

Ambiguous Women: Complicating Gendered Readings of Beth Dutton and Monica Dutton in *Yellowstone*

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Abstract

For five seasons, Taylor Sheridan's American neo-Western television series *Yellowstone* (2018–) has been creating an ambiguous understanding of its ideological positioning. This article explores the depiction of female characters as one of these ambiguous fields. With a focus on the ranch-owner John Dutton's daughter, Beth Dutton, and his daughter-in-law, Monica Dutton, the analysis points to the ways in which female characters and their gender performances are presented in ambiguous ways regarding their correspondence to (racialised) gendered stereotypes. As the characters evoke notions of potentially progressive depictions of (Native American) women, it is crucial to examine them as sites in which gender and race are being contested. The Dutton women exemplify the ambiguous ideological nature of *Yellowstone* because both characters appear progressive at times, but also reinforce antiquated notions about gender and race. By conceptualising Beth as a female rendition of the action hero and Monica as a modern interpretation of the Celluloid Maiden trope, the article addresses their ambiguity and debates whether these representations advance gender equity or perpetuate harmful biases. While Beth initially appears emancipated and in defiance of gendered expectations, her reversion into traditional gender roles and her internalised sexism and homonegativism inhibit such effect. Moreover, because of Monica's resemblance to the Celluloid Maiden trope, the lack of depth to her character, and her inauthentic casting, she does little to advance the fight for beneficial representations of Native American women. Through a textual analysis and a close reading of the primary text, the article discusses what makes these characters ambiguous in their correspondence to (racialised) gender norms.

Keywords: gender studies; postcolonial studies; Indigenous studies; feminist studies; television studies



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Introduction

There is no denying that Taylor Sheridan's American neo-Western television series *Yellowstone* (2018–) has polarised viewers on many fronts. Show creator Sheridan himself has admitted: "I was surprised by the amount of political influence that we have . . . But what we do or don't do can influence a market" (Hibberd 2023). Looking back at five seasons of *Yellowstone*, the series has become a fruitful ground to examine its often-ambivalent political and ideological positioning, and more specifically its positioning of female characters. For as Sheridan says, *Yellowstone* influences not only its viewers but also the market, meaning that the progress they could make in terms of critical representation could influence an entire industry to follow its lead. Where exactly *Yellowstone* wants to lead in depictions of female characters, however, is often uncertain. This article focuses on the ranch-owner John Dutton's daughter, Beth Dutton, and his daughter-in-law, Monica Dutton, who, in their (racialised) gender performances, exemplify the ideological ambiguity that fascinates many viewers and critics about *Yellowstone*.

Both women have been associated with contentions about *Yellowstone*'s progressiveness and conservatism alike (Wanzo 2022), creating paradoxical readings. Beth evokes a sense of defying gendered expectations through her character's key features, namely: toughness, aggression, vulgarity and heroism. The reading of Monica is particularly interesting to analyse for what she represents as an Indigenous main character and the potential that comes with such representation, specifically, calling attention to Native American issues such as the persisting threat of violence against Indigenous women. As prominently featured main characters on a male-dominated series, their characters hold potential for progressive representation and the challenging of (racialised) gender norms. As a woman fighting in a man's world, Beth could advocate for women and work to deconstruct misogyny; she could strive to uplift other women in solidarity; and she could use her sexual openness to deconstruct notions of shame around female sexuality. Her character could challenge antiquated gender roles within the genre and beyond if it were rooted in a progressive understanding of femininity. Likewise, if handled in a culturally sensitive and ideologically critical manner, a progressive depiction of Native American women through the character of Monica could break down harmful stereotypes about Native women's sexuality and gender performance and provide crucial representation. By providing authentic and accurate forms of representation, as well as consistent character development and significance, both characters could advance feminist depictions of women on screen and their roles within the *Yellowstone* universe certainly present opportunities to aim for such advancement.

However, as the article seeks to point out, they create merely an illusion of progress in terms of gender and racial equity as their progressiveness does not extend below surface level. While Beth is arguably inspiring for female viewers in terms of her tenacity in asserting dominance over the male characters, she reverts to traditional gender roles in

her private relationships and exhibits levels of internalised sexism, homonegativism and misogyny. Moreover, the alleged benefits for representation derived from Monica's character are undermined by the perpetuation of stereotypes about Native American women as well as her lack of character development and her inauthentic casting. Therefore, through the characters of Monica and Beth, further questions arise about *Yellowstone*'s ideological ambiguity and whether gender and racial issues are incorporated for the sake of appearing progressive rather than working to change the status quo.

In the article, I will examine Beth and Monica individually, over time as well as in their interactions with the other characters. The analysis of Beth conceptualises her as a hero figure in the traditional, hypermasculine, Western-specific sense and will elaborate on the ways in which her character transgresses gender boundaries as a woman exhibiting a set of masculine-coded behaviours. Subsequently, I will take a closer look at Beth as she is depicted within her most prominent relationships to ascertain her domestic portrayal of femininity. To analyse the ambiguity of Monica, I will examine her as a projection of the male colonial gaze based on her lack of character development as well as the adherence to the "Celluloid Maiden" trope as coined by Marubbio (2009, 3). Further, by establishing authentic representation as a form of Vizenor's (1999, 5) term "survivance" later in the article, my analysis seeks to point out why the lack of authenticity and significance of Monica's character undermines attempts at advancing Indigenous nations by supposedly foregrounding Indigenous characters.

