

Native American Stereotyping in *Peter Pan*: A Modern Solution?



BA Thesis  
English Language & Culture, Utrecht University  
Tessa van Westerop, 6388388  
Supervisor: Roselinde Supheert  
Second reader: Paul Franssen  
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## Abstract

Over the past few decades, readers and viewers have become more critical about representations of minority groups, including representations of gender, race, and ethnicity. This has forced makers of new adaptations to critically think about how to adapt certain aspects of their older source text. This thesis investigates such an adaptation, namely the 2015 film *Pan* (directed by Joe Wright, based on J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911)), which took a transcultural approach and transformed the controversial Native American tribe into an abstract, imagined, and multicultural community. Through close reading and close viewing, this thesis provides an analysis of the representation of the tribe in both *Peter Pan* and *Pan* and shows that despite Wright's efforts to remove the Native American aspects of the story, the film still includes various Native American stereotypes and a white supremacist discourse, similar to those present in the novel. While this particular version does thus not succeed at removing these contested aspects, this thesis does argue that the approach could still be favourable but suggests further research is needed.

**Keywords:** Cultural stereotyping, (transcultural) adaptation; Peter Pan; Native American.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....4

Chapter 1: The Representation of the Native Tribe in Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1911).....9

Chapter 2: The Representation of the Native Tribe in Wright’s *Pan* (2015).....15

Conclusion .....22

Works Cited.....25

## Introduction

Though it may seem a contradiction in terms, Peter Pan - the boy who would not grow up - is over a hundred years old. The now world-famous story about a flying, never-ageing boy named Peter and his adventures on a mystical island called Neverland, was first written by Scottish novelist and playwright J.M. Barrie in 1904. Having first written it as a play, he rewrote it in 1911 as a novel, known as *Peter and Wendy* or simply *Peter Pan* (Laskow). Over time, Barrie's story and the outlandish world he created, which is inhabited by fantastical creatures such as pirates, fairies and mermaids, have proven to be timeless. The story has been adapted countless times, for all types of media, and to this day new versions are being produced.<sup>1</sup>

In recent times, however, J.M. Barrie's story, in particular its portrayal of the Native American tribe that lives in Neverland, has come under scrutiny, as 21st-century readers and scholars have accused it of being racist, stereotypical, and harmful. Many of these accusations are based on the racial terms that Barrie uses to refer to this tribe, for example "piccaninnies" (63) and "redskins" (58). However, critics have also denounced the fact that the tribe members talk in guttural gibberish (Laskow; Yuhas; Purdy 242-3) and that they are portrayed as savages, carrying "tomahawks and knives" (63) and having "scalps, of boys as well as of pirates" (63) strung around them (Callan). Some scholars argue that the story has a white supremacist discourse, as the Indians end up calling Peter Pan the "Great White Father" (116) while bowing to him (Brewer 392).

This is not the first time a literary classic has received such criticism, and the literary representation of Native Americans is fraught with stereotyping and racism. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, stereotypes are representations which are "reduced to a few

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<sup>1</sup> These adaptations include a silent film (1924), a Disney animation (1953), various stage performances (e.g. in 1954 with Mary Martin), several videogames (e.g. *Peter Pan: Return to Neverland* (2002)), the sequel live-action film *Hook* (1991) and a spin-off series about the fairy Tinker Bell (2014).

essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics” (249), meaning that certain aspects of the represented individual or culture are taken, amplified and then called their main characteristics. In other words, people who stereotype apply a commonly held generalization of a group to every single person in the cultural group, failing to recognize or acknowledge any individual differences/variations (Jackson 162). Hall argues that this practice of representation through stereotyping especially occurs when there are large inequalities of power and is often directed against a subordinate or excluded group (258). It is used to portray concepts of difference, in which people tend to present the Other as the opposite of the Self, which is seen as the Ideal Subject. Thus, the Other is defined by what it lacks as compared to the Self, revealing a power structure in which the Other is not seen as different but equal, but as different and lower (Hall 229). The practice of stereotyping is thus necessarily engaged with questions of power and dominance. As mentioned, over the past few decades, the disavowal of ‘othering’ and the creation of these “national characters” (Leerssen 17) has increased, resulting in people criticising texts such as *Peter Pan*. Despite this growing disapproval it is still a common practice. However, it did lead to a new branch in comparative literature; imagology. Imagology is described by Joep Leerssen as a “deconstructive and critical analysis of the rhetoric of national characterization” (17).

