

# The Anthropology of Indiana Jones

I have always been a huge fan of Indiana Jones. The movies, attraction at Disneyland, and the character himself all hold a special place in my heart. There's no denying that the movies are classics, and watching them can be a pivotal point in many people's childhoods.

That being said, after watching the movies as an adult, I have come to realize just how troubling and problematic certain aspects of the film are. In addition, my studies in college have made me realize just what parts of the film and attraction are pseudoarchaeology, or interpretations of the past that are not backed up on science, and paint an incorrect picture of the work that anthropologists and scientists really do out in the field. Let's look a little closer into the films to see how they prove problematic.

## Media: Raiders of the Lost Ark

Indiana Jones was first introduced to the world in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). The movie was an instant classic, a cultural phenomenon, and is considered one of the [top 25 movies of all time](#). Critics alike [rave](#) of its creativity, top-notch action adventure, and non-stop thrills. The movie follows archaeologist Dr. Henry "Indiana" Jones Jr. in 1936 as he searches for the Ark of the Covenant, attempting to locate it before the Nazis do.



*Raiders of the Lost Ark* | © [Rotten Tomatoes](#)

## Racism & Othering

Like most, I grew up watching this movie, admiring all the adventure and action packed into it. As I was re-watching it recently, I first noticed how Indigenous folks were portrayed in the film. In the beginning, Indiana Jones searches for an idol inside a temple in South America, thwarting

traps along the way and barely making it out of the temple alive, only to come face-to-face with Indigenous folks and their weapons pointed towards him.

They're referred to as the Hovito people, wearing only loincloths, feathers, and jewelry. They also have face and body paint. While this may seem harmless, as they are a fictional tribe, the implications and consequences are all too real. Indigenous folks and tribes in South America are teeming with life, and yet, still face [oppression and marginalization](#) to this day. They are not a long-forgotten, fictional people that just shoot weapons at foreigners all day, as the movie implies. In addition, don't the body paint and loincloths seem a bit like they're mocking Indigenous tribes and traditional garb? It is very insensitive to even include Indigenous folks in the first place, let alone create a fictional tribe impersonating them.

There is also a villainization of the tribe that can be seen in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. They're aligned with the villain in the movie, helping him in quest to defeat Indiana Jones. If this seems pretty colonialistic, that's because it is. The Indigenous folks in the film are essentially defending a colonizer, since they do whatever he says with no free will. This also erases their own culture and pushes viewers to see them as savages who are violent and uncivilized. This only further enables oppression against Indigenous folks, since the only representation of Indigenous folks in the media are those that show them as violent and barbaric.

There's also something to be said about the othering in this film. [Othering](#) is a concept that describes the treatment of people from another group as [inherently different](#) from your own group. This is done often with an "us vs. them" mentality, where we categorize and group people into separate groups than our own, often times exoticizing "them". Some examples of this mentality could be seen in politics, (Democrats vs. Republicans) or teams (blue team vs. red team). We see othering in various media outlets every day, from films, music videos, magazine ads, and more.

In the context of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (and the other Indiana Jones films for that matter), we see othering when Indy fights the Indian and Eastern Asian locals, exoticizing them and painting them as the villains and "bad guys." What we're seeing are stereotypes and, again, more mocking of real people and real cultures. They're exoticized, portrayed as different and distant from Indy and our own "normal" culture. An example of exoticization in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is when Indy is invited to dinner at an Indian prince's palace and food such as monkey brains, beetles, and snakes is served. I get the joke – it's obviously for comedic effect. Because nobody really eats those, right? I'm clearly taking this too far with this analysis. Just kidding! Consider this: the only depiction of brown people in this movie are those who are villains, clearly out for power and want to kill our lovable protagonist and hero, Indiana Jones, and those who eat *weird* and *exotic* food that's *oh-so different* than our everyday meals. Do you see the issue now?

To sum up, the exoticization of brown folks in the *Indiana Jones* films allows room for othering, and justifies racism and oppression against them in our society. It's easier to oppress certain groups of people when you don't consider them as part of your own group.



*Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) in Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) | © [IMDB](#)*

### Sexism

Let's look at the series' prequel, [Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom](#). In the film, Indiana Jones winds up in India, where he finds a village and is asked to retrieve a stone that was stolen from them. He is joined by Short Round, a young boy who clearly looks up to Indy, and by Willie, an actress who stumbled into the adventure on accident. Throughout the film, Willie voices her discomfort and rage at Indy for bringing her to the Indian jungle. This is often done by yelling, complaining, and crying at the misfortune she faces. In response, Indy often calls her "sweetie" and "honey," seemingly dismissing her perfectly reasonable complaints.