Beth Dutton

To analyse Beth's character, it is first crucial to establish her as a woman within the genre. This context allows for a discussion of the ways in which her gender performance transgresses or reifies gender ideals and boundaries. *Yellowstone* is often labelled as "neo-Western" (Hibberd 2022) and indeed, the core values of man and nature, violence and vigilante justice define *Yellowstone* (Fine 2012, 153). Fine (2012, 153) analyses female characters in Western series while asking: "Have western heroines really gained equality?" Many parallels exist between Fine's heroines and Beth; hence, whether or not Beth can be read as a Western heroine who transgresses gender boundaries will be discussed in this analysis.

Fine (2012, 153) argues the assumption that "heroic power is inherently masculine" is underscored by the Western genre's environment which emphasises and hyperbolises notions of active, dominant masculinity and passive, submissive femininity (2012, 154) as previously recognised by Mulvey (1975). She further contends that "[t]oughness and aggression, especially as they relate to the traditional active-masculine/passive-feminine dichotomy, are characteristics of the heroic" (Fine 2012, 154). As Fine (2012, 155) incorporates Butler's (1988) understanding of gender as inherently performative, she posits that the characters she analyses subvert gendered expectations by engaging in diverse types of aggression, those that are associated with femininity and those that are

not. Discussing Björkqvist and Niemelä's (1992) findings, Fine (2012, 155) distinguishes between direct and indirect aggression: while the latter is calculated and "a kind of social manipulation", direct aggression is divided into expressive and instrumental, the former of which is usually linked to femininity feeding into notions of passivity as it is associated with reaction rather than action, such as revenge or acts of jealousy. Instrumental aggression, on the other hand, is "formulated with forethought and carried out purposefully" (Fine 2012, 155); it is proactive and therefore corresponds to masculinity in its notions of agency and force. While expressive aggression can be found in self-defence or impulsiveness, instrumental aggression seeks control in order to push the opponent into submission.

Although Beth showcases the impulsive, the reactive, the calculated and the instrumental alike, the moments in which she displays instrumental aggression render her adjacent to the hero figure. Examples include the aggressive business techniques she often crafts over the course of many episodes as well as her inventive forms of revenge. Fine (2012, 156) contends that although the Western genre has a long history of reproducing these notions of active-masculine/passive-feminine aggression, female characters also break with this dichotomy by engaging in male-coded aggression, thereby becoming female renditions of the Western hero rather than just a heroine who comes with a subordinate set of values aligned with notions of reaction and passivity. Another factor which Fine attributes to this break with gender dichotomies is how the characters take on the characteristic role of the protector common in the Western genre. Usually, the hero figure protects "innocent" side characters, who tend to be women portrayed as damsels in distress, whereas Beth not only refuses to be the damsel but also masters the role of the protector (Fine 2012, 156). This role is also tied to understandings of masculine-coded types of aggression, as it is active while the protected remains passive (Fine 2012, 159). As Fine (2012, 156) further supplies, this notion of protection "identifies them as heroic figures, reinscribing their performances of gender".

One such moment of protection plays out when Beth comes to Monica's defence after a salesclerk calls the police on her for allegedly shoplifting (Season Two, Episode Nine). Beth then becomes aggressive towards the clerk and, enjoying the clerk's humiliation, she then stops and admits that the clerk is "lucky [Monica] has a conscience", thereby insinuating that she would show no mercy. Her protection is fuelled by notions of calm and calculated vigilante justice rather than emotionally charged and impulsive revenge. Additionally, Beth's role as a protector of her father John is particularly interesting because he is the head of the Dutton agricultural empire and generally depicted as the hero of *Yellowstone*. Although John appears strong enough to not need protection, his strength does not translate to the field in which he and his legacy are most threatened: modern life under the rule of major, manipulative corporations. The need for Beth's protection in this field renders him helpless despite his patriarchal superiority and produces Beth as a hero. In this way, the series challenges gendered assumptions about heroic figures.

One of Beth's core characteristics is her hatred of fear and showing "weakness". So, even when facing death or assault after her office is broken into, she refuses to give in to the attackers, instead disobeying their orders and provoking them in various ways (Season Two, Episode Seven). For characters in similar situations, Fine (2012, 167) has found such reactions to assault to be indicative of "their heroic nature" as the traditional Western hero faces death and assault only to emerge from it as a stronger man (Luhr 1995, 38). Fine (2012, 167–168) frames sexual assault as a gendered version of the tragic incident producing a hero.

Brown's (1996, 52) findings underscore this reading of Beth's character when he argues,

the development of the hardbody, hardware, hard-as-nails heroine who can take it, and give it, with the biggest and the baddest men of the action cinema indicates a growing acceptance of nontraditional roles for women and an awareness of the arbitrariness of gender.

In conversation with Butler (1988) and Mulvey (1975), Brown (1996, 56) contends that the action heroine contradicts traditional ascriptions of passivity to female characters and thereby underscores Butler's understanding of gender as artificial and arbitrarily defined. Although Beth is not an action heroine in the traditional sense, for example deviating from this tradition in the way she is dressed (usually wearing floral dresses or form-fitting business attire rather than bodysuits like a typical action heroine) or the fact that she is not usually equipped with strong weapons or firearms (Brown 1996, 60), as a heroine in an action-heavy drama series, this reading still applies to her. Brown (1996, 56) further claims, "[the action heroine] is in full command of the narrative, carrying the action in ways that have normally been reserved for male protagonists", a crucial element to Beth's character and the ways in which she transgresses gender boundaries. Once more, what constitutes Beth's heroiness is her embodiment of masculine traits and plot developments, such as agency, protection, and (self-) assertion.

