Black Gold and Broken Promises: Colonial Shadows in Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon*

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Abstract

Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) offers a poignant exploration of the Osage murders of the 1920s. It exposes the systemic exploitation and violence perpetrated under the guise of colonial legality and authority. This essay examines the film through the frameworks of economic colonialism, violence and cultural erasure, and the complicity of legal institutions which in turn reveals how settler greed weaponized familial ties, legal systems, and symbolic violence to strip the Osage Nation of their wealth and autonomy. By juxtaposing the Osage's cultural richness and resilience against the calculated brutality of settler colonialism, Scorsese critiques the moral ambiguities of power and the enduring legacies of systemic injustice. Through layered narratives and compelling character portrayals, the film not only recounts historical atrocities but challenges audiences to confront the pervasive dynamics of exploitation and oppression in modern society. *Killers of the Flower Moon* underscores the cyclical and pervasive nature of exploitation and violence within colonial and institutional systems. It compels the audience to confront the uncomfortable truths about power and morality.

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Introduction

One can explore history and contemporary culture through the lens of creative artists, historians, and social scientists. Their artistic and academic contributions provide unique perspectives and opportunities to delve into specific ideas, places, or phenomena. Despite being widely known for his gripping and intense portrayals of gangster life, Martin Scorsese is a multifaceted filmmaker (Cashmore 2). His work draws inspiration from novels, biographies, historical records, and especially other films. Beyond chronicling the Italian American pursuit of the American Dream, Scorsese has explored themes like 19th-century ethnic conflicts, the existential challenges of 20th-century urban life, and the waning trust in traditional institutions such as families, the legal system, and government. His films capture the brash individualism of American culture and the rewards and consequences of both rejecting and embracing it (3). His documentaries are insightful accounts of American popular culture and its perpetual struggles which highlights the nation's history, crises, and the individuals who shape or undermine it. Through his work, Scorsese presents a comprehensive vision of America.

In a press conference in Festival de Cannes, Martin Scorsese described his latest film, *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), stating, "It is not about the *whodunit*; it is about who did not do it," that calls attention to the pervasive indifference toward Indigenous people, a sentiment he believes resonates universally. This poignant remark stresses the film's thematic exploration of complicity, apathy, and systemic injustice. *Killers of the Flower Moon* recounts the haunting true story of the Osage murders in 1920s Oklahoma, where members of the Osage Nation, enriched by oil discovered on their land, became targets of a brutal conspiracy. White settlers, driven by greed and entitlement, exploited, betrayed, and murdered Osage people in an orchestrated campaign to seize their wealth, revealing the deep-seated structures of colonial exploitation and violence. The discovery of oil in the Osage Nation transformed the region's identity and economy. It marked it as a pivotal player in the American oil industry. The term "black gold," famously coined by Mrs. Rosa Hoots, an Osage mixed-blood, underlines the profound ties between the Osage people and this resource (Burns 417). While early discoveries relied on natural surface seeps rather than advanced geological techniques, the Osage were familiar with petroleum's presence. They used it traditionally for treating frostbite, cuts, and sprains. The rise of industrial uses for oil, especially with the advent of automobiles, coincided with a decline in grass leasing income for the Osages

which ensured that petroleum wealth became their new economic backbone. This boom attracted an influx of businesses, pipelines, and refineries, linking the Osage reserve to the last great frontier mineral rush in the United States (418). However, this newfound wealth also brought exploitation and violence, as the region's riches became a target for those seeking to strip the Osage people of their resources and autonomy, a dynamic vividly depicted in *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

The film serves as a powerful reflection on the mechanisms of colonialism, vividly portraying the intersections of economic exploitation, cultural erasure, and systemic violence inherent in settler colonialism. At its core, colonialism is not only the conquest of land but also the subjugation of its people, driven by the insatiable pursuit of wealth and power. The film explores economic colonialism through the Osage Nation's oil wealth, which attracted white settlers who manipulated legal systems and familial bonds to dispossess the Osage of their rightful inheritance. This economic domination was accompanied by cultural erasure, as Indigenous traditions, autonomy, and ways of life were systematically undermined, replaced with a narrative of dependency and inferiority imposed by settler society. Beneath these strategies lay the violence that sustains colonialism, a calculated, dehumanizing brutality aimed at both enforcing control and eradicating resistance. By illustrating these dynamics, Scorsese's film unflinchingly reveals how colonial ideologies rationalize greed and dehumanization. It perpetuates cycles of exploitation that resonate far beyond the historical events it portrays.

To fully understand the context of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, it is essential to distinguish between colonialism and imperialism, two intertwined yet distinct systems of domination. While both involve the assertion of control by one power over another, colonialism is marked by the presence of significant numbers of permanent settlers from the colonizing nation in the occupied territory (Horvath 47). The domination of regions such as North America, Latin America, Australia, and South Africa by European powers involved the migration of settlers who sought not only economic gain but also permanent habitation. They established societies that displaced and subjugated Indigenous populations. Imperialism, on the other hand, "involves few, if any, permanent settlers from the imperial homeland" (47) In the case of the Osage murders depicted in Scorsese's film, the violence stems from a settler colonial system, where the settlers' greed for oil wealth led to their calculated efforts to displace and eliminate Indigenous people that embodying the brutal dynamics of colonialism.

Colonial economic exploitation systems were fundamentally structured to prioritize the extraction of wealth from indigenous populations through coercive practices and systemic manipulations. While traditional colonial models often relied on forced labor and resource

extraction, exploitation in other contexts operated through subtler, yet equally destructive, means. For example, colonial systems frequently undermined indigenous autonomy and used legal manipulations to transfer wealth and resources to colonizers without direct coercion. Land ownership laws in many colonies transformed native populations into tenants which asserted control over their resources and wealth (Gardner and Roy 146). Similarly, colonial powers often penetrated indigenous communities culturally and socially by using alliances, coercion, or deceit to weaken their social structures and exploit their wealth. These practices highlight how colonial systems, even without forced labor, created pathways to dispossess indigenous populations of their economic power while leaving them vulnerable to systemic violence and manipulation.

