Native Americans in Hollywood

One of the most powerful tools in shaping people's perception of the world in the twentieth century was film, and the epicenter for American cinema was Hollywood. From the very beginning of film, Native Americans have been a popular and pervasive subject for the silver screen, with Hollywood featuring Native characters in more than 4000 films in a little over a century.[1] When discussing the lens through which Native Americans are viewed by non-Native audiences, the two categories they are often put into are the savage enemy or the wise ally, but there is a third category which the former two also fall under: the entertainer. As entertainment, Natives can be mocked, marveled, taught, learned from, slaughtered, forgiven, and any other thing that white audiences wish to see. Films of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have played a significant role in maintaining, changing, and teaching Native American culture as well as shaping the perceptions that most people have of Native Americans.

Media can influence the way people think about certain things and shape their perceptions of people who are different from them. If the only exposure a person has to Native Americans is through cinema, then that is what they form their beliefs and opinions on Native people around. The representation of Native Americans in Hollywood has been varied throughout the last century, but "Either an enemy or a friend, he was never an ordinary human being accepted on his own terms."[2]

To understand why Indigenous people were such a huge part of film's history, it is important to first understand that there was a shift somewhere early on in the history of European-Indigenous American interaction where Native people "ceased being people and

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[1] Niel Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*. (Montreal, Canada: Rezolution Pictures, 2009).

[2] John E. O'Connor, "The White Man's Indian: An Institutional Approach," in *Hollywood's Indian the Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2002), p. 27.

somehow became performers in an Aboriginal minstrel show for White North America."[3] Europeans were fascinated by Native culture from the first meeting, but their perceptions of Native people was not consistent with their actual lives and traditions, which meant there was a heavy dose of fiction and falsehood written about them from the 14th century on.[4]

One notable instance of this popularity was a man named Ishi. Found near death outside of a slaughterhouse in 1911, Ishi was taken in by the University of California in Berkeley, where he lived and worked for the rest of his life.[5] Ishi was wildly popular with tourists who came to see him demonstrate things like arrow making, and his life was documented in films, books, a stage play, and even a Japanese manga.[6][7] Ishi was believed to be the last surviving member of the Yahi tribe of California, which meant he also became a "dying Indian" figure, which was an extremely popular trope in twentieth century films and nineteenth century literature.

In the mid-1800s, American literature entered a Romantic period, which is regarded as the antithesis of the Enlightenment era that preceded it. Native Americans became an ideal topic for authors of this time, as "its emphasis on feeling, its interest in nature, its fascination with exoticism, mysticism, and eroticism, and its preoccupation with the glorification of the past, [...] found in the Indian a symbol in which all these concerns could be united."[8] Movies and books were obsessed with this idea that Native Americans were going extinct, that there were so few Native people left, or even that there was only one Indian left.

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[3] Thomas King, The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 68.

[4] Wilcomb E. Washburn, "Foreword," in *Hollywood's Indian the Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2002), p. ix.

[5] King, *The Truth About Stories,* p. 65.

[6] Nancy Rockafeller, "The Story of Ishi: A Chronology," A History of UCSF (UCSF Library), accessed December 5, 2021, Library (https://history.library.ucsf.edu/ishi.html).

[7] "Ishi," Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, October 2, 2021), Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishi).

[8] King, *The Truth About Stories*, 33.

This idea dominated the silent film genre, as "the majority of these images fixated on the frontier as a metaphor for the doomed, static present of Native Americans set against the kinetic, animated future of the dominant culture."[9] When dime novel Westerns were being made, there were still ongoing struggles between Native Americans and white colonizers, so part of the novelty of this "dying Indian" trope was that, in the eyes of white audiences, it was a real possibility. When there is a threat of extinction or discontinuation, the value of those things tends to increase as people scramble to experience or consume something that is now finite, so this meant that the value of seeing Native people before they went extinct drove up the popularity of things like live performances, like in the case of Ishi.

Above all, the most popular form of entertainment that Native people participated in for white audiences was Wild West shows. These shows were homages to the time of Westward Expansion, such as Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show. Cody's show toured around the USA and Europe for over thirty years and employed Natives to participate in the show. After the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, the Lakota survivors "were given the choice of touring with Buffalo Bill or going to jail. An easy choice, if you ask me."[10] Native people were now subjected to perform for white audiences to escape confinement, and partial credit for the sensation that these shows accumulated was the comfor that Native's passivity in this ordeal brought white people.[11]

Birthed from the popularity of these shows came America's staple movie genre: the Western. Western films epitomized American ideals of freedom, justice, liberty, and the (white)

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[9] Michelle H. Raheja, "Ideologies of (In)Visibility: Redfacing, Gender, and Moving Images," in *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p. 47.