However, as Butler (1988, 522) argues, gender can be understood as a set of rules, the deviation of which is often punished or disapproved of. Gender transgression is a privilege, which I argue Beth is granted through her more hegemonically feminine behaviour in the relationships with her father and her husband, Rip Wheeler. Within her romantic relationship, Beth adheres to more hegemonic ideas of female gender performance, for example, by being vulnerable, depending on her man, and becoming increasingly domestic. In her relationship with Rip, she reverts to more normative understandings of femininity and heterosexual relationships. Although Beth initially refuses any sort of emotionally intimate relationship, she becomes increasingly vulnerable with Rip, relies on him for help, and even starts dreaming of marrying him (Season Three, Episode Four). Romantic Coupling is also a key point in Brown's (2015, 192) analysis of postfeminist heroines, to which he argues that

for all the postfeminist rhetoric about freedom, independence, and abundant choices, the ultimate conclusion of finding Mr. Right reinforces very traditional conceptions about gender and heterosexual coupledness.

Accordingly, heterosexual coupledness makes strong, assertive women's stories of heroism "palatable" (Brown 2015, 191).

With her father, who calls her "sweetheart", Beth also reverts to traditional gender roles, as she is notably affectionate towards him, often kissing him on the cheek or head, as well as saying "I will never tell you no, Daddy" when agreeing to join the family's political campaign (Season One, Episode Three). Despite being in her late 30s, hyper-independent, self-reliant, and heroic, her father is the centre of her world, and she constantly seeks his approval: "Everything I do is for you. To please you. To protect you" (Season Three, Episode Eight). Albeit transgressive in her gender performance to some extent, her character still revolves around men.

What is interesting when it comes to Beth as a heroic figure, rather than a heroine fighting alongside a male hero, is also how this heroicness in public translates very differently into her private relationships. Behaviours that are approved of as protectiveness in business, have the opposite effect in her private life. She is territorial, jealous, and immature, she acts and reacts impulsively, for example, when she gets into a physical altercation with another woman at the bar after she flirted with Rip (Season Five, Episode Three), or when she accuses the governor of wanting to "piss in every corner and make that corner [hers]", then threatening, "I ruin careers for a living. You sleep in my mother's bed again and I will ruin yours" after she spent the night at the ranch on the anniversary of Beth's mother's death (Season One, Episode Six). Later, when John invites Summer, a young environmental activist, to the ranch and begins an affair with her, Beth even challenges her to a fight (Season Five, Episode Five). Contrary to her business behaviour, her aggression in her private life is expressive and impulsive, which following Fine's (2012, 155) argument, is feminine-coded and associated with passivity and reaction rather than activity and agency.

This portrayal of Beth as territorial and emotionally immature underscores notions of female hysteria and irrationality, seemingly proving that as much as she can be accepted for her assertiveness when it manifests in masculine-coded behaviour, her feminine-coded behaviour of impulsive overreaction gives reason to her subordination as a woman. This discrepancy in her behaviour suggests that "business Beth" is only a mask she puts on and that her private persona and gender performance will always prevail over the rational determination that is only innate to men. While impulsive reactions are her *modus operandi* in her private life, in her business life, she makes calculated decisions based on a level of vigilante justice that grants her a position as a seemingly equal player to the most powerful men on *Yellowstone*. This also corroborates Fine's argument about male-coded heroic behaviour being instrumental rather than expressive, which Beth has mastered on many levels, but not on a personal one. Arguably, her

private gender performance can be read as a way of enabling her public gender performance which results in an ambiguous reading of her character as a heroic figure that transgresses gendered boundaries.

In her storyline, Beth is the main character, the heroic figure cold-bloodedly defending her father's legacy by all means necessary, such as either by making questionable deals with other companies or finding loopholes in contracts or government restrictions. Instead of using guns or other forms of physical violence like a traditional Western hero would, her weapons include calculated business manoeuvres, intimidation, threat and domination. It is this performance that is generally associated with the powerful and thus progressive depiction of Beth's character, but at a closer look, her behaviour shows that her techniques are informed by emasculation, misogyny and homonegativism. Therefore, Beth is not an ideologically progressive character although her gender performance transgresses boundaries. Rather than deconstructing gendered assumptions, she perpetuates them through her character's own engagement and legitimisation of such tools of oppression. She exhibits masculine-coded traits but her transgressive gender performance, as well as its approval by characters and viewers alike, is a double-edged sword.

Wanzo (2022, 79) analyses *Yellowstone* and its positioning within conservative television when she characterises Beth as follows:

Beth Dutton [played by Kelly Reilly] is a sexually assertive alcoholic who is nasty to almost everyone but particularly to sexist men. Reilly's scenery-chewing performance is . . . about as far from representing the kind of femininity trumpeted as ideal by conservatives as any attractive, white, heterosexual woman's could be.

