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Killers of the Flower Moon: Removing Anna from the “Fixity” Umbrella

Moukli Brayan’s “Perpetuating Fixity: An Analysis of Osage Representation and the Settlers in *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023)” takes a highly critical stance against Anna’s characterization, especially in regards to her alcoholism. Its argument regarding her role as the “Sexualized Maiden” stereotype employs poignant analysis of the “voyeuristic gaze” within the film, but entirely neglects its dynamic with the characterization of the settlers through their gazes, both literal and figurative (Brayan 200). The camera’s leveraging of visual dominance within the sequence, often in the favor of Anna, allows her resilience to be what lingers over the sequence, rather than her sexualization. Privileging Byron’s literal male gaze over women alongside the use of the camera as a secondary, voyeuristic gaze works alongside Anna’s characterization to create an image of the settler that is simultaneously predatory and passive. Pulling these complexities from a scene creates a more complete picture of Osage women within *Killers of the Flower Moon*, rather than relying on character trope to define character agency.

Brayan’s primary argument centers around criticisms of the film’s settler-colonial perspective through white settler figures Ernest Burkheart and William Hale, claiming that this position “confines [the Osage] to the role of passive, background figures” (Brayan 297). Though there is merit to an analysis of the perspective and its shifts throughout the film, the disparity in screen time between the settlers and the Osage does not entirely diminish their individual agencies. Anna, Ernest’s Osage sister-in-law, stays consistently active in both defense of herself and other women despite her little screen time. Brayan focuses on the unsavory elements of her personality to build a character analysis for Anna as a combination of “the drunken Indian and the sexualized Maiden” stereotypes, perpetuating the very “fixity” of Indigenous representation in Hollywood cinema their analysis claims to avoid (Brayan 200, 197).

A confrontation scene between Anna and Byron Burkheart illustrates her active, assertive personality alongside the differences in her active, female gaze and the other passive, male gazes within the scene. Brayan classifies this gaze with the terms “racist, voyeuristic gaze” and “settler-colonial gaze” (Brayan 200). Without working definitions of Brayan’s terms, the following analysis will equate the male, settler-colonial gaze with aspects of Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” as coined in her “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. Mulvey identifies both the literal gazes of men within a scene and the metaphorical gaze of the camera as active components to the sexualization of a female character. The scene in question opens with Anna staggering across the room to sit in Byron’s lap where two other men gaze in at her, making her the center point of a metaphorical “gazing” triangle. Byron eventually shoves Anna to her feet as a result of her aggressive



flirting, seemingly trying to intimidate her. Though she was made an object of sex, both by the presence of three voyeurs—the two men gazing at her plus the gaze of the camera—and her own flirting, they certainly do not confine her to a passive role.

Despite being at the tip of this threatening “gaze” triangle, Anna refuses to be passivized. Anna is not sexualized by the camera in any way, but rather by her own actions as a means of fishing for drinks to satiate her alcoholism. Mulvey explores the camera as a scopophilic voyeur when it features a woman’s “fragmented body” through close-ups of legs, lips, and other body parts (Mulvey 62). What sexualizes Anna throughout the scene is not the camera, but rather her own body language and dialogue. Up until the point where Byron refuses her another drink, Anna’s flirting and sexualization is entirely self-driven and unsupported by the focus of the camera. Anna stays, relatively consistently, framed in medium to medium close up shots. If anything, the shaky, handheld camera adjacent movements humanize her by taking on the same disorienting, intoxicated qualities of her mannerisms. The camera emphasizes her inability to consent through this intoxication, rather than inviting the audience to gaze at her body. Boiling Anna down to “the drunken Indian and the sexualized Maiden”

enforces unnecessary, binary stereotypes on a fundamentally active, complex character (Brayan 200).

Anna's active gaze, contrary to the "active/male and passive/female" dichotomy outlined by Mulvey, builds on her complexity by carving out agency from a scene that fights to swallow her whole (Mulvey 62). Byron and the other men in the sequence use their gazes either alone, or as accessories to predatory, disturbing comments that all culminate in Byron's defeat. His first comment—the thought that Anna "seems" to open her legs to any man—ends in a

slap from Anna. Her gaze, angry and defiant, is never just a gaze, but a precursor to her actions. Even when Ernest restrains her and pulls her offscreen for this, Anna still manages to stay in an active



role by becoming the foreshadowing voice in her loud remark about Ernest being "no different" from the other men in the room. Brayan argues that Anna's alcoholism comprises her entire character, shackling her to the alcoholic stereotype and barring her from ever "develop[ing] into a 'real' person" (Brayan 200). What Brayan neglects to address is Anna's ruthless defense of herself, even when looked down upon for it by her sisters and the men now married into her family. She is, to Brayan, easily summarized by white settlers within the film as "a drunken 'squaw'" and "a sexually aggressive Indian woman" (Brayan 200). Focusing on this element of her character entirely and defining her through the language of the colonizers obscures the undeniable strength of her agency.

Even when confined to the "role of [a] passive, background figure", Anna's agency shines through in both her active gazing and following actions. Within the same sequence, Byron enacts



his gaze on a young girl at the table, much in the same way he had Anna. He approaches her, gazing at her backside from the left side of the frame. The camera does not move to fragment her body and turn the viewer into a spectator, but rather holds on a nearly full shot of Byron, the gazer, and the subject of his gaze. He then moves closer to the girl and calls her pretty, slipping a hand around her waist as Anna re-enters the frame as a literal background figure, standing in the same area of the frame Byron once stood. The camera cuts to her



reaction—her gaze—and back to Byron, all the while holding Anna's gaze as a prominent background feature. Her gaze is far from passive, even when she exists as a background figure. The aggression in her expression is displayed plainly, and Byron does not touch the girl without Anna's visible, powerful presence. Just as she had when he sexualized her, Anna follows her gaze with action and attempts to pull Byron away from the girl. Brayan's critiques of an indigenous narrative forced through a settler-colonial perspective are fascinating, valuable parts of the film's analysis, but this critique, as it is presented within their piece, does not capture the full picture of Anna's portrayal.

Anna's character, though not representative of all Osage characterization within the film, begins to unpack the flattening aspects of Brayan's argument through her persistent, tenacious gaze and the unapologetic actions that follow. The camera often features both her gaze and the surrounding male gazes in competition with each other, cementing Anna as an active participant in her own narrative rather than a piece of set dressing. Brayan's critique, flawed as it may be, prompts an interesting question for the introspective viewer—is there a place in the settler-colonial narrative for the colonizer's perspective? Elevating the question beyond the simple "no" Brayan appears to answer it with allows *Killers of the Flower Moon* to serve as grounds for important discourse on the continued impact of settler colonial traumas on marginalized, indigenous communities rather than enforcing an unnecessary analytical dead end into a rich, complex narrative.

Works Cited

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