Culture



Elizabeth Olsen and Jeremy Renner in "Wind River" (The Weinstein Company/Fred Hayes)



by Rose Pacatte

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Let me be very honest here. First, I love Westerns. Second, ever since I first saw Jeremy Renner in "The Hurt Locker," I will watch him in anything. He's got a strong, silent, brooding masculine vibe that serves him well in this neo-Western, "Wind River," by Taylor Sheridan (writer of "Hell or High Water" and "Sicario.")

The film opens with a woman running across a barren snow scape of the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming in the middle of the night. A fish and game warden, Cory Lambert (Renner), who tracks animals that kill livestock, finds a frozen body. She is 18-year-old Natalie (Kelsey Asbille), who was once friends with Lambert's daughter, murdered three years earlier. Natalie has been raped, but her cause of death is breathing subzero air that froze her lungs. Her death is designated a homicide.

Lambert and his Native American wife, Wilma (played by Julia Jones, who is Choctaw and Chickasaw herself), are estranged and share custody of their son. Life on the reservation is bleak, as evidenced by Lambert's situation, Natalie's parents, friends and the predatory threat posed by oil workers on or near the reservation. Ben (Graham Greene, who is Oneida) is head of the reservation police force. He first elicits Lambert's help to find Natalie's killers and then is forced to accept investigating FBI agent Jane Banner (Elizabeth Olsen) who is assigned by the bureau almost as an after-thought.

As the only woman on the team, Banner is clearly out of her depth. I am not sure that Olsen was a good casting choice here; she manages, but she looks like a teenager who can barely walk through the snow. But maybe that's the whole point. There are a lot of men in this film, but only about five women. One is depressed, another an alcoholic, two are dead and then there's Banner. She's the one who comes through it still standing (though barely) — and she's the white one.

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"Wind River" is a crime drama that reminded me of a really violent episode of one of my favorite television shows "Longmire" (A&E, now Netflix). But instead of resolving conflict in mostly legal ways, this one ends with an act of non-judicial vengeance displayed as justice in a culture that rarely sees it. Remnants of "The Revenant" here.

There's no romance, joy or satisfaction in "Wind River" because life on the reservation is always just a breath away from disaster from unemployment, alcoholism, lack of educational opportunities, domestic and sexual abuse, suicide, drug addiction and victimization by outside forces. The family constantly under threat by outside forces is a theme that director Sheridan seems to favor.

Just before the credits roll, a bleak notice appears on the screen telling us that "While missing person statistics are compiled for every other demographic, none exist for Native American women." This is a startling statement about people deemed to be disposable. No one has any idea of how many Native women are missing and this is the darkest tragedy of life on the reservation.

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