Colonial powers justified their economic exploitation through ideological constructs designed to uphold the status quo and suppress resistance. Gottheil observes that economic ideology served to "legitimize the particular status quo ... to reduce and channel choice and thereby avoid fundamental questioning of the established system" (84). By presenting colonial economic structures as natural and inevitable, these ideologies curtailed the ability of colonized people to critique or challenge their subjugation. This framing not only legitimized exploitation but also ensured the continuity of colonial control by stifling alternative systems of governance or resistance.

Violence is a prevalent trait of colonizers, yet its methods differ. Old wisdom has it that colonizers almost always use physical violence, yet one must notice that violence has different kinds. Symbolic violence, as one of these kinds, refers to the imposition of cultural, social, and educational practices by colonizers to assert their dominance over the colonized (Kalman 2). This form of violence is less overt than physical force but equally impactful. It functions to erase indigenous identities and replace them with the colonizer's norms and values. Schools, religious organizations, and other colonial systems were used to teach indigenous populations that their ways of life were inferior that instilled a sense of inadequacy and dependency. These efforts normalized the superiority of the colonizer by making their control appear natural and justified while undermining the cultural foundations of resistance.

Colonizers used symbolic violence as a tool to maintain power by shaping perceptions and reinforcing a binary system of superiority versus inferiority. This system portrayed the colonized as uncivilized and subservient, while the colonizer was seen as advanced and authoritative. Kalman observes that this binary "resulted in wage slavery and political powerlessness" (3). By framing their exploitation as a civilizing mission, colonizers avoided the need for constant physical coercion, instead embedding control within cultural and social structures. Through symbolic

violence, colonizers ensured compliance, justified their rule, and suppressed the potential for rebellion by devaluing indigenous identities and replacing them with their own.

Colonial institutions, particularly legal systems and government apparatuses, were central to the domination and transformation of colonized societies. Law played a pivotal role in the ‘civilizing mission' of colonialism. It served as a mechanism to justify conquest and establish control. Western legal systems were introduced to replace indigenous practices, often framed as an improvement over so-called "savage" customs, particularly under British and American imperialism (Merry 890). This process resulted in dual legal systems (one for the colonizers and another for the colonized) which reinforced the structural inequalities between these groups. These dual systems not only served as tools of subjugation but also entrenched cultural dominance by introducing Western norms related to land tenure, labor relations, and personal matters like marriage and property ownership.

Moreover, colonial legal systems did not merely impose foreign rules but actively reshaped social and cultural norms within colonized societies. Courts, police, and administrative institutions enforced compliance with new political orders while regulating everyday activities such as labor, marriage, and even entertainment (Merry 890). While these systems sought to create a compliant labor force and commodify land, they also became spaces for resistance. Colonized peoples occasionally leveraged colonial legal frameworks to challenge excessive exploitation and protect their rights, albeit within a highly unequal power dynamic. The ambiguous nature of these legal systems reveals their dual role as instruments of domination and contested sites of resistance, encapsulating the complexity of colonial control and its enduring legacy (891).

Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* examines the colonial systems that led to the violent exploitation of the Osage Nation in 1920s. The discovery of oil, or "black gold," brought wealth to the Osage but also drew settlers driven by greed, who resorted to betrayal, legal manipulation, and violence to seize their resources. Through the lens of economic colonialism, Scorsese reveals how settlers weaponized legal systems and familial ties to exploit and ultimately dispossess the Osage people. It exposes the inherent violence and injustice of settler colonialism. This essay will argue that *Killers of the Flower Moon* not only recounts a historical tragedy but also lays bare the mechanisms of colonial domination, exploring economic exploitation, cultural erasure, and the complicity of legal institutions.

The essay will explore the film's narrative through three interconnected frameworks. First, it will examine economic colonialism by focusing on how the Osage's oil wealth was systematically extracted through manipulative alliances, fraudulent legal instruments, and settler greed. Second, it will delve into the colonial violence and cultural erasure that accompanied this exploitation by

zeroing in on the physical and symbolic acts of violence that dehumanized the Osage while erasing their identity. Finally, the essay will discuss the pivotal role of colonial institutions, including the legal and governmental systems, in legitimizing and perpetuating the exploitation of the Osage Nation. By situating the film within these frameworks, this analysis will provide a critical understanding of how *Killers of the Flower Moon* portrays the enduring legacy of colonialism as a multifaceted system of economic, cultural, and institutional domination.

Economic Colonialism: Exploitation of the Osage

The film captures the dramatic transformation of the Osage Nation following the discovery of oil on their lands, which catapulted them to unprecedented levels of wealth. Through silent "newsreel" montages, the audience sees images of Osage men and women adorned with "in jewelry, driving fancy cars, large lots of land with cattle and even Anglos driving as their chauffeurs" (Davila 2). The wealth is celebrated in intertitles calling the Osage "the richest people per capita on earth," yet this prosperity becomes a source of dependence and exploitation (figure 1). White settlers are drawn to the region, not as collaborators but as predators eager to exploit the newfound riches.

This economic shift, while initially empowering, isolates the Osage within a colonial framework of wealth extraction. Businesses, pipelines, and oil operations move into the region, controlled predominantly by non-Osage individuals and entities. The Osage, despite owning the rights to this wealth, are positioned as outsiders in their own economy, increasingly reliant on the very settlers who covet their resources. This dependency is starkly portrayed in scenes where Osage individuals are shown interacting with hustlers, exploitative businessmen, and those eager to take advantage of their financial situation under the guise of friendship or commerce.