Based on this assertion and the previous discussion of her as a Western/action heroine, Beth could be read as a character who encourages other women to stand up against sexism and as a female character who deviates from conservative ideals of female gender performance. Yet, there are issues with this positioning. For one, Beth may challenge and confront sexist men, but as her default judgement of other women is usually informed by misogyny, she perpetuates sexism and misogyny. She judges, insults and talks down to other women, such as when she calls her brother Jamie Dutton's campaign manager a "whore" the first time they meet (Season One, Episode Six). When Beth meets the girlfriends of the ranch's cowboys, she calls them "sluts" for camping out with their men, although she also camped with Rip. She justifies this seeming hypocrisy with the fact that her actions are "proper" as she and Rip are married (Season Five, Episode Seven), whereas the other couples are not. Her lack of judgement towards the men underlines the sexism inherent in her beliefs of propriety. When her female assistant drops a tray of coffee, Beth also denigrates her on a sexist basis by aggressively calling her a "fucking pussy" (Season Three, Episode Eight).

Beth's sexism not only manifests in her interactions with women, but also informs her interactions with men, as her main techniques of "being nasty to sexist men" (Wanzo

2022, 79) are emasculation and allegations of homosexuality which she equates to weakness or inferiority. Therefore, she propagates multiple forms of social discrimination. This is especially evident in her business interactions as well as in her conversations with Jamie, against whom she routinely uses homophobic insults or alludes to his being too womanly and therefore too weak, such as when he asks her for advice and she sarcastically retorts, “Yes, I know you’re gay and no, Daddy will not still love you when you tell him” (Season One, Episode Two), or when she yells at Jamie to be a man after she punched him in the face (Season One, Episode Three). Before the pain her brother has caused her is revealed, her behaviour seems immature. After the revelation, her comments remain homophobic and misogynistic, but her anger is explained by the pain he has caused her (Season 3, Episode 6). Through this explanation, the character runs the risk of legitimising homonegativism and misogyny because in Beth’s eyes, the worst she can call her brother is homosexual and feminine, insinuating that these are the worst things a man could be. Along with the sympathy viewers feel for the harm Jamie has caused Beth, her overall antagonisation of him, and the subsequent hatred she feels for him, there is a danger of legitimising her insults along with her pain.

Beth follows the same principle with her business acquaintances whom she tries to position herself above by alluding to the size of their genitals or to their sexual potency, such as with her business partner and superior, Bob Schwartz. She confidently presents him with a business plan and then proceeds to ask, “How are you fixed for junk, Bob?” to ascertain his confidence in his investment abilities, thereby challenging his masculinity (Season Two, Episode One). Other times, she uses similarly emasculating insults against her business opponents to assert dominance and as a way of psychological warfare, especially with Dan Jenkins in Season One with whom she first flirts only to reject him and instead get involved with his wife. Therefore, instead of challenging and deconstructing internalised misogyny and heterosexist notions of masculinity and femininity, Beth is celebrated for behaving just like the sexist men she stands up against. Nonetheless, this only reinforces such notions by positioning not sexism but the individual men as morally wrong and legitimising misogyny, sexism and homonegativism with the help of her character’s “toughness” as a source of credibility over determining what is right and wrong. Her masculine-coded behaviour, combined with the conventional attractiveness that Wanzo (2022, 79) also notes, grants Beth a unique position as a powerful woman within a male-dominated series and it extends well beyond asserting dominance over other women and businessmen.

In the first two seasons, Beth is positioned as a woman who has very few feminine-coded traits and by contrast behaves stereotypically male: she prefers to have sexual encounters without emotional attachment; she rarely shows emotions other than anger; and most of her vocabulary seems to consist of swear words. Beth is a woman who has the same audacity and aggression as the men around her; who dominates the narrative; and who exhibits traditionally masculine traits like vulgarity and entitlement (Fine 2012, 164–65), but who also has no solidarity towards other women. On the contrary, Beth

even appears hateful towards most other women on the show, mistrusting and questioning them by default. Thus, it is difficult to read her as the type of female character who encourages and empowers female viewers. Instead, with all her power, she has no interest in improving women's place in society at large as would be expected from a progressive female main character. This mirrors *Yellowstone*'s ambiguous depiction of women and gender roles: Beth's independence and emancipation may not go in line with conservative notions of womanhood, but her audacity and her demeaning, vulgar and sexist behaviour still grants her respect and allows for the perpetuation of homonegativism and misogyny.

Beth's portrayal of gender, her interactions with other women, and her behaviour towards men all reflect a postfeminist rather than a feminist approach to her character. Although postfeminism is a term difficult to define, scholars like Brown (2015) attribute neoliberal elements such as heightened levels of individualism to its distinction to the feminisms that came before and followed it. Brown (2015, 170) claims that

it is this neoliberal underpinning that contributes to some of postfeminism's greatest limitations and restricts its ideological agency in deference to what are deemed simplistic self-interests and rationalized capitulations to misogyny.

This is an issue I have found with Beth in my analysis. While elevating herself, she does not elevate other women, but instead insults, condescends and mocks them in addition to asserting her dominance over the male characters by accusing them of homosexuality or feminisation. This performance underscores the legitimacy of heterosexist notions of femininity. In her more masculine performance of gender, she supports notions of female subordination by decidedly subordinating women or emasculating men through misogynistic or homophobic insults. In her private life, she reverts to traditional gender stereotypes of a submissive daughter desperate for her father's approval and a woman who needs a man to turn her into a loving wife. In line with Butler's (1988, 519) claims that gender is based on "a stylized repetition of acts", I can thus conclude that Beth's performance of masculinity, as well as her performance of femininity, maintain the construct of both. Moreover, the depiction of Beth as a hero fighting battles for a bigger hero, her father, underscores what Luhr (1995, 42) finds in his study of Westerns: "the Western is about men. Women exist in male terms, as part of the men's stories".

