on stage telling of the story, which featured Scorsese reading the newspaper obituary of Mollie who died at fifty years old in 1937 from diabetes. After a brief silence, the screen cut to a powwow drum being played and the song “Wahzhazhe (A Song for My People)” composed by Osage Composer Scott George, Kenny Bighorse, and Vanny Bighorse, being sung by Osage tribal singers, according to Osage Nation’s Principal Chief Geoffrey Standing Bear (1829-1908).<sup>2</sup>

Lily Gladstone played Mollie’s character excellently throughout the film. Mollie’s character could have been more dimensional and not just stereotyped as one-dimensional. Mollie came off as being passive, compliant, and displaying a lack of emotion. Even in the end when she was questioning Ernest about poisoning her, she did not show any emotion. Perhaps this was the intention of Scorsese, however, as a Native woman myself, I was rooting for Mollie to be more assertive. However, there are moments where Mollie displayed a lot of strength such as when she traveled to Washington D.C. to get BoI involved. I have a great

---

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Maupin, “‘Killers of the Flower Moon’ Nominated for 10 Oscars,” 2 News Oklahoma KJRH Tulsa, January 24, 2024, <https://www.kjrh.com/news/local-news/killers-of-the-flower-moon-nominated-for-10-oscars>.; *Killers of the Flower Moon* (Apple Studios, 2023), <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/killers-of-the-flower-moon/umc.cmc.5x1fg9vferlfeutzpq6rralzf>.; This is the author’s summary of the film.

appreciation for the spirituality she practiced throughout the film by praying at the river every sunrise.

Cara Jade Myers played Anna very well. Her role highlighted the issues of alcoholism within the Native community and her death called attention to the epidemic of (and movement to bring awareness to) Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) plaguing North American Indigenous communities. These communities face high numbers of violence being committed against them. According to statistics gathered by the Red Road Institute, “The murder rate of Indigenous women is three times higher than non-Native women. It is the third leading cause of death in Indigenous women.”<sup>3</sup> Throughout the movie, these statistics were all I could think about.

William Belleau, who played Henry Roan, was very convincing. Henry was a man who suffered from what the film called melancholy, or what we now call depression. His passion in scenes was palpable, and one could feel his pain. He suffered from alcoholism and became desperate to end his life after finding out his wife was having an affair with another man. However, William Hale did not want Henry to die yet because his insurance had not reached full maturity and prevented his suicide. Nonetheless, once this insurance policy took hold, he was later taken out to a field where a hit man provided him with alcohol and shot him in the back of the head.

John Wren, played by comedian Tantanka Means, a Native American member of the BoI, flexed his acting muscles by stretching out of the stand-up comedy specials I have seen him do previously and it was refreshing to see him play a serious role, albeit a small role as a side character with limited lines and screen time. Yancey Redcorn’s role as Chief Bonnicastle was beautifully played, as well as Talee Redcorn’s role as the traditional leader Non-Hon-Zhin-Ga. The other Native cast members who appeared as extras with few to no lines did an amazing job of representing

---

<sup>3</sup>Red Road Institute, “Protect Indigenous Women,” *Red Road Institute Online*, October 4, 2022, <https://redroadinstitute.org/protect-mmip/>.

their community and their culture as it was in the time period depicted. For me, a Native American woman, it was beautiful to see the blankets worn by the Osage women and the regalia that was worn during Mollie and Ernest's wedding. The two leading actors playing non-Osage characters were De Niro and DiCaprio. De Niro's casting as William Hale and DiCaprio's casting as Ernest Burkhart were notable. Both actors were able to distinctly capture the essence of the people they played.

The first time watching the film, it made me uneasy, and many parts were hard to watch such as the murders that happened so quickly, most notably was the scene when Anna's body was recovered from the riverbed and an autopsy was performed. I was saddened to learn about this piece of American history, and part of my own Native American history. This portion of Osage history was brand new to me.

An overall critique that can be made of the film is that all the female characters were either sick, dying, or dead. The issue of murder found its way into the lives of Mollie and her three sisters. While it was never explicitly stated that they were murdered by their husbands and their White counterparts, it can be assumed that Ernest's underhanded abuse of Mollie also happened to Minnie, Rita, and Lizzie Q. They were labeled to have died from a "wasting illness" which characters in the film refer to undiagnosed diabetes as. In one of the most shocking scenes in the movie, Mollie's sister Anna was found shot dead in a riverbed. The scene was graphic, showing gunshot wounds on her bruised and bloodied body.

Another laudatory aspect of the film is its use of the Osage language. For the Native American community, it is always gratifying to see a Native language on a screen, and this is more exciting in a film of this magnitude, helmed by the legendary Scorsese, reaching a large audience that is predominantly non-Native. The use of Native language in this 2023 Oscar nominated film, for which Lilly Gladstone was nominated for best female actor, an effective statement that Native people survived European colonization and genocide. The use of it in this film is a testament

that people like William Hale and his White counterparts' attempts to murder and steal from the Osage People ultimately failed at a complete takeover of Osage land and wealth.

