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Animality as an excuse for murder: David Grann and *Killers of the Flower Moon*

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Abstract

This paper examines the investigative nonfiction book *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* by David Grann, which explores a series of murders of vulnerable members of the Osage tribe that took place in northeastern Oklahoma between 1918 and 1931. Grann's account reveals how white citizens, ranchers, and townsfolk conspired against their Native American neighbors in a scheme involving poisoning, arson, deception, and falsified death certificates. The direct motivation for these crimes was greed triggered by income from oil deposits discovered in the land where the Osage were relocated after a century of broken treaties and other misfortunes. Furthermore, the paper explores how the supposed animality of the victims was employed to conceal and excuse genocidal tendencies against Native tribes, and how contemporary Native American accounts attest to their sense of unreality, resulting in the unclear status and uncanny subsistence of a living person reduced to the status of a ghost. In a broader perspective this paper discusses the colonization of America and its impact on the indigenous tribes who already inhabited the land. The demeaning metaphor of Indians as beasts yielded to a more palatable representation of the Noble Savage, but the accusations of bestiality returned when the tribes attempted to protect their way of living. The colonizers believed that by not cultivating the land and not building large, permanent

communities, the indigenous tribes had forfeited their title to the land; those who resisted were conveniently labeled as pests to justify their inevitable erasure. The paper recalls rarely cited evidence, dating back to the history of the suppression of the 1652 Irish rebellion, to examine the multitudinous ways in which language played an important part in justifying the supposed animality of the indigenous people and eradicating them to make room for government-authorized settlers.

Key words

Native American genocide, Raphael Lemkin, Zitkala-Ša, David Grann, Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Joy Harjo

Animalizm jako usprawiedliwienie dla morderstwa: David Grann i *Czas krwawego księżyca. Zabójstwa Indian Osagów i narodziny FBI*

Artykuł analizuje książkę z gatunku dziennikarstwa śledczego *Czas krwawego księżyca. Zabójstwa Indian Osagów i narodziny FBI* autorstwa Davida Granna, która zgłębia kwestię serii morderstw dokonanych na bezbronnych członkach plemienia Osage, jakie miały miejsce w północno-wschodniej Oklahomie w latach 1918-1931. Książka Granna ujawnia, jak biali obywatele, ranczerzy i mieszkańcy miast sprzysięgli się przeciwko swoim rdzennym amerykańskim sąsiadom w ramach szeroko zakreślonego spisku, w zakresie którego stosowano truciznę, podpalenie, oszustwo i sfałszowanie aktów zgonu. Bezpośrednim motywem tych zbrodni była chciwość, wywołana zyskami ze złóż ropy naftowej odkrytych na terenach, gdzie Osage zostali przeniesieni po stuleciu zerwanych pokojowych traktatów i innych niedoli. Ponadto artykuł rozważa, w jaki sposób rzekoma „zwierzęcość" ofiar była wykorzystywana do zatajania i usprawiedliwiania ludobójczych tendencji wobec rdzennych plemion. Co więcej, współczesne świadectwa rdzennych Amerykanów świadczą o ich poczuciu nierealności, wynikającym z niejasnego statusu i dziwacznego egzystowania osoby zredukowanej do statusu ducha. W szerszej perspektywie artykuł podejmuje temat kolonizacji Ameryki i jej wpływu na rdzenne plemiona, które już znacznie wcześniej zamieszkiwały te

ziemie. Poniżająca metafora Indian jako dzikich zwierząt ustąpiła miejsca bardziej przyswajalnej koncepcji Szlachetnego Dzikusa, ale oskarżenie
o bestialstwo wróciło, kiedy plemiona walczyły o to, by ocalić swój dotychczasowy tryb życia. Kolonizatorzy uważali, że nie uprawiając ziemi i nie budując większych, solidnych społeczności, rdzenne plemiona wyrzekły się praw do ziemi; ci, którzy stawiali opór, zostali oznaczeni jako szkodnicy, aby usprawiedliwić ich nieuniknione wykorzenienie. Artykuł przywołuje rzadko przytaczane świadectwa, sięgające historii stłumienia irlandzkiej rebelii w 1652 roku, aby zbadać rozmaite przypadki, w których język odgrywał ważną rolę w uzasadnianiu rzekomej animalności rdzennych mieszkańców w celu ich likwidacji, by zrobić miejsce dla popieranych przez rząd osadników.

Słowa kluczowe

ludobójstwo rdzennych Amerykanów, Raphael Lemkin, Zitkala-Ša, David Grann, Sterling HolyWhiteMountain, Joy Harjo

The 2017 investigative nonfiction book *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* by David Grann scrutinizes a series of murders of vulnerable members of the Osage tribe, starting at least as early as 1918 and ending at least as late as 1931. Grann's inquiry—apparently more accurate than the one perfunctorily performed by FBI agents on their first grand mission since the agency had been founded in 1908—reveals unpalatable truth: in the north-east area of Oklahoma, near the border with Kansas, in the vicinity of Osage reservation, white citizens, ranchers and townsfolk alike, conspired against their Native American neighbors, acquaintances, and family members, including spouses and stepchildren, in a scheme involving poisoning, arson, deception, and falsified death certificates. "Indeed, virtually every element of society was complicit in the murderous system," Grann writes in conclusion to his exploration (291). The direct motivation for this stunning profusion of crimes had been

greed-triggering income from the oil deposits, auspiciously discovered in the hilly and uninhabitable land where the Osage resignedly relocated after a century of broken treaties and other misfortunes befalling Native American tribes.