The film thus frames this economic transformation as a double-edged sword. While it enriches the Osage, it simultaneously subjects them to systemic exploitation. Their wealth attracts settlers who impose a colonial order that strips the Osage of their autonomy, creating an economic hierarchy that benefits the colonizers at the expense of the Indigenous people.

Figure 1. Silent newsreel montage that frames Osage individuals and their new found wealth

Scorsese's portrayal of America has been a society gripped by obsession and constantly undergoing cycles of collapse and renewal due to violent change. A number of scholars have suggested that "Scorsese is fascinated by reckless obsessives" and that this obsession manifests as a metaphorical "hurricane," embodied by characters and their surroundings (Cashmore 3). It may be clear to some that this obsession with obsessiveness is itself coming from one of his predecessors whom he cherishes, Alfred Hitchcock. For Scorsese, Hitchcock is a master of film language who used the thriller genre to explore his personal Catholic beliefs (LoBrutto 51). Scorsese himself writes when talking about Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958):

Vertigo is also important to me—essential would be more like it—because it has a hero driven purely by obsession. I've always been attracted in my own work to heroes motivated by obsession, and on that level *Vertigo* strikes a deep chord in me every time I see it. Morality, decency, kindness, intelligence, wisdom—all the qualities that we think heroes are supposed to possess—desert Jimmy Stewart's character little by little, until he is left alone on that church tower with the bells tolling behind him and nothing to show but his humanity. (qtd. In Auiler)

These obsessives often succumb to their fixations, leading to self-destruction, harm to others, or patterns of behavior that exacerbate their own troubles. Yet, in many cases, they integrate their obsessions into their daily lives in ways that may go unnoticed by others (4). Such individuals,

consumed by a preoccupation, exist everywhere, in public spaces, workplaces, and ordinary environments. They affect both themselves and those around them.

Scorsese's films vividly depict these characters. They offer a broader commentary on the society that nurtures their obsessions. As Cashmore acknowledges, from his debut film *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (1967), Scorsese has consistently examined life on the margins by presenting varied perspectives and experiences (4). His cinematic world features gentle psychopaths, tormented lovers, greedy criminals, vengeful wrongdoers, and hapless dreamers, all driven by an intense resolve that defines their pursuits and seals their fates. David Bromwich refers to this collection of characters as the "Scorsese Book of the Disturbed" (4). While these characters may seem like outliers, Scorsese's work suggests that obsession is a universal trait in American society. Americans often fixate on material possessions, revenge, or societal recognition, driven by the pervasive desire for success. This relentless pursuit reflects a broader cultural ethos where individual achievement, comfort, and material wealth are highly valued, and traditional gender roles are upheld as enduring norms.

Killers of the Flower Moon follows Ernest Burkhart (1892–1986, portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio) who returns from the war and relocates to Oklahoma, where he joins his uncle, William Hale (1874–1962, played by Robert De Niro), living on the Osage reservation near Tulsa during the 1920s (Tejeda 371). Hale is depicted as a trusted friend and ally to the prosperous Osage people, whose wealth stems from the discovery of oil on their land. From the very beginning we can easily associate Hale with one obsession: greed. When he and Ernest are sitting by the fire, he claims:

HALE: You made a good choice coming back here. Texas got nothing. So much changed last years of what's happened. Hard to recognize the place I can tell you that... Money is spent freely here now.

ERNEST: Yes, sir. The oil, sir.

HALE: There's very much money.

ERNEST: I love money, sir.

HALE: You call me Uncle or King... remember?

ERNEST: King.

Hale's dialogue reflects a fixation on wealth and its accumulation. It emphasizes his greed and his manipulative nature. His remark about money being "spent freely" and the abundance of wealth in the region positions him as someone deeply attuned to the material benefits of the oil boom. It prioritizes profit over any moral or ethical considerations. By insisting Ernest address him as "Uncle or King," Hale reinforces his desire for dominance and control and links his greed to a sense of entitlement and superiority. Furthermore, the term "uncle" builds a bridge between

these two characters, which fuses Hale's greed to Ernest and makes him accept and view this trait as normal. This characterization aligns with the broader narrative of settler colonialism in the film, where the pursuit of wealth through exploitation defines key antagonists like Hale.

As the film progresses, the audience becomes familiar with Ernest Burkhart driving Mollie Kyle, one of the four Osage sisters who possess valuable oil headrights, around town. These scenes subtly establish a relationship forming between the two. It deepens Mollie's trust in Ernest and his growing proximity to her life. Against this backdrop, the narrative shifts to an intimate conversation between Ernest and his uncle, William "King" Hale, where Hale's manipulative intentions are laid bare (figure 2):

ERNEST: you want me to see after Mollie? Why she's a regular customer of mine. (sotto voce) And I think she likes me...

HALE: that Mollie's easy to like and a full blood Estate at that, that's something a man could work with…

Ernest gets it, thinks, turns and looks at his brother Byron…who nods at him…as if Byron has already heard this idea and is encouraging Ernest…

HALE (CONT'D): You got a good face - you can be the marrying kind?

ERNEST: how do you mean?

HALE: we mix these families together and that estate money flows the right direction, will come to us - That's a full blood estate, and she gets that money of her Mother Lizzie. That's good business that and legal. Not against a law, that's smart investment.

Figure 2. Ernest, Hale, and Byron casually having a conversation on how to keep the estate money in the right direction

Hale begins by feigning casual interest, but his true motives quickly surface as he encourages Ernest to pursue Mollie romantically. His remark, "Mollie's easy to like and a full-blood estate at that, that's something a man could work with," frames Mollie not as a person but as a financial asset which reduces her identity to her wealth and lineage. Hale's strategic vision becomes clearer when he elaborates, "We mix these families together, and that estate money flows the right direction, will come to us. That's good business." His calculated suggestion to marry Mollie cloaks outright exploitation in a veneer of legality. It emphasizes his relentless greed and willingness to exploit relationships for financial gain.

