

Some Guidelines for evaluating media portrayals of Indians

Cultural questions:

How are Native Americans portrayed? Are they portrayed as savages or primitives?

Inferior? Simple? Or are they portrayed as members of a complex culture with norms and values and religious systems that ask the same basic questions as other societies?

Are Native Americans lumped together as one culture, as if there is only one Indian culture? Are they seen as diverse, following the same practices, with the same lifestyles and customs? Are they depicted as cultures of the past, without contemporary significance?

Is the focus on the material? On objects? Or is there a recognition of the deeply alive nature of Native cultures and an emphasis on the importance of the sacred in everyday life?

Are Natives depicted as individuals or as communities? Is the communal nature of Native societies understood and respected? Are Natives measured by the standards of success of the majority culture or by their own standards?

Are gender and elderly roles treated with importance? Many Native cultures are matriarchal and all value the wisdom of elders and the importance of ancestors. Or, are Native cultures presented according to Western standards for gender and generational issues?

History:

Does history reflect the viewpoint of the victor? Is an Indian massacre called a triumph or a victory for example? Is sovereignty respected? Are Natives depicted as self-determining?

Are the contributions of Native Americans recognized? Are the events important to Native Americans emphasized or glossed over?

Language:

Are loaded words used such as “savage,” “squaw,” “warpath,” “redskin” etc. Or, is the language respectful and honoring?

Do Natives speak in the broken English of Hollywood movies? Or do they speak as those who come from an oral tradition and value the ability to convey thoughts wisely?

Role models:

Are heroes only non-Natives? Are Natives shown as contributing positively to society? Are there positive Native role models for Native children to identify with?

Are non-Natives depicted as the authority figures that need to take a parental type role to help the Indians? Or, are Natives shown as mature, responsible people who work hard to take care of the needs of their own?

Literature

The printed word has a long rich tradition in the Western world. Stories have been captured on stone, papyrus, clay, parchment and paper. Literature of the ancient world can be traced back to times near to the original source. The copy trail can show how variants crept into a text. To be literate, for much of Western history, was to be among the elite. Knowledge was under the control of those who could read and those who had access to printed materials. Post-Gutenberg, books became the norm for disseminating information. Other forms of print such as newspapers and magazines were created to convey short term knowledge to complement the long term view of most books. Eventually, the Industrial Revolution, advances in printing technology, the rise of public education and other factors led to the notion that literacy was no longer a privilege, it was a right.

Among Native tribes, the tale is quite different. Orality, the spoken word, was the primary means of disseminating information. Storytelling, in oral form, relies on conventions that may exist in printed form, but aren't as crucial when the text is written instead of spoken. The printed word can be complex and abstract. The ease of reviewing allows for longer stories (in general) and portability means the original source need no longer be present. Oral storytelling requires proximity; the speaker must be near to the listener. Spoken language relies on word pictures and memory enhancing devices to ensure that stories are passed along from generation to generation.

Before the arrival of Europeans to the New World, there was little in the way of written language on the continent. Most tribal languages weren't codified until missionaries, government agents, traders and linguists began to compile dictionaries and grammars of Native tongues. In Native terms then, literature can be defined in terms of both oral and written works. And, written works can include pictographic depictions, such as the Ojibwe use of pictographs on birch bark to preserve rituals.

Ruoff (1991) notes, "American Indian oral literatures are performed arts. Over time, a general structure for a traditional ceremony, myth, or song tends to be established by a tribe. But within that structure, a ceremonialist, storyteller, or singer is usually permitted some leeway to create his or her own interpretation. As long as the interpretations are accepted by the group as true to the spirit and content of the original, are performed appropriately, and achieve the desired result, many tribes consider each performer's version as valid." In addition, it is common for the audience to participate in the telling.

This level of flexibility and interaction is ill suited for the characteristics of the printed word. Yet, this became the primary means for preserving Native stories when whites began to record them. Even after audio recording technologies became available, the printed word remained the dominant means of conveying Indian stories. Libraries, for example, will typically have a multitude of Indian story collections and anthologies available in printed form, but often little in terms of recorded material.

Clements (1996) notes “two diametrically opposed views” on the value of European-American written records of Native American stories. One view uncritically assumes that these written records “provide absolutely reliable information about the nature of American Indian oral expression.” The other view dismisses these written records as “utterly worthless.”

Many of these early written records are an odd mix of the King's English and Latin oratory patterns combined with stereotypical “Indian” terminology. The result was a written construction that no Indian would ever utter. The esthetic features and artistic values of Native American verbal expression often gave way to the idea that Native Americans were pre-literate and thus their stories lacked an element of abstraction that needed to be provided by the translator. Because of this, Clements (1996) states that “careful examination of the processes that yield particular representations of Native American verbal art must accompany critical evaluation of published Native American ‘literature.’”

Henry Schoolcraft and others began to collect Indian stories and publish collections. Scholars like Ruoff (1991) have argued that many of these collections do not provide an accurate representation of the material they intended to preserve for readers. By failing to take into account the nature of performance or the cultural significance of the story, much of the original is lost.

Storytellers in tribal societies are highly valued. They have an element of entertainment in their tribal roles, but primarily they are the teachers and socializing agents for their culture. For Western civilization, most storytelling is entertainment. Native songs and stories were sung and told to help in the healing process, to ready warriors for battle, to win over a lover, and to ask the spirits for blessings.