[10] King, *The Truth About Stories,* p. 87.

[11] Philip J. Deloria "Representation," In *Indians in Unexpected Places*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 63.

good guys winning the day. As film historian Angela Aliess puts it: "Americans love Westerns. It's in our blood."[12] Cody's 1913 movie *The Indian Wars* was not the success that his fame might have indicated it would be, and instead bored audiences with its accuracy and lack of a cohesive or compelling plot.[13] This combination of overwhelming historical accuracy and underwhelming entertainment may have set a precedent in Hollywood to embellish these Western tales in order to appeal to their audience, which meant prioritizing what was entertaining over what was true.

Hundreds more films were made in the 1910s that featured Native Americans, with varying success but still the same subject, and Hollywood learned how to cater to its audience; "One need only observe how quickly a director or studio might switch from portraying a "bloodthirsty" to a "noble savage" if the market seems to call for it."[14] Thomas Ince was a huge name in early filmmaking, and his film *Custer's Last Fight*, similarly chased the popularity of Westerns like Cody. Ince's film, however, was a huge success because it directly contrasted *The Indian Wars* by having a big narrative and dramatic draw with little attention to historical accuracy.[15]

The silent film era was also a considerably prosperous time for Native Americans in cinema, a time when "Native American people were directing and acting in films, and they were bringing their viewpoints to the table too, and those were being listened to."[16] One of the most accurate Native-featured films, even more authentic than Cody's *The Indian Wars*, was *The Silent Enemy*. The movie was about the starvation problem within Native communities, another

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[12] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.
[13] Deloria "Representation," p. 74.
[14] O'Connor, "The White Man's Indian: An Institutional Approach," p 30.
[15] Deloria "Representation" In *Indians in Unexpected Places*, p. 81-83.
[16] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.

"dying Indian" hit when there was a real threat of this happening.[17] It was no longer "kill the Indian, save the man" but instead "kill the Indian, save his image."

But there was a shift between silent films and talkies of the later decades. The silent films had many positive images of Native people, but Westerns made during and after the Great Depression leaned more into demonizing Natives in order to popularize the image of the white cowboy hero.[18] This era not only changed forever the way people viewed cowboys, but also the perception and treatment of Native American people, practically rewriting history in a matter of a few motion pictures.

Westerns continued to be created ad nauseam for the next century but lost steam in the later decades. The genre came back in a big way with Kevin Costner's *Dances With Wolves* in 1990. The movie revolves around white Civil War soldier, John Dunbar, who befriends the nearby Lakota tribe and abandons his post to live with them. *Dances With Wolves* is a perfect example of the "white savior" trope that is prevalent in Westerns, as Dunbar jumps to help the Lakota fight against the Pawnee by giving them guns and teaching them how to use them. In reality, the Lakota people were skilled fighters and the first Indigenous nation to defeat the United States military in battle.[19] The biggest failing of *Dances With Wolves* and movies like it is that these Native people are being used as plot development for the white hero. "It doesn't erase the fact that at its core, the film is not a Native movie. It is still a movie made from the outside of us, and is about us, and is meant to be sympathetic towards us, but it isn't us."[20] The movie is ultimately about a white man, and though he creates a friendship and even joins the Lakota tribe, the movie focuses on him.

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[17] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.
[18] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.
[19] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.
[20] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.

Director Neil Diamond noted in his documentary *Reel Injun* that there was a disconnect between his life as an Indigenous man and the Indigenous people he saw on-screen; "Raised on Cowboys and Indians, we cheered for the cowboys, never realizing we were the Indians."[21] Authors Wilcomb Washburn, Philip Deloria, and Thomas King all make a similar distinction between being Indian and being perceived as Indian, the latter being imposed upon Native people by white Americans who expected certain looks and behaviors from Natives for them to be seen as "Authentic" Indians. This is the cross-section between entertainment and life, where Natives must perform certain expectations to cling to their cultural identity. As King puts it, "As long as I dressed like an Indian and complained like an Indian, I was entertainment. But if I dressed like a non-Indian and reasoned like a non-Indian, then not only was I not entertainment, I wasn't an Indian."[22] Because white people had a specific idea of who and what an authentic Native American was, real Native people were made to conform to this image to hold on to their identity in the public eye.

