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## **The savage as living ghost: representations of Native Americans and scholarly failures to dismantle the notion of the savage**

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## Chapter Four

### Savages in Multiple Worlds and Histories: The Decolonial Attempt

#### Introduction

In the previously discussed works, the image of the Native American as savage mostly exists in the imagination of Westerners; there is little actual presence of Native American characters. The Native American “savage” either functions as a “mask” for white European characters or assumes a ghostly presence, evoked through other characters’ statements, projections, or games. In *Lord of the Flies*, children paint themselves as Native Americans, using this “savage exterior” as a mask that eventually unleashes their savage, violent behavior. In *Inglourious Basterds*, the basterds assert a hybrid identity that includes multiple affiliations, such as cowboy, Jewish American, and Native American (“a little Injun,” as Aldo Raine, played by Brad Pitt, puts it). *Brave New World* does involve several representations of Native Americans, but none of these representations is cast from the perspective of Native Americans themselves. John the Savage identifies himself as a Native American, but his in-between position makes him a grotesque figure both in the Savage Reservation and the civilized world. The work I will center on in this chapter sets itself apart from the previous ones regarding the presence and function of Native Americans in it: Alejandro González Iñárritu’s most recent film, *The Revenant* (2015), revisits the history of America’s colonization by European settlers through a narrative of revenge. Native American figures act in it as actual characters, and not just as masks for European characters, or as ghostly presences, projections, stereotypes, or faint traces of a bygone era.

As the only case study in this thesis in which actual Native American characters take center stage, *The Revenant* offers me the chance to scrutinize the mode of their representation, in order to see how it relates to, and tries to counter, Western conventions of representing Native Americans as “savages,” particularly in Hollywood cinema and other popular Western media. The question of the film’s relation to conventional Hollywood representations of Native American “savages” becomes even more compelling if we consider the ways in which both the film and its director, hold an in-between position in Hollywood today. As an independent Mexican director who has recently established himself in the American film industry, Iñárritu uses the resources that the American film industry offers him without, however, being fully integrated in, or appropriated by, the Hollywood industry. His complex, ambiguous position as a filmmaker, neither an insider nor an absolute outsider in the American film industry, allows him, as I will show, to evoke, and play with, Hollywood conventions and representational modes in ways that both subvert them from within but also, significantly, place them alongside other, different worldviews and representational

modes. In fact, this double move that I trace in *The Revenant*—subverting established representations of “savages” from within *and* unraveling other modes of seeing, being, and knowing—is precisely what motivates this chapter’s main question as well as its theoretical and methodological rationale. In my analysis of the film, I am interested both in the ways *The Revenant* critically engages with Eurocentric discourses and Hollywood conventions through its casting of Native Americans, and in those moments where it seeks to disengage itself from a Eurocentric gaze altogether. This concern also gives shape to the theoretical premises of the chapter; my analysis will bring together a poststructuralist/deconstructivist and postcolonial perspective with an approach informed by the work of decolonial thinkers, such as Mignolo and Nelson Maldonado Torres. By tracing the ways in which this film casts Native Americans through and against the figure of the savage, I create a testing ground for these approaches, measuring them through and against each other, in order to explore their potential but also their limits and blind spots.

It should be noted here that a systematic comparison of these approaches and of the ways in which they relate to each other cannot be accomplished in any comprehensive way within the scope of this chapter. Each of these approaches represents a varied and internally differentiated body of theory that cannot be easily summarized, so I will necessarily limit myself to certain general principles in these approaches which are particularly relevant for the questions I pose. Decoloniality is delineated in most detail in this chapter, as this theoretical approach has not been introduced or used in the previous chapters.

Poststructuralism (dealt with in chapter two) acknowledges the dominance of a certain regime of representation that produces a (seemingly) coherent, unified narrative of history. At the same time, it asserts the “impossibility of describing a complete or coherent signifying system,” and thus engages in critiques of “knowledge, totality, and the subject” (Culler 1997, 125). Concretizing this critical position into a strategy of (re)reading, deconstruction, in its most basic description, is a “critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought” (126). As such, it is committed not only to exposing the constructed nature of such oppositions, but also to dismantling them and reinscribing their terms by providing them with different contexts and constellations in which they can assume different operations (126). Central to the operations of deconstruction is the critical concept of difference; difference is not understood here as a “difference between” texts as “separate units,” but concerns the ways a text differs from *itself*: a “difference within,” as Johnson has called it (4). “Far from constituting the text’s unique identity,” Johnson writes, difference “is that which subverts the very idea of identity, infinitely deferring the possibility of adding up the sum of a text’s parts of meanings and reaching a totalized, integrated whole” (4). Denying the possibility of a totalized whole by emphasizing the difference within, deconstruction aims at bringing to light what is repressed, silenced by the normalizing operations of a text: that which texts anxiously try to eliminate without ever fully being able to do so. As I argued in chapter two this emphasis on the difference within also shows how deconstruction, and poststructuralism more generally, operates within the confines of one history, one dominant discursive regime, which it tries to unsettle from

within by showing that it is never identical to itself.

Postcolonialism can hardly be said to represent one philosophical or theoretical approach. But insofar as a dominant strand in postcolonial criticism has been heavily influenced by poststructuralism, postcolonialism is also largely concerned with bringing to light histories of the oppressed which have been silenced by the dominant discourse of Western colonialism, (neo)imperialism, and the violent hierarchical oppositions on which they hinge. Among these oppositions, that of the savage and civilized holds a prominent place. This approach tries to overturn the dominant paradigm that has determined how “Western” and “non-Western” people are viewed and question the terms of the distinction between “West” and “the rest,” which the enormous expansion of European Empires in the nineteenth century consolidated (R. Young 2). As I already showed in chapter three’s discussion of Shohat and Stam’s work, postcolonial approaches also aim at pluralizing history. This pluralization aims at working against the discourse of Western colonialism and its pervasive impact on the lives, identities, and self-perception of formerly colonized peoples. It is committed, in that sense, to charting differences within the one world that Eurocentric discourses have tried, and still try, to shape.

The so-called “decolonial turn” poses as a radical alternative to the former approaches. As a term, it gained ground around 2007, but decoloniality as a multiplicity of approaches has existed long before that. Decoloniality involves several heterogeneous approaches and emphasizes withdrawing from the discourse and logic of colonialism and Western modernity altogether, resisting its all-pervasive power to dominate “History” in the singular. The task of decoloniality, then, as I will explain in more detail in what follows, consists in the “very decolonization of knowledge, power, and being” (Maldonado Torres 2011, 1). It aims to de-link from the logic of Western modernity/coloniality in order to multiply epistemic paradigms, modes of thinking and knowing the world. In the words of Mignolo, this “delinking” as a “de-colonial epistemic shift” aims to bring “to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (2007, 453). Within this framework, then, other modes of knowing and thinking are not (conceptually) dependent on the discourse of Western modernity/coloniality and need not be discussed only in relation to this discourse. Rather, they exist and function in their own rights. Spivak’s famous question—“can the subaltern speak?”—which she poses in the homonymous article and answers negatively, would in fact be moot in the context of decoloniality, as no one is defined as subaltern beforehand; designating peoples as “subaltern” would presuppose the dominance of, and one’s dependency on, a Eurocentric framework. All people speak in and from their respective worlds and need not be defined only through their dependency on, or even critique of, the matrix of Western modernity/coloniality. The project of “de-linking” that decolonial thinkers embark on, then, generates “both the analytics for a critique and the vision toward a world in which many worlds can co-exist” (Mignolo 2007, 463). Here, the idea is not to pluralize one world, but to pluralize worlds.

In this chapter, I will show how *The Revenant* turns this idea into cinematographic practice at certain key moments in the film, even as other aspects, moments, or scenes

remain in a close critical dialogue with Western coloniality, its power structures and key oppositions. By mobilizing the aforementioned theoretical frameworks in my analysis, I hope to unravel the ways in which the film relates to—or, indeed, tries to disengage from—the logic of coloniality and Eurocentrism through its engagement with Native Americans and its revisiting of the history of America’s colonization.

I began this introduction by emphasizing the actual material presence of Native American characters in this film. Yet, as I will show, the film is also deeply preoccupied with the operations of ghosts. In fact, the figure of the ghost is in many ways central to this film’s approach vis-a-vis the problematics that I laid out above. Native Americans function as ghosts in the film on different levels. Their presence, but also their violent murdering, in the film evoke the specter of a future in which their societies and ways of life will have been fully destroyed; their ghostlike quality, in this sense, lies in a material presence that prefigures, and carries the traces of, a future absence. This future, glimpses of which are already offered within the film, comes to haunt the viewer’s perception of the film’s present as well as their own.

The film’s title, *The Revenant*, already invokes the figure of the ghost as a force that keeps returning. The title refers on one level to the protagonist Hugh Glass [Leonardo DiCaprio], who rises nearly from the dead to avenge his son’s murder. However, on a more abstract level, the title also hints at the complex and unpredictable ways in which history as a revenant keeps coming back, haunting the present. The main story of the protagonist as a “ghost” rising from the dead could thus also be read as an allegory for the way the history of colonization returns in the film, claiming our present and reminding us that the dead (the exterminated Native Americans) are neither silent nor invisible, but can assume a form of agency over the present. The film comes to haunt the viewers’ present by revisiting images of the history of America’s colonization in a way that creates ruptures in established historical narratives. As it tells that history from different perspectives, through different voices, it recasts it as a narrative that, as I will argue, does not feel resolved when the viewer leaves the movie theater.

Next to the above uses of the ghost as a conceptual metaphor for the workings of history, the film also accommodates more “real” ghosts: recurrent images and flashes of people from the past in crucial moments of the protagonist’s journey, which may seem like dreams or hallucinations but on closer inspection seem to mix with reality in a way that makes their ontological status hard to pinpoint. Through elements of magical realism, the film also plays with the ghost as a more material, tangible part of reality, which corresponds with beliefs shared by certain Native American societies. In the film, these ghosts, which for the sake of the argument I will refer to as “real ghosts,” function as agents that confront a Western mindframe with other cosmologies and worldviews. They are *real*—or magically real—embodiments of the multiplicity of histories and worldviews that decoloniality brings to the foreground. As such, these “real ghosts” are significant in my analysis of how film anticipates and invites a decolonial approach alongside its critical, deconstructive engagement with Eurocentric narratives and oppositions, such as civilized and savage, body and spirit. Following the film’s engagement with ghosts in the conclusion, will therefore help me bring the main threads and questions of this chapter together.

## 4.1 Iñárritu and *The Revenant*: Hollywood, Casting, Language, and the Native Perspective

In an interview with Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona in Barcelona on June 22, 2009, Iñárritu described his films as “independent”: “I developed my projects with total freedom and have financed them in different ways” (Deleyto and Azcona 123). During the same interview, he said that he has the final say in all his films. Not a single word of the script can be changed when he signs the contract with financial supporters from different countries. In this interview, Iñárritu noted that in the present context the question of whether he is a Mexican or Latin-American filmmaker is a complex one, because for him “art should have no nationality”; “When a work of art is reduced to a geographical territory, often with a nationalistic sense, it’s always diminished” (122). For him, nationality is not a productive category for labeling filmmakers, as films have far more complex affiliations than what nationality can convey. At the time of this interview, then, Iñárritu saw his films neither as a part of Hollywood cinema nor as a part of Mexican cinema, asserting his status as an independent filmmaker.

As an independent filmmaker, Iñárritu has been highly recognized by the American film industry, which has honored him for two consecutive years, 2015 and 2016, with an academy award for best director for his films *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015). Even though, with his latest films, Iñárritu seems to have established himself in the American film industry, his position as a filmmaker in this industry remains complex and ambivalent. In 2015, for example, the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences might have rewarded Iñárritu with the highest award—his *Birdman* received 4 academy awards, including those for best picture and director—but the Academy’s somewhat perplexed attitude towards Iñárritu’s status as an insider/outsider in the American film industry registered in host Sean Penn’s comment during the Oscar ceremony in 2015: “Who gave this son of a bitch his green card?”<sup>1</sup> The comment was said, of course, in jest, but its sarcasm aptly captured xenophobic attitudes in Hollywood (and in America) towards immigrants, particularly those from Mexico and the South. Following this logic, Iñárritu is an outside “invader” in the American film industry, a migrant-director who uses the system’s resources without being fully integrated into it. Iñárritu himself placed emphasis on the issue of migration and the relations between Mexico and the US in his academy award acceptance speech in 2015, in which he called for a better Mexico and for better treatment of immigrants in the United States. “The ones who live in Mexico, I pray that we can find and build the government that we deserve,” Iñárritu said. “The ones that live in this country, who are just part of the latest generation of immigrants in this county, I just pray they can be treated with the same dignity and respect as the ones who came before and built this incredible immigrant nation.”<sup>2</sup> Subtly overturning his status as an outsider, in the latter statement Iñárritu presents those supposed outsiders (migrants)

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<sup>1</sup> See <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/23/sean-penn-green-card\\_n\\_6733238.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/23/sean-penn-green-card_n_6733238.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> See <[https://www.buzzfeed.com/adolfoflores/birdman-director-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu-called-for-resp?utm\\_term=.sl7Z1VyKM#.cjj9mya1](https://www.buzzfeed.com/adolfoflores/birdman-director-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu-called-for-resp?utm_term=.sl7Z1VyKM#.cjj9mya1)>.

as the constitutive elements of the American nation, underscoring what Johnson might call the “difference within” the totalized whole that a nation is often perceived to be.

