

TAYLOR SHERIDAN IS SORRY BUT HIS CHARACTERS ARE NOT: THE MESSINESS OF CATEGORIZING CONSERVATIVE TELEVISION

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Taylor Sheridan played minor roles as an actor for thirty years before finding success as a writer with what he has termed his “American frontier trilogy”: *Sicario* (Denis Villeneuve, 2015), *Hell or High Water* (David Mackenzie, 2016), and *Wind River* (Taylor Sheridan, 2017).¹ His work has many of the conventions of the Western, such as the settler colonialist logic of the “frontier,” the landscape as both sublime and treacherous, conflicts between cowboys and Native Americans, evil banks and other eastern corporate entities threatening the (white) people who have made their home there, and extended gunfights and pursuits.² Above all, Westerns idealize the violently capable male cowboy and mourn the mythical lost past he embodies. Not every Western must be set in the past, but through the cowboy, they do focus on a mythical lost past. Sheridan’s successful television series *Yellowstone* (Taylor Sheridan, 2018–) and the limited series *1883* (2021–22), its prequel, both place idealized and mournful white cowboys at the center of their narratives.

After *Yellowstone* again failed to receive Emmy nominations in 2022, some in the conservative press claimed that this was an example of “coastal elites” failing to award the most popular scripted show on television.³ Such facile logic ignores not only the idiosyncrasies present in any competition, but also issues of genre, the current television landscape, and the industry’s tendency to simply repeat nominations of favored performers. *Yellowstone*’s John Dutton (Kevin Costner) has things in common with the antihero protagonists popular in complex television, but there are many reasons for the series’s lack of nominations other than its allegedly being “red-state television”—referring to both its location and the presumed audience demographics.⁴ Essentially, it is a prime-time soap, a genre that has never

received much love from the television academies; thus, blaming the lack of nominations on an imagined industry resistance to conservative media is specious. Moreover, as some critics have noted, that interpretation ignores aspects of Sheridan’s work that do not fit neatly into contemporary conservative politics or that, perhaps more accurately, pepper the privileging of white masculinity at the center of traditional Westerns with problematic correctives to racist and settler colonialist logic.⁵

Some conservative media are plain to see, such as Fox News and other news services explicitly invested in advancing conservative politicians and projects. Dinesh D’Souza’s documentaries transparently target progressives and Democrats.⁶ Pinnacle Peak Pictures/Pure Flix has produced and distributed films focused on “family, inspirational entertainment,” some of which reproduce conservative talking points.⁷ Its *Unplanned* (Cary Solomon and Chuck Konzelman, 2019) is an anti-Planned Parenthood and antiabortion film. Their most successful franchise, *God’s Not Dead* (2014–21), had grossed over \$100 million by 2021 and focuses on Christians who profess a belief in Jesus and are persecuted by such villains as a philosophy professor, the courts, and school boards.⁸

Persecution of white US citizens may be the conceptual framework that most marks *Yellowstone* as conservative. As Lisa Black, the author of *Picturing Indians: Native Americans in Film, 1941–1960*, argues, it privileges a settler colonial narrative of history through a noble white family simply trying to keep their land and encourages a narrative in which Native Americans should not be seen as any different from white settlers because they also want land and power. It also demonstrates Sheridan’s fetish for brutalizing Native female characters.⁹ For Black, it is no accident that Kevin Costner stars in the series, as his casting harks back to the purported sympathetic treatment of Native Americans in his *Dances with Wolves* (1990), albeit a sympathy deployed through displacing them with a white man “playing Indian.”

Film Quarterly, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 78–82. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2022.76.2.78



Patriarch John Dutton (Kevin Costner) flanked by his family in *Yellowstone*.