According to Julia Boyd, the unfavourable representation of Native Americans in both literary texts and filmic imagery is the result of them being one of America’s most marginalized minorities (106). Despite there being 562 governmentally recognized Native American tribes, each with their own traditions, histories and religions, Native American cultures are often compressed into one ambiguous culture by popular media, effectively erasing the tribes’ individualities (Boyd 106). Moreover, whenever a character of this ambiguous Native American identity is represented, they are often flat, with no character development or dynamic range in their personality, and brought down to harmful, one-

dimensional stereotypes (Boyd 106). While these stereotypes were first present in literature, they grew to also become icons in visual art, and thus it was natural and inevitable for the stereotypes to also progress towards film imagery (Boyd 106). While some of these stereotypes can be seen as relatively positive (for example the stereotype that Native American's are brave (Mclaurin 39)), this more positive image still does not offer a realistic and inclusive representation of Native American culture (Georgakas 26).

Besides the problem of stereotyping, the representation of Native Americans in film also struggles with whitewashing, i.e. the process of casting white actors as characters of non-white races. In doing so, filmmakers ignore the talent and contribution of actors of colour and send a clear message about whom and what they value. According to theorists Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, the problem of whitewashing is a result of "white cultural dominance and Anglo ethnocentrism" (i.e. the belief that one's own culture is superior to all others (Jackson 177)), in which white beauty is often held as the standard even in majority non-white countries (322). Stereotyping and whitewashing in film reinforce ideas of the inferiority of Native Americans, create threats for the safety of Native American youth and alienate members of the culture (Cotton; Mclaurin 43). Moreover, these misrepresentations are "used by white dominant culture to label and limit minority cultures within their own society" (Cotton). Contemporary discussions about racialized stereotypes are thus rooted in the power dynamics that are at play within the representation of different cultures.

The criticism of Barrie's story and the history of stereotyping and whitewashing of Native American characters call for a close examination of the adaptations of *Peter Pan* to determine to what extent these versions evoke similar racist stereotypes, to which the present paper aims to contribute. Ruth Hopkins, a Native American activist and writer, said she "struggled to find a way that *Peter Pan* could be 'fixed' so as not to offend Native peoples" (Yuhas), and indeed, many adaptations over the years have been criticised for their

representation of the tribe. Possibly the most notorious adaptation to receive such criticism is the 1953 Disney animation. This film, which according to some critics is “doubling-down on racism” (Laskow), refers to the tribe as “redskins” (e.g. 00:22:09) and features caricatural characteristics such as being stoop-shouldered, having big noses and bellies and literally red skin (Purdy 243). Moreover, the tribe members’ speech is impaired and mixed with something which looks like sign language (Purdy 242), which stands in stark contrast to the British English the Darling children speak (Laskow; Meek 117). John Darling, Wendy’s brother, furthermore describes the tribe as “quite savage” (00:33:51) and explains that “the Indian is cunning but less intelligent” (00:34:44-00:34:48), which complies with popular stereotypes of Native American people. Finally, this adaptation includes several songs, of which one, “What Makes the Red Man Red?” (00:50:32-00:52:09), portrays various racial stereotypes (Purdy 242; Yuhas). In recent times, however, Disney has publicly proclaimed its disdain for these racial stereotypes. In 2020, they added an official content warning to the film<sup>2</sup> on their popular streaming platform Disney+ (Pietsch), and in 2021 they removed the film from all accounts for children under 7 years old (Bijan).



*Figure 1: A still from Disney's Peter Pan. In this picture several of the native tribe members are shown (00:50:31).*

<sup>2</sup> The warning states: “This programme includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together” (*Peter Pan*).

Many other adaptations have received similar criticism, for example about the whitewashing of the tribe members (e.g. white actress Sondra Lee playing Tiger Lily in the 1964 musical adaptation (Laskow)), the inclusion of racially insensitive songs and gibberish sound patterns (e.g. the song “Ugg-a-Wugg”, which was used in various theatre versions (Yuhas)) or the complete erasure of tribe members (e.g. *Hook* (1991) removed the role of Tiger Lily altogether (Yuhas)). This thesis will look at the most recent adaptation of the story, *Pan* (2015, directed by Joe Wright), which took a relatively new approach to the portrayal of the tribe. Instead of portraying them as a Native American tribe, this film depicts the tribe as a more abstract, original and imagined culture (Laskow). Adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon calls this removing of racial elements that might be considered difficult or controversial by particular cultures “transcultural adaptation” (147). She claims that this particular type of adaptation is often accompanied by a “shift in the political valence” between the original text and the adaptation, which in the case of *Peter Pan* occurred with regard to the representation of Native American people (145). There are, of course, many more aspects related to adaptation studies and intercultural communications which could be applied to this case study. For example, one could focus on how the story has moved from a novel to a film or its production has moved from England to America, which both affect the analysis of the film. However, due to its limited scope, this paper will only focus on racial stereotypes. This thesis will first use close reading to investigate the ways in which Barrie’s novel uses stereotyping to portray the native tribe, and then it will look at how Wright’s *Pan* handled this portrayal by close viewing the film. Eventually, it aims to answer the question whether *Pan*’s approach of portraying the native Neverlanders as a more abstract, original and imagined culture, instead of an actual culture is a favourable choice, as it could be perceived as less offensive towards actual Native American tribes, or whether it evokes similar negative stereotypes as the original novel, albeit in a different way.