This scene also reveals Ernest's own susceptibility to greed and manipulation. Initially hesitant, he begins to grasp Hale's plan as his brother Byron, complicit in the scheme, subtly encourages him. Ernest's transition from confusion to acceptance reflects the corrupting influence of Hale's greed, which permeates their family dynamic. This moment starkly encapsulates the predatory greed driving the exploitation of the Osage people and portraying wealth as a justification for moral decay and manipulation.

One striking example of colonial economic exploitation in the film is the systemic inflation of prices for Osage families, which brings to the fore the predatory behavior of settlers. In a tense interaction between Ernest Burkhart and an undertaker, Ernest accuses the undertaker of charging "Osage prices," meaning deliberately inflated rates for funeral services provided to Osage families. The implication is clear: settlers perceive the Osage's wealth as an open invitation for financial exploitation and treat them as cash cows rather than as equals in business dealings. This moment spotlights the disrespect and dehumanization faced by the Osage, who are not only targeted for their wealth but also derided and belittled in the process. The term "Osage prices" is emblematic of a broader systemic pattern where settlers rationalize exploiting Indigenous prosperity by framing it as a consequence of the Osage's perceived incompetence or extravagance. Rather than being a fair participant in the local economy, the Osage are instead subject to opportunistic practices that enrich settlers while further marginalizing the Osage socially and economically.

By including this scene, the film draws attention to how the colonial mindset permeates even mundane transactions. The settlers' greed is not limited to grand schemes like marriage manipulation or murder but extends to everyday interactions where economic exploitation becomes normalized. This contributes to a broader narrative of systemic injustice. It shows how the Osage are squeezed at every level, from high-stakes conspiracies to routine commerce. In his final remark to Ernest, Turton (undertaker) says:

It's not your money - just get more money for the bill – doesn't hurt you. I work for my money like the good Lord said. Sow and reap, Ernest, Sow and reap. Did you ever see an Osage work?

Turton reveals a callous indifference to the financial burden his inflated charges place on the Osage. His framing of the situation suggests entitlement to the wealth of the Osage which reflects the broader settler-colonial mindset that views Indigenous prosperity as undeserved or freely available for exploitation. Turton justifies his actions with a self-righteous invocation of religious principles: "I work for my money like the good Lord said. Sow and reap, Ernest, sow and reap." This biblical reference serves as a veneer of morality. It even masks his greed while implying that his economic gains are divinely sanctioned.

The most telling part of his statement comes in the rhetorical question, "Did you ever see an Osage work?" This line lays bare the settlers' prejudiced perspective. It paints the Osage as idle beneficiaries of unearned wealth rather than rightful stewards of their resources. Such rhetoric was a common colonial strategy to delegitimize Indigenous ownership and justify their exploitation. By perpetuating the stereotype of the "lazy native," settlers like Turton rationalize their actions as necessary corrections to what they perceive as an unjust distribution of wealth.

This scene encapsulates the core of colonial economic exploitation which is the settlers' belief in their inherent superiority and right to control or profit from the resources of Indigenous peoples. Turton's words not only dehumanize the Osage but also reflect how systemic greed is rationalized within a framework of moral and cultural superiority. The audience sees the hypocrisy in Turton's claim to "sow and reap," as his wealth is built not on honest labor but on the calculated exploitation of the Osage's vulnerability and resources.

In *Killers of the Flower Moon*, Martin Scorsese masterfully portrays the devastating economic exploitation of the Osage Nation. He captures how colonial greed pervades every facet of their lives following the discovery of oil on their land. The film juxtaposes the Osage's newfound wealth with their systemic marginalization and shows how white settlers exploit this prosperity through predatory practices, manipulative relationships, and systemic dehumanization. Central to this is William Hale's calculated manipulation of his nephew Ernest Burkhart, whom he persuades to marry Mollie Kyle, reducing her to a financial asset rather than a person. Scenes like the undertaker inflating "Osage prices" starkly reveal the pervasive greed, where settlers view the Osage's wealth as a resource to be plundered rather than respected. Through these moments, Scorsese critiques the moral decay fueled by economic obsession. He frames the Osage's exploitation as emblematic of the broader settler-colonial mindset that legitimizes systemic injustice and strips Indigenous communities of their autonomy and dignity.

Colonial Violence and Cultural Erasure

In recent discussions that plague scholars in regard to Scorsese's depiction of violence, a controversial issue has been whether his films stand out because of their graphic content or because of their psychological and emotional impact. On the one hand, some argue that Scorsese's films are no more graphically violent than action or horror films. From this perspective, his work is similar to genre films that use violence as spectacle or entertainment. On the other hand, however, others argue that Scorsese's portrayal of violence forces the audience to confront it in a deeply personal and morally unsettling way. In the words of critics who highlight this unique approach, Scorsese's violence resonates beyond its physical depiction, creating a sense of shock and introspection that stays with viewers long after the film ends (McAteer 72). According to this view, Scorsese's ability to emphasize the emotional and psychological weight of violence sets his work apart from conventional genre films. In sum, then, the issue is whether Scorsese's films are impactful because of their graphic violence or because of the deeper moral and psychological themes they explore.

Scorsese's ability to point up violence lies in his use of specific cinematic techniques. For instance, he often employs what critics call the "false buildup," where a scene appears to defuse tension before erupting into sudden, unexpected violence (McAteer 75). This technique makes the audience feel relief, only to be blindsided by brutality, as seen in *Goodfellas* (1990) when Tommy (Joe Pesci) unpredictably lashes out after a moment of humor and kills a man with shocking ferocity. The unexpectedness of the violence in Scorsese's films mirrors the unpredictability of real-life violence, making it more impactful and disturbing. Scorsese contrasts this with Hollywood's sanitized depictions, where deaths are often bloodless or follow predictable patterns. He shows instead the messy, chaotic, and unglamorous nature of violent acts.