Yet, once again, the character of Beth reads ambiguously: on the one hand, she has her own story informed by trauma, growth and emotional ties to other characters. On the other hand, in addition to having no female friend or confidante, her relationships with the men in her life are so omnipresent she barely exists without them. Her business ambitions centre solely around her father, her relationships become increasingly heteronormative, and her only two relationships of significance are with her brother Jamie and Carter, a boy she fosters. However, her relationship with Jamie is fuelled by trauma and hatred, and while Carter grants her character emotional vulnerability, he loses significance to the plot, thereby limiting the complexity of Beth's negotiations of

gender identity as a mother figure within her small family. *Yellowstone* seems to grant Beth a masculine persona only as long as this masculinity is rectified through a rerouting to heteronormative femininity in her private life. This normative femininity, then, seems superior to her masculine persona as she develops into a more domestic and conservatively feminine woman over the course of the show, and is rewarded with idealised notions of true love. This development suggests an artificiality of her masculine persona while at the same time seemingly instrumentalising the persona's toughness and her voice as a female character as a means to justify misogyny and homonegativism. Thus, showing Beth as a woman so seemingly emancipated in public, but so conservative in her private relationships, reifies the sexism her character only seemingly transgresses with her gender performance, thereby resulting in an ambiguous performance of femininity.

Monica Dutton

To this day, representation of Indigenous characters is rare on American television. Furthermore, it is often based on stereotypes and biases, and thus rarely authentic. *Reservation Dogs* (2021–2023) is one of the few examples of a Native-led and Native-produced series and “negative, limiting, and inaccurate representations are widely accessible in the United States” according to Eason, Brady and Fryberg (2018, 70). They posit that

biased ideas and representations of Native Americans . . . constitute the modern form of bias against Native Americans and perpetuate a recursive cycle of low expectations, prejudice, and discrimination. (Eason, Brady and Fryberg 2018, 71)

For an elevation of Indigenous nations, it is thus crucial for film and television to not only break with the lack of representation, but also with such harmful representations. Eason, Brady and Fryberg (2018, 71) further contend that because “the dominant culture provides ideas, beliefs, and assumptions about what it means to be a person or a member of a group”, authentic and accurate representation is crucial to deconstruct such beliefs and assumptions as a way to grant Indigenous nations agency and sovereignty over such representation. They argue that there is a severe lack of media that positions Native Americans as successful, resulting in a lack of confidence among Indigenous people to be successful themselves (Eason, Brady and Fryberg 2018, 75).

In many of its Native characters, *Yellowstone* marks a notable change to this trend: not only in numbers but also in character significance. For instance, Thomas Rainwater, the tribal chairman, is a successful businessman with an Ivy League education who is portrayed as an equal opponent to John Dutton. Moreover, Monica, one of the female main characters, is a Native American woman. On the surface, *Yellowstone* seems to be breaking with traditional depictions of Native Americans. However, as is also evident in the character of Monica, while the inclusion of a Native female main character appears like an important step in the progression of Indigenous equity, the portrayal of

Indigenous women on *Yellowstone*, oftentimes, is still fuelled by what Wanzo (2022, 78) calls a “fetish for brutalizing Native female characters”.

Eason, Brady and Fryberg (2018, 75) also claim that, along with stereotypical and biased depictions, Indigenous characters are often written as “secondary roles lacking character development”, an issue Wanzo (2022, 81) sees in *Yellowstone*:

the Native American series clearly model futurity, not only for Native Americans but for Native representations in general, in ways that Sheridan does not; in his world, they can only be secondary characters who never win.

These two issues, in combination with the pre-existing controversy surrounding Kelsey Asbille, the Eurasian actress who plays Monica, and her contested claims of being Native (Maillard 2017; Wanzo 2022), build another example of the ideological ambiguity of *Yellowstone*. Overall, three main issues arise regarding the representation of Native women through the character, namely: the harmful representation that comes with casting a non-Native actress; the way Monica adheres to stereotypes about Native women; and the character’s flatness that lends itself to allegations of tokenism as well as the diminishing of Indigenous histories and present issues.

In addition to the racial component of Native American women’s representation, gender and sexuality add another dimension (Marubbio 2009, 4). Their gender and sexuality, which are often centred in noble/ignoble savage-inspired portrayals of Native American women, also make them objects of sexualisation and fetishisation (Eason, Brady and Fryberg 2018, 70; Marubbio 2009, 4). As Marubbio (2009, 4) states, “the representation of Native American women . . . provides the colonizer, the white hero, and the viewer with a fetishized body of exotic and raced beauty”. This notion of fetishisation by the viewer corresponds to what Columpar (2002, 27) establishes in response to Mulvey’s (1975) claims that “[t]he determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly”. Columpar (2002, 34) further defines “the ethnographic gaze and the colonial gaze as the mechanisms by which the nonwhite subject has been and continues to be fixed in his/her otherness”. What happens in the depiction and perception of Native American women on the screen, then, is often an extension of the male gaze with the ethnographic/colonial gaze.