Out of many unsolved or never properly investigated cases, only a handful of them ever faced the jury. During the trials of 1926-1929 (there were four of them in total), press comments reflected a certain level of enthusiasm, if not for the actual killings, then for the sensational content, allowing their readers to revel in an atmosphere of scandal. As prosecutors collected enough evidence, supported by witnesses who neither accidentally vanished, nor retracted their statements, the jurors were questioned with respect to their susceptibility to bribery, but not with respect to their deeply ingrained prejudices. "The attitude of a pioneer cattleman toward a full-blood Indian is fairly well recognized," wrote the *Tulsa Tribune* (Aug. 21, 1926; qted in Grann, 215). It must have been in accordance with this attitude that William K. Hale was sentenced to life for only one killing out of several (his sentence was subsequently reduced). A certain discomfort of the jurors to punish, as Grann succinctly puts it, "another white man for killing an American Indian" (215) could be discerned.

But what kind of attitude was it, exactly? A prominent member of the Osage tribe (not mentioned by name in Grann's account) encapsulated it perhaps fairly: "The question for them is to decide whether a white man killing an Osage is murder or merely cruelty to animals" (215). Indeed, the law proved lenient; although some perpetrators were eventually convicted, some others never faced trial. As one witness noted, "white people in Oklahoma thought no more of killing an Indian than they did in 1824" (191). Although the reaction of the white community was not uniform ("There are men amongst the whites, honest men, but they are mighty scarce," another Osage leader, Bacon Rind, noted in 1926 (Wallis, *Oil Man,* qted in Grann, 291), to this day it remains unresolved who ordered and carried out the murders of the few white citizens driven by

conscience to represent the Osage before governmental agencies. All that remains certain is the astounding brutality of these murders—as if their very purpose was to warn off other potential "traitors to their own blood" within a closely knit community.

But isn't all slaughter by definition brutal? In the introduction to *Animal Languages* Eva Meijer points out that from the human point of view "[i]t may seem logical for animals to have no rights and not to be heard by humans; human society prioritizes the wants and needs of humans" (10); this logic may not be so obvious to animals, affected by human interference in accordance with the degree to which they are domesticated and labeled as useful. As Meijer indicates, domesticated animals "have little freedom to make choices or to develop, while wild animals deal with human influence, with human populations occupying or polluting their territory" (11), the latter always just one step away from being marked as pests and exterminated. Grann's nonfiction account prompts us to examine how the supposed animality of victims might have been employed to conceal and excuse genocidal tendencies, whether driven by the federal policy of forceful removal and assimilation wielded against the Native tribes at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and leniency in responding to the Osage's pleas to end the perilous guardianship system) or conducted voluntarily and often eagerly by individual perpetrators. Some contemporary Native American accounts attest to their sense of unreality, as experienced by the people whose embodied presence, in addition to history and heritage, was systematically erased, resulting in the unclear status and uncanny subsistence of a living person being reduced to the status of a ghost.

This sense of unreality permeates the progression of the recently published in the *New Yorker* Sterling HolyWhite-Mountain's "Featherweight." Brought up by a network of ubiquitous, rakish aunts in a reservation, the narrator adjusts to his new life at a college; meanwhile, he finds himself riding

a city bus to previously unknown neighborhoods. His gossamer presence rubs off against the solid texture of the houses "where no one like me had ever stepped foot"; the narrative "I" appears in and disappears from these locations exactly like a ghost, almost without any will of his own, floating along in a breeze. Although HolyWhiteMountain never uses this comparison directly (but perhaps hints at it in the title), it may be worth noting that ghosts can also act as carriers of aggression, as when the narrator remarks on his desire "to take the lives of everyone around me, man or woman or child, to crush their skulls with a stone war club" (so far he has seen such ceremonial items "only in museums and in textbooks"). Ghosts can be also vehicles of nostalgia, as when the narrator presents himself to us watching "the people on the other side of the glass" and imagining "what it was like in their living rooms and kitchens," until he taps into a possibility of becoming, "if only for a moment," someone else.

This desire to inhabit somebody else's life (as a *dybbuk* of sorts; a spiritual parasite) is checked at the moment of realizing its impossibility. First, the narrator is still painfully limited by his own body; second, it suffices to remember that Native Americans were granted American citizenship only on June 2, 1924 (but some states barred them from voting until 1957, and Joy Harjo in *Catching the Light (Why I Write)* notes how Native cultural practices were "outlawed until 1978, when the Religious Freedom Act was passed on behalf of Native tribal nations" [loc. 97]). To live like a ghost means to have no agency, no direct effect on events that appear to concern one. A secondary character in "Featherweight," a gifted student, Allie, moves back to the reservation to embrace her future "flipping burgers at a diner" because she perceives any professional success in the white man's world as a sign of disloyalty to her own people, and her college teachers talking about "how she might *build her academic career"* just make her "want to scream." What surpasses the possibility of verbal communication is Allie's revulsion at the thought of having to talk to white

people about "*the indigenous people of North America*" while "[i]t seemed we would never get to speak for ourselves about the things we wanted to talk about in the way we wanted to talk about them." A promise of academic career for Allie is just a mechanism designed to separate her from herself. "I'm just another white man's dog," she tells her doubting boyfriend. "That's all they want. They're training me like a pet." Accepting praise from her teachers may be too painful for a Native American girl who views her own keen mind as a tool of betrayal. Two centuries of her ancestors' experience are speaking through her, as the difference between supportive, gentle "profs" and sadistic bullies employed as teachers in coercive residential schools justifiably blurs.