In 2016, *The Revenant* won Iñárritu the academy award for Best Director, making him the first Latino filmmaker to win the Oscar for Best Director two years in a row. However, this award was not accompanied by an appropriate response to his 2015 plea for “dignity and respect” for new immigrants. When Iñárritu accepted the award and delivered the award acceptance speech in 2016, he was not even allowed to use all his time and was interrupted by music. Later, when asked about the rude treatment of Iñárritu during the ceremony, producer Reginald Hudlin argued that “it was just one mistake in a three and a half hour show.”<sup>3</sup> This explanation is not convincing enough and cannot excuse the inappropriate treatment of a four-time Oscar winner. Clearly realizing what was happening, Iñárritu just ignored the music, which tried to play him off, and kept talking. In his acceptance speech, he addressed the issue of skin color and racism, calling for equality and the elimination of prejudice against people of color: “So what a great opportunity to our generation to really liberate ourselves from all prejudice and, you know, this tribal thinking, and make sure for once and forever that the color of the skin becomes as irrelevant as the length of our hair.”<sup>4</sup> Ironically, his being played off by music during the Oscar ceremony made Iñárritu’s attack against “tribal thinking” or racism even more relevant and urgent. Although he was recognized as the Best Director two years in a row by the Academy, all the above instances hint at the fact that his reception in Hollywood, and in the American film industry more generally, has not been one of straightforward and unconditional acceptance. Iñárritu remains not quite “one of them.”

Despite starting off as an outsider, since Iñárritu gained fame he has been making use of the means and the budget that Hollywood can offer, yet engages with Hollywood conventions in a critical way. The bill for *The Revenant* was paid by New Regency, a well-known company in the Hollywood film industry, along with Steve Golin’s Anonymous Content, M Productions, and Leonardo DiCaprio’s Appian Way. Although New Regency’s leading role in the production makes the film part of the Hollywood industry, Iñárritu’s film cannot be straightforwardly categorized as a Hollywood film, as in many ways it sets out to break with Hollywood aesthetics and conventions, especially regarding its representation of Native Americans and their contact with settlers. Since *The Revenant* is a film *representing* Native Americans, I will explore its mode of representations, how this representation relates to Hollywood conventions and popular representations of Native Americans in Western media. Specifically, I will trace the film’s critical engagement with Eurocentric discourses that are inscribed in Hollywood conventions, but also its attempt to disengage itself from Eurocentric modes of representation.

For a long time in Hollywood cinema, Euro-American actors customarily played the roles of African-American, Native American, and Asian people, just as they always played the role of white people. “Within Hollywood cinema, Euro-Americans have historically enjoyed the unilateral prerogative of acting in ‘blackface,’ ‘redface,’ ‘brownface,’ and

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<sup>3</sup> See <<https://www.editorsguild.com/industrynews.cfm?LaborNewsid=21458>>.

<sup>4</sup> See <<http://www.ew.com/article/2016/02/24/oscars-2016-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu>>.



'yellowface,' while the reverse has rarely been the case" (Shohat and Stam 1994a, 189). In the case of Native Americans, the situation was worse, because "Long after the powers of Hollywood decided that white actors could no longer play Black or Asian characters, they still chose them for Native Americans in westerns" (Hilger 11). This situation started to change slowly in the 1970s and recently Native American actors, such as Will Sampso, Graham Greene, and Rodney Grant have begun to play major characters in Hollywood films.

However, whether these revisions in casting also entail a more "realistic" portrayal of Native Americans remains doubtful. Shohat and Stam argue:

In recent years Hollywood has made gestures toward "correct" casting; African-American, Native American, and Latino/a performers have been allowed to "represent" their communities. But this "realistic" casting is hardly sufficient if narrative structure and cinematic strategies remain Eurocentric. (Shohat and Stam 1994a, 190)

For them, despite developments towards more "'realistic' casting," community self-representation cannot really take place as long as filmmakers maintain the same Eurocentric narrative structures and cinematic strategies.

In *The Revenant*, Native Americans play the parts of Native Americans. For example, Forrest Goodluck (Hawk) is a member of the Dine, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Tsimshian tribes; Duane Howard (Elk Dog) is a First Nation born in the Nuuchahnulth (meaning "along the mountains and sea") territory on the west coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada; Melaw Nakehk'ó (Powaqa) is born in Canada's north, raised in the community of Liidlii Kue, and comes from a long line of tribal leaders of the Dehcho Dene & Denesuline people; Arthur RedCloud (Hikuc) is a Navajo actor. Although a film's realistic casting does not guarantee a more accurate representation of Native Americans, as has just been discussed above, this choice nevertheless speaks counter to Hollywood conventions that suggest Native Americans are unable to represent, or to speak for, themselves.

English is Hollywood's dominant language. No matter whose stories Hollywood tells, it always tells them in English. Hollywood's promotion of English as a *lingua franca* all over the world can be viewed within a neocolonial framework. "The neocolonial situation, in which the Hollywood language becomes the model of 'real' cinema, has as its linguistic corollary the view of European languages as inherently more 'cinematic' than others" (Shohat and Stam 1994a, 193). European languages, and particularly English, are thought to be model languages of cinema—more "cinematic." In fact, the idea that European languages are naturally superior and more fit for artistic expression or philosophical thinking has a long history. Following this idea, "the colonized peoples including the Amerindians, Irish, Scots, Bretons, Basques and Corsicans were savage and inferior because their idioms were unfit for high culture and elaborate thought" (Acheraiou 7). In Hollywood films particularly, "The 'Indians' of classic Hollywood westerns, denuded of their own idiom, mouth pidgin English, a mark of their inability to master the 'civilized' language" (Shohat and Stam 1994a, 192). In classic Hollywood

Westerns, Native Americans did not only refrain from speaking their own language but they were often regarded as incapable of speaking English well. However, in relatively more recent Hollywood films, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) by Michael Mann and or *Dances with Wolves* (1990) by Kevin Costner, Native American languages began to be heard. Shohat and Stam argue that *Dances with Wolves* “constitutes a relatively progressive step for Hollywood in its adoption of a pro-indigenous perspective, and ... in respecting the linguistic integrity of the Native Americans” (194) However, they also point out that “this progressive step is in part undermined by the traditional split portrayal of bad Pawnees/good Sioux” (194). *Dances with Wolves* thus deviates from certain Hollywood conventions in its representation of Native Americans, in adopting a pro-indigenous perspective and having Native Americans speak their native languages. Yet, the film reiterates other stereotypes about Native Americans, such as the binary of the “good” versus “bad” Indian—which, as we saw in chapter one, is intimately related to the tropes of the “noble” and “ingoble” savage—exemplified in the clash between the peaceful Sioux and the violent Pawnee.

In *The Revenant*, languages of Native Americans are heard frequently and in large portions of the film. The film begins with a scene spoken in a Native American language, which non-Native viewers cannot understand. Both Glass (a white fur-trapper) and his son Hawk (whose mother is Native American) can speak English, but they still communicate in the Pawnee language. After Glass is mauled by a grizzly bear, Hawk keeps speaking to his father in Pawnee. The use of the Pawnee language as the primary language of communication between father and son, even though both of them speak English, makes the viewer feel that the Pawnee language is like a secret, a private language between father and son that we have no access to: i.e. the viewer can read the subtitles but has no full access to their code. As a result, the sense of mastery and control over the “other”—the Native American—which the Western viewer is prompted to assume in most Hollywood films, is here destabilized. Hawk and Glass do not *have* to speak Pawnee in order for the plot to be more realistic or convincing; it would be equally realistic to have them speak English, since they are both masters of this language too, and Glass is, after all, a white American character. The filmmaker’s choice here signals an attempt to break with Eurocentric conventions that project English as the *preferred* (i.e. more civilized or sophisticated) language of communication when characters are competent both in English and a Native American language.

In *The Revenant*, Native Americans not only speak their own languages, but are often able to speak European languages, such as English and French, as well. Hawk can speak English quite well and Elk Dog speaks some French. It is not surprising that Hawk can speak English since he has an English-speaking father, but Elk Dog’s ability to speak French comes as a surprise to the French traders, who hold the prejudice that Native Americans are incapable of speaking a civilized language like French. As a matter of fact, Toussaint, the leader of the French traders, is so surprised to find out that Elk Dog can speak French that he agrees to give him five horses for the pelts despite his initial refusal to do so. Thus, the dominant position of European languages in Hollywood is shaken and the stereotype that Native Americans are incapable of speaking European languages (well) is broken too.

Hollywood portrayals of Native Americans often tend to ignore differences among them and turn them into a single flat figure. The cultural differences among different tribes are often flattened into “a stereotypical figure, the ‘instant Indian’ with ‘wig, war bonnet, breechclout, moccasins, phony beadwork’” (Shohat and Stam 1994a, 180). Native Americans are reduced to a homogenized and unified stereotype. Sometimes this stereotypical figure is split into two types, with one being the negative mirror image of the other: the bad Indian and the good Indian. Here as well, deviating from these stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in Hollywood, *The Revenant*, as I will argue in the following, foregrounds Native American societies as internally differentiated, making it difficult to place them under a single type or classify them based on the binary of the good versus bad Indian.

#### **4.2 Theoretical Framework: The Decolonial Approach**

As discussed in the previous section, as both an insider and outsider in the Hollywood film industry, Iñárritu unsettles Hollywood conventions through his casting and language choices in *The Revenant*. Nevertheless, these choices alone are certainly not enough to guarantee an undoing of the Eurocentric bias that is often imbricated in the narrative structures, aesthetics, and cinematic strategies of films that involve representations of Native Americans, as Shohat and Stam also argue (190). My goal is not to test whether *The Revenant* succeeds in producing a “realistic” representation of Native Americans—the measure for assessing what is “realistic” cannot be determined objectively and it is not my intention to pose such a measure here. What I do want to explore further, however, are the strategies, narrative structures, plot elements, aesthetic choices, and particular scenes through which the film converses with Eurocentric narratives of the history of colonization and representations of Native Americans. I am interested in investigating to what extent *The Revenant* reiterates these representations (differently or not) or offers alternative narratives to the ones developed within a Eurocentric framework. In order to probe this question, I will use theoretical insights and concepts derived from poststructuralist, postcolonial, and, primarily, decolonial theory, putting these theoretical approaches into dialogue with each other as well. Thus, before I delve into my analysis, a delineation of the decolonial approach is called for.

Coined by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, the phrase “the decolonial turn” emerged around 2007 and has been taken up by many theorists, including Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Freya Schiwy, Ramón Grosfoguel, Catherine Walsh, Javier Sanjinés, José David Saldívar, Arturo Escobar, Santiago Castro-Gómez, and others. This is how Maldonado-Torres describes the decolonial turn:

The decolonial turn does not refer to a single theoretical school, but rather points to a family of diverse positions that share a view of coloniality as a fundamental problem in the modern (as well as postmodern and information) age, and of decolonization or decoloniality as a necessary task that remains unfinished. (2011, 2)

Although, as Maldonado-Torres notes here, the decolonial turn does not refer to a homogeneous body of theory but includes multiple approaches. These approaches share the belief that European modernity cannot be disentangled from its “darker side,” coloniality, which it constantly reproduces (Mignolo 2007, 450). By viewing modernity/coloniality as “two sides of the same coin,” decolonial theorists see the rhetoric of modernity as concomitant with the logic of coloniality; in other words, “there cannot be modernity without coloniality,” as the latter is constitutive of the former (464). The close relationship between modernity and coloniality is also emphasized by Maldonado-Torres, who thinks that “Modernity as a discourse and as a practice would not be possible without coloniality, and coloniality continues to be an inevitable outcome of modern discourses” (2007, 244). “Colonialism was by no means the only, but arguably the principal form in which western modernity spread through the world” (2014, 695). This preposition overturns optimistic conceptions of modernity as “a universal global process” associated with newness, advancement, progress, reason, civilization and development, conceptions which have circulated in European intellectual thought since the Enlightenment (Mignolo 2007, 463). If “the rhetoric of modernity works through the imposition of ‘salvation,’ whether as Christianity, civilization, modernization and development after WWII or market democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union,” decoloniality underscores “the political and economic structure of imperialism/colonialism” not as unfortunate accidents in this “package trip to the promised land of happiness” but as essential to modernity’s “perverse logic” (463)(450). It is therefore rather futile to try to salvage the idea of Western modernity by trying to extricate the colonial logic from it. Instead, decolonial thinkers expose the logic of (neo)colonial relations and engage in an “epistemic delinking” which involves a radical decolonization of “the ‘mind’ (Thiongo) and the ‘imaginary’ (Gruzinski) that is, knowledge and being” (450).

