

An Examination of Native Americans in Film and Rise of Native Filmmakers

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Abstract

This paper explored the role of Native Americans in the Hollywood film industry and their actions to establish authentic representations of their population and culture in the media. Using academic literature, film analyses, and contemporary film reviews and articles, the author created a synthesis of the history of Native Americans in film. The author concluded that by becoming producers, directors, and writers of their own stories, American Indians have regained control of their images and been able to combat stereotypes and the exclusion of Native Americans in the creative process. Positive social change for minority populations can be optimized when these populations are in control of their own images in film and media.

I. Introduction

One can use art, music, literature, television and film to trace patterns in society. Since the invention of moving images in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, film has been a particularly powerful medium. Films have served as escapist fantasies, allowing audiences to enter astonishing worlds and encounter wild and colorful characters. Movies have also been used to convey truths about society that are more easily digested in a fictional format. Difficult topics such as the nature of humanity, love, and war have all been explored with film as the tool that disseminates these themes into the consciousness of the masses. With the rise of mass media and popular culture came the onset of a collective consciousness that could be shared by people all over the world, rather than people of a particular culture relying on their own ancestry and specific history. George Lipsitz wrote in his book, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*, "Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen" (Lipsitz 5). This shared cultural experience and spread of information, essentially the enlightenment of disconnected cultures to the activities of one another through mass media, would seem, on the surface, to enrich understanding across lines of ancestry and heritage. Yet basing one's knowledge solely on images viewed in the media comes with great risk when members of these cultures are misrepresented in a stereotypical, inaccurate, or skewed manner.

With increased ability to disseminate information comes the responsibility of presenting images that are accurate and factual. Lipsitz continues to write, ". . . [consumers] can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection" (Lipsitz 5). His statement brings to mind the sharing of cultures through film, but in America, the culture most frequently depicted is that of the white majority. Many

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images of this segment of the population have been transmitted over the past century. Yet minority populations have been woefully underrepresented or misrepresented within the cultural sharing taking place in mass media. When one surveys popular films over the years, it is readily apparent that Native Americans have been often been stereotyped or left out entirely. Native Americans have been inaccurately represented in film throughout history, but contemporary Native filmmakers have found a solution by taking creative control in film production and crafting their own images.

II. Early Stereotypes

Throughout history, Native Americans have remained one of America's most marginalized minorities. As with any minority population, the American Indian population's challenges, struggles and progressive strides are reflected in popular culture. Hollywood and the American film industry have long represented Indians unfavorably. In much the same manner that American colonists forced Indians off their native land, filmmakers have often relegated Native American characters to roles wherein they have been typecast as minor characters displaying stereotypical, historically inaccurate behavior. That is not to say that American Indians have not been present in film. On the contrary, they existed as staple characters for a large portion of the twentieth century, especially in the popular Western genre. This marginalizing of the population has been manifested in the creation of harmful and one-dimensional stereotypes. The American government recognizes 562 Indian tribes, and while 229 of them are based in Alaska, the rest are located in 33 other states (NCAI 2). With each of these tribes come distinctly different traditions and histories that cannot be generalized, but are repeatedly compressed to one ambiguous culture for the purposes of film. Additionally, realistic and whole images of Indians and their stories are drastically underrepresented in films throughout history and in present day. American Indian filmmakers have had to fight to create an artistic voice for themselves and carve a space for expression through film.

Native American characters in twentieth century films have ranged from stereotypes including the bloodthirsty, raging beast to the noble savage. Still other Indian characters, be they heroines, villains, or neutral, were flat characters with little to no character development or dynamic range in their personalities. These stereotypes have their origins in popular American literature dating as far back as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, author of *Celluloid Indians*, notes that popular stories centered on Native American savagery served as outlets for violence and pent up aggression in an early American society that prided manners and respectability. In these stories, the Native American population was seen as bad, though individual members could be represented as good. These stereotypes continued for years. One author, James Fenimore Cooper, began publishing a series of stories titled *The Leatherstocking Tales* in 1841 (LOC). Kilpatrick emphasizes that Cooper is the main creator of the two traditionally most pervasive stereotypes: the noble savage and the bloodthirsty savage, or more generally and simplistically, the good and bad Indian (Kilpatrick 2). The 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. Dan Georgakas acknowledges in his essay *They Have Not Spoken* that the emergence of the noble savage stereotype was an improvement over the rabid savage character, but only at the "lowest level," as it tells the audience nothing about real Native American culture (Georgakas 26). These two stereotypes grew from their literary origins to become icons in visual art, and thus the progression to filmic imagery was natural and likely inevitable.

