

Tropes Have Fangs: Elsa Dutton, 1883, “Going Native”, Adaptive Whiteness and Trope Resilience

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Abstract

In Taylor Sheridan’s television miniseries *1883*, the origin story of his American neo-Western series *Yellowstone*, the voice-over narration is given by the central character, 18-year-old Elsa Dutton. Elsa is travelling with her family from Texas to Oregon on the wagon trail to the West along with migrants from Eastern Europe who have little idea of the country they have arrived in. Despite her death at the end of the series, the voice-over in the next edition of the Dutton family saga, *1923*, is also given by Elsa. Her role and her ongoing spectral presence are the mythical centre of these stories and of the *Yellowstone* series. In *1883*, she plays the daughter who takes advantage of the freedoms of the trail to get out from under her mother, Margaret Dutton’s, control to join the men herding the cattle, and to have two sexual liaisons, including one with a Native American, Sam. In *1923*, as a voice-over only, she plays the role of the ancestor whose grave marks the place in Montana where the Dutton family are fighting for their possession of the land. Interesting directorial and narrational questions arise in relation to the role and voice of Elsa when stories are told of a past in which dispossession from land was being carried out ruthlessly and systematically. While her character exercises enviable freedom for a woman of her time, by contrast her voice-over carries warnings of danger, destruction, hell and disaster for both series, captured in the words, “freedom has fangs”. This gaining of freedom for the settlers and great loss of freedom and autonomy for the Indigenous peoples is a complicated story for the director to manage. This article looks at the storytelling tropes activated in *1883* and shows how they work against intentions to tell an old story differently.

Keywords: *1883*; *1923*; Elsa Dutton; “going native”; Taylor Sheridan; trope resilience

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Introduction

Taylor Sheridan's television miniseries *1883* is the origin story of his American neo-Western television series *Yellowstone*, which tells of how the Duttons came to occupy the contested land in Montana which they farm as an empire in the present-day United States (US). In this prequel, reaching back into the late 19th century and the rush of white settlers seeking to grab free land in order to work it in territories west of the frontier line, the central character is Elsa Dutton (played by Isabel May), who has just turned 18 years old as the journey gets underway. The voice-over narration is given by her to direct viewers' thoughts to the bigger picture of what the small Dutton family, two ex-army officers and a host of naïve and unprepared migrants from Eastern Europe are doing in embarking on an epic journey by wagon from Texas to Oregon. We first encounter Elsa as a voice against a black screen, saying: "I remember the first time I saw it. Tried to find words to describe it. But I couldn't." Then we see her, lying on her side, eyes shut, her face fills the screen, and the words continue, as she begins to move, open her eyes and struggle to her feet. As she speaks, she collapses back to the ground, tears flow down her face, she pants, then raises herself:

Nothing had prepared me . . . no books, no teachers, not even my parents. I heard a thousand stories but none could describe this place. It must be witnessed to be understood. And yet . . . I've seen it, and understand it even less than before I first cast eyes on this place. Some call it the American Desert, others, the Great Plains. But those phrases were invented by professors at universities surrounded by the illusion of order and the fantasy of right and wrong. To know it, you must walk it. Bleed into its dirt. Drown in its rivers. Then its name becomes clear. It is hell, and there are demons everywhere.

As Elsa rises to her feet, we see a burning wagon, Native Americans on horses with weapons, and a man chasing a woman, knocking her down and scalping her. Elsa races to a fallen man to find his gun and is approached by one of the warriors who tells her "No!" She asks him, "Will you let me go?" He says no, he will sell her or kill her. She says: "You speak English, how can you do this?" He answers, "You speak English and your people do this." And so she pulls out the gun, shoots him and in turn is shot by an arrow through the abdomen. Nevertheless, she races after the warriors shooting wildly. And the voiceover says: "But if this is hell, and I'm in it then I must be a demon too. And I'm already dead."