To make someone feel like a ghost in their own life is the final step of a process that took over two centuries of political and existential erasure. *Manifest Destiny,* the notoriously famous painting by John Gast, documents, perhaps against itself, this eerie process of ghost-making. What comes forth are hordes of native people and flocks of buffalos, preceded by wild animals, fleeing from the sunrise of progress (personified by Columbia) in the direction of dark sheets of fog shrouding the mountains. In the far background of telegraph poles, railroad tracks, and farmers ploughing the field (obedient oxen pulling the plow understand the language of the rod), a group of natives devote themselves to performing a dance (Sun Dance? Ghost Dance? both were banned with the end of the nineteenth century) as an act of symbolic resistance. Many researchers (Anderson 2005; Madley 2016; Reséndes 2016; Winchester 2021) emphasize how American Indians interacted with their natural environment on equal terms, with no intention to "rule over … the livestock and all the wild animals," as prescribed in Genesis 1:26, which is precisely what counted against them. In the Mural Room of the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, scantily-clad natives perch on a rock right next to the coyotes, their overall body language, including vigilance and tension in the limbs, suggests some kind of elemental

closeness with emaciated and alert predators. The natives look a bit like threatening ghouls, too, due to their long black hair; in any case, they appear closer in nature to the coyotes than to the dignified white conquerors arriving on seemingly unshakeable boats (Hixson 46-48). As Christopher Rein points out, the colonizers couldn't care less that "humans already inhabited this land" because by not cultivating it; that is, not "breaking the sod, putting it into production, and building large and vibrant permanent communities, the current occupants had forfeited their title and would be forced to yield to those who wished to put the land to a 'higher use'" (219). The Natives removed themselves from the area of human privilege, as defined in the *Holy Bible*; consequently, the process of acculturation consisted of teaching the indigenous tribes agriculture, having left them no time to mourn the near-eradication of tens of millions of American buffaloes (Driscoll 199). Referring to Jeffrey Williams's *Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism: Taking the Kingdom by Force*, Rein points out that the Methodist Church's contributed to the subjugation of the natives by "an increasing acceptance of violence to both defend and extend the faith" (218). It may seem, therefore, that in the nineteenth century the influence of the Catholic Church diminished, while other denominations (evangelical Protestantism) took the lead, all the while continuously feeding into genocidal patterns of conflict.

In his earlier book, *The Lost City of Oz* (2017), David Grann refers to a theologians' debate circling around an issue of "whether these dark-skinned, scantily clad peoples were, in fact human; for how could the descendants of Adam and Eve have wandered so far, and how could the biblical prophets have been ignorant of them?" (153). The rationale was clear: If Indians were not men (if they were beasts or descendants of medieval monsters or "half men"), they could be treated as "natural slaves"; the promise of all the unpaid labor gratuitously added. Patricia Seed locates the core of this debate specifically in the Dominican order's drive for domination and

their rivalry with Franciscan friars in the early sixteenth century. Fray Montesinos's Advent Sunday sermon of 1511, which included the phrase "Are these [Indians] not men?" and consisted of a rampage of accusations against the Spanish settlers who employed "cruelty and tyranny … against these innocent people," having "subjected the Indians to such cruel and horrible servitude" (Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias,* Mexico 1986, vol. II, pp. 440-2, qted in Seed 629); in short, a demand to release the natives from forced labor so that they could attend religious schooling, shielded a larger-scale issue, that of legitimacy of the Spanish crown's claim to the colonies (640). When the Dominicans arrived on Hispaniola, the Franciscan order had already monopolized the conversions. The two debates regarding Indians' humanity (first between 1511 and 1520; second between 1532 and 1537) relied on the claim that all men had a right to be converted (635); however, to undergo conversion, one had to be in possession of a "rational soul" which, as developed in the writings of the Dominican philosopher Thomas Aquinas, distinguishes humans guided by "reason" from "dumb" animals (636); *ergo*, as beasts or "half men" the Indians could not be Christianized; if so, the whole construction of Spain yielding power over the New World with the Papal support, resting upon the condition that the native inhabitants be converted, would have collapsed like a house of cards. Pope Paul III curbed the fiery debates, issuing in 1537 the bull *Sublimus deus,* which proposed that

> since man, according to the testimony of the sacred scriptures, has been created to enjoy eternal life and happiness, which none may obtain save through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, it is necessary that he should possess the nature and faculties enabling him to receive that faith; and that whoever is thus endowed should be capable of receiving that same faith (qted. in Hanke 71; Hanke relies on the translation in MacNutt, *Bartolomew de Las Casas*, pp. 427-431).

