Movie Review: Wind River It Addresses Violence Against Native Women, Law Enforcement & Other Issues, But Mostly It’s About Relationships

Darla W. Jackson
Movie Review: *Wind River*

It Addresses Violence Against Native Women, Law Enforcement & Other Issues, But Mostly It’s About Relationships

By Darla Jackson, Oklahoma Bar Association Practice Management Advisor

*Wind River* is a chilling thriller that follows a rookie FBI agent (Elizabeth Olsen) who teams up with a local game tracker with deep community ties and a haunted past (Jeremy Renner) to investigate the murder of a local girl on a remote Native American Reservation in the hopes of solving her mysterious death.¹

While the above is a succinct plot summary for the film, *Wind River* is a film that is much more than just a simplistic murder thriller. In fact, there are those that believe that the writer and director as well as the actors in *Wind River* gave Oscar worthy performances² or at least the best performances of their careers.³ Some have opined that despite the merits of the film, efforts to cut ties with the Weinstein Company, and contribution of royalties to the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center⁴, the film was overlooked for real Oscar consideration because of the controversy surrounding the disgraced Weinstein.⁵

Some critics of the film have also criticized the fact that the film is focused around “a Native American story” but is written by and told primarily with “white main characters.”⁶ Even though *Wind River* stars well-known Canadian First Nations actor, Graham Greene, and several actors of indigenous descent including Gil Birmingham (Comanche), Julia Jones (Choctaw, Chickasaw, and African American), Tantoo Cardinal (Metis descent), Martin Sensmeier (Tlingit, Koyukon-Athabascan and Irish descent), Tokala Clifford (Oglala Lakota actor from Pine Ridge) and Kelsey Asbille (disputed Eastern Band Cherokee), it is “difficult to escape the fact that the person telling this story is a non-Native. Critics have noted that, while *Wind River* features excellent performances from a number of actors of Native American heritage, most notably Gil Birmingham as a grieving father, the film’s protagonists – the ones coming to the rescue of the reservation – are both white.”⁷ Yet, even those making this criticism note that “the movie does make a point of sending a message about the shameful fact that -- unlike women in any other culture -- Native American women who go missing aren’t tracked or counted.”⁸ And Sheridan gets the message across “with compassion and without preaching.”⁹

However, others aren’t so sure that the message is clear.

At the end of *Wind River*, the major-film directorial debut of Taylor Sheridan, we are informed that no records are kept of how many Native American women go missing each year. It is an odd political note on which to conclude. Because while *Wind River* revolves around the disappearance and death of a young Native American woman, she is largely missing from the film herself, appearing alive only in one brief flashback.

Instead, the film is concerned principally with the fates of the fathers of such young women, two of whom appear in the film as principal characters. Which raises the questions: Is *Wind River* a story about the unacknowledged trials of Native American women? A sincere exploration of male grief? Or simply a vengeance movie that leverages the deaths of young women to up its emotional kick? I don’t doubt that Sheridan aspired to some combination of the first two; I fear that what he wound up with was closer to the final one.¹⁰

Sheridan has on several occasions disclosed his “close association”¹¹ with Native American groups and during one interview stated:
I have a good deal of friends in Indian Country," Sheridan explains, "and it required a lot of trust on their part for me to tell this story. And the only way I could guarantee that these things were handled in a way that did not betray that trust was for me to do it. I've built enough of a relationship with that community that I could go, 'I'm thinking about doing it this way – is that ok?' Which was a question I asked a lot. A person who's never spent time in that world, or who would go at it in what some people call a 'Social Justice Warrior-y' kind of way..." "There are certain things they're just not going to get."12

These types of statements support a conclusion that *Wind River* is not a mistakenly produced “vengeance movie” with “extra emotional kick.” Instead, the movie sends not only a message about the violence against Native American women but communicates many messages; some unique to tribal communities and some not. The final outcome resulted because Sheridan “was keen for their [a Native American] presence in *Wind River* not to act as a backdrop for the film, their culture cherrypicked as set dressing for a conventional crime drama”13 but as a non-idealized depiction of Native America. A depiction that is consistent with approach of Tunica-Biloxi Economic Development Corp., a Louisiana-based tribal business that operates Native American gambling casinos, and that was looking for opportunities to invest in films that raise awareness about Native American culture, warts and all.14

Regardless of the concerns about intended messages, the film has raised awareness of the issues regarding Native American communities. The success in raising awareness has been acknowledged by reviews of the film both in the United States and Europe. For example, a review on the European Independent Film Festival website acknowledges:

> Taylor Sheridan’s latest crime thriller is one of the rare films in mainstream cinema to address the ongoing epidemic of sexual violence on Indian reservations ... Sheridan emphasized that while his film does not recreate a specific real-life case, “it is based on thousands of actual stories just like it.” Policy reports by the National Congress of American Indians (NCIA) estimate that Native American women are twice as likely to experience sexual assault as women of any other race and, on some reservations, are murdered at ten times the national average.15

In Washington, a new law, that was sponsored by Representative Gina McCabe, aims to provide more information on how many [Native] women are missing. McCabe said she became aware of the problem after watching the movie “*Wind River*, which follows the story of a murdered Native American woman...”16

But if you watch carefully or numerous times (as I have) there are many messages that seem to flow from the movie. For example, the deterioration of the youth and their involvement with addiction. In one scene following a violent exchange with youth who are heavily involved with drug trafficking and use, the tribal police chief says, “These kids expect to go to prison. It’s a rite of passage. Hell, I think they look forward to it. Three hots and a cot and free cable. Anything’s better than being here, the way they see it.” This scene is followed by a conversation between Cory (the character portrayed by Renner) and Chip (Martin Sensmeier’s character). Chip asks, “Do you think this is who I wanted to be? Man, I get so mad I wanna fight the whole world. You got any idea what that feels like?” Feelings of anger, hopeless and lack of options create an environment that is often present on reservations. Sharing this situation is a powerful message of the film.

