Those Who Have Fallen Prey

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Dan Trachtenberg's *Prey* is somewhat unique amongst science fiction films in its commitment to tell an Indigenous story with an Indigenous protagonist and Indigenous characters. As such, it presents its narrative without being fully encumbered by a settler lens in demonstrating its primary theme of colonialism and its nuanced metaphor for climate destruction as a consequence of that theme. However, the analysis of these aspects of *Prey's* narrative must be explored with a critical lens, especially considering its development by settler co-writers and its reliance on an existing canon with a fundamentally colonial subtext. Still, the commitment by the heads of production to provide a narrative authentic in its representation of Comanche peoples is as laudable as it is flawed. Its period depiction certainly asserts that there is an inherency in colonialism to be antagonistic towards those that respect and know their own homes.

In contemporary popular culture, film narratives detailing the large-scale consequences of colonialism (e.g. land exploitation, marginalization and genocide) suffered by Indigenous peoples are primarily marketed and delivered to, largely, white audiences using white actors to tell white stories. The suffering and exploitation of both Indigenous peoples and colonised land is often background noise to more palatable, eurocentric stories relying on themes

familiar to and established by settlers[1]. It is surprising, then, that in 2022, 20th Century Studios released *Prey,* a continuation of its long-running series of *Predator* films, about a tribe of Comanche in conflict with the series' alien antagonist. More surprising still is the film's nuance in approaching themes of colonialism and tradition, as well as its stark reflection on the risks of climate change to Indigenous peoples and settlers alike. All this while adopting a hard, earnest stance that since this story is being told, it should be shown through the eyes of Indigenous characters. The film is not without problems, but its stated goal is very clear: to tell an authentic story consulting and using Indigenous voices about issues characteristic of the long history of violence suffered at the hands of colonial powers.

It is important to acknowledge what the film ethically practices in conveying its narrative. Those familiar with Greg Younging's "Summary of Indigenous style principles" will note that the film follows the style guide with clear earnestness. Notably, the film was made with input from producer, Jhane Myers, a member of the Comanche Nation. In an interview with Meagan Navarro of *Bloody Disgusting,* Myers commented, 'I could reach back out to my community. I even would because this is set 300 years back, we needed some older words, I would call my grandpas… "Well, how do you say this? What did your grandpa call this?" (Navarro 2022). This especially aligns with Younging's sixth principle of "collaboration" in which authors are expected to, 'Work in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and authors to ensure that Indigenous material is expressed with the highest possible level of cultural authenticity, and in a manner that follows Indigenous Protocols and maintains Indigenous cultural integrity' (Younging 2018 p.100). Myers asserted a desire for authenticity as being a priority and the film was released with a Comanche dub as well as the original English in line with Younging's 21st principle calling for language as a form of cultural reclamation.

The narratives weave in aspects of Comanche cultural realities around the 18th century. Naru (Amber Midthunder), the film's protagonist, is allowed to join her tribe's hunters to rescue one of their tribe taken by a mountain lion. She is allowed to join due to her knowledge of tribal

[1] Non-Indigenous peoples living in the colonized world (e.g. people of European decent living in Canada)

medicine, which she demonstrates several times. The hunters' secondary goal — to cull the mountain lion as it represents a danger to their tribe — further establishes some authenticity in the way of presenting problems inherent to tribal lifestyle. These are harsh realities emblematic of life within the plains before the advent of cities and modern medicine, and they are meant to introduce the viewer to Naru's world. A world where people rely on the land around them to provide, heal and protect. Interspersed between these and other scenes of the film are clips of the Predator, a large alien adorned in bones with sophisticated technological weapons that hunts any moving animal for sport.