The Pope thus links any doubt regarding the capacity of "all nations" to receive the doctrines of faith with heresy or devil's work, unwaveringly condemning any further "animalization" of native tribes:

> The enemy of the human race, who opposes all good deeds in order to bring men to destruction, beholding and envying this, invented a means never before heard of, by which he might hinder the preaching of God's word of Salvation to the people: he inspired his satellites who, to please him, have not hesitated to publish abroad that Indians of the West and the South, and other people of whom We have recent knowledge should be treated as dumb brutes created for our service, pretending that they are incapable of receiving the catholic faith (qted. in Hanke 72).

Henceforward, the humanity of the indigenous tribes became irrevocably linked with their capacity to convert; meanwhile, no ink had been spilled on understanding how "the Indians" understood their own humanity. After all, it was the Pope ("We, who, though unworthy, exercise on earth the power of our Lord") who ascertained that "the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the catholic faith but, according to our information, they desire exceedingly to receive it" (Hanke 72). This was a momentous statement, which ended the early attempts to blatantly enslave the indigenous people; the bull ascertained that "they [the Indians] may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved" (qted. in Hanke 72). This coherent and comprehensible statement brought a temporary truce in the debate about the Indians' humanity or the lack of thereof, which lasted till the mid-nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the demeaning metaphor of Indians as beasts yielded to a more palatable representation of the Noble Savage (wrought by Dominican friar Bertolomé de Las Casas) who, although naked, exudes natural civility and grace and is not bound by a desire to accumulate worldly goods, alongside the notion of colonized people as

"children" (and thus in need of guardianship). The accusations of bestiality returned, though, as soon as it became clear that, with the development of railroads and the growing demand for land by prospective settlers, to which the tribes responded with desperate attempts to protect their ways of living, the temporary stasis was meant to yield.

The literature on American Indian genocide has expanded (Stannard 1992; Churchill 1997, 2004; Woolford et al. 2014; Alvarez 2016; Bowles 2016; Madley 2016) enough for us to note that the supposed animality of the people about to be conquered was not meant only to justify colonialism alone. Katie Kane in *Drogheda, Sand Creek, and the Poetics of Colonial Extermination* posits that "eradicating an indigenous population" to make room for government-authorized settlers is possible only if "a colonial space [be] understood [as] somehow empty, at least of a population of any value" (84). Language played an important part in ascertaining that the population in question had indeed little or no value. Comparing prospective victims to animals (specifically, pests) leaves a trail linking various instances of genocide worldwide. Jews were compared to rats and vermin; Tutsi – to cockroaches and snakes. Dehumanization facilitates othering potential victims; listed as the fourth step of the *Ten Stages of Genocide* by Gregory H. Stanton, it happens to be preceded by classification (within a division of "us and them" a certain group of people is marked as "them"); symbolization (further emphasis on differences between "us" and "them"'; not lethal on its own, may lead to genocide when combined with hatred and dehumanization), and discrimination (a mere step three; powerless groups are not accorded full civil rights, voting rights, or even citizenship; as such, discrimination legitimizes the victimization of weaker groups, and yet can last interminably as mere status quo, justifying and facilitating random outbursts, without leading to mass violence). Neither classification nor symbolization and discrimination need to lead to genocide; it is then dehumanization that sets off the dynamic of leniency (let us remember

Donald Trump comparing undocumented immigrants to animals while purposefully conflating them with members of transnational gangs, such as MS-13, which might have created an association between immigrants and dangerous predators).

The word "genocide" came into existence in the mid-twentieth century, coined by a Polish Jew, a lawyer named Raphael Lemkin. While still a student at the University of Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine), Lemkin was stunned by his Polish professor Juliusz Makarewicz's opinion that a state can do within its borders as it pleases (thus placing the state sovereignty as the highest value, ostensibly above human-rights concerns) at a conversation that referred to the coordinated massacres of Armenians during World War I (Irvin-Erickson 69). Lemkin fled from the Nazis in 1939, first to Sweden, and then, in 1941, to the United States (his extended family, with the exception of one brother, perished in the Holocaust); in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe,* originally published in1944 by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he argued that existing terms, such as "massacres" and "war crimes" did not encompass the systemic nature of orchestrated mass killings ("Raphael Lemkin…"; Becker 2021; Sands 137-189). He eventually drafted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (formally adopted by the UN in 1948 and ratified in 1951; the United States, however, added its signature only in 1988, having reserved immunity from prosecution). Lemkin drew the word "genocide" from Greek "genos" (race or tribe) and Latin "cide" (killing) to encompass the killing of a race or tribe. Contemporary historians apply his definition to "the varied experiences of the indigenous people of the Americas" (Alvarez 26, 42; Woolford 9-10). In *Axis Rule,* his 1944 treatise, Lemkin emphasizes that while the intent has to be spelled out and demonstrated, the targeted group needs not to be wiped out in its entity:

> Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups (79).