To be a storyteller is to be a person of influence in a village or among a clan. Knowledge from outside the tribe was slow to arrive and suspect until the storytellers decided to incorporate it into the oral collective. Stories were for everyone, not just the privileged few. In this sense, all Native stories are popular culture.

Because of the oral nature of Native storytelling, each generation faced the possibility of losing its stories if they weren't passed down to the next generation. Charles Eastman in *Indian Boyhood* (1902) described the process of how his tribe trained boys to preserve the stories: "Almost every evening a myth, or a true story of some deed done in the past was narrated by one of the parents or grandparents...on the following evening he was usually required to repeat it...The household became his audience, by which he was alternately criticized and applauded."

The stereotype of Native Americans with respect to language is hard to reconcile with reality. Western movies gave us the Indian who spoke in stilted English and had difficulty expressing thought. In reality, Indians are very verbal people. In fact, most

Western writers specialize in fiction or in poetry, many Native writers publish in both genres.

Given this background, its not hard to see that Native American literature is a relatively young discipline. It does not have the thousands of years of tradition that Western literature has. And, since many Native stories were first put into print by non-Native writers, the Indian writer has obstacles to overcome if they want to set the record straight, or have their versions of stories accepted as the norm over those that have been widely circulated.

On the other hand, Native American storytelling is rich in tales and song. It too had been passed down from generation to generation, but not with the preciseness of Western literature. Indian stories were more “alive” in that they could change and evolve over time. Once a story is set in print it becomes more like an object, unchanging.

It is estimated that more than 30,000 books had been written about Native Americans by 1997. Of these, roughly ninety percent were written by non-Natives. It would be impossible to try to address them all. But in a rough sense, we can break them down into two categories: fiction and non-fiction.

As far as fiction is concerned, the image of the Indian was established by writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and popularized later by writers such as Zane Grey. Often these stories romanticized the experience of meeting

and interacting with Indians. White pioneers were heroes, Indians savages. Manifest Destiny was a divine calling and Indian attempts to thwart that movement were deemed heretical. Still, Native Americans would continue to be oral storytellers, and perhaps one of the most famous storytellers in American history – Will Rogers, was Cherokee.

Native American printed literature can be traced back to the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, for example the memoir of Samson Occam or the novels of Yellow Bird (John Rollin Ridge) or Simon Pokagon. In the early nineteenth hundreds, the writings of Charles Eastman achieved some level of popularity. It really wasn't until the 1960s that Native literature became more widely known. N. Scott Momaday's novel *House Made Of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969.

McClinton-Temple and Velie (2007) note that before 1968 Indians had only published nine novels in the United States. Today, that number is approaching 300. While space does not permit an exhaustive history, we can look briefly at some of the key historical works and then profile a few of some of the important modern writers. But before we do that, we can ask the question, what is Native American literature (if it exists)? And, what are its common themes?

And yet, Treuer (2006) believes that “Native American fiction does not exist.” “By declaring that what we write is Indian literature – because of the mere presence of myth, of Native American words, or the origin of the author – without first looking closely at language and its use, without looking at art and artistry, we seek to transcend our

heritages instead of continuing them and we kill the literature in the process...what makes these stories Indian...the force of our desire for it to be so.”

In contrast, multiple anthologies of Indian literature exist. How do they define Indian literature? Velie (1991) defines included pieces as “literature by Indians on Indian subjects. It does not include writing about Indians...” It includes two types of literature: traditional and mainstream. “Traditional literature, which includes tales, songs, and oratory...it was composed in tribal languages for a tribal audience. Today, the traditional genres remain, but most of the works are composed in English. Mainstream literature refers to works by Indians written in English in one of the standard American genres – fiction, poetry, biography, history.”

In fact, Treuer (2006) does list possible characteristics that could classify literature as Native American: they include dislocation, the search for self, the importance of landscape, the use of traditional materials, “nonlinear” structure, and the apparent bricolage of “traditional” and “Western” modes of storytelling. Yet, non-Native authors writing non-Native stories can employ all these characteristics. So the question remains, what is Native literature?

Velie (1991) notes that traditional Indian literature “was – and still is – primarily oral.” He states that one characteristic that sets it apart from American literature is “that it was an organic part of everyday life, not something to be enjoyed by an intellectual elite.” Stories and songs were for all to hear. Indians did not distinguish between “highbrow and

lowbrow art; all their works could have been considered popular culture in the sense that they were intended for the entire tribe.”

Velie (1991) also states that “traditional Indian literature was more functional...myths and tales were educational tools that taught the young tribal beliefs and values.”

In general, how would you classify a literature with respect to an ethnic group? Would the main criteria be racial or cultural heritage? Would you consider topic? For example, would the topic have to be related to cultural heritage or could it be about literally anything? Would it have to use certain writing devices or tools? In other words, what defines ethnic literature?

Now that we've looked at the question of what constitutes Native literature, what can we say about commonalities or themes found in Native fiction? McClinton-Temple and Velie (2007) talk about the difficulties in trying to develop a list of entries for their text. They had to ask questions such as “What qualifies a work or list of works to be included in a reference volume such as this?” One obstacle they faced is that there are “few templates to follow.”

Ruoff (1991) says, “one dominant theme in both oral and written works is the belief that human beings must live in harmony with the physical and spiritual universe. Words, thoughts and even silence have great power and should be used with great care.

Another basic theme Ruoff (1991) finds is “the peoples’ deep reverence for the land.” References to specific places, especially with respect to origins and history are replete in the literature. Place has a sense of sacredness.