## Chapter 1: The Representation of the Native Tribe in Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911)

Ironically, the Piccaninny tribe does not have a huge role to play in Barrie's story. After flying away to Neverland with Peter, Wendy and her brothers John and Michael join the lost boys who reside on Neverland, with whom they go on many adventures. During these adventures, they sometimes encounter the tribe, whose members are initially hostile to the lost boys. It is only after Peter manages to save Tiger Lily, the tribe's princess, from vicious pirates that they become friends. Because of Peter's rescue mission, the tribe vows to protect the lost boys' house from pirates, eventually leading to the tribe and the pirates being locked in battle, which leaves many on each side wounded or dead. Despite not being the most important part of the story, the tribe's presence is thus significant.

Much of the more recent criticism aimed at Barrie's novel is based on the terms he uses to describe the native tribe. The first time the tribe is referred to, Barrie uses the term "redskin camp" (50), and after this, they are referred to as such thirty-four more times. Other descriptions include "Piccaninnies"<sup>3</sup> (five times) and "savages" (four times). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term *redskin* was first recorded in the 18th century, when it still had a neutral meaning, and is now perceived as a dated and offensive term for "[an] American Indian" ("Redskin"). Nancy Shoemaker explains that the exact origin of the term, especially the "red" part, remains contested, arguing that it might have been the Indians themselves who first came up with the term (625-7). However, she further claims that this has not prevented it from becoming a derogatory phrase (643). According to her, it has been appropriated and put to personal use by white people since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leading to "demeaning and dehumanizing racial epithets" of "the noble 'Red Man' and the brutal 'Redskin'" (Shoemaker 643). According to sociologist Irving Allen, informal terms for ethnic

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<sup>3</sup> The term *piccaninny*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is an offensive racial slur originally used to refer to a black child, a black child of African origin or descent, or an American Indian child ("Piccaninny").

groups based on physical characteristics, including the term redskins, are derogatory by nature, as they emphasize the difference between the speaker and the target (18). The effect this derogatory term has is thus similar to that of stereotypes since it shows a hierarchical relationship between the portrayer and the portrayed, i.e. Self and the Other (Hall 259).

The idea of the noble red man and the brutal redskin, as articulated by Shoemaker, correspond with the two most popular stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans in media; the noble and the bloodthirsty savage, or, more generally and simplistically, the good and the bad Indian (Kilpatrick 2). Julia Boyd further defines these terms, stating that “[t]he bloodthirsty savage is a vicious, animalistic beast, attacking white men and kidnapping white children. The noble savage is a wise, exotic being unfettered by society and at one with nature” (106). The bloodthirsty savage is the easiest to identify within *Peter Pan*. According to Lacy Cotton, the bloodthirsty savage is often portrayed as “unattractive, foul smelling and [speaking] in unappealing gibberish tongue” (9). Moreover, they are portrayed as war-loving and are often engaged in “merciless destruction and torture” (Cotton 9). They are also portrayed as cunning, although never “so cunning as to be smarter than the story’s hero” (Cotton 9). As Cotton eloquently describes it; “[b]loodthirsty Indians were something to be feared but also conquered” (9).

