



## **‘Killers of the Flower Moon’ Language Consultant Discusses Impact on Native Representation in Hollywood**

By Christopher Côté (Osage)

In the Spring of 2021, I was approached by the director of the Osage Language Department Vann Bighorse. He came to my office and asked me if I would work as a language teacher and consultant for Martin Scorsese’s film *Killers of the Flower Moon*. I was apprehensive to say yes, because I was concerned about the visibility and how this would affect my Tribe. I am glad that I agreed to work on this film, because I am one of the few who could do it. I had the privilege to help translate the script and teach the actors their lines. Before I ever had a line to translate, I started working with Native actors Lily Gladstone and Cara Jade Myers. Because they were playing Osage women who would have spoken Osage the idea was to teach them how to speak the language. I also had the opportunity to teach Robert DeNiro and Leonardo Decaprio. All of them are amazing people and did a fantastic job bringing this film to life. Once we had lines to translate, the workload was divided between the three of us in the language department. Janis Carpenter, Braxton Redeagle, and I worked closely to provide the best translations.

In October of 2023, I had the privilege of attending the two red carpets to promote the film, once in New York the second in LA. While I was in New York it was the first time I saw the film. This film is gut retching and is not for the faint of heart. This film is full of extreme violence against Osage women and the truth of this film is a visual telling of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP). This point isn’t left out of the film. As mentioned, the presence of violence is displayed throughout the duration of the film. As a proud Osage, watching the murders of Anna Brown, Henry Roan, Charlie Whitehorn, and others was one of the hardest things to watch. For this reason, I may never watch the film again. I have watched gruesome films before, but never have I watched something that hit so close to home. Going into watching the film I had my own expectations of how the film would play out. I had hoped the film would follow the life of Mollie Kyle. However, Ernest Burkhart, played by Leonardo Decaprio, had the most screen time. In an interview Martin Scorsese said out of all the people “the least was known about Ernest.” In those terms it would be easy to have creative liberties. However, I hoped the film would have been more about Mollie and her family.



I will say when it comes to representation Scorsese got it right. His dedication to working with the Tribe created one of the best representations of Indigenous people I have seen. In film the representation of American Indigenous people has been less than stellar, the savage, the noble savage, or the perpetually sad people. I grew up watching films like “Dances with Wolves” and “Last of the Mohicans”. Both films have the presence of Indigenous people, but they were not the main characters of the stories. Both films feature white men who come to live with the Tribes that they encountered. In other words, they went Native. When news of the production of “Killers of the Flower Moon” became public there was an excitement among Osage that I hadn’t seen before. Many Osage Nation citizens auditioned for roles and to be extras. The background of the film is full of Osages, and many worked off the screen. People like Addie Roan Horse and Julie O’keefe used their artistic abilities to create a visually stunning film. I have always appreciated all aspects of life that the Osage people practice. I grew up learning my language and dancing at our ceremonial dance. Now the world has seen just a slice of all the things that I love about my people.

For these reasons audiences were captivated by the film and with the Oscars fast approaching I took a moment to reflect on this monumental moment. Currently history is being made with the nominations of three Indigenous people Scott George, Robbie Robertson, and Lily Gladstone. Scott George is the song writer of Wahzhazhe (a song for my people). Growing up I listened to Scott George sing for the Ilonshka. I have always loved the songs that are sung during this ceremony. I grew up listening to and dancing to songs like the one that’s now up for an Oscar. As mentioned before, Lily Gladstone is up for best actress. As a language consultant I worked with Lily often. During our language classes Lily was extremely dedicated to playing the role of Mollie Burkheart. She acquired a great command of the Osage language and while watching her on set I saw her talent firsthand. Seeing her on the big screen she brought the story to life. From the many conversations I have had with Osages in Pawhuska and other Indigenous people, we all hope that she wins. As a child, I hoped my people, the Osage Nation, would receive such accolades and in the future, I hope this creates an opportunity for the stories of Indigenous people to receive the same attention as *Killers of the Flower Moon*.