A third theme is the idea of “emphasis on direction.” The number four, considered sacred is often incorporated into the structure and content of Indian works. Four represents the directions (north, south, east, west), the four seasons (winter, spring, summer, fall), and the stages of life (infancy, childhood, adulthood, old age) among others. Multiples of four are also common.

A fourth theme is circularity. As Ruoff (1991) states “the circle symbolizes the sun and its circuit. In addition, it sometimes represents the cycle and continuum of human life.” It is also seen in many ceremonies and dances. Lastly, Indian literature often contains a strong sense of community. “Tribal literatures often stress the need for cooperation and good relations among the people within a group.”

Ruoff (1991) categorizes Native literature into five categories – ritual dramas, songs, narratives, speeches and life histories.

Ritual dramas can combine song, narrative and oratory. They are the most complex form of oral literature and are used “to order their spiritual and physical world.” It is not uncommon for a tribe to have “special words or even entire languages that are used only when performing ceremonies.

Songs are “a vital component of most ritual dramas” and “are central to all aspects of American Indian life.” They are the “largest part of American Indian oral literatures.” Instruments can accompany songs; often a drum, rattle whistle or flute is used. The voice of the singer though, is the main instrument. Songs across tribes typically have structures that use such techniques as “repetition, enumeration of directions and parts of the body, and incremental development, in which phrases and lines are repeated, accompanied by minor changes in the repeated positions.”

Narratives can be divided into two categories: myths and tales. Myths are true stories of the distant past. Tales can be true or fictional and are usually from the more recent past. Over time, myths often come to be thought of as fictional. Indian myths “usually describe a primal world peopled by animal spirits in human form, monsters, and aberrations.” Tales are events that have taken place within human memory.

In Native narratives “plots are episodic, settings are simple, and style is terse. The characters are one-dimensional, rarely expressing thought or emotion...they also often contain inconsistencies of time, logic, and detail that are simply accepted by the listeners.” Several themes tend to emerge in oral narratives. One theme is that of creation stories, either by spirits or by a mythic hero, and the ascendancy of humanity. Migration and the beginnings of tribal customs and rituals are frequent story points.

Another theme is stories about tribal cultural heroes. Such a hero “provides the resources and rituals humans need to survive, and defeats the enemies of humankind. A cultural hero also possesses the power to shape various aspects of nature into their final form and to transform inanimate beings into animals and humans. He is usually of divine birth, frequently with Sun, Wind, or Stone as his father and a human as his mother. Often his mother dies or is killed before or during his birth.” A cultural hero is often “a trickster” who relies on deception and cunning to win the day. Tricksters can take animal form and are usually male.

Other themes revolve around ordinary beings who help the spirits or humanity. For example, those who attempt to bring a loved one back from the afterlife, or women who attempt to marry a star, break some taboo and descend to earth, and die and/or give birth to a son.

Speeches were traditional oral, but after contact with whites they were increasingly written down and preserved by white listeners. Among many uses, speeches could be part of spiritual rituals, addresses at councils, or serve as wartime inspirational messages. Most Native orators were male, though female orators were not unknown. As contact with whites grew more numerous and frequent, perhaps the best known Indian speeches today are those that were spoken at meetings with government officials. Since these were usually written down and preserved by white listeners, the accuracy of such speeches might be called into question.

Life histories, or autobiographies were not part of oral traditions per se. Life experiences were often incorporated into stories, but it was rare to find an entire life encapsulated into one oratory. Indian autobiographies first gained popularity in the 19th century. Often, “they were of particular interest to whites who were critical of U. S. government policies...many of these readers thought of Indians as ‘vanishing Americans’ and were eager to learn of Indian cultures that seemed to be disappearing in the face of white settlement of the western frontier.”

Intriguingly, Velie (1991) notes, “one interesting difference between Indian writers and their white counterparts is that while few whites are known for both poetry and fiction, most of the successful Indian novelists have published a volume of poetry.” This speaks to the importance of orality in Native culture. Poetry tends to have more of an oral flavor.

Trout (1999) also wrestled with the idea of themes as she put together an anthology of Native American literature. Trout identified ten key themes in organizing the collection – images and identities, the spirit world, crisis in the homeland, the remembered earth, all my relations, growing up, affairs of the heart, language and learning in two worlds, we survive and memory alive. Each theme can be briefly described as follows:

Images and identities – Who am I? What does it mean to be Indian? What stereotypes prevail and what positive images exist?

The spirit world – How are Indians related to the spirit world? What defines the essential sacred nature of the world in which Indians live? How should contemporary Native Americans respond to the spirits?

Crisis in the homeland – Having been placed in this land by the creator, and having lost the land to outsiders, how can Indians explain the impact and trauma of this conquest? How can Indians find meaning, and recover, in the search for answers as to why this happened?

The remembered earth – What is an Indian's relationship and responsibility to Mother Earth (including plants and animals)? How does sacred place fit with displacement?

All my relations – How does an Indian cope with mixed family heritages and divided loyalties? How should traditional family practices fit with contemporary lifestyles?

Growing up – Where is an Indian's place in the chain of generations? How do Indians reconcile tribal culture and heritage with the demands of modern society? How should the next generation be raised?

Affairs of the heart – From romantic love to trickster teases, what do friendship and love mean from a Native viewpoint? How do traditional patterns of courtship and relationship fit with modern practices?