In Barrie’s first mention of the tribe, he describes how Michael spots “the smoke of the redskin camp,” after which John explains that he can tell by the shapes of their smoke that they are on the war-path (50). By using this as the tribe’s introduction to the reader, Barrie very early on associates the tribe with war and bloodlust, which is linked to the bloodthirsty savage stereotype (Bontius 12). Moreover, Barrie plays up these ruthless aspects of the stereotype through the frequent referencing to the barbaric act of scalping. In the first description of the tribe, he describes the chief of the clan, Great Little Big Panther, as being unable to walk properly because the many scalps hanging from him “impede his progress”

(63). In doing so, Barrie suggests that the tribe has fought and won many wars (Bontius 13). The fear that the tribe instils is further accentuated when even the pirates, brutal in their own right, express fear of the tribe and their scalping practices (Barrie 66). While the tribe is thus represented as fearmongering and cunning, they are also portrayed as less cunning than Peter. Besides the obvious instant in which Peter saves Tiger Lily, it is also shown when it is explained that the tribe once tried to attack the house under the ground, where the lost boys live, but got stuck in the entrance trees and “had to be pulled out like corks” (92).

Bloodthirsty savages are often portrayed as speaking in broken English, or simply guttural gibberish (Cotton 9). In *Peter Pan*, little of the tribe’s speech is recorded, as they are more often than not portrayed as being silent or as only producing guttural or animalistic sounds. Examples of this are “heavy breathing” (64), a war-cry (140) and an “imitation of the call of the coyote” (138). Moreover, after Peter has rescued Tiger Lily, the tribe members utter “How-do?” (117) to the lost boys. According to Barbra Meek, this is an “American Indian heritage language word” which is typically used by authors in an unimaginative attempt to “distinguish Indian characters’ speech from non-Indian characters’ speech” (113). Therefore, while both the tribe’s general silence and their animalistic sounds reinforce the bloodthirsty savage stereotype, the use of the Native American heritage word is also stereotypical (Meek 13).

The stereotype of the noble savage can also be found in *Peter Pan*. While the origin and uses of this concept transcend just Native American stereotyping, as it is also used for the representation of other native cultures, it is a popular trope in the representation of Native Americans (McNaughton 10). According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the noble savage is the “idealized concept of an uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization” (“Noble savage”). However, while the noble savage was “morally superior to the white man because of his natural goodness [...], he

was also considered less intelligent and less human” (Cotton 28). Noble savages are often portrayed as “brave, stoic, self-sacrificing, spiritual and proud” (Bontius 9). Initially, this stereotype was not meant to denigrate but instead aimed to express admiration, relating to the Romantic movement of primitivism, which believed that people who are closer to nature are closer to God (Bontius 9; McNaughton 12). However, for example in *Peter Pan*, this portrayal has also caused oversimplification of Native American culture (Cotton 31).

Several of these aspects can be found in *Peter Pan*, though not all of them are represented in an obvious way. For example, one of the most prominent aspects of the stereotype, being one with nature, is not portrayed in a clear manner. The only time this is indicated is when Peter mentions that Tiger Lily taught him some “forest lore” (Barrie 155), which suggests that Tiger Lily and her tribe are connected with nature or have “knowledge of nature that the other non-Native inhabitants of Neverland do not have” (Bontius 10). Likewise, the characteristic of spirituality, as often portrayed through ritualistic and ceremonial traditions (Danchevskaya 114), is barely portrayed, save for a passing reference to smoking the peace pipe (Barrie 116). However, the aspects of bravery and self-sacrifice are represented very clearly in the story, as the tribe decides to protect the lost boys from the pirates, and many are killed as a result of this.

Tiger Lily represents many aspects of the noble savage stereotype, which is for example shown when she is captured by the pirates and placed on a rock in the sea to drown. She is described as impassive, a proud daughter of the chief who must “die as a chief’s daughter” (Barrie 98). Moreover, she is the only tribe member who utters a full sentence in the novel, but this sentence lacks grammatical structure.<sup>4</sup> While this might be due to her not knowing the English language, it can also be seen as a way to reinforce the idea that the noble

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<sup>4</sup> The sentence reads: “Me Tiger Lily, Peter Pan save me, me his velly nice friend. Me not let pirates hurt him.” (Barrie 116).

savage is less intelligent than white people (Meek 117). According to Brendan Edwards, the stereotype of the noble savage inherently includes the trope of the Indian Princess (49). This image, according to John Coward, portrays the idealized Indian woman, who is “honored for overcoming the limitations of [her] race and represented [...] as beautiful, loving, exotic, and innocently sexual” (92). In the novel, Tiger Lily is described as “beautiful” (63), “amorous” (63) and a “lovely creature” (116) by the narrator. Moreover, she is shown to have romantic feelings for Peter, the heroic white protagonist, which is usual for the Indian Princess (Ross 39) and portrays her as sexual. While Tiger Lily thus seems to fit the mould of the Indian Princess in many ways, it is important to note here that the narrator of *Peter Pan* is often strangely ironic. Despite the narrator saying these things about Tiger Lily, it is thus not entirely certain whether these comments are sincere or not. However, it can be concluded that Barrie, through the narrator, implemented aspects of this popular stereotypical character trope, whether he agreed with the idea of the Indian Princess being beautiful or not.