That voiceover, with its epic language, introduces us to the land itself as savage, as hellish, as a place of death. But because the series introduction with its music forces us to abandon this moment, we realise that we have been given a foreshadowing of a point much later in the story when Elsa herself is in danger and angry enough to kill. When we encounter Elsa a little later in Episode one, she is full of wide-eyed expectation in pale blue dress and bonnet. She is on a train with her mother, Margaret Dutton (played by Faith Hill), young brother, aunt and cousin heading to Fort Worth to meet her father James Dutton (played by Tim McGraw), for the beginning of the journey to the West.

Elsa, with her unmissable straw-blond hair, has wandered off into a different class of coach where the windows are bigger so that she can see more of the countryside. She becomes the object of fascination of a man who starts a conversation with her, but is soon fetched by her mother who tells off both the man and Elsa for not knowing their places. Elsa is put back with her family, backchats her mother, is slapped by her aunt, but then manages to wander off again to look for her father who will be waiting for them on the platform. Standing on the balcony of the carriage, the voiceover says:

The air was different. The air at home is heavy, like a musky soup. Here it is light. With a strange scent of pollen and smoke, like burning flowers. It smelled wild. Untamed. It was beautiful.

This pattern of deep contrast between the early Elsa in both character and voice speaking of possibility and expectation, newness and glory, and the wise (and dead) narrator Elsa speaking of death and destruction is a feature throughout the episodes. Episode three encapsulates these two impulses:

Looking back, there were two journeys. One was filled with danger and death and despair, the other, adventure and wonder. I was on the latter. And I loved it.

By 1923, however, the words Elsa speaks from the grave are only of ruin:

Violence has always haunted this family. It followed us from the Scottish Highlands and the slums of Dublin. It ravaged us upon the coffin ships of Ireland. Stranded us on the beaches of New Jersey, devoured us upon the battlefields of Shiloh and Antietam. And it followed us here lurking beneath the pines and in the rivers. And where it doesn't follow, we hunt it down. We seek it.

Elsa Dutton

Elsa Dutton's character has immediate appeal. She is wilful, she is interested in everything, she is open to exploration, and she is unwilling to be controlled by her strong-willed mother with whom she has a complex relationship of envy and need. She has a devoted father who protects and believes in her. While these characteristics spark viewers' connection to her, she is also our vehicle into the adventure, the opening up horizons that a journey out of a city, out of civilisation, out of constrained femininity with its pre-determined future, will afford her. When finally, after a series of set-backs and problems, the wagon trail is formed and they set off, at the first overnight stop, Elsa remarks as she throws herself into a river in her underdress:

I wish I could freeze this moment. I would live in it forever . . . swimming in the possible while the mud of the real is stuck to the shore. We weren't poor. We weren't desperate. The road west is filled with failures . . . but failure isn't what drove him [her father]. It was a dream. And the dream is coming true.

This beginning has started off in ways with which viewers of the Western genre are very familiar. Against the backdrop of a truly spectacular landscape, we have also been given death by smallpox, traumatised soldiers in the aftermath of the civil war, hucksters, thieves and those who prey on the newly-arrived innocents. We are also, from the first, placed in the viewpoint of the white characters. This, Sheridan is telling us, is a white story, and it takes place in that moment in history when there are 38 incorporated states and the country under President Chester Arthur is determined to settle the Indian question and to open up all the land to cultivation and civilisation. Treaties previously made with the Indigenous peoples are being negated. Reformers have pressured the government to move from a military policy of subjugation to a more “enlightened” policy of assimilation and Native Americans are steadily losing their lands if they will not become farmers and cultivate crops (Hacker and Haines 2005). The railway line connecting the east to the centre to the northwest has been completed and wagon trails of settlers straggling across virgin land are about to be no more. The point in history that Sheridan chooses as the start of his story, is also the point at which the Native American population of the US was at its lowest level – reduced to about 237 000 people decimated by diseases, wars, the seizure of land, and forced abandonment of their cultures and languages (Hacker and Haines 2005, 17).