The Native people who toured with Buffalo Bill were open for audience consumption even behind the proverbial curtains; "in the smothering omnipresence of a white racial gaze, show Indians were, in fact, *always* performing Indian-ness, whether they wanted to or not, twenty-four hours a day."[23] Even before that. California Indians in the 1800s were paid to put on plays for white audiences to generate tourism for missions, where they were dressed in the clothes of Plains Natives to make them appear "more authentic" for their ignorant audiences.[24] Popular Maori writer and director Taika Waititi has pointed out that filmmakers of color don't

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[21] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.
[22] King, *The Truth About Stories*, p. 68.
[23] Deloria "Representation," p. 67.
[24] Robert Miller, "Stereotypes and Native Californians," (September 5, 2021), YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgcY8YAP6R0).

always get to tell their stories because "It's basically like what white culture wants from us is what crippled a lot of our storytelling in the past."[25] Things like this shaped the way Native people were portrayed, cast, and costumed in movies to be immediately identifiable to white audiences and not shatter their perceptions of Indianness.

One of the first big movies that had a Native-centric narrative made by and for Native people was the 1998 movie *Smoke Signals*. The film blends modernity and tradition together to tell a story grounded in reality that deals with issues that were relevant to modern Native audiences. *Smoke Signals* is the perfect example of what good can be made when Native stories are left to Native people to tell. This film marked the "Renaissance" of Native filmmaking, where creative control was given back to Native people.[26]

Earlier this year, Waititi co-created a Native-centric show called *Reservation Dogs* on Hulu. The show follows a group of Indigenous teenagers living on the Muscogee Nation reservation who are trying to save enough money to move to California. *Reservation Dogs* opens with an homage to the 1998 film *Smoke Signals*, and has similar groundings in modern Native issues being told by Native people. Actor Devery Jacobs said that the show "was the first time I looked around and I saw a space for us to collectively mourn and heal and celebrate together."[27] The show was confirmed for a second season just one month after its premier, which speaks to the popularity of the story and how it is not just meaningful to its creators, but its audience as well.

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[25] Derek Lawrence, "Taika Waititi Is Ready to 'Twist and F--- Up' Expectations With 'Reservation Dogs'," Entertainment Weekly (Meredith Corporation, August 2, 2021), Article (https://ew.com/tv/reservation-dogs-preview-taika-waititi-sterlin-harjo/)

[26] Diamond, dir. *Reel Injun*.

[27] Libby Hill, "'Reservation Dogs': Star Devery Jacobs Wants to Take Back Indigenous Stories - and Is Doing It," IndieWire (IndieWire, November 22, 2021), Indie Wire (https://www.indiewire.com/2021/11/devery-jacobs-awards-reservation-dogs-consider-this-1234680764/).

One of the show's writers, Sterlin Harjo, discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic's restrictions on travel allowed Indigenous filmmakers "to show Hollywood that we don't have to live in Hollywood to tell these stories."[28] Harjo raises a great point that Native filmmakers have more recently been able to make media outside of Hollywood through the support of their communities, and because there's more access to technology for people now more than ever, Indigenous people don't have to rely on big film industries to create stories in a visual medium. The California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center at CSUSM created California's American Indian & Indigenous Film Festival: a large annual event that celebrates local Indigenous filmmakers.[29] The festival brings together Native Southern California communities through this celebration and is sponsored by several Native tribes and businesses.

Additionally, thanks to the internet's many websites that allow amateur video publishing, such as YouTube and TikTok, Indigenous artists can create and upload their own stories to share on a massive scale. On the app TikTok, the hashtag #nativetiktok has over 4 billion views and a seemingly endless number of videos that contain everything from ceremonial dances, cultural stories, history lessons, Indigenous activism, and even comedic skits.[30] Even if these methods of video publishing are not as popular as box office movies, Native people have an outlet to share the stories that they want to tell and gain traction from it.

Part of every culture's identity is the stories made within it, and so many stories within the last century have been told through film, television, and video. The film industry has had a

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[28] Joely Proudfit, "Indigenous Filmmakers Finally Find Their Place in Hollywood," Variety (Variety, June 17, 2021), Variety (https://variety.com/2021/tv/features/joely-proudfit-inclusion-rutherford-falls-native-americans-indigenous-filmmakers-1234997801/).

[29] "About CAIIF," California's American Indian and Indigenous Film Festival (California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center), accessed December 5, 2021, https://www.caiiff.com/about-caiiff.

[30] "#Nativetiktok Hashtag Videos on TikTok," TikTok (ByteDance), accessed December 5, 2021, TikTok (https://www.tiktok.com/tag/nativetiktok?lang=en).

tremendous amount of influence on people's world views, and has greatly affected the way people think about Native Americans and their place in the history of the United States. With the increase of creative control given to Native Americans within the last few decades to tell these stories, there is a revitalization and broader sharing of their cultures, and more understanding is beginning to emerge because of this. It has been a long and arduous road that Native people have had to venture in the film industry, but there is finally some turnaround that will hopefully increase as more Native people tell their stories.

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