Language and learning in two worlds – How should Indians understand the linguistic and cultural learning process? What values are found in the traditional ways of knowing and how do they relate to modern educational processes? What is the future of tribal languages? How has the loss of native speakers impacted Native culture and identity?

We survive – After hundreds of years of conquest and oppression, what does it mean to say that “we are still here?” How can Indians cope with and survive demoralizing and defeating experiences?

Memory alive – How do Indians cultivate the importance of remembering and celebrating oral traditions and culture? How will stories get passed on to the next generation?

Native Literature

Charles Eastman lived as a Plains Indian until he was put in school at age 15. Eastman graduated from Dartmouth and became a doctor. Eastman looked to find a “balance and connection between Dakota and European-American cultures.” His book *Indian Boyhood* published in 1902 was the first of two autobiographies he would write, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* would follow in 1916. In *The Soul of the Indian* published in 1911, Eastman explored the tension between his Dakota heritage and his Christian faith. Such struggles are not uncommon, as many Indians today wrestle with dual heritages. One of the key points of this work is that many Indian beliefs are actually close to the ideals of Christianity and that the materialism of white Christianity often comes up lacking. This tension, between Native and white worlds is aptly expressed in *From the Deep Woods to*

Civilization when Eastman writes “I am an Indian; and while I have learned much from civilization, for which I am grateful, I have never lost my Indian sense of right and justice.”

Velie (1991) states that, “until the 1960s the American reading public was largely unaware of works by Indians in mainstream genres.” This wasn’t surprising since he notes much of the published works in this line were “pretty pedestrian.”

The tide began to turn with N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* published in 1968. This novel, telling the story of a World War II veteran’s return to the reservation won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. His second novel *The Ancient Child* is autobiographical in nature and depicts a painter, Locke Setman, who was raised by a white father and struggles with his Indian identity. Momaday has also published several collections of poetry.

Several other authors of note have emerged. Among them, Gerald Vizenor is one of the more prolific American Indian writers. He has penned six novels, eight non-fiction books, nine books of poetry, a play and a film. His first novel, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* published in 1978, is the story of a trickster figure, Proudé Cedarfair, who leads a ragtag group on a journey across America. The trickster theme is evident in many of Vizenor’s works, including his non-fiction books.

Treuer (2006) believes that quite possibly no novel has had a greater impact on Native American literature than Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*. Leslie Silko's first novel, *Ceremony* published in 1977, tells the story of Tayo, a soldier who returns home after World War II. Tormented by his war experiences, Tayo becomes spiritually sick and psychologically broken down. Eventually, a Navajo medicine man guides a ceremony to heal Tayo. She has since written several novels, poetry and essays.

Louise Erdrich, whose first novel *Love Medicine* won the 1984 National Book Critics Award, is the first in a series of novels about the Little No Horse reservation. The series begins in the late 19th century when the Turtle Mountain Chippewa moved to the Plains and continues on to the present day to address issues of gaming, economic development and life in the modern world. In telling these stories, Erdrich uses magical realism, combining the supernatural with the everyday real world. In addition, her stories use other conventions often associated with Native literature. Her stories are not linear, the chronology jumps around, and she often uses polyvocality, that is, multiple narrators. Erdrich has written novels following different storylines in addition to poetry and short stories. One theme that emerges often is that of issues of identity, especially among those of mixed blood. Critic Hertha D. Sweet Wong in discussing Louise Erdrich's novel *Love Medicine* says, "multiple narrators confound conventional Western expectations of an autonomous protagonist, a dominant narrative voice, and a consistently chronological linear narrative."

Sherman Alexie has published novels, poetry and short stories. His first collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* published in 1993, became the basis for the film *Smoke Signals* directed by Chris Eyre. Alexie's writings are noted for many things, among them his ability to affect "readers' attitudes about Native peoples, in particular notions that are based on stereotypes and misinformation.

Winona LaDuke is a social activist who advocates for indigenous rights. She was the vice-presidential candidate on the Ralph Nader led Green Party ticket for President in 1996 and 2000. Her work on the White Earth reservation has included forming community-based organizations and participating in court cases. She has written non-fiction and fiction. Her best-known work is *Last Standing Woman*, published in 1997. *Last Standing Woman* "traces the lives of seven generations of Anishinaabe." In many ways, this book can serve as an example of many of the issues raised in this chapter.

Newspapers

In 2002, NAJA released The Reading Red Report, a major content analysis on coverage of Native Americans by some of the largest newspapers in the United States. What did they find?

"The best stories simply reflected good-quality and fair-minded reporting; writing and editing applied to Native America. They treated Native Americans as people rather than historical figures. They explained to readers the unique status of the 560 federally recognized tribal nations as sovereign governments within the United States. They

acknowledged the depth and diversity of Native American communities. Many stories, particularly in the arts sections, considered Native America in empathetic rather than confrontational tones. Often, though, attempts to summarize the history of U.S. relations with tribes slipped into bland generalizations because reporters lacked knowledge of federal Indian law, tribal histories and local geography.”

The analysis noted that most of the stories about Native Americans and Native American issues revolved around three main areas: “casino gaming by tribes, mascot team names and "on the res" datelined stories.”

The most common stories were “on the res” stories. “A preponderance of "on the res" stories were from Pine Ridge, S.D., or Window Rock, AZ. At best, they provided information about communities many readers know little about. At worst, they reinforced stereotypes about barren landscapes, family feuds and poor yet mystical people, the kind you might see in an old episode of *Northern Exposure*.