Sheridan nevertheless does seem to be doing something different here, even if he operates in a clear genealogy of telling stories of white oppression to demonstrate solidarity across difference. Costner's Dunbar in *Dances* is written as a moral hero, whereas the Duttons are despicable people. John Dutton brands his workers and kills them if they try to leave. Religion is significant in the series only when Dutton has a minister convince a devout parishioner to lie to cover up a murder committed by Dutton's youngest son. Beth Dutton (Kelly Reilly) is a sexually assertive alcoholic who is nasty to almost everyone but particularly to sexist men. Reilly's scenery-chewing performance is incredibly entertaining and about as far from representing the kind of femininity trumpeted as ideal by conservatives as any attractive, white, heterosexual woman's could be. Of course, the Duttons' behavior is not totally out of keeping with the history of the Western antihero that has shaped the ethos of many action films, noirs, and prestige dramas. If the show models conservative values, they are values similar to those of Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990), in which moral bankruptcy to preserve family and property takes precedence—even if it ultimately destroys

the family. Coppola's *Godfather* films undoubtedly model conservatism, yet the fans of those films are not necessarily marked by that ideology.

Numerous scholars have complicated the idea that the Western is inherently conservative, yet the very concept involves a framing of US history and place that disavows the personhood and sovereignty of Native Americans.¹⁰ The genre has, however, had a slow creep toward acknowledging discrimination for decades (even in the silent era).¹¹ When Westerns had a brief resurgence on television in the 1990s following the success of Simon Wincer's miniseries *Lonesome Dove* (CBS, 1989), many series updated the Western with acknowledgments of discrimination against Native Americans, inclusion of African Americans, and more feminist representations of women. *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993–98), *The Young Riders* (1989–92), *Paradise* (1988–91), and *The Magnificent Seven* (1998–2000) all addressed discrimination; *Dr. Quinn*, in particular, took a fairly didactic approach to addressing discrimination and social issues on a regular basis—a mark of its family-friendly approach.¹²

Such series share an affective logic closer to *Dances with Wolves*. In the diegetic logic of *Yellowstone* and some

of Sheridan's other works, the characters are unapologetic, even as Sheridan and his works offer recognition of injury as reparative. The alleged realism of the white protagonists is marked by their acknowledgment of discrimination, which they treat as lacking any possible redress. *Yellowstone*'s John Dutton insists: "This is America. We don't share land here." He and his ancestor in 1883 acknowledge the tribal rights to the land they claim but have no intention of addressing historical injustices or returning the land. In *Hell or High Water*, Jeff Bridges's Texas Ranger calls his partner a "half-breed," jokes about how much "Injuns like the bottle," and says that "Indians aren't supposed to feel sorry for cowboys—it's the other way around." But this casual racism is less important in the narrative logic of the film than his mourning over his partner's death and his desire to for vengeance (which does not takes place by the end, even if he suggests there may be a reckoning later). Sheridan suggests that it is often the wrongness of his protagonists that makes them so right.

In a moment in which conservatives are passing legislation to ban critical race theory and make educating children about a history of discrimination illegal, some of Sheridan's content has nonetheless become too progressive for certain *Yellowstone* fans.¹³ The show has had white supremacists as antagonists, critiqued racial profiling, and included content that fans described as "woke." Sheridan does seem to model a kind of ineffectual politics of recognition of Native loss of sovereignty. In *Hell or High Water*, a mixed Mexican and

Native American character looks out at the land in Texas and describes it as once having belonged to his people until it was taken by white people, who were now in turn having their land taken by the banks. In *Yellowstone*, Sheridan tells the story of the forced sterilization of Native American women on reservations through a focus on the rich white daughter who is taken to the reservation clinic by her brother for an abortion so that it will not be reported to her father. The plot drew attention to the history of state sterilization of Native American women—one of many eugenics projects against Indigenous, Latina, and Black women carried out well into the twentieth century. Members of the audience unfamiliar with this history were made aware of it, but at the cost of deflecting attention from the point of such eugenics projects in the United States: genocide.¹⁴

White supremacy is the enemy in one subplot—but its principal victims are wealthy white people. When white supremacists working for a rival of the Duttons attack their entire family, the leader of the Broken Rock Indian Reservation (Gil Birmingham) says, "What they did to John Dutton hasn't been done since they did it to us." Targeting one family—particularly one that maintains its power through intimidation, blackmail, and murder—is certainly not equivalent to genocide. But such a displacement is common to westerns that treat white people as the natural inheritors of so-called "vanishing Americans"—a mythology in which Native Americans people and traditions are



The Native American actors Gil Birmingham (as Thomas Rainwater, left) and Mo Brings Plenty (as Mo, center) with Luke Grimes (as Kayce Dutton, right), in *Yellowstone*.