But the feelings of loss and hopelessness are not just seen in the youth. Loss of tribal culture, customs and ceremony are concerns of older tribal members. In a discussion between the Cory and Martin (played by Gil Birmingham) Cory inquires, “What’s with the paint?” and Martin says that the paint is his death face. When Cory then asks, “How would you know what that is?” Martin responds, “I don’t. Just made it up. Cause there’s no one left to teach me.”
Another important message communicated by the film are the restraints regarding the lack of jurisdiction and law enforcement resources available in Indian Country. This message is continually visited throughout the film but nowhere as poignantly as the scene in which the FBI Agent (played by Olsen) expresses her frustration with the medical examiner’s decision not to list the cause of death as homicide. The medical examiner tries to explain that despite the fact that the cause of death is a pulmonary hemorrhage the death “is very prosecutable as a murder.” The examiner then suggests that the FBI agent “… present the rape, present the assault … “ but he is interrupted with an emotional response that “Those [crimes] don’t fall to the jurisdiction of the FBI. They fall to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.” Following this exchange is a discussion of lack of resources the Tribal Police Chief has to investigate this and other crimes.

The point is also made in a scene in which the Tribal Police Chief and the FBI Agent are about to enter a trailer housing known drug dealers. The FBI agent suggests that they wait for back-up. The Tribal Police Chief seemingly speaking about the lack of jurisdiction as well as life on the reservation answers, “This isn’t the land of backup … This is the land of: You’re on your own.”

But while these messages may be unique to the Native American story, there are other messages that are not unique. One reviewer states it well:

This movie is not about “White Saviorism.” Taylor Sheridan has created a profound and gripping reality about the complexities of relationships between different peoples ... Wind River spoke to me and resonated with me and, in a necessary way, is a devastating look at reality. [emphasis added] 

Picking up on the way that the depictions of relationships are handled in Wind River, another reviewer says:

At times, Sheridan has his characters spell out a little too clearly what they’re thinking and feeling, and that’s often the case in the exchanges between Cory and Martin. But the words are so beautiful and come from such a place of deep truth, it’s hard not to be moved, and they help give Wind River a simultaneous sense of timelessness and immediacy.

Living and working in Indian Country (in both Oklahoma and South Dakota), Wind River also resonated with me. In fact, it resonated with me to such an extent that I made a digital purchase of the film. (But if you don’t want to purchase the film, it is currently available for viewing on Netflix).

I felt the film added a realistic depiction and raised awareness of important issues and messages. While several of the interfaces between Natives and non-Natives were realistically depicted as less than positive, the film and story left me with an optimistic view that relationships between Native and non-Natives can be strengthened and can serve as a basis to help address some of the serious issues that have historical and current context.

I am also encouraged by the positive views of the film coming from the Native community. As noted previously, Wind River was made with an investment from the Tunica-Biloxi Economic Development Corp. Additionally, the movie received the 2017 Best Film Award from the American Indian Film Institute, which was established to foster “understanding of the culture, traditions and contemporary issues of Native Americans.” And reviews from Indian Country, such as the review by Vincent Schilling appearing on Indian Country Today, conclude that Wind River is “the most realistic and respectful portrayal on film of the relationships between Native people and others outside ‘the rez.’ ... Look no further, Wind River is the film to see ...” I agree.
Endnotes:

9. Id.
17. While the intricacies of jurisdictional issues based on the interplay among statutes such as P.L 280, the Major Crimes Act (which does include rape) and the Indian Civil Rights Act, is not an area that expect filmmakers to have a complete grasp of, the film did have advisors on tribal relations and accurately depicted a long-standing view that the FBI is hesitant to investigate sexual violence. In 2007, Amnesty International documented the “concern at the failure of the FBI to investigate crimes of sexual violence against Native American women ... research suggests that FBI involvement in the investigation of such crimes is rare and that even in those cases which are pursued by the federal authorities there can be lengthy delays before FBI agents start investigations ... federal authorities may reportedly not pursue cases in which tribal police have begun an investigation. Officers from tribal law enforcement ... were reluctant to take steps to preserve evidence at a major crime scene for this reason.” Amnesty International, Maze of Injustice: The Failure To Protect Indigenous Women From Sexual Violence In The USA, https://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/mazeofinjustice.pdf [https://web.archive.org/web/20180418112325/https://www.amnestyusa.org/pdfs/mazeofinjustice.pdf].
20. One scene that portrays the strained interaction between Native and non-Native is the FBI agent’s questioning of the family of the murder victim. The FBI agent asks, “Why would you let your daughter stay with a guy that you've never met? whose name you don’t even know? ... I don’t mean to offend you. I’m trying to understand the dynamic here, Mr. Hanson I'm trying to help.” The father’s responds to the provided explanation, “Why is it whenever you people try to help, it starts with insults.”
22. Vincent Schilling, supra note 3.