These stories also played into typical stereotypes. For example, "most Native Americans lived in cities, not on reservations. So many stories in *The New York Times* were datelined Pine Ridge that a reader might not have realized that New York City's 87,241 Native American residents make up the largest urban Indian community in the nation.”

Casino stories were the second most common stories. Indian gaming has become a major change agent among many Native tribes. Tribes are using gaming revenues to build

much-needed infrastructure, strengthen educational resources, and improve medical care. For the first time in decades, tribes are beginning to flourish economically, which is also helping spur programs and initiatives to preserve and restore traditional culture. Yet, as the Report notes, “most casino stories were focused on government process. They contained comments from government bureaucrats who expressed suspicions of tribal enterprises. They turned potential stories about economic successes into redundant and sometimes negative accounts.” In support, Historian Mary Ann Weston (1996), who has written extensively on media coverage of Indians, criticized newspaper coverage about Indian gaming “for not describing adequately the tribal sovereignty that made it possible.”

The third most common stories dealt with school/athletic mascots. These stories are important in that mascots often reinforce the negative stereotypes of Indians stuck in history. They also potentially denigrate sacred rituals and ceremonies. The Report states, “when they are the most-frequent and best-played stories that readers find about Native Americans, they skewer public perceptions about tribal nations and Native American communities.”

Note that none of these three issues would be considered the biggest issue among most tribes – the preservation of traditional culture.

The 2002 Reading Red Report encourages journalists to take the time to understand Native issues and take the time to find Native sources. As the Report notes, “Most tribal knowledge, though, is still shared in face to face talks, sometimes called oral tradition. Native American communities are wary of journalists, particularly those who drop in expecting to be met by a public relations officer willing to give them guided tours. Building relationships with credible sources in Native America takes personal effort on the part of journalists. It takes stepping out of the daily newspaper routine, and approaching the subject matter as an avocation rather than a one-day report.” This sort of reporting takes time and resources, something today’s mainstream papers are cutting back on in the face of declining readership. It raises the question, what would motivate mainstream newspapers to engage in deeper reporting on Native issues?

The 2007 Reading Red Report updates the current newspaper reporting environment. It found, “many fewer objectionable headlines and stories than the 2002 report, but still discovered stereotypical terms such as “warpath” and “peace pipe” in stories published from Jan. 1, 2005 to Dec. 31, 2006.”

Researchers “analyzed 1,741 articles in newspapers in cities that had high American Indian populations, including Albuquerque, Anchorage, Los Angeles, New York, Oklahoma City, San Diego and Tucson. The study looked at whether the news coverage portrayed Native Americans positively, negatively or neutrally, if Native sources were used and whether stereotypical terms appeared in print.”

They found “that 75 percent of the articles were neutral and only 6 percent had a negative tone toward American Indians. The study also found that a majority of the coverage was about arts and entertainment, education and casinos, although very few stories had datelines from reservations.”

The Report notes, “The best stories came from newspapers providing beat coverage on Indian people, including *The Albuquerque Journal*, *The San Antonio Express News* and *Tulsa World*.” What made these stories good? “Local Native Americans were profiled as everyday people doing positive and negative deeds or provided interactions between Natives and others.”

In summary, “Newspapers in states with high American Indian populations are covering Indian people with more accuracy and cultural sensitivity, but more training and hiring of Native journalists are needed for unbiased stories.” So, things have improved in the last five years, but there is still a long way to go.

Stephanie Greco Larson (2006) has also looked into newspaper coverage of Native Americans. She echoes these findings and says “Native Americans are still characterized as a problem in three ways – as a problem for the government and businesses, a problem to themselves, and a problem for whites.”

Will the situation improve? There are issues on both sides. For the mainstream press, Native Americans are to a great extent, essentially invisible. There are few Native

Americans employed in the news industry. The news cycle is becoming faster. This often doesn't relate well to the slower pace of Native life and the hard work and patience it takes on the reporters part to forge relationships and gain the trust of contacts in Native communities. And, the bias of news stories today often leads to coverage of sensationalized stories that can be conveyed simply. Native American stories often have a long, complex history that is unfamiliar to the news audience. This means extra work on the part of the news organization to make Indian related stories both understandable and fair.

Television

In both television and film, there have historically been two stereotypes of Native Americans. The first stereotype is that of the primitive savage. Indians are portrayed as inferior, uncivilized, crude, and fiercely ruthless and need to be dealt with by the superior culture; either by extermination or assimilation. This is the pattern found in many Westerns and on many of the TV shows of the 50s and 60s. The second stereotype is that of spiritual gurus. Portrayals of Native Americans and their spiritual beliefs and oneness with nature make them New Age naturalists with a wisdom that the rest of the world should seek. This was a common stereotype in the 1980s. In contrast, a relatively little used realistic portrayal is showing Native Americans in contemporary settings with their culture an accepted part of their normal everyday lives. This is by far, the least used of the three models described here.

What makes TV unique with respect to the portrayal of Native Americans? Well, anyone can write a book, a newspaper requires modest capital to start at the once a week or once

a month community level, and an Internet site is even easier to start. Film is more difficult. Hollywood style features are incredibly expensive to produce and finding funding is difficult. On the other hand, finding grant money or foundational funding for documentary or education film is far easier to come by.