Recalling a statement ascribed to Colonel Chivington ("Kill'em all, big and small, nits make lice"), which had directly preceded the massacre at Sand Creek on Nov. 29, 1864 (a public outcry of disapproval in the Eastern part of the United States followed but didn't lead to any shift in the prevalent attitude) (83), Kane, appealingly for our Eastern-European perspective rooting her argument in the history of European peripheries, elucidates on a little known fact: the metaphor (of nits and lice) dates back at least to the seventeenth century England, when it was used by an anonymous poet who praised Cromwell's suppression of the Irish rebellion: "He (by good advise) / Did kill the Nitts, that they might not growe Lice" (qted in Kane 84, 100; attributed to William Mercer). The similarities between the two massacres (in case of Ireland, it was the bloodshed at Drogheda of Sept. 1649), Kane asserts, should not be overlooked (85). As one of many metaphors justifying Western forms of colonization, these "associations of the rebellious Irish with the parasitic louse were quite common" in the seventeenth century (86). The siege of Dogheda, followed by "an instance of wholesale and sweeping slaughter" was carried out both in response to the anticolonial uprising of native Irish and Catholic settlers of English descent and as an overall expression of "British military and colonial policy toward the Irish" (Kane 85; comp. O'Donnovan and "August 1652: An Act for the Settling of Ireland").

Group of Osage Indians posed outside the White House
Public domain, Library of Congress,
https://lccn.loc.gov/93515477

Osage Indians, 1/10/23
Public domain, Library of Congress,
https://www.loc.gov/item/2016833983/

The association between the native, presumably surplus, tribes and parasitic insects reinforces itself, rather disturbingly, in the context of countless references to Native Americans, beginning with their childhood experience marked by "the reeducation gulags" (Kane 87). As we read both in Kane's account of native children having their hair cut off and "powdered with DDT insecticide" in the second half of the twentieth century (87) and in Zitkala-Ša's "The cutting of my long hair" (strikingly similar, minus the DDT, not invented yet) (91), this drastic ritual hints at an initiation rite of sorts, although not an uplifting one but rather demoting the native children according to the dialectic of purity and squalor (Kane 89). In the tradition of her people, as Zitkala-Ša reveals to better acquaint us with her anguish, the shearing of hair had been forever associated with cowardice and shame; whether the school administrators were aware of this connection, they managed to create a metaphorical link between small children and the apparent risk of "infestation" right at the time when the native territories and resources were being expropriated and the natives themselves were recurrently marked as "expendable" (Kane 89). Dehumanization, however, is never a sadistic game performed for its own sake; instead, its purpose is economic, clearly defined, and obvious to most participants. As further elucidated in Stanton's diagram of systemic annihilation, dehumanization becomes lethal when followed by organization (militias or paramilitary groups to provide deniability of state responsibility); polarization (hate groups broadcasting propaganda via accessible means); preparation (plans are drawn for genocide); persecution (victims are identified and isolated); extermination (mass killing); denial (the tenth and final stage; chillingly, always follows a genocide).

Nowadays, the expression "off the reservation" is considered offensive and inappropriate in respectable company. And yet it must have previously taken root in the language quite firmly and for a long enough time to become an idiom. In its original meaning it referred to Native Americans leaving their

assigned tracts of land; thus, acting "outside the bounds of control, propriety, or acceptance," as an entry in *The Free Dictionary* informs. The reservation (as a place one is removed or "transplanted to"; in the case of Native Americans most often as a result of a "treaty") is meant to be uncomfortable, potentially unlivable; it is both a place that nobody wants (neither the settlers, nor the natives) and a "conventional mechanism for the effective dislocation of indigenous people" (Kane 93), constructed and deployed to conclusively dismantle the native resistance by removing recalcitrant natives who lost the battle. It is a place where these survivors are expected to starve, fall sick, and die.

Grann recalls that when he first accessed the FBI files concerning the string of grisly murders that became the framework of *Killers of the Flower Moon,* he was struck by a variety of methods with which these murders were committed: "Repeat killers tend to rigidly adhere to a routine, yet the Osage murders were carried out in a bewildering array of methods. There was no signature" (114). Or rather, signatures were too plentiful, hinting at multiple authorship. The opening passage conveys a sense of nondescript danger:

> In April, millions of tiny flowers spread over the blackjack hills and vast prairies in the Osage territory of Oklahoma. There are Johnny-jump-ups and spring beauties and little bluets. The Osage writer Joseph Mathews observed that the galaxy of petals makes it look as if the "gods had left confetti." In May, when coyotes howl beneath an unnervingly large moon, taller plants, such as spiderworts and black-eyed Susans, begin to creep over the tinier blooms, stealing their light and water. The necks of the smaller flowers break and their petals flutter away and before long they are buried underground (5).

The early spring drama unfolding in accordance with the prehistoric clock both prefigures and reiterates the present-day genocidal narrative, with one meaningful difference; the dainty small flowers recover; the same ritualistic takeover of larger

flowers "stealing" the smaller ones' sources of sustenance will be reiterated yearly. Not so much for the North American indigenous people whose ecologically mindful manner of interacting with their environment will neither be recovered nor repeated.[1]