In 1883, it quickly becomes evident that there are just not enough skilled men to control the cattle, lead the wagons, fight off trouble and keep everyone safe and alive for the many months it will take to reach Oregon. This gives the rationale for Elsa’s freedom and experimentation. Her father, pulls her out of the wagon, gives her a horse, and makes her part of the team of cowboys seeing to the cattle. This immediately causes friction with her mother, who grudgingly consents to allowing her the freedom of the trail while reminding her constantly that as soon as they reach their destination, she will have to return to a female role which will ensure her marriageability. Once on horseback, Elsa sheds her dress for pants, starts a flirtation with a cowboy which results in a loud sexual liaison not far enough from camp to be discrete, and asserts her adult status. One night, while watching the cattle with her father, they have this conversation:

Elsa: Know what today is? [Laughs]

James: I don’t know. Thursday, maybe?

Narrator: Eighteen years ago on this day, Lee surrendered to Grant in the home of Wilmer Mclean in the village of Appomattox. A year later, I was born. It was Monday, April 9th, 1883. Monday was my birthday.

Elsa: [To her father]: Yeah, Thursday.¹

This recognition of her maturity which she marks, and tells us, but which bypasses both her parents, is reinforced when they are attacked by bandits and the cowboy she loves

1 By my calculation Elsa has just turned 17, but much of the plot depends on her being 18 and an adult.

is killed. Enraged she shoots and kills his killer. For a while she is sunk into sullen, speechless mourning. But this shifts when the party cross into Comanche land and need to negotiate their passage with two Comanche. One of them, Sam (played by Martin Sensmeier), asks her about her horse – an animal with hair almost the colour of Elsa's. Hearing that his name is "Lightning" – "cause that's how fast he is", a race is required to prove it. She wins the race and Sam says to her: "I think you are the lightning. Lightning with the yellow hair. [Gives the name in Comanche] That's what I will call you. Lightning Yellow Hair." Elsa's relationship with Sam develops fast. They have to find shelter during a tornado, and huddled with Sam against the wind, she starts to kiss him. Afterward when the tornado dissipates, James says to her: "I knew you'd make it . . . Well, now you can tell anybody who'll listen that you lived through hell." She answers: "It wasn't hell, Daddy. It was beautiful." After the storm, the cattle need to be found and the men realise that bandits have rounded them up. They go in search only to realise they are outnumbered by cattle thieves. Elsa tries to lure some of the bandits away so that the men can deal with the others, but she miscalculates and as she is about to be overtaken, Sam and his brother arrive and kill the three men chasing her. Elsa watches the brutal killing of the bandits, while narrating:

There is horror to every killing. Even when it's justified. Even when I killed, I was horrified. But watching Sam kill was like watching a lion hurl itself onto a deer. His fury was so magnificent, there was no time for horror. Not even for the men he killed. I questioned my mind. I wondered if I am the one who is dead and this is all a dream. I watched him ride away and decided I must be awake. I must be alive. Then I chased after him.

The visible signs of the relationship are clear to all in the wagon trail when Elsa starts to wear clothes which Sam has had made for her by two Comanche women: chaps that allow for better comfort on a horse; and a vest decorated in Comanche colours, a startling blue with yellow and red pieces embroidered on it. She also hunts a buffalo with Sam, and they eat part of its heart "to take its strength". They then return to camp with blood on their faces. Margaret tells James:

Ran off with that Comanche boy, killed a buffalo. Came back, her face covered in blood 'cause I guess they ate half of it in the field . . . She is feral. You always talked about how you'd raise our boys to be men and you started with her. When we get back to any form of civilization I'm gonna have to undo all of that.

The seriousness of the relationship becomes clear to her parents when Sam tames a wild horse to give to her father as a bride price:

James: What is this?

Sam: It's for you.

James: Why is it for me? [Speaking to Elsa] Are you aware of what he's asking?

Elsa: I'm aware. Take the horse, Daddy.

Margaret: Young lady, I will not allow this.

Elsa: You're not allowing it. I'm eighteen years old. I'm allowing it.

Narrator: I understood my mother's worry. My choices make no sense in her world, where customs and prejudice rule, where law cannot reach. There will be customs and prejudice here too, I'm sure. But they were born of this world and belong in it. To import the traditions of the place you fled, the place that failed you, is to condemn the place you seek with the same failures.