According to the film's IMDB webpage, by March of 2024, which is considered to be the end of the awards season for films from 2023, *Killers of the Flower Moon* earned over four hundred and one nominations and one hundred and twenty-five wins at various film associations from the United States and abroad.<sup>4</sup> The film won at least fifteen awards for Best Film or Best Foreign Film.<sup>5</sup> Director Martin Scorsese won at least eight awards for directing the film.<sup>6</sup> Actress Lily Gladstone won at least forty-five awards for Best Actress, Actress of the Year, or for her break-out role.<sup>7</sup> Other notable awards were for Best Original Score and Best Cinematography.<sup>8</sup>

Of the seven nominations for the Golden Globes, Lily Gladstone took home the award for Best Performance by a Female Actor in a Motion Picture, Drama. Most memorable was the speech she gave when she accepted the award. She began to address the audience in the Blackfeet language, which is customary in Native communities when you greet people. It may seem to non-Native audiences that she simply spoke her language, but this was much more than that. It was a powerful statement to show that she is here, Natives are still here, *we* are still here. She thanked her mother, cast members, and film team. In a most electrifying dedication that brought many tears throughout the Native community, she said:

And this is for every little rez kid, every little urban kid, every little Native kid out there who has a dream, who is seeing themselves represented and our stories

---

<sup>4</sup> "Killers of the Flower Moon (2023): Awards," *iMDB*, [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5537002/awards/?ref=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5537002/awards/?ref=tt_awd).

<sup>5</sup> "Killers of the Flower Moon (2023): Awards."

<sup>6</sup> "Killers of the Flower Moon (2023): Awards."

<sup>7</sup> "Killers of the Flower Moon (2023): Awards."

<sup>8</sup> "Killers of the Flower Moon (2023): Awards."

told by ourselves, in our own words with tremendous allies and tremendous trust with and from each other.<sup>9</sup>

There was a lot of anticipation and excitement within the Native American community for the Academy Awards, hoping Lily Gladstone would walk away with an Oscar. While *Killers of the Flower Moon* did not win any of the ten nominations from the Academy Awards, Gladstone made a place in all our Native hearts. She represented the Native American community with grace, beauty, and humility. The entire Native cast has left a lasting imprint on us all. It was surreal to get to see actors who represented the Native American community on red carpets. They wore beaded jewelry from Native beaders and designer dresses that they collaborated with Native artisans to create culturally significant pieces.

I sought to highlight the impact the film and its Native American cast has had on the visibility of Natives in the media. We are beginning to not only see Native actors and actresses being put on the big screen, but our stories and histories are beginning to be brought to mainstream media. Our voices are being lifted and centered in the telling of those stories. While there is still a lot of work to be done, we are slowly, but surely, taking back our stories from non-Native narratives. The film itself, the film's team, and the actors are working towards the right direction to bring attention to our Native Communities.

---

<sup>9</sup> Lily Gladstone, "Lily Gladstone Wins Best Performance By A Female Actor In a Motion Picture-Drama". January 7, 2024, Golden Globe Awards. Beverly Hills, CA. CBS and Paramount+, 5p.m. Pacific Time.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSapi-Og004>.



## **Bibliography**

- “Frequently Asked Questions.” Osage Nation, August 24, 2021.  
<https://www.osagenation-nsn.gov/who-we-are/minerals-council/frequently-asked-questions>.
- Gladstone, Lily. “Lily Gladstone Wins Best Performance By A Female Actor In a Motion Picture-Drama”. January 7, 2024. Golden Globe Awards. Beverly Hills, CA. CBS and Paramount+, 5p.m. Pacific Time.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSapi-Og004>.
- Killers of the Flower Moon*. Apple Studios, 2023.  
<https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/killers-of-the-flower-moon/umc.cmc.5x1fg9vferlfeutzpq6rra1zf>.
- “Killers of the Flower Moon (2023): Awards,” *iMDB*.  
[https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5537002/awards/?ref\\_=tt\\_a\\_d](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5537002/awards/?ref_=tt_a_d).
- Maupin, Jennifer. “‘Killers of the Flower Moon’ Nominated for 10 Oscars.” 2 News Oklahoma KJRH Tulsa, January 24, 2024.  
<https://www.kjrh.com/news/local-news/killers-of-the-flower-moon-nominated-for-10-oscars>.
- Red Road Institute. “Protect Indigenous Women,” *Red Road Institute Online*. October 4, 2022.  
<https://redroadinstitute.org/protect-mmiw/>.

### **Author Bio**

Lina Tejeda is half Pomo from her tribal homelands in Northern California and half Mexican. She is a graduate student in the master of art in history program at California State University San Bernardino. Her area of focus is California Indian studies and museum studies/ public history. Lina is passionate about working in institutions to advocate for the return of cultural sacred items to tribal nations from which they belong and telling the true histories of the California Indian people. In her spare time, Lina is a traditional Pomo dancer who has taken to learning about her cultural traditions including basket weaving, beading hats, regalia making, singing, gathering materials, and learning about the traditional ecological knowledge in California. While her passion lies in her own cultural heritage, she finds enjoyment in all areas of history including topics such British history, French history, and social histories of the United States. Lina would like to thank and give photo credit to Adriana Robles and AR NorCal Budget Photography.

