Review: Harjo S. and Waititi T., *Reservation Dogs*, 2021-23, FX Productions.

Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi's series, *Reservation Dogs* (2021-23), is a prime example of a new array of powerful indigenous storytellings in 2020s North American popular culture that are claiming increasingly more (screen) space for their communities. It offers a considerate and intimate depiction of how complex, indigenous characters navigate loss by relying on the relational strength and humor of their community. The show's most remarkable contribution is its creation of a reservation-imaginary, assembled from a constellation of fictitious spaces which ring true to the personal knowledge of Native audiences. This imaginary enables *Reservation Dogs* to present a larger systemic critique which transcends any one community, while remaining grounded in the lived experiences of indigenous people in contemporary North America.

The plot follows a friend group of indigenous teenagers, Elora (Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs - Kahnawake Mohawk[1]), Bear (D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai - Oji-Cree), Cheese (Lane Factor - Caddo), and Willie Jack (Paulina Alexis - Alexis Nakota Sioux), who live on a reservation in rural Oklahoma. In the wake of the suicide of their close friend, Daniel (Dalton Cramer - Seminole), the "Rez Dogs" must find their own personal means of coming to terms with this tragic loss. The show is built around them trying to fulfil Daniel's dream of leaving the reservation for the promised land, California. Through their various adventurous schemes, audience members get to know the Rez Dog's parents, grandparents and other relatives living on the reservation. History seems to be repeating; communal ruptures, sometimes explicitly associated with the racist, settler-colonial system, are haunting all generations. Following different processes of healing, the serial narrative takes us across space and time: it moves us off the reservation and then makes us return to it changed; it takes us to the past to a 1970s Oklahoma in the midst of its boarding school era and then forward again to the present moment, in which the friends are envisioning their futures.

First released in August 2021 by FX on Hulu, *Reservation Dogs* ran for three seasons (as intended) until September 2023. It is the first series by creator Sterlin Harjo (Seminole and Muscogee), a filmmaker from Oklahoma and 2024 McArthur Fellow. Previously, he had made multiple feature films and shorts. Co-creating with Taika Waititi (Māori), who first met Harjo at a Sundance Institute program (Rice), the show was made exclusively by indigenous directors and writers, and by an almost entirely indigenous cast and crew. Significantly, all of this is a first for an American series, a series which enjoyed great popularity in Indian Country and beyond. It was also a critical success, and the show won two Peabody and two Independent Spirit Awards. It was nominated for other prestigious accolades, most recently for five Primetime Emmy Awards, and over three consecutive years, the American Film Institute named it as one of the "ten best television programs". *Reservation Dogs* is part of a rapidly growing field of Native American, or more broadly, indigenous filmmaking, which has, until fairly recently, been primarily represented through shorts and feature films. Now it seems the time of Native shows is dawning. The serial format is significant as it allows a greater depth of world and character-building as well as potential audience engagement with the evolving narrative (Kelleter). *Reservation Dogs* is not alone in utilizing the extended screentime of the episodic format to expand the visual storytelling possibilities of depicting indigenous lifeworlds. Contemporaneously to *Reservation Dogs*, series like *Rutherford Falls* (2021-22), *Dark Winds* (2022-present), and Marvel's miniseries *Echo* (2024) have been released, and multiple others have been announced to be in-the-making.

Besides editorials, active fan wikis, being featured on multiple indigenous podcasts, and viral memes, there has also been some burgeoning academic engagement with the cultural phenomenon that is *Reservation Dogs*. At the 2025 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association's

[1] I provide the cast and crew's tribal affiliation to show the great diversity of indigenous national backgrounds of those collaborating to create the series. I do so to the best of my knowledge.

Conference (NAISA), I was excited to find that there were multiple scholars discussing the show, for example, its depiction of queerness and its particular style of humor. I, too, have been working with the show in the frame of my doctoral thesis on *indigenous activist seriality*, in which I analyze it as a case study for *Mvskoke futurity* (Harjo). Furthermore, I am greatly anticipating a co-edited volume by Joanna Hearne and Timothy Petete about the series that is scheduled to be published at the end of this year.

Reservation Dogs empathetically presents past and present trauma that spans the generations and caringly shows pathways and rituals of mourning. The protagonists, as they work through their shared grief, become a catalyst for their entire community to remember and honor those who have "walked on". A particularly poignant example can be found in "Mabel" (S2E4) co-written by one of the show's stars Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs. The episode is devoted to documenting the wake of Mabel (Geraldine Keams - Diné), beloved elder and grandmother to Elora. Besides being deeply affecting, it also offers a pedagogical opportunity of cultural learning: about how to do right by a dying community member and how the respectful conduct depicted might relate to your own. Care-giving is presented as a meaningful, even decolonial, practice that creates and maintains community ties and is essential for the passing on of knowledge. The care of the community for each other and across generations is at the center of the show, and healing trauma and recovering from harm is presented in interdependence with mending the relational network on the reservation.

But care is not only expressed with seriousness. What bridges the many generations is also constant teasing. What the show offers in emotional sincerity, it doubles in humor. While banter in the show is presented as an important part of indigenous lives more generally, it also makes the dark parts of the narrative easier to parse, without ever ridiculing hardship. Indeed, while the underlying themes and topics of *Reservation Dogs* are often deeply troubling and, at times, gut-wrenching, the tone of the series is mostly comedic. This is a difficult balance to strike, but the show's sense of timing and comedy is impeccable.