Regardless of her relationship with Sam, Elsa is persuaded to leave Comanche land and to press on with the family towards Oregon. But Sam has told her: "Everything you see and everything you saw yesterday is my home. You're always welcome in it, Lightning with the Yellow Hair. It's your home too, now." And she promises to return once her family is settled. Things unravel fast. As they journey, they come upon a group of Lakota women and children who have been massacred.² The men set off to find the murderers and while they are gone the Lakota men return and assume that the Dutton wagon train is responsible. Elsa tries her trick again of depending on her very fast horse to lure the attackers away from the wagons, but this time she is not fast enough and no one comes to her aid. The scene encountered at the beginning of 1883 plays out. She is shot through the liver with an arrow dipped in manure. But she shouts out the only Comanche words she has learned ("I love you", "Lightning Yellow Hair") to the attackers and, surprised, they stop to take notice and find out from her that others are responsible for the massacre. They stop the attack. Frantic efforts are made to save Elsa but there is no medical help not even in a nearby fort. As the days go by it becomes clear she is dying. Her father makes a promise to her mother who cannot bear the thought of a grave left back on the trail that will not be visited. He says:

Our wagon drive is over. Where we bury her is where we stay. That is our home. Not here. Not in this place. No. Not in this place. I will find the place. By God, I will find a place.

He sets off with deathly ill Elsa on horseback to find it. They then encounter a group of Crow people who recognise that Elsa is about to die and their leader Spotted Eagle (played by Graham Greene)³ tells James:

2 "Lakota" and "Dakota" have the same name (meaning "allies" or "friends") in different dialects for a conglomeration of the nations that occupied the great plains.

3 Greene is a First Nations Canadian and also appeared in *Dances with Wolves* as Kicking Bird, the tribe's holy man who befriends John Dunbar (played by Kevin Costner) and eases his way into the Native American community. Greene was nominated for an Oscar for his role.

Spotted Eagle: I know a place for you. You go through that pass then you follow the river south. I used to hunt that valley as a boy. The winters are cruel, but the summers are rich and a man who plans can thrive. And you look like a man who plans.

James: What's the valley called?

Spotted Eagle: I don't know the word in your language, but it's, uh . . . when you die, you go there.

James: Heaven.

Spotted Eagle: No, there's another word, it's not . . .

James: Paradise.

Spotted Eagle: Yes, Paradise. Good name. But know this: that in seven generations my people will rise up, and take it back from you.

James: In seven generations you can have it.

Spotted Eagle: Someday my family might seek to hunt that valley and if they do, you remember me. And you let them.

So, in this way, Elsa's grave site is given freely but with a condition made and agreed to by her father. This condition and assent overshadows *1923* and *Yellowstone*. The end for Elsa of the yellow hair is a heaven

filled with good horses and open plains and wild cattle and a man who loves me. Race ya. [Laughs] It is always sunrise in my world. And there are no storms. I am the only lightning. I know death now. I've seen it. It had no fangs. It smiled at me. And it was beautiful.

The Dead Narrator Device

Although *1883* starts with the event that causes Elsa's death and even though the words she narrates at that point are "And I'm already dead", the viewers either do not believe it or are unsure of what to believe. Unlike Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002), which is much quoted as an exemplar for its use of a dead narrator in which it is unmistakably clear that the central character is speaking with a dead mouth (Alber 2020, 43), the fact that Elsa immediately rises to her feet, puts the viewers into a suspended state of doubtfulness about her survival until the last 10 minutes of the series. Brilliant plot-making and deflection aside, there are some interesting things to be explored about the dead narrator device. In this case, Elsa, the character who embraced everything – beautiful and demonic – has lived and died because of her single-minded intention to explore, to experience and to know for herself. The burst of life that was Elsa ("What drives Elsa?" Margaret muses and then answers, "the wind.") goes out

without acrimony, without guilt, without recrimination, in peace. But the spectral voice-over in both *1883* and *1923* speaks another Elsa, the dead one, long in the grave, watching the fifth and sixth generations of Duttons on the land freely given for her burial. Does this Elsa know of the pact made by James and Spotted Eagle? Is the haunting by this sentient dead voice about wresting the land and from the Native Americans with terrible aggression?