*Peter Pan* thus portrays characteristics of both stereotypes, as the tribe members are portrayed as war-loving, barbaric, and cunning (yet not as cunning as the white hero), and as self-sacrificing, brave, spiritual and less intelligent than white men. However, the seemingly stark opposition between the two almost obscures their commonality; they are savages. The two stereotypes differ in many aspects, but within the eye of the *spectants* (the representers (Leerssen 27)), they resemble a type of inhumane creature between men and beast. This aspect of inhumanity can for example be found in the many comparisons between members of the tribe and animals. Examples of this include when Tiger Lily is compared to an eel (100), when the tribe members are called “snake-like” (137) and when Great Big Little Panther is said to walk on all fours, like an animal (63). Moreover, they are described as being naked, with their bodies gleaming with paint and oil, further evoking the image of uncivilised and animalistic creatures. This creation of the savage, either noble or bloodthirsty,

can be related to the idea of white imperialism and Victorian discourse in which whiteness was naturalized as the superior category (Bontius 11; Brewer 390) and white colonizers used the savage image to justify the brutal treatment of Native Americans (Bontius 13). According to Brewer, Pan “explicitly equates himself with the figure of the all-powerful white patriarch” (390), since he assumes a dominant position with relation to the tribe and makes them call him “Great White Father” (116) while they grovel at his feet. Moreover, the original title for the play as submitted by Barrie was *The Great White Father* (Brewer 390). Thus, within *Peter Pan*’s representation of the native tribe, a clear discourse of white supremacy can be found.

While *Peter Pan* uses many racial stereotypes and terms, it is important to acknowledge the timeframe in which the story was written (Brosius; Langwell; Nešporová 44). Aspects that are considered unacceptable now were not always considered unacceptable in 1911 (Laskow). As Anne Hiebert Alton, the editor of the 2011 scholarly edition of *Peter Pan*, claims: “Barrie’s racist depictions of Native Americans, among others, appear throughout the novel and the play, and reflect the not atypical, though clearly offensive, stereotypes of the time” (93). Moreover, it can be argued that the native tribe, like everything in Neverland, is based on the imagination of children, meaning that they resemble these stereotypes because those are the stereotypes Edwardian-era British children would have had (Laskow). Accordingly, these explanations might be the reason that the story has not received as much criticism as for example *Mary Poppins*, which in the 1980s already was subjected to much worse criticism concerning its racist portrayals, and subsequently, the reason why the novel has not yet removed for example the derogatory terms *redskins* and *Picaninny* (Laskow). However, these explanations do not justify the portrayal of racial insensitivities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and thus new adaptations must take this criticism into account and do better.

## Chapter 2: The Representation of the Native Tribe in Wright's *Pan* (2015)

The 2015 film *Pan* tells the story of how Peter became the boy who would not grow up. At the beginning of the story, Neverland is occupied by evil pirates led by the fairy dust searching captain Blackbeard, which has forced the fairies to go into hiding. Already before Peter comes to Neverland, the native tribe actively fights against Blackbeard's rule. When he does arrive, it is revealed that the natives have a prophecy that states that Peter will be the one to free Neverland and save the fairy kingdom. After this, Peter works together with the tribe (mainly Tiger Lily) and eventually defeats Blackbeard. When looking at the representation of the native tribe in this film, it quickly becomes clear that the creators of this version thought critically about how to portray these characters. Instead of portraying the tribe as a Native American tribe, it is depicted as a multicultural community, making it a transcultural adaptation (Hutcheon 145). Regarding this choice, the film's director, Joe Wright, has been quoted saying

I thought about the idea of having a Native American tribe, and that worried me actually. What would I be saying with that choice? So then I thought, well, where should they be from? And I couldn't decide, so I felt like picking just one race would be an unwise choice. So then I thought about the potential of them being the indigenous people of the entire planet. (Schwerdtfeger)

Thus, to avoid a controversy surrounding the tribe, *Pan* set it apart from any existing culture, creating a multicultural world, causing viewers to reimagine Neverland as an imaginary place (Flicks and the City 31:31 - 32:49). This approach was accentuated by featuring decorations, clothing and music reminiscent of various cultures, by having people of all kinds of ethnicities and races inhabiting the tribe and by showering the tribe in an "outlandishly bright array of pinks, purples, browns and bright blues" (Laskow). While this approach of portraying the tribe as an abstract and imaginative community is relatively original, some

critics argue that the 1991 adaptation *Hook* did something similar (Starr). In that film, the native tribe was not mentioned by name, but the creators seemed to have blended the tribe with the lost boys, creating a multicultural society that is made up of all of the natives of Neverland. However, in *Pan*, Wright seems to have taken this approach and developed it further, since here the tribe is specifically referred to as a native tribe, though it is not Native American or native to any other real-life place.