This sexualised othering is particularly significant considering Asbille’s portrayal of Monica, because on the body of a Eurasian actress that passes as Native, white assumptions about female Native American bodies are reinforced, highlighting that racial markers are not natural but instead ascribed to bodies which are then racialised and sexualised based on their Otherness. Columpar (2002, 33) refers to Wiegman’s (1995) positioning of race as “constituted as a visual phenomenon, with all the political and ideological force that the seemingly naturalness of the body as the locus of difference can claim”. Therefore, casting a non-Indigenous actress in the role of a Native American woman reifies the legitimacy of such ascriptions and perpetuates racist assumptions about Native female bodies. By deciding that Asbille is phenotypically

“Native-looking” enough to play a Native American character, images of white-created markers of indigeneity are perpetuated, resulting in a practice in which race is acted out and thereby practically caricaturised, similar to redface. Lopez, Eason and Fryburg (2021, 698) discuss the different treatments of redface and blackface, which entail the artificial creation of assumed features of racialised bodies through white bodies. Where blackface targets, ridicules and often infantilises Black populations, redface aims such practices at Native American bodies by, for example, painting faces in red shades or using other techniques to “depict Native . . . Peoples with distorted and exaggerated facial features”. Control over the portrayal lies with the colonial gaze and the character of Monica becomes a blank canvas onto which bias and gendered stereotypes about Native American women are projected (Bird 2001, 81).

As Vigil (2021, 170) postulates, authenticated representation of Native Americans by Native Americans can be considered a form of “survivance”, a term coined by Vizenor (1999, 5) as describing a way of asserting Native realities and “an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories”. Casting inauthentically, however, inhibits this sense of “survivance” by feeding into the colonial gaze as Native American realities are exchanged for white imaginations of such, effectively dehumanising them (Bird 2001, 65). As Eason, Brady and Fryberg (2018, 71) contend,

breaking this cycle . . . requires that new ideas and representations defined by Native American people accurately reflect who and what Native people are, not who others imagine them to be.

For this to happen, it is critical to incorporate Native people in the creation and depiction of Native characters, by involving Native writers, casting Native actors, or ideally both and more. As Sheridan states in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, he writes most episodes by himself (Hibberd 2023). Following Eason, Brady and Fryberg’s (2021, 74) assertions that most Indigenous characters are still rooted in their (non-Indigenous) creator’s bias, *Yellowstone* therefore does little to break the cycle of harmful misrepresentation. This is because cultural insiders are not involved in the creation of Native characters which can lead to white creators projecting ideas and assumptions onto supposedly Native bodies (Eason, Brady and Fryberg 2021, 70–71) that are rooted in harmful stereotypes.

One prevalent stereotype in the depictions of Native American women is what Marubbio (2009, 3) calls the “Celluloid Maiden”. This stereotype is a way of fetishising and commodifying the Native American female body (Ono and Buescher 2001, 35) and subordinating her to white colonisers (Marubbio 2009, 3–4). Clearly sexualised in her innocent primitivism, the Celluloid Maiden is “civilised” through her love for her white husband (Marubbio 2009, 7). Monica bears resemblance to this trope due to the nature of her relationship with her white husband Kayce Dutton and the ways in which she increasingly adapts to the Dutton way of life, thereby submitting to her husband and his family. In seasons one and three, she strictly opposes the Duttons; whereas in seasons

two and five, she voluntarily moves to the ranch and even takes on a job John organised for her. As Marubbio (2009, 4) contends, Native American depictions onscreen have for decades referred to the stereotypes of the noble and ignoble savage as they are “inextricably bound to America’s image of itself as a nation built on manifest destiny and the conquering of the savage and the wilderness”. This notion is underscored by Black (2022) who attributes a “settler-colonial version of American history” to the ways in which *Yellowstone* addresses Native history. Most of Monica’s life has taken place on the reservation in an isolated and alternative way of life which is why assimilation with and resistance to the Duttons symbolises assimilation with or resistance to white ideas of civilisation. The more Monica gives in to or opposes them, the more she adheres to the noble or ignoble savage archetypes. For example, by condemning the Duttons and their way of life as corrupted and dangerous, she insists on the superiority of her morals over their set of beliefs, but by exchanging her job as a teacher at a reservation school for that of an assistant professor at Montana State University, which John even organises for her, she submits to Western lifestyles and therefore appears “civilised” at last.

Marubbio (2009, 4–5) argues that the Celluloid Maiden trope encompasses many of the archetypes in previous existence, such as the squaw, the Indian princess, or the young maiden, “taking on the complexity and power of a cultural icon and overshadowing them in its levels of symbolic meaning”. Two main components make up the Celluloid Maiden concept, namely, the Celluloid Princess and the Sexualised Maiden who represent the female renditions of the noble and ignoble savage figure (Marubbio 2009, 4). The Celluloid Princess is characterised by “her innocence and purity, her link to nobility, her exotic culture and beauty, her attraction to the white hero, and her tragic death” (Marubbio 2009, 6). These characteristics apply to Monica on various levels. Although she is a young mother and therefore less virginal than the typical Celluloid Princess, she is characterised as nurturing, gentle and non-violent, which depicts her as almost innocent, reinforcing primitivist notions of the noble savage, especially in comparison to Kayce, a former navy SEAL who, during the first three episodes alone, kills several people, including Monica’s brother Robert Long.