Going Native, or Playing Indian

The makers of *1883* have made much of their commitment to portray the Native Nations of the late 19th century in the US with authenticity. Care was taken to get the languages correct; to attend to the specificities of dress and weapons; to hire Native American actors for those parts; and to distinguish Comanche from Crow from Lakota. But nevertheless, questions must be asked about taking the central character and allowing her to “go native” or in the words of Deloria (2022) to “play Indian”. It is satisfying to a female, white viewer to have this character throw off the tight bonds of femininity, whiteness and 19th century civility and civilisation and open themselves to the possibility of being affected by a country not quite tamed, by a culture that is other. It reminds us with a pang of deep regret that the encounters between Europeans and Indigenous peoples might have gone differently had superiority been replaced with curiosity. To go back in time to imagine a moment of openness and possibility exemplified by a character who is full of life and expectation is a narrational technique that is not to be discounted because it questions whether the past that was laid down was inevitable.

However, regardless of how engaging Elsa is, she stands within literary, cinematic and genre tropes that have been activated for a very long time in telling the story of the American West. Deloria (2022, xiv) notes of the subjects who animated the writing of his own book, *Playing Indian*, that they are “colonisers and immigrants, settlers struggling to make sense of their place on land that is, and will always be, haunted and contested”:

Playing Indian is simultaneously a swaggering assertion of power and a furtive admission of uncertainty. That contradictory duality is both its undoing – Indian play can solve none of the problems of American settler identity – and the source of its perpetuity: it is an itch that Americans never fail to scratch.

Deloria (2022, xiii), a member of the Dakota Nation,⁴ sees the white Americans’ “Indian fetish” in the Boston Tea Party; the American Revolution; “Red Man” fraternal orders; Lewis Henry Morgan’s literary society; the Woodcraft Indians, Camp Fire Girls, Boy Scouts, YMCA Indian Guides; “and hippies and New Agers of the Indian-inflected countercultures of the late twentieth century”. Using the words of Slotkin (1973), who wrote the trilogy *Regeneration through Violence*, Deloria (2022, xi) sums up the

4 Deloria calls himself Dakota, so I have followed that usage.

impulse of the settlers and colonisers: “Become the Indian to kill the Indian/Kill the Indian and then become the Indian.” This is a logic of elimination married to a logic of assimilation, Deloria argues. It is evident to white Americans that they can never be indigenous, so they take on aspects of nativeness in order to acquire indigeneity. The deep ambivalence of needing the accoutrements of Indianness alongside the need to remove the barriers to possession of the land, the Native Nations themselves, sits at the heart of this relationship. Huhndorf (2001, 3) goes further, in that she recognises that American settler whiteness, despite its ambivalence and its desire for real indigeneity, still has as its driving force “the regeneration of racial whiteness and European-American society”.

Over the last century, going native has become a cherished American tradition, an important – even necessary – means of defining European-American identities and histories. In its various forms, going native articulates and attempts to resolve widespread ambivalence about modernity as well as anxieties about the terrible violence marking the nation’s origins. (Huhndorf 2001, 2)

Unlike Deloria, who focuses his attention on societies and performances – such as the Boston Tea Party – which have taken on Indianness (e.g., dress, names, behaviours), Huhndorf (2001) uses literary texts and films (such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) whose main character John Dunbar is played by Kevin Costner who also plays John Dutton, the patriarch of *Yellowstone*), to show that the desire to become indigenous for white settler Americans is evident too in their cultural products. Huhndorf is critical of many cultural forms which take as their central vehicle a white character sympathetic to Native Americans, or even characters like Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves*, a disillusioned soldier who moves into and becomes part of an Indian community. Huhndorf (2001, 5) says that ultimately they reinforce the still deeply-held belief that “real Indians were destined to disappear, and European Americans are the proper heirs of ‘Indianness’ as well as the land and resources of the conquered Natives”. In addition, films like this make another complex move; they allow the white central character to cast a critical eye on the degeneracy and violence of European cultures, a factor strongly evident in *1883*, in which almost every white character not part of the wagon trail is a thief, a rapist, or a murderer. By going native, Huhndorf suggests, the authenticity and purity of a culture attuned to the land out of which it arose, it is hoped, can be taken on by those who settle it.