The conquest of America by Europeans is a crucial moment for Mignolo and other decolonial thinkers, as it marks the emergence of a new world order that Mignolo calls the “modern/colonial world” (2009, xiii). Hence, for Mignolo, America’s “discovery” and “the genocide of Indians and African slaves” constitute “the very foundation of ‘modernity,’ more so than the French or Industrial Revolutions” (xiii). The diptych of modernity/coloniality thus first took shape in the sixteenth century, turning “the discovery/invention of America” into “the colonial component of modernity whose visible face is the European Renaissance” (xiii). Essential for the formation of this matrix of modernity/coloniality are the forces of capitalism, which helped Europe achieve world hegemony, up until a “second historical moment of transformation” which Mignolo locates “after World War II, when the US took the imperial leadership” over from European powers, such as England and Spain (xiii).

It should be noted here that decolonial thinkers distinguish coloniality from colonialism, which “denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). Coloniality “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (243). That is to say,

colonialism denotes a form of political and economic domination maintained by colonial administrations, while coloniality represents an enduring pattern of power that persists after the collapse of colonial empires. Colonialism, then, may have various historical forms and can be destroyed if the political and economic relations that sustain it cease to exist but, as a kind of power that structures knowledge and being, coloniality is hard to eradicate. As “we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday,” coloniality still dominates our world today (243).

It should be noted here that a critical perspective on modernity is certainly not the prerogative of decolonial thinkers, nor were they the first to advance such a critique. Critical views on modernity (as it was cast by Enlightenment thinking) had been formulated in the late nineteenth century, for example, when the climate of cultural pessimism that had overtaken European thought provided fertile ground for such critiques. Nietzsche’s outspoken critique of the Enlightenment ideals of progress and reason and his outlook on European civilization as corrupt and declining is a case in point, although his perspective remained largely Eurocentric. The project of modernity as a straight progressive line towards a better future lost more of its optimism and credibility after the ravages of the two World Wars and the Holocaust in the first half of the twentieth century, which revealed the destructive face of technological progress and the darker underside of European civilization—the supposed beacon and final destination of progress. A more radical critique of Western modernity and the legacy of the Enlightenment was issued by thinkers of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno note in their “Introduction” to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, their aim was to explain why “humankind, instead of entering a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (xiv). Adorno and Horkheimer saw this kind of barbarism in the totalitarian state as manifested in German Nazism and the Communism of the Soviet Union, which marked the bankruptcy of European reason. Yet, this barbarism was not, for them, an exception to European modernity, but a structural feature of Western history. For them, “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity” (1). Despite modernity’s association with advancement, rationality, liberation and progress, these thinkers showed that the disasters of the early twentieth century—and most notably the Nazi death camps during the Second World War—were not exceptions, but intrinsic products of modernity.

Despite the critique of modernity and the legacy of European Enlightenment in critical theory, dominant Western historical narratives still tend to construct an event like the Holocaust less as a failure of modernity itself, and more as a tragic exception and aberration that betrayed the “benign face” of civilization and modernity (Spanos 86). This view was further challenged by anti-colonial thinkers at the height of, and shortly after, the anticolonial struggles in the 1950s, which sought to put an end to the European colonial domination of the rest of the world. In Aimé Césaire’s passionate manifesto against colonialism, *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), the perverse logic of European colonialism is inextricably linked with the barbarism of the Holocaust; they are both logical consequences of European modernity.

Modernity was also criticized—and pluralized—in the last quarter of the twentieth century in the context of postcolonial, postmodern, and poststructuralist theory. The term postmodernity was introduced as a continuation of, but also a break with, modernity, and therefore involves a critique of the project of modernity and its universalizing aspirations. According to the Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, “In principle, postmodernity also articulates a respect for other cultures in terms of their incommensurability, difference, and autonomy” (233). This critical moment in postmodern thought is also acknowledged by decolonial thinkers. Quijano, for example, recognizes the postmodern critique of “the modern concept of Totality” (Quijano in Mignolo 2007, 451). However, decolonial thinkers find this critique to remain Eurocentric or at least Eurocentered: “limited and internal to European history and the history of European ideas” (451). They therefore stress the need to issue this critique of Totality not only from the perspective of postmodernity but also “from the perspective of coloniality” (451). Mignolo extends this argument to poststructuralist and postcolonial thought in order to distinguish decoloniality from these approaches. Decoloniality, for him:

introduces a fracture with both the Eurocentered project of post-modernity and a project of post-coloniality heavily dependent on post-structuralism as far as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida have been acknowledged as the grounding of the post-colonial canon: Edward Saïd, Gayatri Spivak and Hommi Bhabha. De-coloniality starts from other sources. (452)

For him, the critique of modernity’s hegemonic, universalizing project, its “notion of Totality,” does not necessarily take us to “post-coloniality, but to de-coloniality” (452). Similarly, Dussel also argues that postmodern and postcolonial theory (as heavily indebted to poststructuralism) “does not question the centrality of Eurocentrism,” and remains a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism (233). “Postmodernism and poststructuralism as epistemological projects,” Ramón Grosfoguel writes, “are caught within the Western canon reproducing within its domains of thought and practice a coloniality of power/knowledge” (212). (This persistent being-caught-in the very world it tries to dismantle, was key in chapter two.) According to decolonial thinkers, instead of challenging the concept of coloniality, postmodernism and poststructuralism reproduce and reorganize the coloniality of power/knowledge. Michael Ennis and Mignolo, for example, argue that “Postmodernism, self-conceived in the unilateral line of the history of the modern world, continues to obscure coloniality and maintains a universal and monotopical logic—from the left as well as the right—from Europe (or the North Atlantic) toward the outside” (24). From a decolonial perspective, postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory do not radically question the colonial logic of modernity. This holds for critical theory too (as also practiced in the above approaches). Hence, “the de-colonial shift (decolonization of knowledge and of being) marks the Eurocentered limits of critical theory as we know it today, from the early version of the Frankfurt School, to later poststructuralists (e.g. Derrida) and post-modernists (e.g.

Jameson)” (Mignolo 2007, 485).

Here is where the importance of the notion of “delinking” manifests itself. Postcoloniality has pluralized history, unearthing the suppressed voices of formerly colonized peoples, but in the eyes of decolonial thinkers remains an approach that criticizes Western modernity and coloniality from within. Poststructuralism and deconstruction are marked by the very same limitation. Adopting a poststructuralist framework entails using the categories of the dominant discursive regime, including the terms of binary oppositions, in order to reverse and breach hierarchies; it is a form of critique within the system, that denies the possibility of a position of exteriority to the discourse one is criticizing. Let me repeat a quote by Culler, here, that I also used in chapter two: “to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise” (1982, 86). The practitioners of deconstruction remain within the system they criticize, putting its oppositions into question and revealing the rhetorical mechanisms through which these oppositions are produced; they are, in other words, committed to exposing the “difference within” (Johnson 3). In contrast, decoloniality’s “delinking,” in Mignolo’s words, aims at an “epistemic shift” that:

brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics. ... Furthermore, de-linking presupposes to move toward a geo- and body politics of knowledge that on the one hand denounces the pretended universality of a particular ethnicity (body politics), located in a specific part of the planet (geo-politics), that is, Europe where capitalism accumulated as a consequence of colonialism. De-linking then shall be understood as a de-colonial epistemic shift leading to other-universality, that is, to pluri-versality as a universal project. (2007, 453).

If the “growing dominance of Western epistemology” since the sixteenth century and European modernity’s exclusionary “imperial concept of Totality” suppressed or denied “the possibilities of other totalities” outside the West—Mignolo mentions, for example, the Ottomans, Incas, Russians, and Chinese—decoloniality is committed to reintroducing other epistemologies and worldviews as “equal players in the game” (451). Delinking from Eurocentrism—the objective of the decolonial “epistemic shift”—aim to reveal the hidden complicity of the rhetoric of modernity with the logic of coloniality and articulate other modes of knowing, understanding, and relating to the world.

For decolonial thinkers, this delinking leads us towards a transmodern world. The category of “transmodernity” has been proposed by Dussel “as an alternative to the Eurocentric pretension that Europe is the original producer of modernity” (Dussel in Quijano 546). Decoloniality imagines a transmodern, polycentric world, which calls for egalitarian dialogue among equal players. Different from “post,” “This ‘beyond’ (‘trans-’) indicates the take-off point ... from what modernity excluded, denied, ignored as

‘insignificant,’ ‘senseless,’ ‘barbarous,’ as a ‘nonculture,’ an unknown opaque alterity” (Dussel 234). “Transmodernity,” as Maldonado-Torres writes about Dussel’s version of this category, “is one way of expressing a decolonial attitude with regards to modernity, opening philosophy to multiple languages and stripping modernity of its colonizing elements and biases” (2011, 7). Transmodernity contributes to opening up different conceptions of knowledge, different languages and voices, so that the hierarchical relations among them can be broken down. Dussel imagines the future of transmodernity as “multicultural, versatile, hybrid, postcolonial, pluralist, tolerant, and democratic,” differentiating the latter from the “modern liberal democracy of the European state” (236). As the orientation of decoloniality, he hopes that transmodernity may lead us to a world in the plural, as when different worlds co-exist.

Although the differences between decoloniality and poststructuralist and postcolonial approaches are certainly significant, in this chapter I start from the premise that a poststructuralist or postcolonial framework and a decolonial approach are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but could also in some cases be complementary or possible to combine in the analysis of cultural objects. I will put this premise to the test by mobilizing these approaches in analyzing the complex operations of *The Revenant* vis-a-vis Eurocentric narratives and coloniality. In my analysis, a poststructuralist approach will be useful in showing how the film questions the metaphysical foundations of a series of deep-rooted binary oppositions in Western thought, primarily those of the civilized (White, male, European) versus the savage (Native American) and the related oppositions of nature/culture, male/female, subject/object, and spirit/matter. However, as discussed above, I will also show how a poststructuralist “reading” of the film informed by postcolonial concerns, productive as it may be, is not enough to account for certain moments in which Eurocentric narratives confront alternative frames of reference and modes of knowing. *The Revenant* itself, as I will show, integrates these perspectives in its structures, as it attempts to not only deconstruct the logic of Eurocentrism from within, in line with poststructuralist and postcolonial perspectives, but also juxtaposes it with an alternative logic that harbors alternative narratives, in line with the decolonial aim of “delinking.”

### **4.3 *The Revenant* from the Perspective of Decoloniality: Coloniality of Power, of Being, of Knowledge, and of Nature**

In order to look at the ways in which the logic of coloniality pervades different domains, decolonial thinkers often distinguish between the coloniality of power, of being, of knowledge, and of nature (Mignolo 2007, 451). Coloniality of power mainly refers to how the colonizer imposes economic and political regulations upon the colonized, while coloniality of knowledge specifies the epistemic domination of the colonized by the colonizer. Coloniality of being pertains to racial, sexual, and other hierarchies established between the colonizer and the colonized, while coloniality of nature emphasizes the subordinate position of nature to the notion of European *culture*. These domains are largely interrelated and should not be seen as autonomous. If the coloniality of power



refers to the “political and economic spheres,” decolonial thinkers explore how this coloniality is extended to the “coloniality of knowledge and of being (gender, sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge)” (451). Although these domains overlap, in what follows I will use these forms of coloniality—of power, being, knowledge and nature—as structuring categories in order to analyze *The Revenant’s* engagement with coloniality. My aim is to explore how Eurocentric narratives—especially those foregrounding Native Americans as savages—are appropriated and critically recast in the film and whether (and if so, how) the film tries to “delink” itself from coloniality through the staging of what I will call “decolonial moments.” To those “decolonial moments” in the film I will devote a large part of my analysis.