Television, from its network roots in the late 1940s and early 1950s, has historically been the toughest medium for people of color to break into in terms of programming. The three major networks (NBC, CBS and ABC) dominated TV production for years. A bottleneck formed at the network level in that the producer, trying to pitch a TV show, essentially had only three outlets to pitch to. If the three majors said no, there was little recourse in terms of getting a TV show funded. (I should point out that PBS provides an alternate source – but mostly in terms of documentary, not in terms of mass audience entertainment). As a result, very few producers in any given year could be successful in getting a TV series started. The nature of the commercial TV system also had a structural bias against the creation of minority-based programming. By its economic model, network TV had to be general interest TV. It had to attract large mass audiences. It did so by creating entertaining programs that were lowest common denominator and appealed to the majority culture. That is, they were broad based enough to appeal to large audiences without offending them. An example might suffice. Tim Allen, a successful standup comic, was also the star of “Home Improvement.” While Allen’s stage routine was “blue” and adult in content, his TV show had to be toned down in order to attract kids and families. Allen simply couldn’t directly translate his comedy routines to the TV screen.

We can look at a brief history of Native American portrayals on television to illustrate these issues. Westerns were common television fare in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For example, *Gunsmoke* (1955-1975), *Wagon Train* (1957-1965), and *Bonanza* (1959-1973). All of these shows lacked major or even secondary Indian characters. As Larson notes, “The shows are about white people, and Native Americans are usually merely nameless fools or threats or are excluded.”

Other Westerns, such as *Cheyenne* (1957-1963), *Law of the Plainsman* (1959-1963), and *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957) featured continuing Indian characters in roles supportive of whites. *The Lone Ranger* gave us Tonto, played by Jay Silverheels, as perhaps the most recognized TV Indian in history. Though the Indian as companion was a step up from other television portrayals, it still left much to be desired. Indians were still seen as less powerful, less important and less valued than white characters. It also brought into play the idea of the good Indian, one who had something to offer, yet had to assimilate and give up his Indian identity in order to fit in.

One show that bucked the trend was *Brave Eagle* (1955-1956). The show featured a Cheyenne chief as the central character, but presented him as sympathetic and doomed. It would not be until the 1960s that the first major modern-day Indian character appeared on television in the title role for *Hawk* (1966). Burt Reynolds played the half-Iroquois NY City policeman. Note that yet again, a non-Native was playing the Indian role. In that respect, television would fare no better than film.

The second major Indian character, a Navajo deputy sheriff in New Mexico appeared in *Nakia* (1974-1975). Two major Native American characters were included in the Alaska comedy *Northern Exposure* (1990-1995). Jojola says, “The only glimmer of a true Native presence comes in the form of TV serials. CBS’s *Northern Exposure* set the scene for casting a few fleeting cameos, as Native actors were allowed to portray themselves as genuine contemporaries.” In contrast, Jojola has little good to say about *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, calling it “an awful, awful apologist’s series done in a historical revisionist tradition.” Both *Northern Exposure* and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* are now available on DVD. These shows might represent a good opportunity for you to conduct your own textual analysis. Watch each series. How are Native Americans portrayed? How do the questions raised in this book apply?

The 1970s saw TV’s pro-Indian sagas such as *I Will Fight No More Forever* (1975), *Mystic Warrior* (1984), and *Roanoak* (1986). All struggled to fill the gap left by the decline in the production of Hollywood Westerns by rewriting American history.

The idea of a made-for-TV movie, or a documentary gave us the paradox of Ted Turner. As Rollins (1998) says, “Turner financed the documentary *The Native Americans* (1994), a six hour look that “aggressively attacked the racial legacy in America since the Age of Discovery.” He also developed the made for TV movie *Geronimo*. At the same time, Turner owned the Atlanta Braves, and television showed us pictures of him doing the

tomahawk chop during games. And, the Turner media empire showed more cowboy and Indian shoot 'em ups than any other media conglomerate.”

To this point then, television has essentially the same dismal track record as film. The same stereotypes, the same images, the same stuck in history approach of the Hollywood Indian were simply transferred over to television.

Why was this so? The structural nature of television production tends to mitigate against the accurate portrayal of Native Americans, especially in a contemporary context. The typical television show has 22 or 44 minutes to tell a story. In order to tell that story, the plot, dialogue and character development must move relentlessly forward. Simplicity rather than complexity becomes the norm. Aside from the main characters and the main plot line, creative elements often must be reduced to images that audiences can immediately relate to without additional explanation or development. Take the stereotype of the computer geek, for example. If a computer geek is called for in a television show, the producers are not going to cast an eighty-year-old woman to fill the part. Why? The episode simply can't or won't take the time to explain why someone is cast against type; it pulls away from the main story line and disrupts the flow.

This perpetuates the dilemma for Native Americans in two ways. First, since Native Americans are often viewed as “stuck in history,” it becomes difficult to cast Native Americans in secondary roles in contemporary stories. They simply do not fit the image that audiences are expecting and the time can't be taken to explain why a Native

American could be a banker, or a judge or a police officer. It's just easier to avoid those issues entirely. Second, if it is difficult to cast Native Americans in secondary roles, it makes it difficult for Native Americans to get the experience and the screen exposure they need to grow into lead roles. This becomes a self-perpetuating system.

Minority based programming built around minority culture has had a very difficult time finding slots on network schedules because it simply isn't broad based enough. From time to time there were breakouts such as *Sanford and Son* or *The Cosby Show*, but these were the exceptions rather than the rule. Examples of shows primarily built around other minority groups such as Latinos or Asians were even harder to find. Native American shows simply didn't register. In fact, in looking at most content analysis research on television programming from the 1950s to the present day goes something like this: "African Americans were once again underrepresented on network television, with Latinos and Asians lagging behind as well. There weren't enough Native Americans found on network TV to analyze."