Moreover, Scorsese's films critique how violence is internalized by characters and viewers alike. In *Mean Streets* (1973), for example, gangsters are shown watching violent Hollywood films, and their actions begin to mimic the glamorized violence on screen (McAteer 75). By portraying characters who are shaped by media representations of violence, Scorsese reflects on how cultural narratives influence real-life behavior. This intertextuality serves as both a commentary on the media's role in perpetuating violence and an indictment of the audience's complicity in consuming it as entertainment.

Ultimately, Scorsese's violence demands the audience's attention not just to the act itself, but to its broader implications. By stripping away the glamor and emphasizing the consequences (both physical and emotional) he transforms violence from a plot device into a thematic core that invites

reflection. This approach ensures that Scorsese's films are not just about violence but about the ways violence shapes human relationships, morality, and society. Through his masterful use of shock, symbolism, and critique, Scorsese positions violence as a central, unavoidable element of the human condition. He forces us to consider not just what violence looks like, but what it means. Along the same lines, in *Killers of the Flower Moon*, Martin Scorsese masterfully juxtaposes dialogue and visuals to create a moment of profound irony and moral discomfort. Following a calm, seemingly reflective conversation between Ernest and Hale by the fire (At the first 12 minutes of the movie), where Hale introduces the Osage people and outlines the socio-political dynamics of Oklahoma to Ernest, the audience is abruptly confronted with a series of harrowing murders of Osage individuals, each carried out in a brutally different manner (figure 3). This stark transition from Hale's composed demeanor to the horrifying violence illustrates the duplicity of his character and the larger systemic betrayal faced by the Osage people.

The impact of this scene is amplified by Hale's final statement before the murders are shown: "The Osage are the finest and most beautiful people on God's earth." This declaration, which on the surface seems to express reverence, is rendered deeply ironic in light of the subsequent imagery of their exploitation and brutal killings. Scorsese uses this contrast to critique the moral hypocrisy of colonial systems and those who feign admiration while simultaneously orchestrating violence and greed-driven oppression. The scene forces viewers to grapple with the juxtaposition of outward declarations of respect and the stark reality of systemic violence. It invites a deeper reflection on the historical patterns of exploitation that underpin the film's narrative.

Figure 3. A series of murders of Osage individuals

One of the most insidious forms of symbolic violence in *Killers of the Flower Moon* is the exploitation of marriage as a means to control Osage wealth. This is epitomized in the conversation between Hale and Ernest about Mollie Kyle, where Hale explicitly frames marriage as a calculated move to secure her headrights. Through this dialogue, Hale reduces Mollie to her legal and financial assets. He commodifies her identity and erases her agency. His callous approach gives focus to the settler-colonial tactic of weaponizing familial and cultural institutions to perpetuate exploitation under the guise of legitimate relationships.

The marriage between Ernest and Mollie, initially presented as a budding romance, transforms into a transaction orchestrated by Hale's manipulative ambitions. Although Ernest hesitates at first, he internalizes Hale's narrative, recognizing Mollie as a means to consolidate Osage wealth within the family. The relationship, portrayed under the veneer of love and partnership, becomes a reflection of how settler-colonial greed infiltrates even the most intimate spheres of life. This manipulation turns personal relationships into tools of domination. It emphasizes the settlers' willingness to exploit every aspect of Indigenous life to secure economic and cultural power.

This dynamic mirrors broader colonial strategies that use cultural assimilation to consolidate control. By embedding exploitation within intimate relationships like marriage, colonizers extend their influence into the personal and familial realms of Indigenous communities. This symbolic violence not only strips individuals of their agency but also reinforces the systemic transfer of wealth and power to settlers. Mollie's reduction to a "full-blood estate" encapsulates how

marriage is weaponized as a colonial tool. It exemplifies the pervasive reach of settler systems into the personal lives of the Osage.

The film vividly portrays the gradual erosion of Osage traditions and identity through symbolic acts of cultural domination. It accentuates the violence inherent in colonial assimilation. In an early scene set in a bark lodge, an elder laments the impending loss of Osage language and customs, saying, "Those children who are outside listening, they will learn another language. They will be taught by white people. They will learn new ways and will not know our ways." This moment foreshadows how colonial systems impose their norms, severing younger generations from their cultural heritage. By replacing Indigenous knowledge with settler education, the colonizers erode the Osage's connection to their identity, embedding the narrative that white settler values are superior and inevitable.

The symbolic violence of this cultural domination is further exemplified in Mollie Kyle's interactions with her legal guardian, Pitts Beaty. When Pitts scrutinizes Mollie's expenses and forces her to justify her spending and declare herself "incompetent," it becomes clear how colonial institutions delegitimize Indigenous autonomy. This system, ostensibly designed to "protect" Osage wealth, reinforces the narrative that Osage traditions and governance are obsolete, replaced by settler authority. Mollie's forced compliance illustrates the psychological toll of this institutionalized subjugation. It shows how colonial systems weaponize bureaucracy to dismantle Indigenous identity and replace it with dependency.

The film juxtaposes Osage cultural practices with the encroachment of settler influences to highlight the commodification and erasure of Indigenous values. Mollie's Osage-style wedding, steeped in tradition and community, is overshadowed by Hale's speech at the reception, where he praises the mixing of families as a means to secure financial gain. This contrast reflects the duality of colonial exploitation: while settlers commodify and romanticize Indigenous culture for their benefit, they simultaneously undermine its foundational values. Scenes like the baby-naming ceremony stand as poignant reminders of what is being lost. It further amplifies the film's critique of the insidious ways colonial forces erase and replace Indigenous traditions.