Monica’s clothing and make-up is understated (she wears distressed jeans, a simple tank top and a flannel shirt in Season One, Episode One), suggesting simple living conditions. Contrary to Beth, whose clothing emphasises her wealth as well as her sexual beauty (she wears form-fitting dresses that often show a lot of cleavage), the contrasting staging of Monica’s body suggests notions of natural, humble beauty. Her attraction to the white hero manifests in her marriage to Kayce. Although she has not (yet?) suffered a tragic death, other plotlines could be read as such. A traumatic brain injury in Season One, for instance, leaves her battling to survive; in Season Five, she almost dies in a car accident that causes the death of her newborn son; and she closely escapes being raped and murdered on the reservation in Season Three. She also witnesses an attack on the ranch in Season Four; the suicide of her sister-in-law in Season One; as well as the kidnapping of her son Tate in Season Two. Death and suffering seem omnipresent in Monica’s life, noticeably more so than in many other

characters' lives. Which begs the question of whether *Yellowstone* is raising awareness or creating a spectacle out of Native issues and suffering.

Additionally, as Marubbio (2009, 7) declares, the Celluloid Princess's "voluntary union with the white hero validates subsuming her disappearing culture into his dominant one". On more than one occasion, Monica surrenders her moral values to keep her family together, for example, by moving to the ranch to reconcile with Kayce. She also takes to a form of fatal violence that she had been strictly opposed to prior to this incident, whereby she surrenders strong morals and oppositions to the Dutton way of life. In effect, as the series progresses, her non-Western, Native lifestyle is eliminated in favour of the white Dutton lifestyle: the Monica introduced in the first episodes has undergone significant changes and arguably has assimilated with the Duttons more and more. Her tragic experiences have arguably taught her to surrender her ideals and convictions, which stresses the noble savage component of the Celluloid Maiden trope and depicts her as a primitive individual lending herself to the shaping of white civilisation. Monica proves to be a character who can be coerced into the life of her husband's white settler family and into turning her back on what is framed as an inferior, primitive way of life.

The second component to Marubbio's (2009) Celluloid Maiden is the Sexualised Maiden. A "more erotic figure", she "embodies enhanced sexual and racial difference that results in a fetishizing of the figure", in line with "becom[ing] the female representation of the ignoble savage" (Marubbio 2009, 7). While Monica cannot be characterised as sexually threatening or as a "femme fatale", a characteristic which Marubbio ascribes to the archetype, the prominence of her sexuality and "racial exoticism" (Marubbio 2009, 7) portray her as adjacent to the Sexualised Maiden. For one, despite being portrayed as a gentle and nourishing maternal figure, she is younger than would be considered proper for having an eight-year-old child. It is also often implied that she seduced Kayce, albeit consensually, and through her pregnancy, the product of what could be read as a sexual threat, "trapped" him on the reservation (as suggested by John in Season One, Episode Six). Moreover, Monica is depicted in a sexualised way, for example, by seductively leaning in the door frame to their bedroom in her underwear or by repeatedly suggesting to Kayce that they could "make another" baby (Season One, Episode One). Throughout Season Three, Monica and Kayce are also increasingly sexually active, often engaging in sexual acts in nature, suggesting an almost primal sexual bond (Season Three, Episode Four).

In addition, from the beginning, Monica wears clothing that, although it is not as revealing and explicitly sexual as Beth's attire, highlights her figure, or by not wearing a bra suggests a simple, natural form of beauty as well as a refusal to conceal her sexuality. Although Monica corresponds more with the Celluloid Princess, she also shows traits of the Sexualised Maiden as the importance of sexuality for her character and her relationship is continuously highlighted throughout all five seasons. Sexualisation based on exoticism and exotification is common in depictions of Native

American women on the screen as pointed out by Black (2022) and also Ono and Buescher (2001, 34) who, in their discussion of the commodification of Pocahontas highlight the tradition behind such depictions informed by “the fantasy of colonizers”. In the character of Monica, this sexualisation is heightened, leading to a fetishisation of her and Native American women in general, rather than breaking down harmful stereotypes.

The fact that Asbille is not Native American, as well as the reversion to the Celluloid Maiden trope, undermine the beneficial representation her character could deliver, but so does her character development. Due to the overall lack of character development, as well as the nature of the development Monica is granted, her principles are ridiculed and over-simplified, which is harmful in combination with the commodification of Indigenous pasts and the Native American female body, such as the brief mention of forced sterilisations on Indian reservations within Beth’s storyline of an involuntary hysterectomy (Season Three, Episode Six). Although it may appear progressive to devote screentime to issues affecting Indigenous women, or to even mention forced sterilisations on reservations, the way such issues are depicted diminishes them and

members of the audience unfamiliar with this history were made aware of it, but at the cost of deflecting attention from the point of such eugenics projects in the United States: genocide. (Wanzo 2022, 80)

Forced sterilisations are addressed within Beth’s storyline, but the systemic violence that enabled such practices on Native American reservations is disregarded. Black (2023) even goes so far as to proclaim that the “hysterical distortion insults all Native women, but especially the survivors of forced sterilizations”.