As we saw in the previous section, decolonial thinkers consider America’s “discovery” and colonization as the foundational moment in the “foundation of modernity.” In this light, *The Revenant’s* revisiting of a moment in this history of colonization of America is of particular significance. In doing so, it re-examines the conditions that led to the hegemony of the colonial/modern world while also staging moments that point to other epistemic paradigms, other worldviews. Set in 1823 Montana and South Dakota, *The Revenant* is a story of revenge. Led by Captain Andrew Henry [Domhnall Gleeson], American fur trappers move towards Fort Kiowa with their guide Glass. After a surprise attack by the Arikara tribe, led by Elk Dog who is in search of his kidnapped daughter Powaga, the fur trappers lose 33 men and many pelts. Later during their journey, Glass is terribly mauled by a grizzly bear, and comes close to death. To speed up their journey, Henry offers 100 dollars to any person willing to stay behind with the seriously injured Glass. John Fitzgerald [Tom Hardy], Glass’ half-native son Hawk, and Jim Bridger [Will Poulter] volunteer to stay with Glass. Eager to get back, however, Fitzgerald tries to smother Glass, but is seen by Hawk. After a fierce fight, Fitzgerald kills Hawk and moves away his dead body. Then, Fitzgerald tricks Bridger into leaving Glass alive in a shallow grave. After many struggles, Glass manages to survive and make his way to the Fort. In the meantime, the Arikara tribe exchanges the pelts they have stolen for rifles and horses. They do this with French traders, who are the ones that have kidnapped Powaga and used her as a sex-slave, though Elk Dog does not know this at this stage. With the help of Glass, Powaga successfully castrates and kills Toussaint [Fabrice Adde], the leader of the French traders, and returns to her tribe. To take revenge for his son’s murder, Glass is determined to kill Fitzgerald. After a fierce fight, he leaves Fitzgerald in the hands of the Arikara tribe, who kill Fitzgerald in the end but let Glass live.

Coloniality, as previously mentioned, does not disappear with the end of colonialism, but continues its workings as long as capitalism is still dominant. “Coloniality of power unpacks coloniality as that broad but specific and constitutive element of global model of capitalist order that continues to underpin global coloniality after the end of direct colonialism” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 392). “As a matter of fact,” Mignolo writes on the topic, “the modern/colonial world cannot be conceived except as *simultaneously capitalist*. *The logic of coloniality is, indeed, the implementation of capitalist appropriation of land, exploitation of labor and accumulation of wealth in fewer and fewer hands*” (emphasis in the original) (2007, 477). The logic of coloniality corresponds with capitalist

exploitation and oppression by means of seizing land, labor and wealth from (formerly) colonized subjects. Among the resources taken from the colonized, land is perhaps the most important. Mignolo further specifies the importance of land to capitalism. “Capital was necessary to organize labor, production and distribution; and, the appropriation of land enormously increased the size and power of capital. It was land, rather than money, that made possible the qualitative jump of mercantile economy into mercantile capitalist economy” (481). The “discovery” and conquest of the Americas made “The New World” an ideal place to develop and boost mercantile capitalist economies. Therefore, Quijano and Wallerstein argue that “a capitalist economy, as we know it today, couldn’t have existed without the ‘discovery and conquest of Americas’ (qtd. in Mignolo 2007, 477). In the following section, I will consider how the coloniality of power—those aspects of coloniality that are intertwined with capitalism and relate to the exploitation of Native Americans and their land—is thematized in the film.

### *Coloniality of Power*

Set in wilderness of North America, *The Revenant* shows how the logic of the capitalist market determines the practices of the colonizers and their relations with Native Americans. The film starts with a group of fur trappers from the Rocky Mountain Fur Company marching towards Fort Kiowa. Although we do not see how the wild animals are killed and skinned, in one of Glass’ dreams we see a mountain of buffalo bones, which may hint at the massive annihilation of animals (whole herds of buffalos) in the service of pre-capitalist exchange. The Arikara tribe seem to be interested in the fur trade too, as the fur trappers on their way to the fort are attacked by the Arikara, who steal most of their pelts. Later, we learn more about the motives of the Arikara. Their chief’s daughter has been kidnapped, and to find her they need horses and rifles. To get those horses and rifles, they have to steal pelts from the fur trappers and exchange them with French traders. Thus, they steal pelts not to use them themselves, but to exchange them for horses and rifles, so that they can protect themselves from the violence of the American settlers. In this sense, the Arikara are also dragged into a capitalist logic by the European colonizers, forced to treat goods not as means of subsistence but as a form of currency that they need in order to survive in the new (capitalist) order of things.

As Canadian geographer Cole Harris notes, it was a commonly accepted fact among European colonizers in the Americas that they, as civilized, “knew how to use land properly and that savages did not” (170).<sup>5</sup> They thus assumed that up until the arrival of Europeans “most of the land was waste, or, when native people were obviously using it, that their uses were inadequate” (170). This logic served to justify the massive dispossession of natives from their lands. “From the perspective of capital, therefore, native people had to be dispossessed of their land. Otherwise, nature could hardly be developed. An industrial primary resource economy could hardly function” (173).

In the film, Native Americans are not just silent witnesses of this process. They are aware of the fact they are gradually losing their land and openly confront European settlers about their violent practices of exploitation and dispossession by labeling these practices as theft. This unravels in the scene in which the Arikara approach the French

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<sup>5</sup> Harris’s study focuses on the dispossession of native lands in British Columbia.

traders in order to exchange the pelts they have stolen for horses and rifles. Elk Dog starts speaking to Toussaint, the French leader, in his own native language and asking the translator to translate for him. As a good capitalist, Toussaint negotiates the exchange, trying to maximize his profit; he appears unwilling to give Elk Dog horses by arguing that it is not a part of their agreement and that the pelts are only worth half price. Provoked by Toussaint, Elk Dog starts speaking French to him. Although the French Elk Dog speaks is quite elementary, his ability to speak it shocks the traders, who firmly hold the belief that Native Americans are savages, and thus inferior in their linguistic capacity, French a noble language they are unable to master. Elk Dog's ability to speak French shakes the basis of their prejudice against Native Americans. More importantly, however, during their conversation, Toussaint tries to shame Elk Dog by accusing him of stealing the pelts from the American fur trappers. This theft—which, as shown previously, was motivated by the capitalist logic that the Arikara were forced to adopt—is nevertheless put in perspective by Elk Dog's response to Toussaint. Elk Dog juxtaposes this minor theft with the larger theft, the colonizers' violent seizure of native lands: "you all have stolen everything from us. Everything! The land. The animals."

A telling reversal takes place in this scene. The viewers' first encounter with Native Americans in the opening scene of the film—in which the Arikara attack the American fur traders, killing most of them and stealing their pelts—may have served to cast the natives as savage thieves; it may have seemed to perpetuate their negative stereotyping in Western media. Native Americans in the film are not noble savages, pure and untouched by the logic of capitalism, but have been forced to accept this logic in order to survive; their theft of the pelts is a sign of their implication in this logic, as we realize later in the film. Elk Dog's above-mentioned statement to Toussaint, however, unveils the systemic dispossession of land by colonialism as the ultimate act of theft. Theft (including the Arikara's minor theft) is thereby projected as a byproduct of the capitalist logic of coloniality. European settlers are cast as intruders and thieves, unsettling the initial association of the Arikara with stealing. In this way, the film starts by staging a negative stereotypical image of Native Americans as savage thieves—playing with the viewers' own possible biases—only in order to ironically cast this image back at the viewer, overshadowed by the larger theft that colonialism perpetrated. Elk Dog's speech leaves Toussaint speechless, and eventually makes him agree to give them five horses: a meagre compensation indeed for the incomparably graver theft that the colonizers have committed.

### *Coloniality of Being*

Coloniality of being refers to the establishment of rigid hierarchies among different groups of people, whereby non-Europeans are often deprived of their humanity (their status as human beings) and cast as savages. The binary opposition between civilization and savagery and the identification of the former with Europeans and the latter with Native Americans was commonly assumed by white people in the nineteenth century, as Harris also notes. Under a Eurocentric gaze, Native Americans were cast as inferior human beings or non-humans, justifying their inhumane treatment, the plundering of their lands, the exploitation of their labor, or raping of their women. "Blacks or Indians"

were historically denied “human interests,” Mignolo notes, as they “have not been considered humans and, therefore, could not have interests” (2007, 465). They could therefore be exploited by Europeans without need for moral justification. “In the New World, then, racism was an epistemic operation that institutionalized the inferiority of the Indians and, subsequently, justified genocidal violence, as Dussel pointed out, and exploitation of labor, as Quijano underlined” (479). In what follows, I will explore how *The Revenant* deals with hierarchical distinctions relating to race and gender, paying specific attention to the ways in which the opposition between settlers and Native Americans, savages and civilized, good and bad Indians, man and woman, are played out.

The film stages powerful confrontations between characters, in which the binary opposition between “savage” and “civilized” is thematized and repeated—with a twist. The binary was naturalized in Western minds and systematically applied to Native Americans and European colonizers respectively at the time the film’s narrative takes place. The racial hierarchy this binary consolidated is already staged in one of the first scenes, in which Fitzgerald accuses Glass of forgetting his identity as a white man. After the surprise attack of the Arikara, Fitzgerald questions Glass’ plan to get off the boat and walk to the Fort and vents his resentment towards Glass and his son Hawk. At first he blames Glass’ Pawnee “buddies” and only stops complaining when one of the men in the group tells him that Pawnees are also against the Arikara. He then calls Hawk (whose mother was a native) a “half-breed” and calls Glass’ wife “savage”—“what kind of savage you think his momma was?” he remarks. His absolute identification of Native Americans with the signifier “savage” confirms an essentialist vision about the nature of Native Americans, which even becomes tautological in his following statement: “Savage is savage.” For Fitzgerald, the savagery of Native Americans requires no explanation. As it appears to be a fact of nature, there is no need to rationalize the savage/civilized distinction. They are born as savages and their savage nature cannot be changed. Later, he confronts Glass about his past, when Glass lived with Native Americans before his village was decimated by colonizers and his wife murdered: “Is it true what they say? That you shootin’ a lieutenant while you was living with them savages?” Receiving no answer from Glass, he continues: “21 dead soldiers, more than 40 dead feather necks. But you and your boy are the only ones to get walk out alive. It was kind of a miracle, don’t you think?” As there is still no response from Glass, he continues: “Is that what you did? Shot one of your own to save this little dog right here?” Fitzgerald accuses Glass of forgetting his place as a white man, because he is rumored to have shot a lieutenant in order to save his son’s life. Clearly, for Fitzgerald racial affiliation trumps the father-son relationship: a white man has a commitment to his fellow white men rather than his (hybrid) son. This logic is based on his regard of natives as non-subjects, deprived of any human interests; Fitzgerald’s use of an animal metaphor to refer to Glass’ son (“little dog”) typifies this logic that deprives natives of their humanity and thus frees the colonizers of any obligation to respect or defend their lives. Glass counters Fitzgerald’s claim by rejecting the natural basis of the racial affiliation: “As far as I can tell my place is right here, on the smart end of this rifle.”

The “savage” trope is commonly applied by the settlers to Native Americans in the film, and another popular distinction in Eurocentric discourses, that of the good versus

bad Indian, also seems to be evoked. There are Native Americans who work for the settlers and follow their orders, doing all kinds of chores at the Fort. Submissive and accepting of their masters, these Native Americans are regarded as good Indians, while others, who refuse to work for the settlers and try to lead independent lives, are considered as a threat and cast as bad Indians. However, the boundaries between settlers and “good Indians” are also drawn stringently. The Fort where the settlers are based draws clear borders; the Fort is first of all walled, so that the settlers can protect and barricade themselves against their “bad Indian” enemies. Only the “good Indians” are allowed to enter the Fort, because they work for the settlers as manual labourers or prostitutes. An American flag figures inside the settlers’ Fort. As a nationalist symbol, the flag is used to set up borders and include subjects as legitimate citizens while excluding others as illegitimate. The flag suggests the settlers’ self-identification as American citizens. The presence, however, of the silent Native American servants in their tents just outside the Fort, neither legitimate subjects that reside inside nor fully expelled to the outside as their services are needed, problematizes the processes of constructing an American national identity. Those Native Americans just outside the Fort, invited inside when needed but rejected as illegitimate subjects from the national “we,” reveal the other’s constitutive role in the construction of the American nation—literally, through their labor. The film thereby shows the narrative of the construction of the American subject as haunted not only by violence against the “bad Indians” (who “deserved” to be exterminated) but also against the “good Indians” who are exploited. The natives that hover hauntingly between the inside and the outside of the Fort remind us of Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum: “There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (248).