The term "Osage prices," (mentioned earlier) used by Ernest to criticize the inflated funeral costs charged by the undertaker, encapsulates the symbolic violence embedded in the settlers' perception of Osage wealth. This phrase signifies more than economic exploitation; it dehumanizes the Osage by reducing them to mere objects of financial gain, perpetuating the colonial narrative that their wealth is undeserved and freely available for exploitation. By framing inflated prices as a norm specifically for the Osage, the settlers embed an entitlement to their resources within everyday interactions. This symbolic violence subtly enforces the colonizers'

dominance by normalizing the Osage's disenfranchisement. It paints their financial exploitation as both acceptable and inevitable. Such rhetoric, while ostensibly about economics, carries a profound cultural weight, as it reinforces the systematic marginalization of the Osage and diminishes their autonomy within their own land.

Martin Scorsese employs both explicit and symbolic violence to critique the systemic exploitation and cultural erasure faced by the Osage people under settler-colonial systems. Through stark juxtapositions of dialogue and visuals, Scorsese unravels the moral hypocrisy of colonial figures like Hale, who outwardly express admiration for the Osage while orchestrating their exploitation and murder. The use of marriage as a tool for economic domination epitomizes this dynamic, as Ernest and Mollie's relationship transforms into a calculated transaction under Hale's manipulative influence. This symbolic violence extends beyond individual relationships to illustrate how settler-colonial greed infiltrates even the most intimate spheres of Indigenous life, commodifying Osage identity and eroding their cultural foundations. By embedding exploitation within familial and cultural institutions, the film highlights the pervasive reach of colonial oppression into personal and communal realms.

Scorsese further amplifies this critique by contrasting Osage traditions with the encroachment of settler values. It underscores the symbolic violence inherent in cultural assimilation. Scenes of Osage elders lamenting the loss of their language and customs, paired with depictions of legal guardianship that strip Mollie and others of autonomy, reveal the insidious nature of colonial systems designed to delegitimize Indigenous governance and replace it with settler authority. The commodification of Osage culture, seen in moments like Mollie's traditional wedding overshadowed by Hale's financial motives, encapsulates the duality of colonial exploitation – romanticizing Indigenous practices while systematically dismantling their foundations. Even everyday interactions, such as the reference to "Osage prices," reinforce the settlers' entitlement to Osage wealth, normalizing exploitation and perpetuating marginalization. Through these layered depictions, Scorsese critiques the multifaceted violence of colonialism, compelling audiences to confront the historical and systemic forces that continue to shape Indigenous disenfranchisement.

The Role of Colonial Institutions: Law and the Government

Martin Scorsese's films often explore the blurred boundaries between law and criminality. They reveal a symbiotic relationship between these two forces. In Scorsese's world, crime and law are not distinct opposites but interdependent entities that reflect each other. This dynamic is vividly

illustrated through characters who embody both criminal and authoritative roles, creating moral ambiguity. As Cashmore notes, "There are no good guys and bad guys in America: just people who see themselves as the former, but whose actions suggest they are the latter" (9). This perspective critiques the idea of law as inherently virtuous and crime as purely malicious, suggesting that both can stem from similar motivations of power, survival, and ambition.

Scorsese also critiques the suppression of individuality by larger institutions. He portrays how both legal systems and criminal organizations thrive on uniformity and control. This suppression is a recurring theme, as Scorsese's characters are often consumed by these powerful entities, leaving little room for personal agency. Cashmore emphasizes this, stating, "In his America, individuality is frequently consumed by larger, more powerful entities that thrive on sameness" (9). This critique extends to corporations, syndicates, and urban systems that prioritize conformity over human complexity. By highlighting this loss of individuality, Scorsese not only underscores the dehumanizing nature of these systems but also their role in perpetuating cycles of oppression and alienation.

Further, Scorsese portrays crime as a reflection (rather than an aberration) of legitimate power structures. Crime, in his films, is depicted as an exaggerated form of the same mechanisms used by law-abiding individuals to ascend to power. Cashmore underscores this idea by noting, "Crime, for Scorsese, is a caricature of power: an exaggerated version of what law-abiding people do enroute to becoming powerful" (9). By presenting crime as a mirror of governance, Scorsese challenges viewers to rethink the moral binaries associated with legal systems. This perspective is reinforced by his portrayal of law and order as tendencies rather than absolutes, where characters often operate within a framework of blurred moral and ethical boundaries. This nuanced depiction questions the legitimacy of both legal and criminal authority and invites audiences to see them as reflections of the same societal flaws.

To sum up, Martin Scorsese's films explore the complex relationship between law and crime. They show how they are not entirely distinct but rather interconnected forces driven by similar desires for power and control. His work highlights the moral ambiguity of legal systems, where those who uphold the law often act with the same self-interest and questionable ethics as those who break it. Both legal and criminal systems, as depicted in his films, prioritize conformity and suppress individuality, leaving little room for personal agency. Scorsese also portrays crime as a reflection of legitimate power which suggests that criminal actions are often exaggerated versions of the same behaviors used to gain influence within lawful systems. By blurring the lines between law and crime, Scorsese prompts audiences to rethink the legitimacy and morality of the structures that govern society.

The themes outlined in Martin Scorsese's broader work, particularly the interplay between law and criminality, find strong parallels in *Killers of the Flower Moon*, specifically in the character of William "King" Hale and the systemic corruption surrounding the Osage murders. Hale's dual role as a respected figure in the community and the orchestrator of criminal schemes to exploit the Osage epitomizes the blurred boundaries between law and crime. As Cashmore suggests, crime in Scorsese's films often mirrors legitimate power structures, and Hale's actions exemplify this dynamic. While he positions himself as a paternalistic figure and benefactor for the Osage, his calculated manipulation of the legal system and use of murder for financial gain reveal the moral ambiguity at the heart of his character. Hale exploits both legal and criminal mechanisms to achieve his ends which reflects Scorsese's critique of power structures as inherently self-serving, regardless of their outward legality.