In the early 1870s, the Osage, driven from their traditional habitat in the prairies, settled in the rocky hills of northeastern Oklahoma. In the words of Wah-Ti-An-Kah, the Osage chief at the time, "My people will be happy in this land. White man cannot put iron thing in ground here. White man will not come to this land. There are many hills here… white man does not like country where there are hills, and he will not come" (Mathews, *Wah'kon-Tah,* 33-34, qted in Grann 40). In truth, the Osage had little choice but to accept the relocation. In keeping with the idea of a reservation as a place not destined for living, *Report* of the Commissioner of *Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1871* called this location "broken, rocky, sterile, and utterly unfit for cultivation" (qted in Grann, 40). The Osage, who accepted it, expecting to be left in peace, were already decimated, following a series of forced migrations and outbursts of "white man's diseases" (these typically included smallpox, chickenpox, typhus, influenza, and tuberculosis); the entire population diminished from ten thousand—an impressive number at the beginning of the nineteenth century—to the mere three thousand one hundred

[1] Grann must have been inspired by Rachel Carson's already classic beginning of *Silent Spring,* where an immaculate landscape unravels in a manner that mobilizes all our senses ("The town lay in the midst of a checkboard of orchards of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards, where white clouds of bloom drifted above the green land.") Carlson employs her poetic skills in the service of a non-fiction account written with a clear purpose of warning us – already in 1961 – against the indiscriminate use of pesticides and their effect on environment. At last one spring "a strange blight" occurs; "some evil spell" affects the community; "mysterious maladies" befall farm animals and people alike, and "the shadow of death" eventually materializes as "a strange stillness." The birds (listed with precision as "robins, catbirds, doves, jays, and wrens") are simply gone, and so are the bees; thus, silent spring.

years later. Their old way of life became by then enveloped by nostalgia. In accordance with the doctrine "every buffalo dead is an Indian gone," the American buffalo was extinguished by 1877. S.C. Gwynne's account connects this "greatest mass destruction of warm-blooded animals in human history" with the Western expansion:

> In 1869 the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, linking the industrializing east with the developing west and rendering the old trails—Oregon, Santa Fe, and tributaries—instantly obsolete. With the rails came cattle, herded northwards in epic drives to railheads by Texans who could make fast fortunes getting them to Chicago markets. With the rails, too, came buffalo hunters carrying deadly accurate .50-caliber Sharps rifles that could kill effectively at extreme range—grim, violent, opportunistic men blessed now by both a market in the east for buffalo leather and the means of getting it there. In 1871 the buffalo still roamed the plains: Earlier that year a heard of four million had been spotted near the Arkansas River in present-day southern Kansas. The main body was fifty miles deep and twenty-five miles wide. … In Kansas alone the bones of thirty-one million buffalo were sold for fertilizer between 1868 and 1881. (Loc 146)

One might add that buffaloes had been killed and utilized by the Osage as well, but the duel between a lightly-armed human person and an animal was considered a clash between equals; nor did it have, as an experience fulfilling both practical and spiritual purposes, the destruction of an entire population in view. Driscoll argues that this "sixth mass extinction event," is not to be understood as a mere "tool for carrying out genocide against human peoples," or even an "ecocide," but rather a destruction of an entire species characterized by intricate social rules and traditions, regarded as persons in their own rights; indeed, as "ancestors, relatives, and teachers" of Plains Indigenous cultures, through "a series of genocides perpetrated, often quite deliberately, by Western governments and corporations in the context of (neo-)colonial expansionism and

resource extraction" (198). Out of the millions of buffalo killed, only around 200,000 remain today, which is a striking contrast to the Native American "caring practices" of preserving and respecting the natural world, as opposed to the Western approach of "management" of nature that implies control (Anderson 153).

The Osage whom we encounter on the pages of *Killers of the Flower Moon* have just shed or are in the process of shedding their traditional names, clothes, their pastimes and celebrations, and finally the faith of their ancestors; women no longer braid their hair but rather cut or style them. The inevitable loss of a name symbolizes the impossibility of resistance. Mollie Burkhard, whom Grann positions in the center of this narrative, was born in 1886 as Wah-kon-tah-he-um-pah. Bestowing a name, in Osage tradition, was a formative ritual; only then could one be considered a person by the tribe. But the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the time when the indigenous people realized that their losses were final. The tribe simply could not afford another battle. Mollie attended the St. Louis Catholic missionary school; she watched her classmates attempting to flee, only to reappear bound with ropes by lawmen who had chased after them on horseback. Such compulsory measures (additionally confirmed by Zitkala-Ša in her *American Indian Stories*) effectively contaminated the link between the younger generation and their parents, who proved unable to protect their children from hurt and humiliation. Back in Gray Horse, wearing blankets and moccasins no longer brought positive connotation. Self-appointed fashion experts in Pawhuska call Native women "blankets," as if by virtue of adhering to their ethnic attire the women were nothing but ungainly commodities.

This narrative of displacement, starvation, and misery wanes as soon as the discovery of one of the largest oil deposits in the US in the rocky hills of the Osage reservation is confirmed and the Osage become the wealthiest people on the planet. The oil wells are drilled, then leased and subleased,

while quarterly checks dispatched to everyone on the tribal roll grow from a few dollars to hundreds, and then to thousands. This seemingly unlimited wealth (majority of these large oil deposits are now depleted) meets with undisguised envy. To the white community of landowners, seasonal workers, and rowdy ruffians from the nearby hills, this sudden rise in status of the native population is the source of discomfort combined with the brewing sense of injustice. As shown on several photographs, Mollie and her sisters, Anna, Minnie, and Rita do not renounce traditional attire of the Osage Indian, complete with the eponymous blankets; however, they also acquire western-style houses, cars, servants, and chauffeurs. The press stacks up complaints about the spending habits of the Osage, lamenting their growing wealth, only to add on the sly: "The Osage Indians are becoming so rich that something will have to be done about it" (Estelle Aubrey Brown, "Our Plutocratic Osage Indians," *Travel,* Oct. 1922, qted in Grann 76). We are left hoping that what these columnists were calling for was just another legal measure contrived by the authorities, not an intricately designed conspiracy involving, to a large extent, the whole town.