Nations are built upon the manual labor of the others they exploit: slaves, servants, precarious subjects that function as ghosts, haunting each great civilization’s or nation’s originary narrative. Renée Bergland writes about the role of such Indian ghostliness in the process of constructing the American subject:

The American subject ... is obsessed with an originary sin against Native people that both engenders that subject and irrevocably stains it. Native American ghosts haunt American literature because the American nation is compelled to return again and again to an encounter that makes it both sorry and happy, a defiled grave upon which it must continually rebuild the American subject. (22)

Read in this light, the gate of the Fort is not just meant to keep “bad” Indians away and to open for the white settlers, but is also an icon for the place where an encounter takes place, recurrently, with the very entity the Fort tried to chase away or exterminate. After all other French fur traders are killed by wolves, one of them successfully makes his way to the Fort and is allowed to enter, because, the guard shouts: “white man at the gate.” This ontological boundary set by American settlers functions on the basis of race; French settlers are also white, and part of the European civilization, which sets them apart from the savagery of Native Americans. The film underscores this essentialist ontological

boundary by literalizing it visually (the flag, the Fort, the gate, its borders). Yet, at the same time, it deconstructs it in several ways; the settlers' brutal violence against Native Americans and the internal differentiation of both Native Americans and the settlers, as I will argue in what follows, often work to blur the natural basis of the civilized/savage distinction and ironize its application by characters in the film. In *The Revenant*, the violence of European settlers against Native Americans is abundant. The viewer sees flashes of the destruction of the native village in which Glass and his family used to live and the killing of Glass' wife. These flashes belong to the film's past but come alive in Glass' memory. In the film's present, images of the destroyed village which Fitzgerald and Bridger come across on their way to the Fort are also highly confrontational. The settlers in the film keep contradicting the rhetoric of civilization through their destructive actions, which in contemporary viewers' eyes cannot be justified. The fate of another Native American character in the film, Hikuc, exemplifies this point. After "rising" from his shallow grave and successfully escaping from the Arikara attack, Glass comes across Hikuc, who is alone but willing to share his food, heal Glass' wounds, and help Glass survive by building a tent that protects him from the severe weather conditions. Compared with Glass' former fellows, Hikuc is more human. When Hikuc has left and Glass wakes up in morning to continue his journey, he finds the Native American hanging dead from a tree. A wooden board hangs from his neck with the inscription: "on est tous des sauvages" (we are all savages). The French words imply that Hikuc has been killed by the French traders. The inscription allows for a double reading; at first sight, it seems meant as a description for all Native Americans, a verdict imposed upon them by their European executioners (here: French traders, for whom all natives are "savages," and therefore deserve to be killed without any distinction between "good" or "bad" ones). But, in the viewer's eyes, the inscription reads more as a description of the executioners themselves, as a statement that underscores the savagery of the colonizers. It is, after all, written in French—a colonial language—and not in a Native American language; it therefore reads less as a (staged) confession or self-description of Hikuc and his people and more as an (inadvertent) admission of the colonizers' savagery. Following this reading, Hikuc's killing reveals the violence of the so-called European civilization, thereby disrupting the essentialist, ontological basis of the distinction between civilized Europeans and Native American savages.

The film plays with the trope of the good and bad Indian in other ways too. The binary trope is evoked, for example, by the aggressive, violent Arikara who seem to form a contrast with the more peaceful Pawnee. Hikuc, the Pawnee man, is indeed friendly and hospitable to Glass. As he tells Glass, however, his family and entire tribe were killed by the Sioux, which suggests the Sioux as a more aggressive tribe of Native Americans who are keen on killing the Pawnee. This seems to confirm the Eurocentric distinction between naturally good Indians (close to the "noble savage" trope) and bad, "ignoble" ones who engage in extreme and senseless violence. However, things are more complicated than they may seem. The Arikara's violent attacks against the white settlers, as we find out in the course of the film, are motivated by the kidnapping of the chief's daughter, whom the whole tribe is in search of. When the daughter—who has fallen into the hands of the French and is used as a sex-slave—is retrieved and reunited with her

people in the very end, the violence of the Arikara seems to halt. In the final scene of the film, they pass by Glass, defiant, neither harming him nor fully acknowledging him. Their violence is therefore revealed not to be a result of their “naturally” aggressive instincts and irrational character as “savages,” but rather a re-action to the greater violence done to them by the settlers: the unlawful removal of the chief’s daughter from her people and, of course, the settlers’ seizure of their land.

The hierarchy between European settlers and Native Americans is also challenged through the film’s underscoring of the internal differences among white settlers. Not all of the European settlers hold a hostile or contemptuous attitude towards Native Americans. Glass used to live within the Pawnee tribe and made a family with a Pawnee woman. Although terrified by the Arikara, Bridger is friendly towards other Native Americans. After leaving Glass alive in the grave, Fitzgerald and Bridger come across a destroyed native village, where corpses of Native Americans, including a dead pregnant woman, lie everywhere. Bridger notices that there is still a woman alive in the destroyed village. To prevent Fitzgerald from killing her, he keeps silent and leaves her some food that might help her survive. In a conversation during this scene, Bridger asks Fitzgerald: “who did this?” Fitzgerald answers: “I don’t know. Could be Captain Leavenworth boys.” Fitzgerald then picks up a European pocket watch from the ground, which seems to confirm his guess that the settlers have committed this crime. The annihilation of the whole village prefigures the genocide and nearly total extermination of Native Americans. As noted, this violent excess was often supported by a civilizational rhetoric that identified European civilization with rationality, civility, cleanness, progress, and improvement, and cast Native Americans as irrational, underdeveloped, and primitive. This rhetoric is evoked and subverted through one of Fitzgerald’s comments about the corpses: “Look at them. They’re always stinking of shit.” Hygiene and smell are conventionally evoked as standards that distinguish civilization from savagery. “Indeed, we are not surprised by the idea of setting up the use of soap as an actual yardstick of civilization,” Freud writes in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* (Freud 40). Fitzgerald’s iteration of the colonial rhetoric of “clean” Europeans versus “dirty” Indians in a scene ridden with corpses of natives has the effect of metonymically transferring the “dirt” that Fitzgerald associates here with the “savage” natives to the deeds of the colonizers themselves. An ironic contrast is implicitly created between literal and metaphorical (moral) “dirt.” Even though Fitzgerald’s comment is not meant ironically at all, the viewer cannot possibly miss the irony of his statement in the context of this scene.

Another conversation, this time between captain Henry and Fitzgerald after both of them have arrived at Fort Kiowa safely, again iterates and simultaneously subverts colonial civilizational rhetoric. Captain Henry expects the arrival of Captain Leavenworth and his army so that there will be enough settlers to, in his words, “shoot some civilization into those fucking Arikara, get back our pelts.” In his statement, civilization is practically identified with the violence of colonialism—the bullets that, ironically, will not “civilize” the Arikara but will lead to their annihilation. The European “civilizing mission” therefore betrays its darker side; here, this violent side is not suggested as an exception to an otherwise civilized endeavour, but as an inherent part of civilization, thus also affirming the inextricability of modernity/coloniality, as decolonial thinkers

see it. In this scene, civilizational rhetoric is repeated and simultaneously overturned in the captain's statement. It is noteworthy that captain Henry is otherwise projected as one of the "good" or nobler white characters in the film (he is the one that hesitates to leave Glass behind, for example). His statement about "shooting civilization" into the Arikara is made when he is drunk and his rational faculties or civilizational restraints recede to make room for the his darker side. The violent side of colonialism, the film suggests here, is not an exception to be found in the behavior of only the "corrupt" or bad white characters, like Fitzgerald. Even "good" white characters, like captain Henry, are not innocent or free from the violent logic of coloniality, but carry this logic in their everyday practices and language. The pervasive *systemic* violence of capitalism, therefore, makes it impossible to talk about "good colonizers" and "bad colonizers."

The rigid boundaries between "savage" natives and civilized white men are also tested through the figure of Glass' son, Hawk, of mixed-blood, with a white father and a native mother. To survive among European settlers, Native Americans often had to remain invisible. Such invisibility "originates in Europe's earliest encounter with the Indian" (H. Brown 3). During their first encounter, for the European settlers, "great numbers of people [we]re less fortuitous than resources of gold or spices" and, thus, Native Americans were greatly ignored from their very first contact with Europeans (4). Although Hawk, being half white, should be visible, he is still ignored, but for different reasons. In a lesson Glass teaches his son on how to survive among the settlers, he puts emphasizes invisibility and silence. "I told you to be invisible, son... if you want to survive, keep your mouth shut." For Glass, the key is to "be invisible" which implies a lack of voice and of agency. As Hawk is unhappy with his father's advice, Glass feels the need to explain to Hawk the way white settlers see him: "They don't hear your voice! They just see the color of your face. You understand? Do you understand?... You have to listen to me, son. You have to listen." Glass knows well that it will be very difficult for Hawk to survive among the white settlers. Hawk is neither recognized as one of the white men nor seen as completely Native American. If in Western eyes the distinction between savage and civilized is ontologized and racialized, a character like Hawk, who does not fully belong to either race, threatens the rigidity of this binary as, in the binaries terms, he is illegible. As such, Hawk holds an in-between position that deprives him of agency and *demand*s invisibility. He functions like a ghost, whom the settlers treat as invisible but whose existence is also a reminder of the impossibility of establishing any pure opposition. Hawk's ghostly presence is a projection of the settlers' fear that the absolute binary they have established to legitimize their conquest of America and its natives is untenable; is always haunted by the threat of racial hybridity.

Most female Native American characters in *The Revenant* also remain voiceless, but not fully devoid of agency. Some native women live near the Fort, keeping the white settlers company while the latter drink and revel at the bar. These women are either presented as sex-objects, who are there to satisfy the settlers' sexual desires, or as servants, who help settlers mend clothes and fetch water. Both roles underscore their disempowerment and objectification by the settlers. Other native women—just like men—are shown to have fallen victim to the settlers' violence; Glass' wife, who is killed by European settlers, is a prime example. Yet, even though she is no longer alive in the



film's present, she keeps coming back as a ghost at crucial moments in Glass' adventure. She keeps returning in his dreams or hallucinations, giving Glass strength to go on. In her appearances, she does not look angry or sad—which would be justified by her violent murder at the hands of the colonizers—but retains a rather calm countenance. This appears to fit the stereotypical image of stoic and unsmiling Native American women depicted by, for example, Edward Curtis (1868-1952), an American ethnologist and photographer of Native American peoples. Yet, the graceful smile on her face that we can discern in some of these appearances forms a contrast with the above depictions. If Native American women in American films are often "admiring witnesses who regard White men as gods," here, most native women are witnesses to (or victims of) white men's violence, betrayal, lies, and crimes (Shohat and Stam 1994a, 64).

There are moments in the film, however, when female characters step out of their witness or victim positions and assume agency. A striking example is Elk Dog's daughter, who is kidnapped and used as a sex-slave by the French fur traders. As daughter of her tribe's chief, she may be regarded as a symbol of the tribe's future, carrying the hope of continuing the tribe's lineage. Her subjection to repeated rape may be taken as a metaphor for the illegitimate seizure of Native American land by colonizers. The rape brutally literalizes the white colonizers' penetration into, and destruction of, the Native Americans' ways of life, but also their "theft" of these tribes' futures. Later, with Glass' help, Elk Dog's daughter castrates and kills Toussaint, one of her rapists. Kidnapped, sexually abused, objectified, and treated as a sex slave, in the end she nevertheless assumes agency. Glass helps her escape but he leaves Toussaint's treatment to her; he does not kill him on her behalf. If he had done so, the Eurocentric narrative of women of color being saved by good white men would have been repeated and the assumption of women as powerless victims would have been confirmed too. Glass here refuses to fully occupy the position of the girl's savior, leaving Toussaint in her hands.

### *Coloniality of Nature*

In *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (2008), Arturo Escobar, a Colombian-American anthropologist, writes: "The concept of coloniality that has been applied to knowledge and power ... also applies to nature" (120). Escobar offers the following outline of the coloniality of nature:

Very schematically, the main features of the coloniality of nature ... include classification into hierarchies ("ethnological reason"), with nonmoderns, primitives, and nature at the bottom of the scale; essentialized views of nature as outside the human domain; the subordination of the body and nature to mind (Judeo-Christian traditions; mechanistic science; modern phallogocentrism); seeing the products of the earth as the products of labor only, hence subordinating nature to human-driven markets; locating certain natures (colonial and third world natures, women's bodies, dark bodies) outside of the totality of the male Eurocentric world; the subalternization of all other articulations of biology and history to modern regimes, particularly those that enact a continuity between the natural,

human, and supernatural worlds – or between being, knowing, and doing.  
(121)

For Escobar, the coloniality of nature manifests itself in various areas, including gender and race, and is thus intertwined with colonialities of power and of being. Since gender and race have already been discussed in the previous paragraphs, I will now examine how the coloniality of nature works in the film by contrasting the relationship of European settlers with nature to the attitude of Native Americans towards their natural environment. Colonial attitudes towards nature are typified by a perception of nature as undeveloped, outside the human domain, and subordinate to the human intellect—an object to be exploited. Under the matrix of the coloniality of nature, the idea that natural, human, and supernatural worlds are interdependent is negated and alternative biologies and histories—which may emphasize the continuity between nature, human beings, and the supernatural—are not recognized either.