In a seminal study conducted by Bradley Greenberg et al in 2002, Greenberg summarized past studies on the depictions of minorities in the mass media. Greenberg says that "early studies on the portrayals of minorities on prime-time television focused predominantly on the images of Blacks, inasmuch as depictions of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were negligible." For example, in the 2000-2001 television season, Native Americans made up only 0.2% of all primary recurring characters on prime-time.

Later in the study, Greenberg states “For Native Americans, almost no images are available for analysis.” In the 1996-1997 season, for example, Mastro and Greenberg (2000) found no Native Americans on prime-time television. As such, Greenberg notes, “Native Americans are not seen as part of contemporary U. S. society on television.”

Wilson and Gutierrez (1995) say “Native Americans...have been largely invisible in mainstream advertising...” (with the exception of sports mascots). A more recent study by Mastro and Stern (2003) found that in an analysis of 2,880 commercials airing during prime time in February 2001, 2,315 speaking characters were identified. Whites comprised 1907 of the speaking roles, African Americans 285, Asians 53, Latinos 24 and Native Americans, 9. As Mastro and Stern state, “Native Americans, rarely shown were most often depicted in ads for macro-retailers (e.g. Walmart) and automotives.” These numbers, however, were too small to be included in a statistical analysis. In their words, “Due to the small number of appearances of Native Americans, they were excluded from further analyses.”

Is the situation likely to improve? Wilson and Gutierrez (1995) state “the small percentage that Native Americans comprise of the population in urban areas and their geographic dispersion in rural areas make them less attractive for mainstream advertisers looking at potential growth markets. As far as advertising is concerned, it appears that, except for some major corporations, Native Americans will continue to be treated as the Most Invisible Minority...”

For more historical research on Native Americans and advertising, I would encourage you to explore Elizabeth Bird's book *Dressing in Feathers*.

Perhaps more tellingly than research on television and advertising images, Greenberg notes that with respect to how Native Americans themselves use the media, "no studies of general media use among representative groups of ...Native Americans were found." If studies don't exist to help television networks/channels understand Native American media preferences and habits, how will television networks/channels be able to develop programming to fit with Native American media needs?

Given this lack of Native Americans on television – which encompasses everything from producers to writers to actors to content (both television programs and advertising), it has been difficult to say anything meaningful about how television portrays Native Americans, other than that they are mostly absent. Enter *Star Trek*.

When *Star Trek* first went on the air in 1966, a time when racial issues were on the front burner of American society, the show was considered groundbreaking. With a multi-racial cast, most notably Nichelle Nichols as Lt. Uhura; an African-American female on the bridge of the Enterprise, *Star Trek* broke racial barriers including the first interracial kiss. Surely *Star Trek* then, would be able to break out of the primitive savage stereotype or the New Age spiritualist stereotype and portray Native Americans as they really are.

Over the course of several decades, *Star Trek* spun off into several series, from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to *Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager* and *Enterprise*. All in all, from its

debut in 1966, *Star Trek* has been on the air to the present day on network television and in syndication. By analyzing how *Star Trek* portrayed Native Americans we can, by proxy, gain an understanding as to how the portrayal of Indians has changed on television. If *Star Trek* fits the general stereotypes and/or changes over time, it can lend much insight into how the rest of television programming progressed as well. This portion of the chapter will look at how *Star Trek: The Original Series* (ST) portrayed Native Americans in the mid to late 1960s. It will then look at how *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) portrayed Native Americans in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Finally, it will look at how *Voyager* (V) portrayed Native Americans in 1995 to the early 2000s. Sandwiched as interludes between each of these main analyses, there will be examinations of three other Star Trek series: *Star Trek: The Animated Series* (AS), *Deep Space Nine* (DS9), and *Enterprise* (E). Though Native Americans are not frequently depicted on any of these three series, they do serve as transition points and offer additional insight into the world of Star Trek and how it portrays Native Americans.

Film

The history of Native Americans in film goes all the way back to the beginnings of the medium. When Thomas Edison invented the kinetoscope he needed images to shoot. These early images were often called actualities, that is, he would film events from real life, sometimes on location, sometimes in his studio known as the Black Moriah. At the 1893 Chicago Columbian World's Exposition Edison showcased his new invention. One of the films he exhibited was a recording of a Hopi Snake Dance. Other films of Native American ceremonies would follow. We can note that these actualities raise several

issues. First, actualities, in theory, depict real life happenings. That is, they are authentic. In this case, using real Indians, in authentic attire performing authentic ceremonies. On the other hand, these ceremonies could be staged for filming rather than a natural part of daily life. Further, accurate or not, they were contemporary in the sense that these ceremonies were present day happenings. In other words, Native Americans were not stuck in time; yet. As Jojola (1998) remarks, “few would have predicted that this kind of depiction would persist into contemporary times.”

As silent film developed, it moved beyond the actuality, increasing in length and narrative complexity. With films like *The Great Train Robbery* by Edwin S. Porter in 1903, Edison’s successors were experimenting with new techniques, special effects and dramatic ways of telling stories that may or may not reflect the real world.