One instance of such occurs early in the film and establishes the dynamics of power and corruption in Fairfax, Oklahoma, under William "King" Hale's control. As Hale instructs Ernest on maintaining discretion, his dual roles as a reserve deputy sheriff and orchestrator of criminal schemes reveal the blurred boundaries between law and criminality (Figure 4):

HALE: Don't get played out in the open with liquor or you'll cause trouble. That right, Byron?
BYRON: That's right, King.
Ernest looks from his brother Byron back to his uncle.
HALE: There's only one deputy Sheriff I don't hold a commission under... I am officially a reserve deputy sheriff in Fairfax... but I don't want to bring unwanted eyes...
ERNEST: I will not find that trouble, I won't do stupid things.

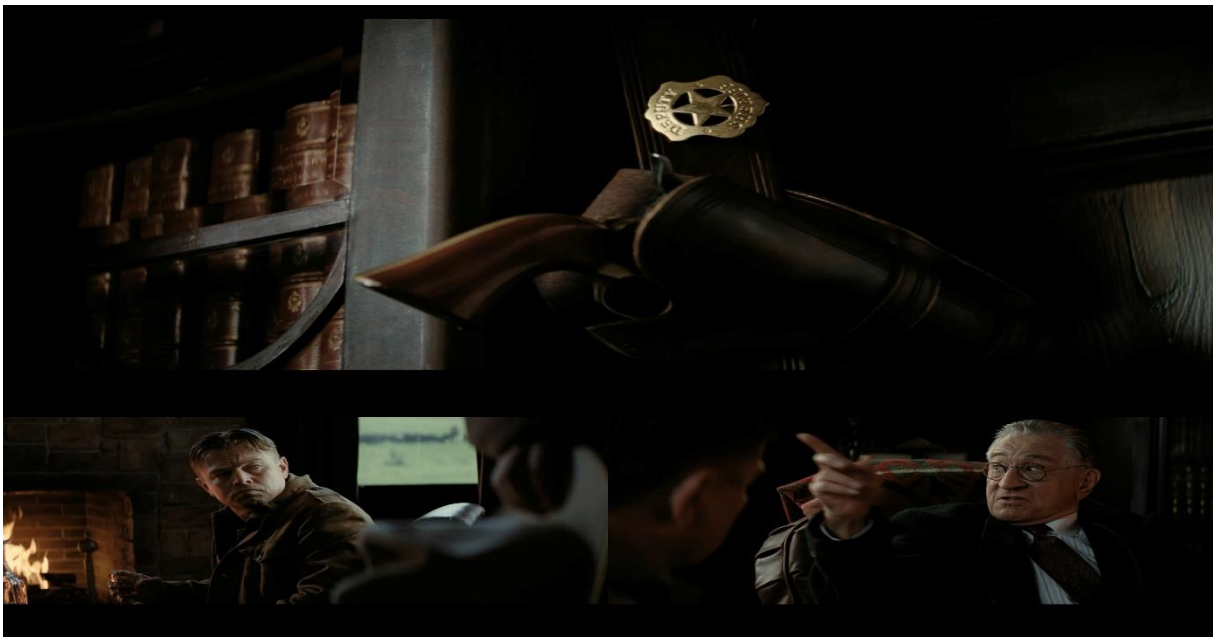

Figure 4. Hale establishes himself as the law early in the film

This resonates deeply with Scorsese's recurring theme of blurred boundaries between law and crime. Hale's admission that he is a reserve deputy sheriff, holding commissions under nearly all the local law enforcement, illustrates the symbiotic relationship between legal authority and criminal enterprise. His position within the law provides a veneer of respectability and a shield against scrutiny, even as he orchestrates crimes against the Osage. This duality reflects the interconnectedness of law and criminality that Scorsese critiques, where the legal system becomes complicit in perpetuating injustice rather than preventing it.

Hale's manipulation of his dual roles magnifies the moral ambiguity central to Scorsese's exploration of power structures. By cautioning Ernest not to attract attention with overt recklessness ("Don't get played out in the open with liquor or you'll cause trouble"), Hale reveals his strategy of maintaining control by operating under the guise of legitimacy. His role as a deputy sheriff allows him to wield both legal and extralegal power, showcasing how authority figures can exploit their positions to facilitate corruption while avoiding consequences.

This scene also emphasizes the suppression of individuality and autonomy within powerful systems, another hallmark of Scorsese's work. Ernest's deference to Hale and Byron's endorsement of Hale's advice reflect the hierarchical control Hale exerts over his family. Ernest's assurance that he "won't do stupid things" indicates his submission to Hale's authority and illustrates how larger systems (whether familial or institutional) consume individual agency to preserve their own dominance.

This dynamic is further reinforced in the depiction of the systemic collusion between settlers and institutions. The legal guardianship system, which ostensibly exists to "protect" the Osage, becomes a tool of oppression, granting settlers like Pitts Beaty legal control over Osage wealth. This institutionalized exploitation aligns with Cashmore's argument that crime is not an aberration but a reflection of governance, as the legal system facilitates rather than prevents the theft of Indigenous resources. The complicity of law enforcement and local authorities in the Osage murders blurs the line between protector and predator that creates a world where morality is subordinate to ambition and survival, much like the dynamics explored in Scorsese's *Goodfellas* or *The Departed*.