The coloniality of nature is not only a central point of concern for decolonial thinkers but also within ecocritical studies (in fact, the two approaches often overlap). Ecocritic William Rueckert, for example, argues that “man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (113). The anthropocentric vision that typifies the Western rhetoric of modernity/coloniality justifies the conquest, domestication, violation and exploitation of nature. Western colonial logic “assumes the primacy of humans, who either sentimentalize or dominate the environment” (Martin 217-218). From an anthropocentric perspective, the natural environment is secondary while humans occupy the primary position as centers of a world that they (wish to) control.

In the film, the settlers’ exploitative relationship with nature forms a sharp contrast with Native Americans’ more reciprocal relationship. The aim of the fur trappers is to transport furs to the Fort in order to sell them. Their attempt to exploit natural resources places them in an antagonistic relation to nature; nature is an object they need to master and turn into a source of profit. The film, however, exposes the limitations of their anthropocentric vision and relation to nature by projecting a different vision of the human subject’s place in nature; extensive shots of the landscape—a grand valley, huge snowy mountains, gigantic rivers and waterfalls, the falling of bright stars, a large-scale buffalo migration, blizzards and storms—present us with a nature that resists the colonizers’ attempts to appropriate and master it. On their way to the Fort, for example, Glass and Hikuc have to go through a blizzard. After discovering that Henry has been killed and scalped by Fitzgerald, Glass witnesses an avalanche. This contrast between the power of man and that of nature also takes a concrete form in the scene where Glass is terribly mauled by a grizzly bear, eventually succumbing to the wild animal’s power. The film’s aesthetics thus go against the anthropocentrism of European coloniality and towards a more eco-critical perspective of the world. Nature here does not only function “as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama” (Glotfelty xxi). As a force with its own agency, nature is certainly not always compatible with, or reducible to, a human project. The film presents humans in extremely adverse

weather conditions and often casts them as small, vulnerable parts of the landscape. In these ways, *The Revenant* could be said to assume what certain critics have called a “biocentric” perspective, which “decenters humanity’s importance” and “explores the complex interrelationships between the human and the nonhuman” (Martin 218).

The film’s aesthetics thus undermine the coloniality of nature that typifies the settlers’ attitude. Its mode of representing nature and humans in nature seems more aligned with a Native American understanding of humans’ relation to nature, as it is cast in the film. Native Americans in Hollywood are customarily represented as seen from the perspective of Western characters. From this perspective, “Native Americans appear intruders on their own land” (Shohat and Stam 1994a, 119). Their murder is justified through their portrayal as aggressors or invaders. They are the obstacles in the way of white American settlers, who have, or are on their way to gaining, mastery over the new lands. What stands out in *The Revenant*, however, is the white settlers’ unfamiliarity with the landscape; they desperately need a guide (Glass) to find their way in a hostile environment. When captain Henry has to lead his men on his own after Glass is injured, he seems uncertain about the route to be followed and frightened by the vast and unfamiliar landscape that stretches before them. The settlers seem to be at the mercy of harsh weather conditions, unable to master nature or defend themselves against the attacks of the Arikara. The foggy, gloomy atmosphere that surrounds them on their journey to the Fort, the tall, straight trees that seem to hold a mysterious force, hiding perhaps the Arikara who, like ghosts, can appear suddenly and attack: all this conveys the impression that the land is haunted. The fur trappers seem to know that “the land is haunted because it is stolen” (Bergland 9). They are thus cast as the “intruders,” unable to assert the kind of control over the land and its peoples that defines Eurocentric narratives of colonization (and their reproduction in Hollywood cinema).

The settlers appear in a certain sense more vulnerable and foreign to their surroundings than Native Americans; as outsiders in this world, they are terrified of “the Ree” (the Arikara), whose bows and arrows can be more effective than their guns. As the Native Americans appear much better equipped to function in the natural environment than the settlers, the European one-directional evolutionary narrative according to which humans progress from a state of nature to modern European society is challenged. In this reversal of the hierarchy between settlers and natives, the settlers are cast as the (unwanted) guests, while the Native Americans know the land quite well and follow a way of life that allows them to adjust to the harsh natural environment. After escaping from the Arikara, Glass, who has adopted Native American ways, builds a small wall with stones, catches a fish with his own hands, and eats it raw. Hikuc knows how to retrieve buffalo meat from the mouths of wolves. The Native Americans make fire by sparking flints. Sometimes nature poses a danger to their lives and sometimes it turns out to be a protective force, as when Glass hides within the carcass of a horse to keep warm and survive a blizzard. Native Americans know how to use nature to their benefit, without exhausting its resources or radically modifying it. They even make use of nature to heal illnesses. Hikuc, realizing that Glass is in danger of dying from his infected wounds, builds a hut for him and places maggots on his wounds to clean them. After a night in this hut, Glass seems to recover completely. The maggots eat the swollen part of his body.

This kind of bio-surgery is a unique way of healing among Native Americans. Once they start to travel again, Hikuc also shows Glass how to taste snow, a gesture that suggests an intimate relationship between humans and nature. This relation poses as an alternative to the settlers' exploitative attitudes.

The relation of man to nature as a central motif in the film was also foregrounded by DiCaprio in his 2016 Oscar speech: "Making 'The Revenant,'" he said, "was about man's relationship to the natural world."<sup>6</sup> In his speech, DiCaprio called for more attention to climate change—"the most urgent threat facing our entire species." He added: "We need to support leaders around the world who do not speak for the big polluters, but who speak for all of humanity, for the indigenous people of the world, for the billions and billions of underprivileged people out there who would be most affected by this." DiCaprio's call for an ethics of care and respect for nature was issued in direct opposition to the coloniality of nature, so typical of the colonialist conquest of foreign lands but also of current neoliberal practices of natural exploitation and destruction.

### *Coloniality of Knowledge*

Compared with the coloniality of power—as it materialized in colonial conquest, oppression, appropriation of land, and exploitation of labor—the imposition of Eurocentric modes of knowing works in more indirect but perhaps more persistent ways. The category of coloniality of knowledge involves the imposition of Euro-American epistemology, its patterns of expression, and its beliefs and images. In this section, I will focus particularly on the role of religion, as Western Christianity played a pivotal role in determining the epistemological paradigm that accompanied colonial domination. Referring to the convergence of knowledge and capital in the sixteenth century (and afterwards), Mignolo writes: "*The control of knowledge in Western Christendom belonged to Western Christian men, which meant the world would be conceived only from the perspective of Western Christian Men*" (emphasis in the original) (2007, 478). "Whatever did not fit the religious and moral standards set by Christianity, in terms of faith and physique," Mignolo continues, "was cast out of the standard of humanity" (479). Indeed, as Christianity was believed to encompass humanity as a whole, non-Christians were often excluded from the sphere of the human, as Anthony Pagden also notes, "And since for early-modern Christians the *communitas christianae* was the heir to the Greek *oikumene*, the community of man, exclusion from that community implies a species of non-existence" (Pagden 7). Native Americans, of course, had their own religious systems, which included beliefs about the afterlife, ghosts, and the soul. Their religious belief systems and epistemologies, however, could be dismissed by European epistemology and the imperatives of Euro-Christian modernity, because, again, Native Americans were regarded as savages or (often) as non-human.

Mignolo writes on the epistemological problem that the existence and diversity of Native Americans posed to their colonizers:

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<sup>6</sup> See <<http://oscar.go.com/news/winners/watch-leonardo-dicaprios-acceptance-speech-for-best-actor-2016>>.

... in the sixteenth century a concept of *race* emerged at the intersection of faith, knowledge and skin color. ... In the New World, the surfacing of the “Indians” (people speaking myriad languages among them Aymara, Quechua, Guaraní, Nahuatl, various dialects of Maya roots, as dissected and classified since the nineteenth century by Western linguists), created a crisis in Christian knowledge as to what kind of “being” the “Indians” would have in the Christian chain of beings? Since Indians did not fit the standard model set by White Christian Men and did not themselves have the legitimacy to classify people around the world, they were declared inferior by those who had the authority to determine who was who. (2007, 479)

The exclusion of “Indians” from humanity, Mignolo argues, was often justified by the conviction that “the Indians did not have ‘religions’ and whatever they believed was considered to be the work of the Devil. Also, they did not have alphabetic writing and so were considered people without history”—so they were both savage (here, history-less) and evil (479). In the following, I will discuss how the coloniality of knowledge, mainly as it takes form through the imperatives of Christianity, takes effect in the lives of both the American settlers and Native Americans in *The Revenant*.

Fitzgerald’s seemingly paradoxical attitude towards Christianity exposes some of the problematics of the selective application of this belief system in the context of the colonial project. While he regularly evokes Christianity for his own benefit, in some instances he outright mocks it. He uses Christianity as an excuse to cover his guilt and justify his crime. When Bridger wonders whether they did the right thing leaving Glass alive in the grave, Fitzgerald answers affirmatively that “Good Lord’s got us on the road, whether we chose or not.” His evocation of God helps him renounce his personal responsibility in tricking Bridger into leaving Glass behind to die (by convincing him that they had been spotted by the Arikara and their lives were in danger). Paradoxically, Christian rhetoric is here used to justify a crime that could not have been justified by Christianity’s moral code. This hypocritical use of religious rhetoric hints at the problematic ways Christianity was mobilized in the colonial project. Its moral imperatives were selectively applied and variously interpreted in order to serve the ideological demands of colonialism—coloniality of knowledge in the service of coloniality of power. Later on, in a conversation with Bridger, this hypocritical use of religion is underlined even more emphatically, as Fitzgerald deflates and ridicules Christianity altogether. He starts telling a story about how his father found God when faced with difficult circumstances: robbed of his horses by Native Americans, starving and delirious. At the anti-climactic end of the story Fitzgerald reveals that the God his father found was just “a squirrel.”

While Christian rhetoric is largely deflated in the film, even by white characters like Fitzgerald, viewers are often presented with images that take them towards other epistemologies and belief systems. The film is replete with magical images and visions that cannot be appropriated and explained by European epistemology and its rationalist structures. Instead, they seem to belong to a mode of understanding the world akin to

magical realism: a genre and mode of expression that has been particularly popular in Latin American literature.

An oxymoronic phrase, “magical realism” describes a combination of reality and fantasy. In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004), Wendy Faris investigates magical realism as a prominent trend in contemporary international fiction, charting its characteristics and narrative techniques. “Magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them” (Faris 1). By combining realistic representation with fantastic elements, magical realism destabilizes a dominant form of realism based on empirical definitions of reality. Magical realism does not entail an absolute rejection or overturning of the conventions of realism, but plays with and challenges them through fantasy. As such, magical realism can be mobilized in literary texts or films as a challenge to Eurocentric perspectives, which are often marked by strict distinctions between reality and fantasy, the natural and supernatural. Faris argues:

... to adopt magical realism, with its irreducible elements that question that dominant discourse [of realism], constitutes a kind of liberating poetics... Because magical realism often gives voice in the thematic domain to indigenous or ancient myths, legends, and cultural practices, and in the domain of narrative technique to the literary traditions that express them with the use of non-realistic events images, it can be seen as a form of narrative primitivism. (103)

The “irreducible elements” of magical realist literature—or, in our case, film—transgress the boundaries of Western discourse, whether these boundaries are ontological, political, or epistemic. This kind of art has the political potential to disrupt the status quo, re-imagine history, destabilize established structures of power, and move towards an alternative understanding of reality.

This is why magical realism has also been explored for its contribution to postcolonial critiques of Western imperialism. As Stephen Slemon argues, magical realist texts or films “comprise a positive and liberating engagement with the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity” (422). Magical realism can problematize Eurocentric discourses by providing an alternative framework, which may either explain what remains unexplainable by European/Christian epistemologies or re-explains what has been explained by Eurocentric discourses differently. Because of its capacity to provide alternative visions and “realities,” magical realism has served as an effective decolonizing agent, offering alternative means of expression to those oppressed by coloniality, the dispossessed, the silenced, and the marginalized.