Modern Indian filmmakers have made positive progress with representation of native peoples since the days of popular Western films featuring cowboys pitted against or aided by one-dimensional Indian characters. Georgakas posits that Indians have so often been the vicious villains in the beloved Western epics because those characters are used to reveal the evil and bestial human nature that white culture refused to ever portray or acknowledge about Indians, a theory backed by Kilpatrick. Georgakas further explained that the guilt of the white majority is often demonstrated through one white villain who wants to massacre the native population or execute some otherwise dastardly deed (Georgakas 26). Yet such a blatantly deplorable portrayal of racism and persecution of American Indians fails to address real and nuanced issues of race and culture that existed and remain in present day.

Furthermore, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's book, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, discusses the noble savage convention and elaborates on the habitually harmful practices of casting and portraying Native Ameri-

can characters. For example, the Indian character may be portrayed in films as wise and peace loving, yet that same character would also be taught important skills by an Anglo hero (Shohat and Stam 194). The authors reference the sympathetic film *A Man Called Horse* in particular, pointing out the absurdity that the white character would teach the Indian about a bow and arrow, a weapon used by Native Americans for decades (Shohat and Stam 194). Repeatedly, Indians and Indian culture are discounted in this manner and audiences learn nothing that is culturally accurate about this population.

Though it may be simple to argue that the stereotypes of noble savage and bloodthirsty savage are a relic of the distant past and now widely seen as outdated, it remains important to recognize that James Fenimore Cooper, author of the previously mentioned series *The Leatherstocking Tales*, wrote *The Last of the Mohicans*, which was subsequently made into a popular film in 1992 (Kilpatrick 3). As Kilpatrick writes, the nineties were considered a time of “heightened sensitivity and new sensibilities” regarding race, yet the one-dimensional depictions of Native people were still very much present (Kilpatrick 3). In *Native Americans on Film: Conversations, Teaching, and Theory*, the author wrote, “Because the power of First Cinema drives the film market, imbuing viewers with perceptions of what Native film should look like, the need to refuse stereotypical representations of Native peoples still exists in North America” (Marubbio, Buffalohead 2). Certainly in present day, the notion that Native Americans are either noble or evil savages has been shown to be inarguably false and a gross misrepresentation. Mass consciousness has evolved to the point where those stereotypes are not assumed. Therefore, the question must be asked, what does society know about real Native American culture? From many films that have had box office success and popular appeal, the answer would be regrettably little. Contemporary popular representations of Indians such as *Pocahontas* (1995) or *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) put the spotlight on Indians, but there is still very little valuable or authentic information about the history or culture of contemporary Native Americans.

III. Revisionism and Representation

One major challenge for Native Americans in film is not just representation, but accurate representation. Faye D. Ginsburg, in her essay “Screen Memories: Resignifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media,” provides further evidence that the impact of images depicting specific populations on film is historically widespread (Ginsburg 39). She cites *Nanook of the North* (1922) as proving that “the current impact of media’s rapidly increasing presence and circulation in people’s lives and the globalization of media that it is part of . . . are not simply phenomena of the past two decades” (Ginsburg 39). *Nanook of the North* was promoted as a documentary about indigenous people in the Arctic, yet in truth was a largely fictional movie with scenes set up by the director. The film created an impression among its large viewing audience wherein people developed a false idea of how the Natives lived. Considering *Nanook* was made almost a century ago, this problem is deeply rooted in cinema history.