The guardianship system, mandated by Congress in 1921 specifically to prevent the Osage from controlling their own money, appears to echo Thomas Aquinas's theory of "rational soul" as the main distinction between humans and animals. If "the Indians" were "like children" (not in full possession of "reason"), a state-appointed overseer of their expenditures must have seemed justified. Indeed, the only criterium for asserting possible financial independence was a racial one: "full-blood Indians" were automatically excluded from the realm of self-reliance. The press was set on ceaselessly providing new evidence to justify the guardianship system and thus creating a public consensus about the supposedly wild spending habits of the Osage. This frenzy of lamentation over the Osage's profligacy appears prompted by the fact that the money from oil pumps allowed the Osage to experience the kind of affluence

that only selected few whites in the supposed Promised Land could claim: houses with servants, cars with chauffeurs. Some of these employees were immigrants, some black, and some white; one government inspector, as if to testify to his own cognitive confusion, included a comparison to Sodom and Gomorrah in his 1920 report to Congress quoted by Grann (79). Some of the most affluent Osage were women, and their apparent rule over the flocks of servants directly contradicted all the foregoing efforts of the boarding school system, meant to imprint in its graduates the hierarchy of both races and genders in accordance with the westernized framework; more specifically, to teach the Native girls, first and foremost, feminine virtues, such as cookery, needlework, housecleaning, and overall docility. On a more tragic note, the Osage were charged exorbitant, if not extortionate, prices for every product they had to finance, not excluding funerals (up to $6000, or $80,000 today), as if even gravediggers would not wish to overlook an occasion to turn into profiteers (22). And yet the public consensus remained that it was the ubiquitous Osage and their spendthrift habits that had to be curbed and controlled first and foremost.

Martin Scorcese's rendition of David Grann's *Killers of the Flower Moon* was first planned already in 2019 (the completion postponed by the pandemic) and has not been released at the time of writing this article. But the postponement offered ample time for research. Aware that the movie was going to provide a suitable occasion to discuss the representation of Native Americans in the "Western" movies of the bygone era, Scorcese met with Chief Standing Bear back in July 2019, confirming that his team would be working closely with the Osage Nation on the aspects of "culture, history, and the language." Scorcese also admitted that what attracted him to Grann's account was "the intrinsic sense of evil. What is it in us that makes us capable of committing these acts of evil" (Duty). One might suggest that an extensive moral inquiry may not be needed when the answer could be easily summed up to the

opportunity and greed combined. How close is our focus on "evil" to the fascination with its dramatically rendered goings-on? Zachary J. Goldberg contends that

> when we consider acts commonly thought to be paradigmatically evil[,] such as genocide, forced mass starvation, or war rape, the immense and perverse suffering of the victims seems to be both necessary and sufficient for such acts to be properly labeled "evil." Add to the discussion the wide array of motivations that inspire perpetrators to commit acts of evil—obedience to authority, fear, peer-pressure, religious faith, ethnic hatred, thoughtlessness, ambition, etc.—and the focus on perpetrators in an analysis of evil might seem not only unnecessary but befuddling. After all, genocide is considered evil regardless of the perpetrators' motivations (74).

Indeed, we have every right to fear that excessive focus on perpetrators blurs the contours of victims who are subsequently once more obliterated. Contrarily, Goldberg argues that shifting the center of attention from perpetrators to victims altogether stands for "consequentialist" and "symptomatic" proceedings "in that they identify only the effects of evil while neglecting its source" (74). Our task is rather to reinstate the main Kantian premise; i.e., that "it is only by examining the psychology of moral choice that we can hold perpetrators responsible for their actions" (74). Even if in consequence we discover, perhaps inevitably, that moral choices may lead to acts that are deeply immoral and demoralizing.

William K. Hale (we are yet to see the rendition of this character by Robert De Niro), the man condemned in the 1929 court trial, should serve as a fitting example of the Kantian assertion that "evil is an invisible enemy that originates in a person's moral psychology often hiding behind reason and even good conduct" (Goldberg 74). A model citizen and Mollie Burkhard's father-in-law, he was "a man with no known past," first noticed when working as a cowboy on the ranch in Oklahoma. With no buffaloes in view, cowboys drove cattle "from