Deloria (2022, 2) remarks that those who had abandoned European countries were desperate to make themselves anew with a new identity that rejected “an older European consciousness”. Whatever the deep motivation, native lives are still being made “subservient to the needs of the colonizing culture” (Huhndorf 2001, 5). Furthermore, the appalling viciousness of the annihilation of Native Nations and their cultures is downplayed so that a proper political, public reckoning with the events, attitudes and atrocities that made the US is endlessly delayed:

Acknowledging this terrible past contests the imaginary unity of America and undermines the ideal of a free and democratic nation. It also raises a series of challenging, perhaps unthinkable, questions about the defensibility of European-American political dominance, past and present, and even the legitimacy of European Americans' presence on the continent. Moreover, the conquest of Native America, which took hundreds of years to complete, cannot be dismissed as an anomaly. Rather, it is the foundational event in American history. As such, it has been built into the nation's narratives, though in distorted and obfuscatory ways. (Huhndorf 2001, 11)

The fact that even now in the 21st century, and even with a wider consciousness of the injustices of the past, provoked by resistance movements, that these stories continue to be told, is evidence, according to both Deloria and Huhndorf that the "obsession" or the "itch" has not been satisfied. Stafford (2005, 162–163), writing from New Zealand, and focusing on early romance literature which is set in glorious landscapes, pays attention to the obsessive, reiterative storytelling of the settler and its phases of development:

firstly, the incorporation of indigenous subject-matter – mythology, history, custom, literary forms – in settler narratives. The indigene is fashioned as a subject for artistic expression at the very moment when he is being separated off from the modern and excluded from the modern nation ... The settler owns the stories of the indigene, because the indigene is figured as no longer present to contest ownership. Secondly, settler narratives depict the settler, in the now empty and available landscape, as taking on the characteristics of the (now absent) indigene. The characteristics constitute a validation of settler possession and indigenous dispossession.

This underscores the insights of both Deloria and Huhndorf and allows us to see that the creation of the Elsa character activates old, deep, and maybe even unconscious, storytelling devices which even the most aware of film directors may not have entire control over. But what about the Indigenous characters who are the other part of this equation of settlement and aspirations to indigenisation?

Being Native, Indigenous Character Tropes

Stafford (2005, 169) also remarks that these processes of story-making construct the indigene (in her case the Maori), as "implicitly spiritualised". Even an Indigenous people's very pragmatic knowledge of the land is made mystical via indigenous characters in settler stories, and in this way, the land itself can be made mythical, a "fantastic alternative to the present" (Stafford 2005, 170). This is an important insight. If I return to the Indigenous characters in *1883* who are given names and dialogue, there are less than a handful.⁵ Sam, who appears at the point when Elsa is sunk in misery and

5 *1923*, which continues the story of the Duttons after the death of both James and Margaret, has a woven-in storyline of a young Native American woman, Teonna Rainwater, who is incarcerated in a Catholic school during the years of forced assimilation and is horribly abused. She refuses to assimilate and after killing her torturer, she escapes and after an arduous journey finds her father.

grief, is a plot device to reactivate her energy and zest for life by challenging her to a race. He also appears when she is in danger to rescue her, seemingly arriving from nowhere to butcher the men trying to kill her. He also gives her magical words – “I love you” and “Lightning Yellow Hair” in *Comanche* – which she uses almost as a spell to stop the attack on the Dutton party after she has been shot. Spotted Eagle appears at the point in the series when Elsa is dying. His family helps bring down her fever by putting her into the cold water of a river so that she can travel, and then he points out the place where James can bury her. Despite viewer engagement with both Sam and Spotted Eagle as characters, and despite the dignity, dialogue and agency accorded to them by the director, there is also no doubt that they operate within the trope of the mystical appearance by the highly-spiritual native at the right time with the right words, which has been activated by generations of filmmakers. This trope also allows such film characters to continue to be ethereal, of no great substance, to be spirit, but not present in substantial form, in great numbers, with names, demanding justice. As Faris (1994, 189) notes, “the pleasures of contact with the primitive world”, allow for us to fantasise about “simpler lives”, “sexual freedoms” and “mysterious spiritualities”. These pleasures are at play for directors, actors and viewers in the telling of stories like *1883*.