Why was a female character written to be so loud, dumb, and annoying? And why is Indiana so rude in response to her? I get what the directors were intending to do, make Indiana seem more heroic and stoic to her incompetence and ditziness, but it truly just comes across as misogynistic. Indy also objectifies Willie, as he is only interested in her as a sexual object of desire. He enjoys her for her pretty face and body, not for her as a person, and only gives her the time of day when he wants sex in return. Gross, Indy.

As a woman, hearing Indiana talk to Willie like she's a child incapable of understanding their dire situation is so disappointing and disillusioning. An example of this is towards the beginning of the film: Willie rides an elephant, but boards backwards, screaming and crying for help in the process. Indy dismisses her cries, only paying attention to where they're headed. He's my hero, as I'm sure he is for many other folks. Why would he put down or ignore everything she's saying? Does her voice not count, too? I know she complains a lot, but let's be honest, I know I would too in her situation.



*Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) and Willie Scott (Kate Capshaw) in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom | © [Rotten Tomatoes](#)*

### Pseudoarchaeology

I'm sure we all know the obvious: archaeologists don't wander into hidden and forbidden places, put their lives in danger, shoot guns at enemies, have whips handy, or drink from long-lost cups that may or may not be the holy grail. Most of what Indiana Jones did was actually very destructive to the history, contexts, and understanding of what each artifact he found was. You can't simply grab an artifact from its location and study it right afterwards. Careful measuring, note taking, photos, and other procedures must be followed before an object is taken from its location from which it is found. Without knowing precisely where and when it was found, archaeologists will have a harder time finding what time period it is from, where to find similar pieces, and other important information that clue scientists into what humanity was like at that point in time.

There is also a lot of reading, studying, proposal drafting, funding and other planning that goes into an archaeological excavation before digging even begins. All of this is done to better understand our history as humans, not simply to put artifacts in museums. In fact, many archaeologists might argue that items should be returned to their country of origin, not locked away at a museum. This is the one aspect *Temple of Doom* got right. As Indy is walking away from the sacred site, Indy explains that in a museum, the sacred stone so idolized by the Indian village would just be another rock, which is why it is better to leave it where they found it. They know all they need to know, so it's best to just leave it in its original place.

### **Theme Park Attraction: Indiana Jones Adventure**

One of my absolute favorite rides at Disneyland in California is [Indiana Jones Adventure](#). From the high speeds, abrupt stops and turns, nostalgic soundtrack, endless tunnels, mysterious sounds, and dim lighting, it's truly a masterpiece of Lucasfilm, Ltd. and Walt Disney



Imagineering. We, however, are here today to look a little closer and scrape the surface of what we see every time we ride this attraction.



*Indiana Jones Adventure* | © [Disneyland Resort](#)

### Racism + Othering

In a similar fashion to the movies, racism and othering is very evident in the ride. Right off the bat, we're introduced to the villain of the ride, the evil god Mara. According to the story of the ride, once you look into Mara's eyes, you unleash powerful evil and must try to escape the temple and its many traps. In researching for this article, I found that [Mara](#) is a real Buddhist demon, and it's insensitive and offensive to include them at an attraction.

Additionally, the safety video that plays inside the temple as you're standing in line shows "newsclips" of visitors who went inside the temple. The narrator describes what they received after visiting the temple, and talks of Mara and the temple as mysterious, striking, and exotic. Once again, this is blatant racism as it describes something that is spiritual and belongs to the Buddhist religion. This is harmful to those who practice Buddhism because it perpetuates the idea that they are "other" people, practicing something that is bad.

On top of that, the temple in the ride is a place that white folks have claimed as their own, as we can see in the video white folks entering and exiting the temple freely. Nevermind its sacredness or spirituality. This perpetuates the idea that colonialism is acceptable and justifiable, which is definitely not true.

### Pseudoarchaeology

The Indiana Jones Adventure attraction also depicts an incorrect picture of archaeology because people are freely entering the temple to claim the artifacts as their own. This is definitely not the norm in the field. As mentioned, it is very colonialistic for us visitors to be entering the temple and taking what we assume is ours. While anthropology has had

[colonialistic roots](#), scientists are definitely making huge strides towards addressing and rectifying colonialism in study and practice today.

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative to be critical and analyze our history, including classic films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and pop culture favorites such as the attraction Indiana Jones Adventure, in order to know its implications and impact on our culture today. Racism, othering, sexism, and colonialism are all violent, and allow marginalization and discrimination against folks to persist.

We can still be fans of, appreciate, love and adore, and cherish these films, rides, and characters. We can just be a little wiser and be informed consumers, not simply taking everything we see from the media at face value. While this analysis only scratches the surface at what is problematic with the Indiana Jones franchise, we can begin a large conversation with what is presented to us in the media and entertainment.