Magic images in the film that do not comply with Western realistic conventions can be associated with Native American mythologies and belief systems. In one of Glass’ flashbacks, taking us back to a moment before the colonizers’ attack that destroyed the native community he was part of, we see his son Hawk play with a bird, which rests on his hand. In the same flashback, which is focalized by Glass, we move to an image of

Glass' dead wife after the attack has taken place and watch a small bird crawl out of the bullet wound on her chest. Later, after Hawk has been stabbed to death by Fitzgerald, we can discern the feathers and head of a small dead bird lying beside the heavily injured Glass. These images of the little bird could be understood in relation to a bird ritual of the Pawnee people, a peace and friendship ritual known as the "Hako or calumet of peace." In this ritual, "The birds represent the gods and the people; one sees the flocks afar off, flying and calling; they come sweeping across the sky, circling, alighting; and at the center of the great ceremony are the calumet stems, adorned from end to end with feathers and bird heads" (Hyde 24). We know that birds had a symbolic meaning for many Native American tribes and often functioned as omens (24). The appearance of the bird from Glass' wife's bosom is a magic realist element that also seems invested with symbolism—a sign, perhaps of the wife's rebirth or the attachment of her soul to the bird, which signals her afterlife. The little bird seems to suggest that death is not an end. This does not conform with a Christian understanding of the afterlife, however; the rebirth of the bird, which is suggested as part of Glass' memory, indicates a form of afterlife that is not located in a separate, invisible, supernatural realm (paradise or hell) but in the same world, the world of the living. This suggests a living-with-the-dead in our world—a living *with* ghosts—which echoes Native American beliefs.

Whereas the idea of reincarnation is usually associated with Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, it is also prevalent among Native Americans, although it is impossible to make valid generalizations about the complexity of Native American beliefs. In *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit*, a collection of essays by anthropologists and one psychiatrist, we can see how the concept of reincarnation varies among different Native American societies during different periods. In the book's introduction, Antonia Mills admits the complexity of beliefs around reincarnation and argues that many scholars who work on Native Americans find it difficult to generalize on this topic. Different from reincarnation in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes salvation and transcendence, the concept of reincarnation among Native Americans emphasizes a "returning to terrestrial life" (Mills 17). Its ethics is "based on the premise of the equality of human consciousness with that of other species of animals, fish, and fowl" (17).

The image of the dead bird later on in the film, which is a symbol for Hawk's death, not only suggests the violent destruction of Native Americans by the settlers, but also the attempted destruction of Native American epistemologies and systems of belief. The coloniality of knowledge enters the film in this image of the dead bird, a forceful visualization of such coloniality's consequences: the annihilation of Native American communities (the bird's corpse) and of the "afterlives" of their belief systems (the bird is not reborn in this scene). Going against the finality of this destruction, however, the film also counterprojects images of the bird's rebirth in the previously discussed scene with Glass' wife. These magical realist images, which suggest an alternative reality, signal the continued presence of Native American epistemologies, which haunt their executioners even after the destruction of native communities.

#### 4.4 Decolonial Moments: The Disenchantment of Eurocentrism

By probing *The Revenant's* engagement with the above four aspects of coloniality—power, being, nature, and knowledge—I have tried to show how the logic of coloniality and the rhetoric of “civilization” are addressed in the film. The film shows the logic of coloniality at work in different practices and attitudes, including the oppositional hierarchies within Euro-American epistemology that determine the settlers’ relationship to Native Americans (in terms of civilized/savage) and to the natural environment (in terms subject/object). However, it also disrupts and deconstructs these binaries; the brutality of the settlers’ practices, for example, weakens the credibility of the signifier “savage” when applied to the Native Americans. “Savage,” furthermore, is used in contradictory ways, causing confusion and destabilizing the certainty with which it is mobilized in colonialist rhetoric. Although the settlers keep using the term exclusively for the Native Americans, an ironic twist is created when the signifier “civilization” is tainted by connotations of violence (as when Henry tells Fitzgerald that he plans to “shoot some civilization into those fucking Arikara”). Apart from this ironic destabilization of the dynamic between the two concepts, the inscription “we are all savages” on the board that hangs from the dead Hikuc’s neck delinks the term from particular groups of people and attaches it to a certain kind of violent behavior that (potentially) typifies all human beings (and particularly Hikuc’s executioners).

The film, however, does not limit itself to a critical, deconstructive restaging of colonial oppositions and practices: it also confronts the logic of coloniality and its oppositions with alternative ways of looking at others and the world, many of which are inspired by Native American worldviews. In the last section, on coloniality of knowledge, I discussed some of the ways in which the film challenges Eurocentric epistemology with alternative visions. In this part, I continue along the same lines, close reading certain pivotal moment in the film which I designate “decolonial moments”: moments in which an alternative logic and knowledge is enacted that signals a delinking from colonial logic, and moments in which Native Americans seem to assert their own subject-status, delinking their vision from the gaze of the colonized. These moments, I argue, can be considered involved in the project of decolonizing knowledge—the “delinking” that Mignolo and other decolonial thinkers envisage. As Mignolo puts it:

Decolonization of knowledge shall be understood in the constant double movement of unveiling the geo-political location of theology, secular philosophy and scientific reason and simultaneously *affirming the modes and principles of knowledge that have been denied by the rhetoric of Christianization, civilization, progress, development, market democracy.* (emphasis added, 2007, 463)

Decolonization (which in the above quote does not refer to the *historical* process but to “decoloniality” as an attitude in an ongoing process) exposes the cultural and geopolitical specificity of European theology, philosophy, and reason, thereby undoing their universalist aspirations. At the same time, it acknowledges and promotes



alternative modes of knowing suppressed by the rhetoric of modernity.

The film's title, *The Revenant*, projects the theme of returning from the dead to take revenge as the focal point of the narrative. Revenge narratives are popular in Hollywood. They offer a rather conventional narrative structure centered around the correction of an injustice that leads to the restoration of justice and (moral) order, offering catharsis and resolution. Such a narrative structure was also employed recently by Tarantino (after *Inglorious Basterds*, which is also a revenge film of sorts), in *Django Unchained* (2012), as a way of restaging the history of slavery, but in a way that aims to "restore" this historical trauma through the cathartic effect of revenge; the black slave comes back to reclaim his family and kill his masters. *The Revenant* is, on one level, also a narrative of revenge. Nevertheless, its treatment of this theme complicates and problematizes the conventional (Hollywood) structures of the revenge-narrative. The film in fact questions the revenge-narrative as an effective means of restoring justice for past crimes (here, the crime of colonialism against the Native Americans) by juxtaposing the European idea of revenge with other modes of dealing with a traumatic past. For example, while Glass thirsts for revenge, Hikuc, the Pawnee man, has another attitude towards those who have killed all his loved ones and destroyed his world (the Sioux). Instead of seeking revenge, he chooses to leave revenge in the creator's hands, as he tells Glass, and decides to go south in order to find more Pawnees and start a new life. Hikuc's attitude creates a sharp contrast with that of Glass, for whom killing Fitzgerald for the murder of his son has become a singular goal. Revenge as the restoring of a past violence with more violence is therefore questioned through this alternative vision, which does have a deep impact on Glass, as we find out at the very end of the film. After his final violent fight with Fitzgerald, Glass refuses to finish him off, remembering Hikuc's words: "revenge is in the creator's hands." For Glass, this means leaving Fitzgerald in the hands of the Arikara, who have suffered even greater injustice at the hands of the colonizers. The Arikara killing Fitzgerald can still be seen as a form of revenge, of course. Nevertheless, Glass' decision to forgo his own right to revenge shifts our initial interpretation of the title. Rather than a story of personal revenge, this becomes a story about a haunting historical and systemic injustice that has to be restored—that of colonialism. Glass' words—"revenge is in the creator's hands"—notably cast the subsequent killing of Fitzgerald by the Arikara as an act of higher justice. Not only does Hikuc embody an alternative attitude to revenge but, more generally, an ethics of hospitality, responsibility, and care for the other, even if this other does not belong to one's own family or group. Hikuc helps Glass, willing to share his meat and travel with him. They both carry the burden of loss, as this Pawnee man has lost all his family members. Because he has a horse, he could travel much faster than if he walks with the wounded man, but he nevertheless chooses to stay with Glass and take care of him. When Glass becomes weaker, Hikuc chooses to walk and lets Glass ride the horse. Travelling with Glass slows down his mission (to find other Pawnees), which may be what leads to his demise at the hands of the French traders. His ethics of hospitality and responsibility for others, however, compels him to stay with Glass rather than leave him behind, as the other fur trappers did.

In her study of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribes in *Women of the Earth Lodges:*

*Tribal Life on the Plains* (1995), Virginia Bergman Peters stresses this attitude of responsibility for others as typifying these tribes: their “*responsibility* for – rather than authority over – others, ... *linkage*, not dominance, seems to be the system by which the village agricultural tribes... lived, and that ... has helped them survive to this day” (167). That this responsibility “helped them survive to his day” acquires, of course, a bitterly ironic undertone in the context of the film, as it is likely this very attitude that gets Hikuc killed. However, his alternative ethics does manage to shake the perverse logic of violence as a means of restoring injustice, so dominant in Eurocentric discourse.

Hikuc’s death, then, does not undo the power of his alternative ethics. The idea of physical death as an end is more generally challenged in the film. Glass’ wife, as already discussed, appears as a ghostly apparition at key moments in his journey, contradicting the idea that the dead disappear from this world. Once, the fleeting image of Glass’ wife seems to warn him about the approaching Arikara, making him wake up on time to escape. At the beginning of the film, we witness a mourning ritual of the Arikara, who also lose many of their people in their brutal fight with the fur trappers. An old Arikara man, a shaman perhaps, murmurs something while wandering around the field of the dead. There are no subtitles available, but he seems to be talking to the souls of the dead. Such images suggest another understanding of death in Native American societies. Indeed, for the Pawnee, death does not mean the end, but is regarded as transportation to another state, “a transition to a portal beyond space and time” (Hemingway 57-58). Native Americans in general believe that the soul remains after the body is dead. Dead people are not devoid of agency, as they are still among us like ghosts, able to affect the living. In the film, dead natives such as Glass’ wife, Hawk, and others killed by settlers, keep haunting the living. The settlers sense their haunting presence, which is perhaps why Fitzgerald once warns Bridger: “You put some eyes on the back of your head. These Indians ain’t never as dead as you’ll think they are.”

The continued presence of dead Native Americans is also underscored in the film through echoes of their voices. At the very beginning of *The Revenant*, the camera moves over the faces of a series of dead Native Americans (later, we understand this to be a scene from the destruction of Glass’ village). Their peaceful faces suggest that they may be asleep rather than dead. We then hear the following in the Pawnee language: “It’s okay, son... I know you want this to be over. I will be right here... But, you don’t give up. You hear me? As long as you can still grab a breath, you fight. You breath... keep breathing.” We have no idea who the speaker is or where “here” is. The fleeting images from Glass’ past, showing the destruction of the native village, allow us to infer that “this” refers to the violent crimes committed by the settlers against the Pawnee. The “here” may refer to the destroyed village or the inner mind of the “son” to which the voice is speaking. This prophetic-sounding voice already prepares us for the resilience of the voices of the dead, who will keep accompanying the living. We hear the same voice again after Glass is mauled by the bear. This time, his son Hawk keeps talking to him in the Pawnee language: “Can you hear that wind, father? Remember what mother used to say about the wind? The wind cannot defeat a tree with strong roots. You are still breathing... I miss her so much.” Hawk encourages his father to be like “a tree with strong roots,” which cannot be defeated by the wind. Glass hears his wife’s voice again

when he is in a coma, lying in the hut Hikuc builds: “I will be right here... I’m right here. As long as you can still grab a breath, you fight. You breathe. Keep breathing. When there is a storm... And you stand in front of a tree... if you look at its branches, you swear it will fall. But you watch the trunk, you will see its stability. It’s okay, son...” Later, after Hawk is stabbed to death, Glass talks to him using the same words: “I’m not leaving you, son. I’m right here.” The repetition of these—not identical, always in different variations—confirms the logic of haunting, which is based on a perpetual coming back. But contrary to ghost-stories of revenge, the kind of haunting suggested in the above examples is a welcome one; it is a haunting that reassures those in danger that what they have lost still lives and is able to give them strength.

The metaphor of the tree, which is central in the above Pawnee saying, is also motivated by Native American epistemologies, which attribute personhood to animals and other cosmic elements. “All animals and cosmic constituents are intensively and virtually persons, because all of them, no matter which, can reveal themselves to be (transform into) a person. This is not a simple logical possibility but an ontological potentiality” (de Castro 57). Ontologically, everything in the universe is a person or can be transformed into a person. Here, we may take the tree not only as an abstract metaphor; the vividness of the evoked image seems to transform the tree into a person with a message for Glass and other Pawnees. The Pawnee saying certainly suggests a strong connection between humans and their natural environment in that it imagines a person as a tree with strong roots that persists in the face of danger and does not easily give up or lose stability; yet, it also seems to construct a contrast between vulnerability—the branches seem vulnerable to the wind—and strength—the trunk of the tree is stable. The tension between the vulnerable branches and the strong trunk implies that, although the Pawnee are vulnerable (defeated in battle, decimated by colonizers), their traditions and cosmology will survive, just like the trunk.