The series *1883* is suffused with violence and the accounting for violence dominates Elsa’s narration through this series and into the next. The European settlers of this series fall into two camps: the reprehensible, who use violence to get what they want and in doing so cause mayhem and destruction; and the honourable, who use violence as defence and to put to rights what has been made wrong. Elsa’s narration, though, implies that violence not only happens to the Dutton family, but having become habituated to violence, they also seek it out. This binary understanding which applies to white settlers, becomes more fixed when applied to the Indigenous characters. Goldie (1989, 86), surveying the image of Indigenous peoples across settler texts from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, observes: “Violence is yet one more of the standard commodities through which the indigene as imaginative textual creation is valorised”. In Elsa’s narration about Sam’s killing of her pursuers there is an uncomfortable valorising of a savagery which goes beyond defence. But Elsa declares herself to find this display “magnificent”. It is also alluring and she chases after him. When Elsa encounters the Lakota warriors hunting the killers of their women and children, she is able to stop them by telling an English-speaking warrior that they are mistaken about the identities of the killers. Immediately the attack is called off, implying an honour and a control of violence, which is endemic to people who know and use violence with skill. Goldie (1989, 15) calls this “the attraction and repulsion . . . of the demonic violence of the fiendish warrior”.

Goldie (1989, 15) also reminds us that the other “commodity” which appears to be “standard in the ‘economy’ created by the semiotic field of the indigene in Australian,

Viewers await the second series of *1923* to find out what becomes of this character and what connection there is to the Dutton story.

Canadian, and New Zealand literatures [is] sex". However, in *1883*, we are far removed from the standard trope of the temptation the Indigenous woman poses to the civilised white man, which might by this point have been narrativised to death. With the sensibilities of the current era, and the massive desire among vocal female audiences for sexually aware, agentic and adept female characters, Sheridan gives us a young woman who pursues her sexual desires, first with a white man and then with a Native American man, Sam. As the object of Elsa's attentions, Sam is both capable and honourable. Nevertheless, despite the shift, the Indigenous character is still the sexual object in the narrative and there is a suggestion that the display of his "magnificent" fury in killing has sexual connotations, so that these two characteristics remain firmly entwined. Summing up the "commodities" that Goldie (1989, 17) names as part of the semiotic treatment of Indigenous characters are sex, violence, orality, mysticism and the prehistoric, which she calls the "circular economy within and without the semiotic field of the indigene". It is clear from a reading of *1883* that these features still form part of the story-telling bag of tricks for even the most politically – and historically – aware scriptwriters and directors.

Semiotic Control

Sheridan has embraced an enlightened approach to respecting the cultures, languages, dress and customs of Native Americans, by saying:

I don't think there is a more misrepresented group in American cinema than the Native American. And what little I can do to correct that historical perspective in fiction, I'm going to do.⁶

However, the fact is that the "semiotic control" of the story, which according to Goldie (1989, 5), was "awarded" to the invaders, remains a central problem in *1883*. The *Yellowstone* stories are about white characters and made for white audiences with Native Americans playing subordinate roles and Native American audiences eavesdropping. The attempt to take a central character in *1883* and play with a flirtation with nativeness, does not undo centuries of trope-making and narrational devices which are intrinsically attached to the power of semiotic control that comes with centuries of settler whiteness and the making of stories for white settlers. Thus far, even respect for natives and women on the part of scriptwriters and directors has not yet achieved a break with the conventions which are integral to storytelling; such as the much used device of the death of a woman to drive the plot.⁷ Tropes – or what Goldie (1989, 17) calls "commodities" – operate as rhetorical devices to deliver meaning within cultural products but they are also rooted in underlying cultures. Filmmaking is replete with tropes, with entire