Similarly, although Monica appears passionate about Indigenous activism, teaching Native American history and taking her students to Indigenous events in seasons two and three, after the third season and her reunion with Kayce, Monica no longer engages in activism and her teaching is never mentioned again, suggesting her idealism has been conquered as she admits to getting it “out of [her] system” after helping to catch and kill a potential murderer (Season Three, Episode Nine). Her activism and teaching passions seem temporary distractions and become irrelevant once the love story with her white husband is foregrounded again. This is also mirrored in costume details. During her time as a teacher and an activist, which coincides with the couple’s separation and marriage struggles, Monica frequently wears shirts with prints such as “Native Love” (Season Two, Episode Eight). However, she discontinues this in later seasons when they no longer live on the Dutton ranch, but are happily in love again, thereby underscoring a reading of her character which suggests that her activism and involvement with Native issues is but a rebellious phase while being closer to the Duttons, which she eventually outgrows. As Black (2022) finds, Monica “seems lifeless at times” which suggests her presence for presence’s sake, a form of tokenism rendering Indigenous characters effectively insignificant. Kayce’s lack of involvement with Indigenous issues

emphasises this development. Even while he lives on the reservation, his involvement with the issues his wife's tribe faces is minimal and usually only serves to produce him as the hero, such as when he saves a young Native girl from kidnappers (Season One, Episode Three). Moreover, while the storyline about missing and murdered Indigenous women seems progressive, it is dropped soon after Monica gets it "out of [her] system" (Season Three, Episode Nine). Within it, Monica's martyr storyline of baiting herself out for the greater good and killing a man in self-defence suggests that her categorical opposition to murder has disappeared when she tells Kayce, "I believe in my heart that every man you killed has made the world a safer place. That's how I feel about the man I killed" (Season Three, Episode Eight). Hence, rather than continuing her activism, she has learnt the value and superiority of the Dutton's *modus operandi* of vigilante justice and thereby surrendered to the white coloniser's way of life.

The harm resulting from this lack of development in Monica's storyline is two-fold: firstly, it diminishes the severity of important issues; and secondly, this depiction second-guesses attempts at combating systemic injustice and raising awareness for Indigenous histories and futures. Monica's devotion to telling "the right version" of history (Season Two, Episode One), for instance, seems performative through this contrast and instead reinforces notions of her irrational idealism both through the lack of consistency in storytelling and Asbille's lack of Indigenous heritage. What could be constructed as a complex character through authentic casting and character development is turned into a caricature of a Native woman seen through the eyes of conservative, white settler colonialism: overly emotional, idealistic, and in need of adapting to civilisation, in this case the Dutton way of life.

Monica mirrors *Yellowstone*'s ambiguity as the incorporation of her character creates a sense of ideological progress through its existence, as well as the issues to which it calls attention, but then does not address these issues in their complexity, thereby diminishing them rather than advancing the fight against them. Instead of breaking the cycle of misrepresentation, Monica only adds to the fetishisation and commodification of Indigenous women as well as perpetuating harmful stereotypes and inaccurate representation of them.

Conclusion

Although *Yellowstone* features two female main characters in a male-dominated environment, the drama series is far from being a progressive representation of women. Seemingly embodying female advancement and a position as an equal to the men in the series, Beth evokes notions of progress and gender equity. After a close reading of her character, however, her gender performance and the gendered roles she inhabits within the franchise reveal her as more traditional than initially apparent. Domestically, she is traditionally feminine; appears "tamed" by romantic love; and her life revolves around her father. Her private relationships reveal her as a woman who lives for the men in her life. She may seem to transgress boundaries of the traditional Western hero, but her

relationships, as well as her apparent internalised sexism, contrast this transgression and thus produce an ambiguous performance of the character's femininity. A critical reading has revealed that Beth's transgression of gender boundaries is only permitted in the micro-society of the family drama, because her traditionally feminine roles in her relationships, as well as the central role of romantic love for her character development, suggest a strategic utilisation of masculine coded behaviours that create a useful persona.

Furthermore, instead of uplifting women within the show and thereby advocating for female advancement outside of it, Beth legitimises the inferior position of women through her emasculating and homophobic behaviour towards men; her default disapproval of other women; and her overall sexist attitude. Thus, the depiction of her character can be considered in line with *Yellowstone*'s overall ambiguity, as although she seems empowered, strong and independent, she proves to be conservative and submissive in her relationships with the men in her private life.

Similarly, although it may appear as if *Yellowstone* calls attention to Native women's issues, these plots have little significance on the grand scale of the *Yellowstone* plot and instead, are often undermined by the contexts they are put in. Monica reverts to the sexualised stereotype of the Celluloid Princess, and thereby reinforces the fetishised commodification of the female Indigenous body. Further, the depiction of Monica as an inconsistent idealist who eventually surrenders her convictions to the Duttons' way of life, diminishes the positive representation that could be derived from having a Native female character on a critically acclaimed and widely popular show. What makes these aspects about Monica especially harmful is that her portrayal by an actress who is not Native American undermines the character's authenticity and underscores the dehumanising effect created by stereotypes and lack of character development. Instead of being a means by which Indigenous, and especially female Indigenous, American "survivorship" could be supported, Monica does the opposite as she becomes a platform for projections and fetishisation of the white colonial gaze. As my analysis of Beth and Monica in their specific contexts has shown, the characters mirror the ideological ambiguity of *Yellowstone*. Both Beth and Monica serve to create an image of the series that it does not fulfil: although many aspects about their performance and character depiction could be considered progressive at first glance, the two revert to harmful, sexist and racist stereotypes about (Native American) women and so create complex images of (racialised) femininity that read ambiguously.

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