Certainly, many scholars and members of the Native community have spoken out about this issue throughout the past several decades. Lumping together the facets of multiple tribes into one flat image of a Native American has had ramifications ranging from over-generalized movies to tipis and drums being sold as children’s toys, despite the fact that only Plains Indians ever lived in tipis and those are just a selection of tribes from the 562 in existence (NMAI). Activist and author Ward Churchill uses his book *Fantasies of the Master Race* to elaborate on issues concerning American Indians, particularly in the context of literature and cinema. Many scholars today feel that he is inflammatory and some Native people do not accept him in the movement, but Churchill continues to be prevalent in the literature surrounding this topic. He refers to what Hollywood has done in terms of melding Indian culture together and ignoring regional differences as a “space/time compression” (Churchill 172). He posits this has been done so repetitively that it has had numerous negative consequences (Churchill 172). Churchill refers to this compression as revisionism, but the term revisionism does not always necessarily carry negative connotations, and it is heavily employed by many in the discussion of Native Americans in film.

In fact, revisionism can also refer to the films that inverted common plotlines and narrative structures to give Native people nuanced and more accurate likenesses and stories in Westerns. Scholars Margo Kasdan and Susan Tavernetti analyze revisionism in the 1970 film *Little Big Man*, identifying the concept as a positive notion. While still definitively part of the Western film genre, *Little Big Man* turned convention on its head and showed the Cheyenne tribe as a dynamic and cooperative society retaining many realistic tradi-

tions, and alluded to the harsh treatment and displacement of their people committed by white society (Kasdan and Tevernetti 121). The film constantly draws comparison between the functional Natives who are in tune with nature and the cyclical seasons and the white people who by comparison are more savage and less functional. Of course, this film is a standout among many less progressive and more typical films of the era. As Native filmmaking has progressed, it has become increasingly apparent that Native filmmakers are the key to changing the narrative, in effect, rewriting the story that has been told hundreds of times.

IV. Whitewashing

An additional facet to changing the story lies in the visual aesthetic of the film, which inherently includes the actors. A problematic stereotype arises from the physical appearance of Indians in film. Whitewashing, meaning the casting of white actors as characters of non-white races, has long been a pervasive problem for many minority actors and filmmakers. Shohat and Stam point out that because of white cultural dominance and Anglo ethnocentrism, white beauty is often held as the standard in even majority non-white countries, existing as “the mythical norms of Eurocentric esthetics” (Shohat and Stam 322). Casting white actors in Native American roles, ignoring the talent and contribution of Indian actors, has been occurring for decades. In an essay by Ted Jojola, “Absurd Reality II: Hollywood Goes to the Indians” found within *Hollywood’s Indian*, he addresses how absurd these casting practices became, especially in the mid-1980s (Jojola 15). In a film titled *The Legend of Walks Far Woman* (1984), Raquel Welch, an actress of the time widely regarded as a sex symbol, played the lead role of Sioux warrior Walks Far Woman (Jojola, 15). The connection to what Shohat and Stam write about Eurocentric beauty in the casting of Welch is obvious, and it also relates back to box office numbers and commercial interests. Jojola goes on to reference the film *Outrageous Fortune* (1987) in which famed comedian George Carlin plays an Indian scout (Jojola 15). Though these examples date back a couple decades, this practice is still employed today. One can reference the *Lone Ranger* reboot of 2013, in which white actor Johnny Depp plays Tonto, engaging in what many critics call “redface.” Depp has long been considered a versatile actor, but this casting choice crossed the line in what was considered by many a racist and inappropriate decision. It ultimately boils down to another white person cast as non-white character. Still, *Time* reporter Lily Rothman reported in an investigative culture article that Comanche film advisor Wallace Coffey was not offended by the choice, but rather pleased to see a Native American character in a mainstream film with a huge studio budget (Rothman 2013). Though some members of the Comanche population may have accepted Depp in this role, the fact remains that audiences learn nothing about present-day Indian culture and do not see an Indian actor in a role they are qualified for. By casting white people over Indians consistently, Hollywood sends a clear message about whom they value. Additionally, Jojola explains how Hollywood often appropriates and blurs the lines of Indian culture through revisionism, in which the traditions of completely different tribes are mixed and oversimplified and attributed to the wrong people (Jojola, 13). This practice has since influenced Natives as they have had to play into these stereotypes to contribute to an in-demand tourist trade, creating a strange dual reality for the modern population.