valued because they are treated as absent from the lands they still inhabit.¹⁵

Sheridan has been heralded for his casting and respectful treatment of Native Americans in much of the non-Indigenous press (despite receiving backlash for casting the primary Native American character with a non-Native). The politics of recognition in his work are starkly lacking in relation to the Native-run television and streaming series that have appeared recently. Shows with Indigenous creators such as *Reservation Dogs* (Sterlin Harjo, 2021–), *Rutherford Falls* (Sierra Teller Ornelas, 2021–), *Dark Winds* (Graham Roland, 2022–), and others, like Chris Sheridan’s *Resident Alien* (2021–), with a strong Native presence, also have Indigenous representation in the writing room, ensuring they reflect the history of representations of indigeneity. Indigenous writers and artists across the globe have made a strong push for decades to protest redface casting and to call for Indigenous characters to be represented with complexity. In terms of reparative media practices, the Native American series clearly model futurity, not only for Native Americans but for Native representations in general, in ways that Sheridan does not; in his world, they can only be secondary characters who never win.

Despite the inadequacies of *Yellowstone* as a reparative cowboy narrative—which may be a conceptual impossibility in terms of addressing settler colonialism in the United States—the simple categorization of “conservative” marks Sheridan as much more of an outlier than he actually is. It ignores how the aesthetics of the Western consistently appeal to lovers of Hollywood media and how people with all kinds of political investments are interpellated by the cowboy typology as well as some of the category-escaping conventions of the genre. So much of what makes the Western pleasurable is, in fact, the aesthetic quality that Susan Sontag once famously described as fascist. The Duttons reflect Sontag’s descriptors of fascist representation: “preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant behavior, and the endurance of pain; they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude.”¹⁶

The Dutton family takes a pathological approach to labor that is balanced in the show by the pleasures of a chosen/alternative family narrative that Sontag terms the “ecstatic feelings of community.” Her “choreography” of fascist aesthetics is indeed central to both the cowboy and the Western—so much “‘virile’ posing,” “glamoriz[ation of] death,” “fetishism of courage,” and the “act ... of forgetting” that the pleasures of action and virile masculinity are allowed to overcome any dwelling on the injustices that are always present.¹⁷

These features are the characteristics of many an action film, since the characteristics of fascism are not confined to texts that are ideologically fascist. However, viewers can take pleasure in the aesthetic and still be opposed to fascism, or drawn to fantasies of power without capitulating to their logic. From Westerns to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, varied publics take pleasure in these media, and an understanding of that attraction can help to problematize the claims about *Yellowstone* as an outlier. *Yellowstone* is successful not because it is different from other television but because Sheridan does the omnipresent so well.

The fascist aesthetic embodied by the cowboy always leads into the logic of white persecution in a space haunted by histories of genocide against Native Americans and inevitably displaces violence against Indigenous people in the present. Yet the figure of the cowboy continues to have a wide-ranging appeal in Hollywood narratives of all political persuasions because of its themes of community, courage, overcoming persecution, the beauty of stoic dominance, and the pleasure of forgetting, which together allow the fantasy to live forever. However, what does it mean when fans suggest that these sociopathic protagonists model the best of America? Should people see a difference between a show that practices a politics of recognition—however deeply flawed—and a discourse that fails to acknowledge that discrimination ever occurred? *Yellowstone* is certainly in the tradition of settler colonialism entertainment, but surely something interpretative is lost in understanding it only as that.

Sheridan’s popular series is, in short, messy. It is perhaps time to acknowledge that there are some contexts in which the category of “conservative” may not do analytical justice to the complicated ways in which pleasure, genre history, and politics work. Taylor Sheridan’s work certainly deserves more rigorous—and more interesting—categorization than that one word can deliver.