Texas to Osage territory … and then to Kansas, for shipment to slaughterhouse in Chicago and other cities" (Grann 26). (This peregrination, we might note on the margin, guides us to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* of 1905, a novel dissecting the awful business of Chicago meat-processing plants). Eventually, Grann continues, "he [Hale] hoarded and borrowed enough money to buy his own herd in Osage territory" (26). Then he went bankrupt. Then he bounced back and "became an expert at branding, dehorning, castrating, and selling stock" (27). Dehorning cannot be performed painlessly even today (the procedure involves ripping off the corneal nerve, which runs from behind the eye to the base of the horn, supplying sensation to the horn, resulting in an acute pain response and a delayed inflammatory reaction). And yet dehorning and other procedures must be performed for the welfare and advancement of the society, as well as, obviously, for profit. Predictably, a dehorner must extinguish any pang of empathy when interacting with an animal in pain. Eventually Hale bought more territory from the Osage. All that he subsequently needed was a transformation, a total makeover; he provided himself with a collection of suits, bow ties, and felt hats, as well as with a schoolteacher for a wife; he recited poetry. He developed ties with politicians. He became known for his charity, donating to a local hospital and even supporting the Osage at the time preceding the oil boom. All these efforts aimed at remaking himself as a model citizen contributed also to his becoming a model candidate for the position of a guardian.

The guardianship system opened the dam to a stunning financial fraud; by 1925 an astonishing amount of $8 million was collectively syphoned from the Osage accounts, prompting Congress to pass another law, which prohibited a non-Osage from inheriting headrights. And yet a white spouse or stepparent could also and often did act as a guardian, consequently accessing inheritance as next of kin (Grann 154). Consequently, the Osage, including children, continued to die in alarming numbers, while applicable evidence would conveniently van-

ish: bullets disappeared during an autopsy; sheriffs proved ineffective, and doctors failed to recognize symptoms of poisoning. The system of guardianship ended for the Osage with the precedent court ruling of April 21, 1931, which at last stated that Mollie Burkhard was "restored to competency, and the order heretofore made adjudging her to be an incompetent person is hereby vacated" ("Probate records of Mollie Burkhart," File No. 2173, NARA-FW, qted in Grann, 229). But the prevalent views would not be as easily diffused, as proven by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Marshall's statement of 1931—for the purpose of the Cherokee Nation v. Georgia case—that the Indian tribes are "domestic dependent nations"; juxtaposed against the recently closed and well-publicized FBI investigation in Osage county, Marshall's comparing the federal/tribal relationship to "that of a ward to his guardian" portends a persistent menace ("Federal Trust Doctrine"; Ball 1188; comp. legal ramifications of the guardianship concept in Williams 104-108).

It seems obvious that such a canvas murder scheme, resulting in disrupted families, broken community ties, and apparent harm on both an individual and societal level, would not be possible if the perpetrators and onlookers alike had not reached a consensus regarding the lesser value of the lives lost. Even with the perpetrators mostly remaining in the shadow, the extend of the crimes was evident; the harm was happening in full view; during the aptly called Reign of Terror, several members of the tribe left the reservation, often as far as to Canada. Apart from the ongoing trauma experienced by survivors, the Osage language and culture, both dependent on a community of active users, became especially endangered. We should now recall Adorno and his exploration of how the blurring of human-animal boundary may be used by perpetrators to justify blatant harm, dispossession, and outright murder:

> Indignation over cruelty diminishes in proportion as the victims are less like normal readers, the more they are swarthy, 'dirty', dago-like. This throws as much light on the crimes as on the spectators. Perhaps the social schematization of perception in anti-Semites is such that they do not see Jews as human beings at all. The constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom. The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally-wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze – "after all, it's only an animal" – reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure themselves that it is "only an animal," because they could never fully believe this even of animals (105).

The gaze of an animal conflates with the gaze of a human who is *like* an animal. In a culture that justifies the killing of animals on a mass scale, genocides are as unavoidable as ancient prophecies. Therefore, after all, we can start questioning the fascination with every new unearthing of "evil," and we might be obliged to begin exposing its feigned naïveté as a mere falsification, a case of pretend amnesia, which allows the public to conveniently forget any of its previous occurrences and heretofore absolve itself collectively from seeking to uncover its trails and patterns.

Naivety and hope stand for the cornerstones of humanity, though, the kind of humanity propagated by Adorno and Derrida, and practiced by the Prairies tribes up to the mid-nineteenth century. This humanity, paradoxically, also relies on the purposeful blurring of boundaries between animal and human. Driscoll refers to Derrida's argument for redefining the human-animal border. Rather than simply trying to eliminate this supposed "obstacle," it is crucial to acknowledge and examine the complexities and contradictions of this border, which should not be underestimated or taken lightly, but instead should be considered in parallel with the "inner" border, the enforcement and transgression of which has significant

ethical and biopolitical implications (Driscoll 194). By the same token, resisting the kind of official discourse, which cajoles us into believing that we, in "Fortress Europe," are more worthy (more deserving of space, of comfort, and of safety) than others, "lesser" people, is crucial today, just as it was for the inhabitants of Fairfax and Pawhuska, Oklahoma, in the 1920s, when some of the neighbors of the Osage nation willingly embraced their status as auxiliary to murder, while a few dared to actively resist it. The act of telling and retelling history should not be made subservient to some form of therapy, but rather, as Grann stated during his book tour for the *Oklahoman*, by restoring history "we will learn from that history, and we will learn not only about the past but [also about] the kind of nation and the kind of people we want to be in the future as well." Grann's persuasive and chilling nonfiction account reminds us that shaping history is our responsibility because we too are becoming a piece of history to tell.

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