If sayings like the one discussed above, which can be ascribed to a Pawnee worldview, seem inspired by, or in tune with, the natural environment in which the action takes place, the doctrines of Christianity seem out of place in this territory. This implicit contrast between Christian and Native American cosmologies becomes manifest in a particular scene, in which Glass, after falling asleep in Hikuc’s hut, dreams of an abandoned church full of faded icons depicting Christian saints, and images from hell and paradise involving demons and angels. Unlike the grandiose churches of Europe, this church is deserted and its walls severely damaged. The church is a relic, and this relic seems to suggest that Christianity is out of place in this wild territory; the European civilizing mission, based on transmitting Christian doctrines to the natives in order to save them, acquires an ironic undertone through this image. The ruined church cannot belong to the narrative’s past; it can be seen as a future ghost, prefiguring the bankruptcy of the European civilizing project in the Americas. The church stands alone and deserted, unconvincing as a symbol of faith, without promise of salvation: an object that—unlike the strong tree in the Native American saying—has not proven able to find fertile ground and grow strong in this land.

This dream-image also involves more elements that set up a complex dialogue between European and Native American worldviews. On one of the church walls, we see

an image of a crucifix. As the camera moves, we discern a lamb standing right in front of the crucifix. In the Bible, the lamb is a symbol of Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself to redeem humanity. This biblical symbolism, however, does not work seamlessly or unambiguously in this scene; contrary, perhaps, to (Western Christian) viewers' expectations, this sacrificial lamb is black, suggesting, perhaps, Native Americans and other people of color as the victims sacrificed at the "altar" of Euro-Christian modernity. This allusion introduces racial discrimination into the heart of a Western Christian narrative that poses as inclusive of all humanity. The contradictions in the way colonialism used Western Christian epistemology as a means of dominating others are thereby brought to the foreground.

As this scene proceeds, we see that the black lamb has changed into Glass' son Hawk, who is coming to embrace Glass. This may allude to the Biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac. In Genesis 22: 1-19, Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham is willing to obey God's order and to sacrifice his son, but is interrupted in the end by an angel that replaces his son with a sacrificial ram (*New International Version*). In the film's scene, a reverse transformation seems to have taken place. The black lamb changes into Hawk, whose in-between position as neither white nor Pawnee also puts the holiness and purity of the burnt offering into question. Hawk, the excluded and illegible other of colonialism's racial hierarchies, poses here as the actual sacrificial victim of the Christian narrative. In this way, the biblical narrative becomes violently tainted through its association with the "sacrifice" and eradication of Native Americans in the name of Christianity and religion. In the end, we see Hawk changing into a towering tree and Glass kneeling down, looking at the trunk of the tree—a direct allusion to the aforementioned Pawnee saying.

In a series of transformations or allegorical equivalences, this scene changes Christ on the cross into the black lamb, which then changes into Hawk, who then changes into a tree. In these transformations, Christian epistemology is being gradually replaced by a Native American perspective on the world. Thus, even though the scene confronts us with the sacrifice of Native Americans in the name of Christianity (a sacrifice that ends differently than Abraham's story, as God does not intervene to save them), the transformations in this scene allegorically contradict this death, showing Native American epistemologies outliving the Christian narrative.

Equivalences are constructed between Biblical narratives and Native American beliefs as well as between characters in the film and Biblical characters, such as the crucifix and the lamb, Isaac and Hawk, but these equivalences are never complete; Christian narratives are "contaminated" by Native American epistemologies as well as by their own darker, exclusionary sides, and do not emerge unscathed from the juxtapositions this scene performs. Just as the church in this scene is severely damaged, so are the modes of understanding the world associated with (modern Europe's appropriation of) Christianity, deprived of their coherence and universalism. They succumb to the weight of their internal contradictions, exposed through this encounter with alterity (epitomized in Hawk, the black lamb, the outsider who is also an insider); inclusion in Christianity is concomitant with exclusion, peace concomitant with violence, self-sacrifice and altruism concomitant with the sacrifice of (savage, inferior) others. At

the same time, this scene which witnesses the transformation from a lamb to Hawk to a tree, also reflects the idea of reincarnation by Native Americans that I discussed earlier.

The dream-scene in the church can, finally, be viewed as an attempted translation, in which a series of elements from Euro-Christian and Native American epistemologies “translate” each other and transform in the process. The question of translation in the encounter between European and Native American cosmologies is a central one among cultural anthropologists. Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro admits that the main task of cultural anthropology is translation, while he points out that “The real problem is to know precisely what translation can or should be, and how to undertake it” (87). For him, “Good translation succeeds at allowing foreign concepts to deform and subvert the conceptual apparatus of the translator such that the *intentio* of the original language can be expressed through and thus transform that of the destination. *Translation, betrayal ... transformation*” (87).

If colonialism proceeds by a logic of translation, translating the other’s language or culture as a means of appropriation and control—deciphering the other’s language as a means of eradicating its alterity and subordinating it to the “language” of the self—the translation that takes place in *The Revenant* proceeds by a different logic. The translation that takes place in the church scene is never complete, since the resulting “equivalences” never yield coherent, unequivocal narratives. Furthermore, this translation draws attention to the internal alterity—the difference within—the “original” language: those elements or subjects that the Euro-Christian framework includes by excluding, its repressed others. It is also remarkable that this “translation” does not aim at translating the indigenous perspective into a Eurocentric framework, but follows a reverse process; Euro-Christian narratives are eventually “translated” into Native American frameworks, with the tree as the final element in the scene’s series of transformations. Through this process, these Euro-Christian narratives are radically transformed. It is also significant to note that this scene’s “translation” foregrounds both the proximity, intertwinement, and intimate encounter of these frameworks and their incommensurability, their ineradicable difference.

## Conclusion

Like a ghost, the figure of the savage takes different forms—such as the noble savage, animal-like savage, and ignoble savage—and keeps renewing itself through every appearance. This is perhaps one of the reasons why, in Western discourse, the ghost-like savage, being uncontrollable and sometimes even unpredictable and incomprehensible, is a frequently used term to describe Native Americans.

Native Americans were often described as ghosts in colonial rhetoric; they were reduced to ghost-figures, as their subjectivity was frequently questioned and denied. “When European Americans speak of Native Americans,” Bergland writes, “they always use the language of ghostliness” (1). The reduction of Native Americans to ghosts justifies (and confirms) their dispossession by Europeans (4). Yet, the ghost is an ambiguous figure in the context of coloniality, signifying not only disempowerment and loss of subjectivity, but also an alternative form of empowerment and agency. Thus, the

figure of the Native American ghost also has the power to challenge the logic of coloniality. As Marx declares in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, “A specter is haunting Europe” (203). “This European ghost, the specter of Communism, is clearly a political entity, a disembodied figure that represents political and economic power relations within a context of emergent nationalism” (Bergland 7). Different from this European ghost, American ghosts include “ghosts of African American slaves and Indians as well as disfranchised women and struggling workers” (7). All these “described and imagined” ghosts “were those whose existence challenged developing structures of political and economic power” (7). “Europeans take possession of Native American lands,” but at the same time Native Americans “take supernatural possession of their dispossessors” (3). Making sure that the history of “murders, looted graves, illegal land transfers, and disruptions of sovereignty” is never forgotten or settled, they keep haunting the European settlers, taking possession of their minds and imagination (8). Both “guilt over the dispossession of Indians and fear of their departed spirits” keep haunting the European settlers (19).

Indeed, as my analysis of *The Revenant* has hopefully shown, the figure of the Native American ghost functions as a force that resists coloniality's annihilation and suppression of the voices of others, signaling the continued active presence of the past in the present. As (magically) real presences in the film, Native American ghosts also embody a different conception of the relation between life and death that defies the rigidity of this opposition in Western thought. That is, in the alternative vision that the film projects, the ghosts of the dead are not just metaphorical or immaterial, but *real* presences among the living, invested with agency; they extend warnings, provide consolation, give strength, or project an alternative ethical stance. In this context it is notable that in Dutch “revenant” does not have one equivalent term but is translated as “zichtbare geest,” which is: *visible ghost*.<sup>7</sup> As part of another world but also an integral part of “this” world, ghosts confront Eurocentric epistemology with an alternative way of being and knowing, another way of relating to the past and to loss and trauma. As such, they can be seen as agents of the kind of delinking from coloniality that Mignolo and other decolonial thinkers envision.

This delinking takes a more concrete and powerful form in the final scene of Iñárritu's film, in which the gaze of Native Americans is prominently staged. In this scene, the Arikara pass by Glass on their horses without harming him (as the viewer might have expected, given their previous violent attacks). As they ride by, they seem indifferent to Glass' existence. They ignore him. We see Powaqqa, the Arikara chief's daughter who has been retrieved, riding on a horse with them. Of course, the chief's withdrawal from a conflict with Glass can be easily motivated from a plot-perspective; Glass has contributed to saving the chief's daughter. We may assume that since the motivation for their attacks is removed—the daughter is back—they have less reason to engage with Glass through violence.

Yet, the powerful aesthetics of this scene function on a different level. If this is taken as a narrative of revenge, as the title connotes, the viewer might expect the final conflict between Glass and Fitzgerald to represent the film's climax and restore our sense of

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<sup>7</sup> The title of the film in Chinese is *HuangYe LieRen*, which means “the hunter in the wildness.”

justice. The *denouement*, however, does not involve catharsis, a sense of satisfaction, or restoration of a moral order (in the way that a film like *Django Unchained* does); there is, in my view, no sense that history is somehow made right through this conflict. This may also be why some critics considered the film's ending to be "curiously unmoving" (von Tunzelmann).<sup>8</sup> Glass seems desolate, indeed empty, in this final scene. Fitzgerald's death has failed to alleviate the pain of the loss of his son, and has now also deprived him of a sense of purpose, since his enemy is gone. By betraying our expectations, the final scene redirects us to the indifferent gaze of the Arikara, which becomes the crux of the scene. Their refusal to validate or reciprocate the protagonist's gaze as they turn away from him decenters Glass as the film's protagonist. Their disregard for Glass (a white character, let us not forget) signals a break with Western literary and filmic narratives in which Native Americans commonly gain their identity—whether good, bad, or ambiguous—only through their juxtaposition and contrast with white characters. What we see in the end is an attempted representation of Native Americans as subjects in their own right, no longer defined only in relation to the Western gaze. The last scene, I argue, constitutes an attempt to break away from the Settler/Native Americans opposition by rejecting the opposition itself as constitutive of their respective subjectivities. Their procession signals a turning away from *revenge*—which involves an inability to *de-link* from the logic of the enemy and oppressor—towards an ethics of withdrawal from the colonizer's logic and gaze, echoing the decolonial project of delinking from the matrix of modernity and coloniality.

However, this scene also confirms the logic of haunting as a force that never rests and keeps coming back without offering a sense of resolution, as revenge narratives commonly do. The Native Americans who walk by, we realize, are real and yet they are also ghosts; the film has offered us a glimpse of the future of their annihilation (the destroyed villages) and therefore we may also see their final procession as a procession of ghosts—a march of the walking dead. Yet, if these real presences also function as ghosts from the future, their affective force on the viewer is all the more powerful. There is neither catharsis for Glass, nor for the viewer, who has to face the fact that, although history can and should be revisited, this revisiting cannot erase the violence of the past by creating a coherent narrative that moves along the lines of revenge, catharsis, and resolution. This operation of the ghost as a force that always lingers in historical narratives—a trace of what is silenced or absent, never allowing history to "rest"—speaks to the operations of deconstruction, as well as to postcolonial approaches to history: attempts to break up dominant historical narratives by listening to the voices of the dead, the oppressed, the (formerly) colonized. These ghosts are also, perhaps, a reminder that the *delinking* decolonial thinkers envisage cannot be a complete project; those other epistemologies, narratives, and worldviews that the film projects as alternatives to Eurocentric frameworks are also haunted by the logic of coloniality, which still needs to be staged in order for it to be deconstructed, opposed, ironized. With this in mind, the film's final scene can be understood to perform a delinking from coloniality without, however, letting go of the critical project of a poststructuralist, deconstructive critique of colonial logic, the logic that ontologizes and essentializes savages and

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<sup>8</sup> See <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/20/reel-history-the-revenant-leonardo-dicaprio>>.

civilized. This haunting balancing act, I believe, is an essential part of Iñárritu's film.