Notes

1. Matt Goldberg, “Taylor Sheridan on ‘Wind River’ and How It Connects to ‘Sicario’ and ‘Hell or High Water,’” *Collider*, August 4, 2017, <https://collider.com/wind-river-taylor-sheridan-interview/>.
2. Jim Kitses articulates many of these conventions in his discussion of Western directors in *Horizons West: Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (Kindle ed., 2019; first published 2004 by Bloomsbury [London]), 39. However, he rejects centering masculinity as central to the Western.
3. Nicole Russell, “Coastal Elite Emmy Voters Who Snubbed ‘Yellowstone’ Don’t Know What They’re Missing,” *Fort*

Worth *Star-Telegram*, July 19, 2022, www.star-telegram.com/opinion/nicole-russell/article263629918.html; Amanda Harding, “‘Yellowstone’ Receives Zero Emmy Nominations While Woke Shows Get Multiple Nods,” *Daily Wire*, July 13, 2022, www.dailywire.com/news/yellowstone-receives-zero-emmy-nominations-while-woke-shows-get-multiple-nods.

4. For a discussion of the antihero in contemporary television, see Jason Mittell, “Lengthy Interactions with Hideous Men: Walter White and the Serious Poetics of Television Anti-Heroes,” in *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age: Exploring Screen Narratives*, ed. Roberta Pearson and Anthony N. Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 74–92.

Yellowstone does not have the characteristics of much of complex TV, and Dutton is not as performatively hideous as the character Mittell discusses, but since some people have (inaccurately, I’d argue) framed it as part of prestige TV of the twenty-first century, it is important to recognize that Dutton can be characterized as an antihero. A number of people described *Yellowstone* as “red-state TV”; for an example, see Daniel Fienberg, “Despite ‘Yellowstone’ Snub, Popularity is a Priority at the Emmys,” *Hollywood Reporter*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-features/emmys-2022-yellowstone-snob-popularity-1235191001/>.

5. See Chris Vognar, “‘Yellowstone’ Is the Country’s Biggest TV Sensation: Why Are Critics Shrugging?,” *Texas Monthly*, April 2022, www.texasmonthly.com/arts-entertainment/yellowstone-taylor-sheridan-tv-empire/.
6. See, for instance, D’Souza’s *2016: Obama’s America* (2012), *America: Imagine the World without Her* (2014), *Death of a Nation* (2018), *Trump Card* (2020), and *2000 Mules* (2022).
7. Pinnacle Peak, <https://pinnaclepeakpictures.com/about-us/>.
8. Etan Vlessing, “Pure Flix Rebrands as Pinnacle Peak Pictures,” *Hollywood Reporter*, January 22, 2021, www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/pure-flix-rebrands-as-pinnacle-peak-pictures-4120566/.
9. Lisa Black, “On ‘Yellowstone,’ and the White Desire to Control the Narrative,” *High Country News*, April 22, 2022, www.hcn.org/issues/54.5/indigenous-affairs-art-on-yellowstone-and-the-white-desire-to-control-the-narrative.
10. As Daniel Worden says in an overview of the scholarship, “The consensus of both the formalist account of the western

as a set of tropes about individualism, violence and moralism and the historicist reading of the western as a symptom of US hegemony is that the western reinforces conservative values regarding nationalism, racial identity, the necessity of violence, and American exceptionalism.” Worden, “Neo-liberalism and the Western: HBO’s *Deadwood* as National Allegory,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 222.

11. As Jacquelyn Kilpatrick explains in *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Films* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), silent films often showed that Indians were mistreated even if they were “noble savages,” but the coming of sound made representations eliminate even that concession (46–47).
12. *Dr. Quinn* is an interesting historical case study as a show that had ratings that were higher than others that were allowed to remain on the air, but with audience demographics that were presumably considered less desirable. See Tom Bierbaum, “Here’s How TV Works: ‘Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman,’ The Autopsy,” www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1998/06/14/heres-how-tv-works-dr-quinn-medicine-woman-the-autopsy/be6ca5b4-11a2-48f8-bc3a-d6c1d0ec2986/.
13. I noted a number of criticisms charging that the series was “woke” because of these various plot points; however, many fans accused the show of being “woke” after Kevin Costner supported Liz Cheney’s candidacy, as she was unpopular with many conservatives following her participation in the January 6 hearings and continued criticisms of Donald Trump.
14. Jane Lawrence, “The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women,” *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 400–419; D. Marie Ralstin-Lewis, “The Continuing Struggle against Genocide: Indigenous Women’s Reproductive Rights,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 71–95.
15. Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1982).
16. Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York, Vintage Books: 1981), 91. Originally published in *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975.
17. Sontag, 96, 87, 91, 91, 96, 74.