This antagonist is, at first, reflective of the threat of colonialism. The monster is large, (literally) invisible, and technologically advanced to the point of being a seemingly insurmountable threat to both the Comanche tribe and the delicate balance of their ecosystem. It kills indiscriminately and violently, collecting trophies for inexplicable reasons. When it is met by the tribes' Hunters, they succumb to violence, the likes of which they had never seen by an enemy they do not understand. These aspects of the Predator largely echo the long history of violence enacted upon Indigenous peoples by colonial forces, reflecting the genocide of indigenous peoples as a result of settler colonialism. "The question of genocide is never far from discussions of settler colonialism. Land is life—or, at least, land is necessary for life. Thus contests for land can be—indeed, often are—contests for life." (Wolfe 387) However, late in the story it is revealed that there are other killers endemic to the plains. French hunters, revealed to have slaughtered bison in a similarly savage and indiscriminate way, both allude to the eventual extinction of the wild American Bison and reflect the realities of colonial oppression. Their capture of Naru and her brother, Taabe (Dakota Beavers), and the torture and humiliation the two are condemned to, echoes a history of oppression characterized by kidnappings and torture, notably in American Indian Bording schools. These schools' purpose was to remove Indigenous children from their communities and integrate them into settler culture.

The Predator, following their capture, thus begins to represent a larger threat; it now threatens the lives of the tribes' people, the creatures endemic to their home, as well as the exploitative settlers. It becomes a cumulative symbol of the threats

facing all of us as a consequence of the colonial project. Climate change, for instance, has long been recognized as a consequence of industrialization and overutilization of natural resources, which are two explicit consequences of colonialism. It is a threat which has been, until very recently, largely invisible to most. It is a larger than life threat, which we are not technologically prepared to adapt to that will affect settlers and Indigenous peoples across the world in dramatic and violent ways. The film culminates in Naru's knowledge and utilisation of her environment, herbal medicines and traditional hunting strategies to overcome the Predator; this suggests maintaining a respect and knowledge of one's natural environment — inherent in much of the cultural rhetoric espoused by Indigenous peoples — will provide solutions to the destructive threats we face as a species. However, there is some foreshadowing that the threat may not be entirely gone, enforcing the concept of stewardship over one's territory.

There are some issues, however, that need to be confronted when critically analysing the film as an Indigenous story. First, the co-writers, one of which directed the film, are both white settlers. While this is not condemnable by any means, it does need to be stated that they are criticizing their own community of settlers. That being said, their commitment, again, to collaborate with Indigenous peoples is reflective of a respect for the material. Additionally, there always exists a clear bias in telling stories within the European tradition within blockbuster cinema. Again, these aspects of the film need not be considered damning, but they are existent and worth being cognizant of. The second issue is more fundamental in that the foundation the Predator series — beginning with the first film — has a history of glorifying imperialism.

Released in 1988, the film depicts a group of military personnel assigned by the CIA to rescue a foreign minister from a South American Guerrilla force. The film is a largely vapid action film, but it is reflective of more recent aspects of American colonialism: CIA sponsored political interference in South America (notably in Nicaragua, Cuba and Chile)[2] [3] [4] are 20th century examples of the kinds

[2] Nathan J. Stone. 'Prevention or Provocation?'

[3] William A. Morgan. 'Cuba: Context and Consequences for the American Empire'

[4] Clare Foster. 'The Sandinista Heritage'

of issues the Predator in *Prey* symbolises. Such events as the CIA's sponsoring of the Contras or the United States support for Batista in Cuba and Pinochet in Chile are problematic examples of Imperialism in the neo colonial era and are at odds with the stated goals of films and stories such as *Prey.* The film's protagonists enter the unnamed South American country illegally, and kill with impunity but the audience is meant to cheer for them. One could certainly argue that the film was more a product of its time but it is difficult to disentangle the more problematic aspects of imperialism glorified in its foundational entry. Still, it should be noted that utilising an existing, long standing, and popular franchise to tell a story about colonialism using the voices of people most affected by it might supersede the need to critically analyse the problematic issues inherent to the series as a whole. However cognisance of the authentic history of colonialism includes acknowledging the problematic aspects of stories intended for settler audiences is important in critically analysing *Prey.*

That being said, *Prey* itself is a clear example of what is of value in depicting stories about Indigenous peoples. It was made collaboratively with a focus on authenticity even insofar as committing to providing the Comanche language as an optional way to experience the film. It is careful in handling themes and issues that are important to consider when reflecting upon the immediate and lasting effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples. Its depiction of a larger than life monster reflects the real world implications of colonisers' unwillingness to collaborate with Indigenous communities in non-exploitative and damaging ways. It respectfully asserts the need to acknowledge that there are real invisible Predators that need confronting and the best ways to do that are found within traditions that respect our habitat.

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