According to Hutcheon, a transcultural adaptation does not necessarily mean that the adaptor will take into account all of the cultural changes that occurred over time, as there are instances in which the adaptor changes certain contested representations, but leaves other aspects and stereotypes intact (146). This also seems to be the case in *Pan*. While the term *redskin* is not used, the tribe members in *Pan* are referred to as “savages” on numerous occasions (00:27:42 / 00:42:32 / 00:46:33), and various aspects of the popular Native American stereotypes described in the previous chapter are present in the film. The tribe is portrayed as bloodthirsty, for example when Peter’s friend James Hook exclaims that its members will kill Peter sooner than help him (00:46:33), and when the tribe forces Hook to fight for his life against their strongest warrior (00:53:03). The tribe’s bloodlust is further accentuated through the fact that it is strongly suggested that the tribe at least partially scalped Blackbeard (01:33:29). Moreover, they are described and portrayed as very cunning, for example when Tiger Lily singlehandedly fells two Neverbirds (00:50:55 - 00:51:19), or when a pirate describes how the natives “sprang from the trees and laid waste to forty of our most formidable men.” (00:27:20 - 00:27:24). Both bloodthirst and cunningness are important aspects of the bloodthirsty savage stereotype which were also featured in *Peter Pan*. Other aspects of this stereotype, however, were not featured here. Examples are the idea that bloodthirsty savages are less cunning than the hero and the idea that they can only speak in broken English or gibberish. This last idea seems to even be challenged by the film, since



Tiger Lily punches Hook in the face when he tries to speak to her in a very exaggerated, slow and loud voice, acting as if she would not be able to understand him otherwise (00:51:26 - 00:51:37).

The noble savage stereotype is also present in *Pan*. An important aspect of this stereotype, the connection between the noble savage and nature, can be found when Tiger Lily is able to project memories through water (01:18:19). Spirituality, which is often portrayed in media through ceremonial and ritualistic traditions (Danchevskaya 114), can be found in both the singing and dancing of the tribe and in the tribe's tradition of having newcomers fight their strongest warrior. Finally, the tribe members are portrayed as brave, self-sacrificing and stoic. A strong example of this is when Blackbeard, in pursuit of fairy dust, threatens to kill the tribe's chief and Tiger Lily if they do not tell him where the hidden fairy kingdom and Peter are (see figure 2). In this situation, they both decide to stay silent and die, rather than betray their friends (01:08:49 - 01:09:45).



Figure 2: Moments before Blackbeard kills the chief for not giving up information about Peter and the fairies (01:08:50).

Besides the racially stereotypical aspects in the portrayal of the tribe, the film also includes a white supremacist discourse, similar to that of Barrie's original novel. Even though Peter's father was a fairy from Neverland who took human form and presumably shaped his human body after the people he knew from Neverland, i.e. the multicultural tribe, Peter is

portrayed by white actor Levi Miller. As mentioned before, Peter turns out to be the Chosen One from the native tribe's prophecy; a flying boy who will lead an uprising against Blackbeard and free the natives and the fairies from his tyranny. As such, the natives treat Peter as their messiah. Upon the revelation that he wears "the Pan" (i.e. a pan flute shaped pendant, 00:56:16), the entire predominantly non-white tribe bows before him; a white boy (see figure 3). This scene is very similar to the passage in Barrie's novel in which the Native American tribe bows before Peter Pan, thus drawing a clear parallel, despite Wrights intentions to move away from these racialized aspects of the story. Adding to this, *Pan*



*Figure 3: The native tribe bows before Peter (centre, in grey pants and green shirt) (00:56:52).*

evokes the white saviour trope by making Peter the Chosen One. According to Matthew Hughey, the white saviour trope is a popular narrative in film in which a messianic white character rescues non-white characters from unfortunate circumstances (8). This strongly suggests that non-white people are incapable of making progress on their own, instead always needing a white person to guide them. Hughey argues that this trope reinforces white supremacy through "an implicit message of white paternalism and antiblack stereotypes of contented servitude, obedience, and acquiescence" (8). As this trope is apparent due to Levi Miller being white, casting a person of colour for this role, which even makes sense within the story due to Peter's father being a fairy in human form, would have removed this

narrative and functioned to create a more diverse world, closer to that what Wright claimed to want to make.