Subjects of substantial mockery are racist archetypes of Native people. The most iconic example for the series' style of humor is William Knifeman, self-proclaimed "Spirit Warrior" and ancestor of Bear, played by Dallas Goldtooth (Bdewakantunwan Dakota and Diné). He appears to Bear throughout the show to tease and advise him. Repeatedly, breaking the third and fourth wall, Knifeman comments and plays with many ill-conceived imaginaries of Native Americans, while the other protagonists simultaneously offer new, complex indigenous characters. Reaching beyond individual experiences, *Reservation Dogs* points to systemic dangers of the settler-colonial society, focusing particularly on boarding schools and white supremacy but also the harder-to-grasp challenges of living on a reservation. These overtly critical stances are delivered with great attention to peoples' personal experiences – a skilled exercise in making the personal political and vice versa, and a powerful way to educate an often unknowing public about the destructive legacies of colonization.

Episodes are characteristically rich with situation comedy, (inside) jokes, and puns. Riffing on mainstream pop culture and ridiculing dominant presentations of Native American characters in film, the series is aware of its own position within a stereotype-filled media environment. It extends beyond mere canon critique, however. The style of subversive parody invalidates the settler gaze without undermining the significance of the multigenerational relationships presented. Rather, it is an artfully applied foil against which meaningful interactions such as grieving, care-giving, and growing come into clear focus. It is also the cause for much of the series' laugh-out-loud moments, a favorite of mine being when two elders, played by the legendary Wes Studi (Cherokee) and Gary Farmer (Cayuga), offer an "old song" as prayer to the creator and then whole-heartedly begin to sing Tom Petty's *Free Fallin'*.

An important component of Sterlin Harjo's work has been his repeated collaborations with an evergrowing group of Native actors, something that appears to have really crystallized in *Reservation Dogs*. It is not just the actors themselves that are reoccuring, but also characters that reappear across, what could be called, the "Harjo-verse". Harjo's list of frequent collaborators is far too long to include

here, but a noteworthy example of both of these practices, i.e. of recurring actress and character, is the role of Irene played by Casey Camp-Horinek (Ponca). (Hearne) This translates into a familiarity of cast and crew and also a recognition on the part of the audience. Those that do not yet know Harjo's entire oeuvre might still rejoice to find many legends of Native American cinema (re)united in *Reservation Dogs*, e.g. the late Graham Greene (Oneida) from 1990's *Dances with Wolves*, Wes Studi from 1992's *Last of the Mohicans*, Gary Farmer and Evan Adams (Tla'amin) from 1998's *Smoke Signals*, but also stars of a later generation, like Zahn McClarnon (Hunkpapa Lakota) from 2022's *Dark Winds* and Lily Gladstone (Blackfeet), who starred in Martin Scorsese's 2023 blockbuster, *Killers of the Flower Moon*.

Reservation Dogs' narrative emphasizes community and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and this is also mirrored in the show's production. Many of the people involved described the special atmosphere on set. Jon Proudstar (Pascua Yaqui), another recurring Harjo collaborator, likened being on set to a cookout, and Sten Joddi (Muscogee) recalled this special occasion:

> My favorite moment was the day that we filmed the music video for 'Greasy FryBread.' … The aunties were all there, and everybody was talking about directions for the stage, and the aunties just randomly started singing a Muscogee hymn together. And in that moment, the whole room just fell silent, and we were all just in that moment together. (Clary)

The series creates spaces for intimacy and growth for its characters and for the intertribal community that came together for its production. The locations are much more than a background to the friend group's story, rather all of them taken together (the Indian Health Services clinic, the private homes of protagonists, the police station, the church, the woods, the trading post, etc.) are central to the lifeworlds of the characters on screen; they are "the Rez". Production designer Brandon Tonner-Connolly elaborated:

> When we're creating and decorating the sets, we're (...) thinking about the crew and cast who are from the community, and the people down the block who might stop by to watch filming. We want them to feel the spaces are right. It's about that experience as much as the final product on film. (Hadadi)

This aspiration of "authenticity" and integrity points towards a curious tension in the show: the line between the accuracy and the imaginary of spaces, i.e. the specificity of "real" indigenous experiences and their imagined expansion and generalization. The narrative is anchored explicitly in contemporary Oklahoma, where it is also mostly filmed and produced, but the location of the reservation "Okern" is fictional. The locations do not represent any specific Native community but rather an *authentic imaginary* where Okern becomes a stand-in for "life on a reservation". And this approach of deliberately staying generic rather than particular, while maintaining representational specificity seems to have paid off: Indigenous audiences from across Turtle Island took to social media to express how much they recognized certain social dynamics, practices and even aesthetics from their own experiences living on reservations.

Reservation Dogs creates a new path for indigenous serial filmmaking. What makes it such a remarkable show are its practices and depictions of grieving and growth, the self-aware and empowering humor of its characters, and its assemblage of spaces that adroitly dances along the line between reality and fiction. Episode by episode, Harjo and Waititi grow an authentic imaginary that enables the series to make political arguments and to convincingly communicate structural critiques. The narrative of a small group of friends and their families becomes part of a much larger commentary on contemporary indigenous peoples in North America. While the storyline places agency and power with its Native protagonists, it does not downplay historic and present systemic injustices. The show never gives up its sincerity or shies away from somber moments; its comedy feels caring. *Reservation Dogs* posits that intergenerational ruptures caused by its settler-colonial legacies can be healed

through mending relationships and drawing strength from community, including ancestors' spirits and all the generations in between.

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