Scorsese's critique of individuality being consumed by larger institutions also resonates in *Killers of the Flower Moon*. The Osage, as individuals, are systematically stripped of their agency through layers of bureaucratic and social control. Mollie Kyle's interactions with her legal guardian and the societal pressures imposed by Hale's schemes illustrate how both legal systems and settler colonialism thrive on conformity and the suppression of autonomy. Mollie, despite her efforts to assert control over her life and family, becomes ensnared in a web of exploitation that prioritizes the uniformity of settler dominance over individual complexity. This reflects Scorsese's broader commentary on how institutions, whether criminal or legal, perpetuate cycles of oppression by reducing people to tools for maintaining power and control.

The governmental system of guardianship for the Osage Nation, as depicted in historical accounts, was rife with corruption and exploitation. It epitomized the systemic oppression faced by the Osage people during the early 20th century. Under this system, wealthy Osage individuals, often classified as "incompetent" by county courts, were assigned white guardians to manage their estates. While ostensibly designed to protect their interests, this arrangement became a legalized mechanism for larceny. Guardians exploited their wards' wealth, often enriching themselves at the expense of their wards' financial security and autonomy. As G. Edward Tinker described, guardianships were treated as a "profession," with individuals often controlling the finances of multiple Osage wards simultaneously, creating opportunities for widespread fraud (Burns 437).

The guardianship system allowed for egregious financial abuses, as evidenced by numerous documented cases. For instance, one attorney-guardian manipulated his ward's estate (valued at over $90,000 and generating annual payments of $7,000–$12,000) into a $20,000 debt while personally profiting $75,000 over five years (Burns 438). In another instance, a guardian purchased an automobile for $250 and resold it to his ward for $1,250 which demonstrates the routine nature of such exploitative transactions. These practices were often sanctioned, or at least tolerated, by local courts, which legitimized the corruption by granting guardians unchecked

authority over their wards' finances and even rewarding convicted exploiters with further guardianship roles.

The testimonies and investigations into the guardianship system underscore how deeply embedded these practices were within the broader legal and governmental frameworks. Courts were complicit in perpetuating this exploitation, often dismissing or failing to address glaring abuses. As a result, the guardianship system became a tool for economic oppression, systematically stripping Osage individuals of their wealth and autonomy under the guise of legal authority. This legalized exploitation highlights the intersection of systemic racism and colonial greed, where government-sanctioned structures were weaponized to deprive the Osage of their rightful resources.

These elements in *Killers of the Flower Moon* showcase the interconnectedness of law and crime which reinforces Scorsese's exploration of moral ambiguity and systemic corruption. By presenting crime as a reflection of legitimate power and legal systems as vehicles for exploitation, Scorsese prompts the audience to question the ethical foundation of governance and the societal structures that enable such violence and greed. This nuanced portrayal aligns with the thematic continuity in Scorsese's oeuvre, challenging viewers to reassess the binaries of morality and authority.

Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* exemplifies his recurring critique of the blurred boundaries between law and criminality. It uses the character of William "King" Hale and the systemic exploitation of the Osage people to expose the moral ambiguities of power. Hale's dual role as a respected community figure and orchestrator of heinous crimes reflects Scorsese's assertion that crime is often a mirror of legitimate authority, both driven by similar motivations for power and control. The legal guardianship system, intended to protect the Osage, becomes a legalized mechanism for theft, further augmenting how governance can perpetuate systemic exploitation rather than prevent it. This interplay between law and criminality highlights Scorsese's thematic exploration of the dehumanizing impact of institutional power, which thrives on conformity and suppresses individuality. Through these portrayals, Scorsese critiques the complicity of legal systems in perpetuating cycles of oppression. He invites audiences to reconsider the ethical foundations of societal authority.

Conclusion

Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* serves as a profound interrogation of the intersections between colonialism, systemic oppression, and moral ambiguity. It challenges the

audience to rethink entrenched ideas about power, governance, and authority. The film reveals how legal systems, often perceived as instruments of justice, are weaponized to perpetuate economic exploitation and cultural erasure, as seen through the guardianship system and the institutionalized greed targeting the Osage Nation. When he portrays figures like William "King" Hale, who seamlessly blend criminality and respectability, Scorsese dismantles the binary opposition between law and crime and in turn, exposes both as reflections of the same flawed power structures driven by greed and self-preservation.

Furthermore, the film critiques the loss of individuality under oppressive institutions, depicting how both colonial and legal frameworks thrive on conformity to maintain control. Through characters like Ernest and Mollie, Scorsese demonstrates how personal agency is systematically consumed by larger forces which renders individuals as tools in broader schemes of exploitation. This thematic thread underscores the dehumanizing nature of institutional systems, whether familial, legal, or colonial, that prioritize their own perpetuation over the dignity and autonomy of those they govern. Such dynamics resonate with broader cultural critiques and invites viewers to question how these systems continue to function in contemporary contexts.

Scorsese also highlights the duality of violence, both physical and symbolic, employed to sustain colonial dominance. The film juxtaposes explicit acts of brutality with subtler forms of cultural erasure, such as the loss of language and traditions. It illustrates how colonial oppression operates across multiple dimensions. In embedding colonial ideologies within personal relationships, such as Hale's exploitation of marriage as a financial strategy, Scorsese deepens how intimate and systemic forms of violence intertwine to uphold colonial hierarchies. This layered portrayal challenges the audience to recognize the pervasive and insidious nature of such oppression.

Finally, *Killers of the Flower Moon* underscores the cyclical and pervasive nature of exploitation and violence within colonial and institutional systems. It compels the audience to confront the uncomfortable truths about power and morality. It would be a further and also interesting study to explore Scorsese's cinematic portrayal of concepts like hybridity or mimicry by Bhabha. Through its layered narrative and moral complexity, the film invites reflection on not only historical injustices but also their enduring implications. It challenges viewers to question the structures that continue to shape societal dynamics.

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