V. Native Filmmakers Taking Control

A major reason why these indigenous voices are sparse in film is because Native filmmakers have traditionally been few and far between. White males have long dominated the film industry, and since they are at the creative helm, they have served their own interests, told their own stories, and been bound to popular commercial demands. Yet, Indian filmmakers have been on the rise in recent decades. These storytellers have headed up successful documentaries with accurate facts and integrity in artistic voice, and have moved into more narrative storytelling as they have gained traction, as exhibited by successful films such as *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *Powwow Highway* (1989). The future of Native American cinema exists in veteran writers and directors, like documentary filmmaker Sandra Osawa, who have paved the way for rising young storytellers, such as director Sydney Freeland, whose 2014 film *Drunktown’s Finest* premiered at Sundance Film Festival. These creators will strive to tell truthful and multifaceted stories that allow Native Americans in film to not be defined solely by a stereotype or their racial identity, but rather to represent a complete experience of a human being who has lived within that culture.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Native filmmakers took control of their portrayals in media and started a wave of production for their own films. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick's book *Celluloid Indians* looks at Native Americans in film and provides a breadth of historical context for the period she discusses. As detailed by Kilpatrick (1999), throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a wave of Native American activism hit America as these activists worked to improve their social conditions. Beginning in the 1960s, Kilpatrick writes that "civil rights issues had become a major focus of the media and of legislators, and Native Americans were beginning to be considered one of the oppressed minorities in America" (Kilpatrick 66). She then explains in regard to their rights and liberties, "Instead of other people and institutions saying what the American Indian needed or wanted, they were determined to say for themselves what was best for them" (66). The same statement applies to Indians taking agency over their own cinema. Agency is one of the most important facets of social change. An individual must first feel that they have the capacity and power to effect change in a larger context in order to produce social progress. This idea certainly holds true in the context of social movements, and it is important to view film and imagery in popular culture as a tool to effect social change. As a mirror for society, popular culture is also subject to social change. Creating a political and social dialogue about American Indians goes hand-in-hand with achieving greater representation.

Documentaries became and have remained a powerful medium for Native American creators. Beige Luciano-Adams wrote an article for the International Documentary Association, titled "Their AIM is True: Native American Filmmakers Look to Define a New Era," that synthesizes the trajectory of trailblazing filmmakers in the sixties and onward with the path of modern filmmakers. Luciano-Adams references Native American Public Telecommunications, a minority consortia organization that received a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 1976 (Luciano-Adams). In the years since, NAPT has remained crucial to the Native media industry and today maintain an important resource: a website titled Native Telecom, where thorough and categorized information regarding Indian filmmakers and films, past and present, can be found. The website contains an extensive database of such work and remains a valuable industry resource, both for people involved in production as well as scholars. Luciano-Adams includes revolutionary filmmaker Sandra Osawa in her discussion (Luciano-Adams). Osawa produced a documentary series for NBC in the seventies called *The Native American Series*, which was "the first to be produced, acted, written and researched by Native Americans in the US" (Luciano-Adams). Native filmmakers were facilitated in getting involved with documentary film production in large part because of the support for NAPT from PBS, and because documentary was issue-driven which corresponded well with the political and social movements of the time (Luciano-Adams). In more recent years, Luciano-Adams notes a shift to narrative film, which is significant because while documentary is an extremely valuable medium, narrative films usually draw larger audiences and are often distributed more widely than documentary pieces. Narrative work can have a widespread positive influence on perceptions of Native American stories by spreading accurate depictions of Native peoples to audiences that may otherwise never seek access to such information (Luciano-Adams).