Another casting choice that sparked controversy was that of white actress Rooney Mara for the role of Tiger Lily. When this casting choice was made public, hundreds of complaints were filed online, and a petition was started to try and stop it from happening.<sup>5</sup> According to these protesters, the role of Tiger Lily should have been given to a Native American actress, since she is originally written as an Indian/Native American character who is part of an Indian/Native American tribe. This demand for an actress of the same ethnicity as the original character may also be reaction to the underrepresentation of people of colour in cinema. According to a *Hollywood Diversity Report* from 2015, minority groups, under which Native Americans, are underrepresented on every front of the American film industry (Hunt and Ramón, *Report 2015* 1), and while their representation is increasing, this still holds true for 2020 (Hunt and Ramón, *Report 2020* 3). From all of the different minority groups analysed, natives were underrepresented the most, both in the 2015 and in the 2020 report.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4: Actress Rooney Mara as Tiger Lily (00:48:15).

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<sup>5</sup> This petition called “Warner Bros: Stop Casting White Actors to Play People of Color!” has been signed by 95.770 people upon the writing of this paper, but is still online and can still be signed (Arnold).

<sup>6</sup> In these reports, Native American’s are grouped together with other native communities, for example, Native Hawaiians. This means that the numbers for the representation of purely Native Americans are even smaller than the numbers given in these reports.

Thus, according to these protesters, the role of Tiger Lily could have been an opportunity for a Native American actress to work on a high-profile project, and in doing so this could have elevated the representation of Native Americans (Sneed). However, as many of these complaints were filed before the film was released (Arnold), the protesters were not able to take into account Wright's idea of a transcultural adaptation, which consciously stepped away from the Native American aspect of the story.

Besides the lack of representation of Native Americans in media, the controversy regarding this casting can also be related to the "powerlessness of historically marginalized groups to control their own representation" (Shohat and Stam 184). While the stereotypical and caricatured portrayals of people of colour that were popular in the beginning of the twentieth century are no longer used (Lopez 434; Shohat and Stam 189/196), it still frequently happens that characters who are traditionally of colour are played by white actors, without paying attention to the erasure of the original race/ethnicity (Lopez 434). While this silent whitewashing does not reinforce any direct or physical stereotypes, it is still dangerous, because it does "reify whiteness as both invisible and dominant" (Lopez 435). Regarding the case of Tiger Lily, Joe Wright has defended the whitewashing of the character by claiming that since the tribe is represented as a multicultural tribe instead of a Native American tribe, anyone can play Tiger Lily in this world (Schwerdtfeger). While this argument could be accepted to some extent, the fact that Tiger Lily seems to be the only white person in the tribe complicates this matter. Out of all of the characters from the tribe, Tiger Lily is by far the most important character, and she is subsequently one of the main characters in the film as a whole. Thus, by making the entire tribe multicultural and predominantly non-white, except for the most important character, Wright evokes the idea that people of colour can only play minor characters. This tactic of whitewashing only the major characters and leaving the minor roles for actors of colour is frequently used by filmmakers (Shohat and Stam 189) and

suggests that people of colour are less important and heroic than white people, effectively reinforcing ideas of white superiority.

Thus, by changing the native tribe of Neverland to an imaginary tribe in an attempt to sever ties with actual Native American tribes and the accompanying controversies, *Pan* has taken a step towards a rendition of *Peter Pan* in which racial stereotypes no longer play a role. However, while the tribe is thus not called Native American, it still employs numerous examples of Native American stereotypes akin to those present in Barrie's novel. As viewers of *Pan* may well be aware of the history of the tribe in *Peter Pan*, i.e. that they were originally written as Native Americans and are often portrayed as such, changing the race of the tribe but keeping many stereotypical aspects can still be seen as invoking these racial stereotypes. Moreover, by casting white people in the main roles, specifically Peter and Tiger Lily, the film counteracts the idea of a multicultural society and implements a white supremacist discourse within the film.