⁶ See "The Native Americans of *1883*": <https://youtube/85RQhsVJJ2s>

⁷ This is an interesting development in filmmaking by Indigenous writers and directors. Series like *Reservation Dogs* (2021) and *Trickster* (2020), make a start in addressing where semiotic control lies, but they work among and against centuries of playing native and being native in already-existing stories told.

websites⁸ dedicated to categorising the plethora of tropes that are repeated in films and assigning them to genres. Handbooks on filmmaking (e.g. Monaco 2000; Rizzo 2005) teach filmmakers how to successfully incorporate existing tropes into storytelling. Even YouTube videos give advice on plot tropes, dialogue tropes, character tropes and imagery tropes.⁹ Philosophers of “trope theory” insist that all of human communication, even the most informational, is rooted in trope-making, or trope-using (Burkhardt and Nerlich 2010; Maurin 2002). Tropes inescapably have ideological intentions (White 1978; 2014) and truth-making capacities (Maurin 2002, 10). They are flexible and adaptable, and combine both abstract and particular, and simple and complex elements (Maurin 2002, 10). A trope is a mechanism or “communicative shorthand” to deliver a complex message (Krieger 2012, 399–401). Tropes might be genre-specific, or medium-specific or work across mediums and genres, but they are always attached to underlying cultural convictions about appropriate and inappropriate behaviours, and therefore judgements, and ideas about how the world is or should be. Goldie’s (1989, 17) use of the word “commodities” might, therefore, be a more useful term to describe these rhetorical devices used in film but which have high-value stakes in the non-film world, not least monetarily.

Resilient Tropes and Adaptive Whiteness

In her work on challenging imbedded white behaviours in education, Berlak (2002, 51) leans on an insight gleaned from Wilson (2002) about the adaptive unconscious – a part of the mind that thinks, “sets goals, interprets and evaluates evidence and influences judgements, conscious feelings and behaviour”. In trying to account for persistent racist behaviours that arise among student teachers who have been thoroughly educated about racism in the classroom, Berlak (2002) resorts to the theory of the adaptive unconscious to explain why conscientised people behave contrary to their acquired knowledge. This allows her to explain and account for why actual behaviours can be at variance with conscious intentions. In Gladwell’s (2004, 34) explanation of the adaptive unconscious, this facility is the short-hand, pattern-making capacity of the brain based on “thin slices” of information. Considering the functions and functionality of tropes, we could conclude that the adaptive unconscious is the place where tropes are made, and its pattern-making power lends power to tropes which are patterned, meaning conveyors.

So, when Sheridan speaks of according dignity and agency to Indigenous characters and then puts words in Elsa’s mouth such as these: “To import the traditions of the place you fled, the place that failed you, is to condemn the place you seek with the same failures”, he is consciously challenging the ancient narrative of the inevitability of the superior race inheriting the lands and cultures of the inferior. These words lay blame for disaster and death on the shoulders of those who were the bearers of civilisation with

8 See, for example: <https://tvtropes.org>

9 See “Tropes Explained: Types of Tropes and the Art of Subverting Them”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILcM9mh9sic>

their inflexible political, cultural and religious attitudes. In Ferguson's (2014, 1101) words, this is a whiteness that has humility and introspection, it has realised that "it is not alone in the world, it learned to acknowledge the presence of particularities and acknowledge itself as a particularity as well". But this conscientised storytelling is counteracted by the tropes activated by the adaptive unconscious which too is operating in filmmaking. It is also undone by the denial – or deferral – within *1923* and the many seasons of the *Yellowstone* series to fulfil the right and claim that "In seven generations my people will rise up, and take it [the land] back from you", and the answer, "In seven generations, you can have it". As Ferguson (2014, 1101) comments: "Whiteness has yet to demand the one thing required of genuine self-criticism – redistribution." Enlightened whiteness is adaptive and works from within the adaptive unconscious. When placed as a layer on top of an old genre, it reinscribes the baseline ambivalence and irresolution about being white in another's land. As Ferguson (2014, 1106) says, it is a whiteness that is "kinder and gentler but no less paradoxical". And in storytelling, it activates tropes that are very resilient in the face of change. If I may be allowed a modification of Elsa's script: tropes have fangs. And they can poison the most noble of film-making intentions.

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