VI. Contemporary Native American Films

Several relatively recent films that have been garnered critical acclaim exemplify the shift to narrative film. *Smoke Signals* (1998), a feature film written by Sherman Alexie and directed by Chris Eyre, is widely regarded as the best example of contemporary Native filmmakers taking agency over their own story. Amanda J. Cobb wrote an essay for the 2003 edition of *Hollywood's Indian* titled "This Is What It Means to Say Smoke Signals" in which she discusses the films' impact. She writes that the film, the first feature to be written, directed, acted and co-produced by Native Americans, "is an achievement because it exists at all" (Cobb 206). Joanna Hearne's book *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western* posits that the film is a breakthrough because of the extent of Native control over a studio-backed feature that ended up appealing to Native and non-Native audiences alike, all while being a Native production in a Native location (Hearne 267).

The primary themes of *Smoke Signals* are father-son relationships and identity, which results in a story that, while told by American Indians, is widely relatable. John Mihelich wrote "Smoke or Signals? American Popular Culture and the Challenge to Hegemonic Images of American Indians in Native American Film" and uses his appreciation for Alexie's work and interest in how it impacted popular perception of Indians to base his essay around a series of questions about the film that he posed to young students. His essay is unique in that it takes an almost survey-like approach to generating information about cultural impact. Interestingly, his

students identified the alcoholism plot line as negatively impacting Indian image, so he draws mixed conclusions from his research (Mihelich 134). Students found the film enlightening because of its realistic portrayal of reservation life, while they also found it to reinforce the modern stereotype of rampant alcoholism on Native American reservations. Other scholars interestingly pinpoint the stereotypes in *Smoke Signals*. *Seeing Red: Hollywood's Pixeled Skins*, a book edited by LeAnne Howe, Harvey Markowitz, and Denise J. Cummings, spends each chapter analyzing a specific movie with Indian characters, so naturally they include a chapter on *Smoke Signals*. Howe writes about how she grew up surrounded by Indians who held diverse occupations and that she was never exposed to alcoholism, thus she wishes the film relied less on some stereotypes such as alcoholic, absent fathers and abused mothers (Howe 115). Still, it remains accepted by scholars that *Smoke Signals* is a seminal work for Indian filmmaking.

VII. The Sundance Institute's Native Film Program

Another major development in Native cinema in the last twenty years has been the creation and evolution of the Sundance Institute's Native American and Indigenous Program, commonly referred to as the Native Film Program. The Sundance Institute is one of the foremost outlets for independent filmmakers and works to support them both financially and creatively (Sundance). The Institute famously organizes the annual Sundance Film Festival, one of the most renowned independent film festivals in the country, a place where talented filmmakers showcase their films and potentially acquire distribution opportunities that would not otherwise be possible. Sundance Founder and President Robert Redford has a long-standing commitment to supporting indigenous filmmakers and believes wholeheartedly in the program because "Native American and Indigenous filmmakers are rooted in a long and deep tradition of storytelling" (Sundance). Redford's commitment underscores the fact that, perhaps more than any other group, Native Americans are generally most equipped to be expert filmmakers because storytelling is so entrenched in their culture.

Beverly R. Singer, author of *Wiping the War paint Off The Lens*, quotes scholar and art curator Rick Hill of the Tuscarora tribe as saying that creating visual art "comes from our ancestors to which we are bound to add our own distinctive (traditional) patterns" (Singer 9). The oral tradition is an integral part of Indian culture. Stories are passed down through generations to teach history and morals to young members of the tribes. Logically, oral tradition would be crucial in a time before technology or even a written language, and as technology evolved, filmmaking and visual art would follow suit as a powerful medium to share stories and aspects of a culture that drastically need to be preserved and have their integrity retained. Many generations of Native Americans grew up in an era where they were faced the dual nature of what they knew to be true about their cultures and what Hollywood told the masses was true. Since the beginning of the Sundance program, Redford has relied on Native American filmmakers to lead the institute. Larry Littlebird and Chris SpottedEagle, two highly respected Native filmmakers, have held leadership roles since the program's inception (Sundance). Littlebird is an actor and director as well as a storyteller in the art of oral tradition, and he believes that "the word is what we hold precious" (Bezdek). Chris SpottedEagle is a documentary director, and these two men were at the forefront of a surge in Native films in the eighties and nineties. The current director of the Native Film Program, N. Bird Runningwater grew up on the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico (Sundance). During his time as the head of the program, Runningwater has taken the Native Film Program's initiative and gone global, establishing filmmaking workshop and labs for indigenous filmmakers in New Zealand and Australia (Sundance).