## Conclusion

J.M. Barrie's original novel *Peter Pan* (1911) and many of the adaptations of the story that have come out since have recently been at the receiving end of criticism concerning their representation of the native tribe of Neverland. Because of these recent controversies, this thesis has attempted to provide a detailed analysis of the tribe's representation in both *Peter Pan* and its most recent adaptation, *Pan* (2015). In doing so, it aimed to answer the question of whether *Pan*'s approach of portraying the tribe as a multicultural and imagined tribe of people from all over the world, instead of a Native American community, was a favourable way of representing these originally Native American characters.

Despite its director's efforts to move away from the stereotypes, controversies and racially charged worldviews, *Pan* does not succeed at removing these racial aspects altogether, as it for example implements a discourse of white supremacy and dominance, similar to that of the original novel, by casting a white actor for the role of Peter. Moreover, by portraying Tiger Lily as a white woman *Pan* evoked a controversy surrounding the whitewashing of characters of colour, leading many people to think that in doing so he was intentionally taking away much-needed representation of Native Americans in modern media and further reinforcing feelings of white superiority. Moreover, *Pan*'s portrayal of the native tribe complies with many aspects of the popularised Native American stereotypes, seeing as the tribe members are portrayed as bloodthirsty, cunning, spiritual, self-sacrificing and stoic. This aspect is especially relevant, seeing as the audience's previous knowledge play an important role in their interpretations of the story (Cutchins and Meeks 308). According to Hutcheon, audiences "operate in a context that includes their knowledge and their own interpretation of the adapted work" when giving meaning to an adaptation (111). Cutchins and Meeks further elaborate on this, claiming that "readers and audience members who experience adaptations respond, at least sometimes, based on a perception that the adaptation

has either been true or untrue not to an ‘original’ text, but to their original experience with a text” (308-9). This means that the viewers’ knowledge about and experience with the original novel and previous adaptations of *Peter Pan*, and in this case particularly the previous representations of the native tribe, influence these viewers’ interpretations of *Pan*’s native tribe. Thus, as part of the audience may still associate *Pan*’s native tribe with Native American people due to their previous knowledge about the characters, the persistent Native American stereotypes in *Pan* might reinvolve stereotypes about Native American people, instead of moving away from these controversial aspects of the characters.

While the execution of the creation of *Pan*’s multicultural community thus has some fundamental flaws, the idea of moving the characters away from Native Americans in itself could still be a solution to the problem of the representation of the tribe. From the first chapter of this thesis, it can be concluded that the native tribe in Barrie’s *Peter Pan* was created during a time of white imperialism and ethnocentrism, resulting in a portrayal which is now generally considered racially insensitive, stereotypical and harmful. Furthermore, the history these characters have will always remain a factor in the interpretation of any new adaptations of the tribe. Continuing to represent them as a Native American tribe will most likely only provide the Native American community with continued stereotyping and negative attention, instead of positive and accurate representation. Thus, instead of trying to fix characters that are fundamentally flawed and historically tainted, removing *Peter Pan*’s tribe from the static list of Native American characters and instead representing them as something entirely different, can be seen as a favourable way of representing the native tribe that is less offensive towards Native Americans. However, this thesis has shown, specifically *Pan*’s attempt at creating a world in which the racial stereotyping of the original novel is removed was not successful, as the film still implements Native American stereotypes and a white supremacist discourse.

Within qualitative studies such as this one, the researcher plays a very important role (Dörnyei). This paper has attempted to write according to the concept of cultural relativism (i.e. “the view that a culture can only be understood by the standards, behaviours, norms, and values within the culture and not by anything outside” (“Cultural relativism”) and that no culture is inherently superior to another (Jackson 161)), but this is never a hundred percent achievable as “for good or bad, we all have biases” (Jackson 166). Thus, this thesis was written through the cultural lens of a white, western European woman, and this has created a cultural bias, which might have affected the analysis. In order to further investigate this paper’s topic, another researcher, possibly of Native American decent, could repeat this investigation in order to solidify or contest its conclusion. Moreover, as mentioned before, other aspects of adaptation theory and intercultural communication could prove to be interesting topics for further research on this adaptation. Finally, due to the scope of this thesis, it was not able to look at any other adaptations that used a similar strategy, for example *Hook* (1991). However, especially in light of the growing awareness surrounding stereotyping and other racialized representational practices in media, further research on these other adaptations could lead to more information regarding the transcultural adaptation tactic and its practical uses. Since new adaptations of the story are continuously coming out, an analysis of these new adaptations and their approach to representing the tribe, especially in light of *Pan*’s attempts and its accompanying controversies, could also prove to be an interesting point for further research.



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