While *Smoke Signals* earned well-deserved praise and status as a major and oft-cited example of Native film, the fact remains that the film was released in 1998. Thus in 2014, sixteen years after *Smoke Signals* hit the mainstream, it is important to continue to reshape the collective consciousness as new Native works are created. Younger generations have taken up the mantle of the older, trailblazing creators. *Drunktown's Finest* is a more recent example of successful Native cinema, having been released in 2014 at Sundance through the Native Film Program. This film is especially timely because 2014 marked the twentieth anniversary of the program. The anniversary was celebrated by a film exhibition at New York City's Museum of Modern Art in July 2014, titled "Carte Blanche: Sundance Institute's Native American and Indigenous Program" (Michelson). *Drunktown* is one of the films that premiered at "Carte Blanche" and while it received mixed reviews, its existence inarguably makes it a success in Native filmmaking. Thirty-four-year-old director Sydney Freeland identifies as both Native American and transgender, which influenced the narrative of her

film (Michelson). *Drunktown* follows three protagonists: an alcoholic young father, a transgender woman with self-esteem issues, and a college student dealing with her adoptive parents while yearning to discover her biological family (Rapold). Freeland is quoted as saying that she was inspired to make this film because she did not see realistic representations of her people growing up, and she wanted to tell a story that she could relate to (Michelson). This film is important because it achieves the goal of telling a human story that is set in the context of Native American lives. Journalist Simon Moya-Smith writes, “Demons, discovery, humiliation, redemption—there have been plenty of films that offer stories on the complexities of the human condition, but very few have put a Native face to it” (Moya-Smith). This sentiment sums up the larger picture of Native representation in popular culture. When the creators themselves are American Indians, this representation becomes possible.

Drunktown’s Finest is not without its critics. Several noted that the acting seemed flat, and the complicated plot required a more intricate telling than was presented. But Redford, for one, stands behind this movie, stating that “it’s a tough movie, but it’s a tough life” (Moya-Smith). *Drunktown’s Finest* and other recent films that follow in the same vein show the complexities of life for Natives on and off the reservation, a subject that films did not address until Native creators like Freeland took control of the cinematic narrative.

VIII. Conclusion

Native peoples have worked hard in the past decades to create narrative stories in the context of their culture. Kristin Dowell explains in her journal article, “Indigenous Media Gone Global” for *American Anthropologist*, “A burgeoning field of scholarship on indigenous media has examined how media technologies are appropriated and transformed to meet the needs of local indigenous communities” (Dowell 377). The digital age has created many new opportunities for filmmaking in general, all of which American Indian directors and storytellers can take, and have taken, advantage. Today, an individual can buy a relatively low-priced digital single-lens reflex camera to shoot footage, use professional editing software on a personal computer, and choose from one of many sharing platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo to share a product with the world. Because the means of film production and distribution are more accessible, a greater number of Native filmmakers are able to tell their stories using film as the medium. These films sometimes even depict stories traditionally used by elders to teach moral lessons to youth and transform them into dramatic narrative pieces, thus employing multiple aspects of their culture in the media space Indians have created (Dowell 378).

Images of Native Americans in film throughout American history have told a great deal about the social position of the population. Ugly stereotypes persisted for years, yet waves of activism and a newfound sense of agency allowed Native filmmakers to take control of telling their own stories. The Native film world has flourished in recent years, and trends indicate an encouraging incline in Indian film production. Society must support Native people as they push for more true and accurate representation and foster a climate in our nation where popular culture represents the interests, cultures and lives of every member of its population.

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