Native American stories became part of this developing medium. Perhaps a starting point might be when Pathe Freres hired James Young Deer and Princess Red Wing to give authenticity to their Westerns. James Young Deer would go on to produce and direct *White Fawn’s Devotion* in 1910. Aleiss (2005) uses *White Fawn’s Devotion* as an example of a silent film that didn’t resort to cliches of savage Indians attacking wagon trains. The film tells the story of an Indian woman and a white man who are married and almost come to a tragic end until a dramatic ending happily reunites the couple. This would be one of the few positive depictions of an interracial relationship, and would soon become a taboo.

D.W. Griffith, one of the most famous (and in some respects infamous) directors of the silent era and noted for films such as *Intolerance* and *Birth of a Nation* also directed many Westerns. Aleiss (2005) traces his criticized portrayals such as his depiction of Sioux warriors as savages in *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* in 1914 and his praised portrayals such as that of a white boy and an Indian companion in *The Redman and the Child* in 1908. For many directors at this time in film history, depictions of Native Americans were just as likely to be positive as negative. However, it would not be long before the Hollywood Indian would become the norm.

King (2006) talks about *The Vanishing American*, which starred Richard Dix and debuted in theaters in 1925, and lamented the treatment of indigenous people in the reservation system. Dix played a college-educated Native American who is forced to choose between accepting the ways of mainstream Anglo-American society or following the ways of his Native American heritage. King notes that *The Vanishing American* “is a classic expression of this sympathetic zeal, a film that critiques the treatment of indigenous people in the reservation system, while lamenting their impending doom.”

Aleiss (2005) also notes, “Among the more sympathetic and culturally sensitive films that capped this era was *The Silent Enemy* (1930), a feature about the Indians’ struggle against hunger. The movie re-created Objibwa lifestyle with painstaking detail: the carving of a birch-bark canoe, the hunting of partridge, and the sounding of a wooden instrument to lure a hidden elk.”

Aleiss (2005) says “The Indian as a noble hero actually preceded the cowboy star...Indian themed pictures were especially popular from 1910 to 1912, when studios released approximately twelve to fifteen of them per month.” “Some of the stories proved to be more audacious than what the standards of the time dictated. Tales of ruthless whites would parallel those of hostile warriors, lasting interracial marriages would complement the Indian/white relationships that failed, sympathetic half-breeds would occasionally offset the treacherous ones, and an Indian’s heroic sacrifice might be matched by a white man’s generosity. And many films delivered a sharp indictment against civilization and its unfair treatment of Native Americans.”

This promising start for the relationship with film and Native Americans was not without its problems. Native protests of cinematic representations go back to 1911. King (2006) notes, “While the content of these earliest films varied, they have two things in common: first they endeavored to be detailed and authentic portraits of Indian life; and second, they presented Native Americans through established cliches, namely warriors adorned in ‘war paint and feathers...brandishing tomahawks and scalping knives,’ which undermined their ethnographic intentions.” This interplay of positive and negative images at least has some sense of proportion. While it would be preferable not to have any negative portrayals of Indians, this was a time in the film industry when Native Americans at least had an opportunity to present positive images that could compete in the marketplace of ideas for the minds of moviegoers.

Furthering this relatively more open era in terms of access and content, in discussing the depiction of Native Americans in the silents, Angela Aleiss (2005) makes an interesting observation. She notes that “many ‘reforms’ so grandly proclaimed by contemporary filmmakers were commonplace” during the silent era. These ‘reforms’ include using Native Americans to play themselves, employing Native Americans behind the camera, and creating positive images and storylines for Native Americans. Yet, these early opportunities were not sustained.

Why is this? Why did Native Americans have such a promising start in film? Native American actors and directors had access and opportunity and sympathetic and realistic images could be found without too much searching. Perhaps it was the openness of the system. The industry was still in its infancy. The rise of the studio system (and the talkies) was still in the future. Anyone with even limited resources and a desire to create movies could develop content as they saw fit. As the industry matured however, control of filmmaking gradually became the province of the major Hollywood studios. As Indian themed films remained popular, they were coming under the influence of an industry that was increasingly seeing film as a product, often mass produced, and designed to appeal to large audiences. Authenticity was no longer the goal, entertainment was. And, as film moved towards the talkies of the late 1920s and early 1930s, positive portrayals of Native Americans in film had not been sufficiently infused into the industry to withstand the coming of the Hollywood Indian.

The Hollywood Indian would come to mean the film portrayal (or more accurately, stereotype) of what it meant to be Native American. This portrayal, however, would be seen through white eyes rather than Native ones. In other words, it presented Indians as Hollywood producers saw them rather than how they actually were. The rest of this chapter will flesh out the idea of the Hollywood Indian.

The 1930s were a decade of big budget Westerns featuring cowboys and Indians. These films were dominated by a sense of Manifest Destiny. It was also a time when faith in the ability of government to solve problems needed to be restored. In film then, stories centered around the theme of taming the West and making the frontier safe for settlers and their families. Cowboys represented law and order, and they were the enforcers of civilized behavior. They had to have a foil, which too often were unrealistic portrayals of 'savage' Indians. Native Americans served as stock villains. Cecil B. DeMille's *The Plainsman* (1931) and John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) serve as examples of this type of portrayal.

Much then, of the advancement Indians had made in the silent era was lost. In the 1940s with the advent of World War II, filmmakers had a chance to reassess the relationship of Indians and whites. The quest for territory and "breathing space" was seen in a new light. But this exploration would soon give way to the Westerns of the 1950s. Two films, in particular, stand out as examples of the direction Hollywood was taking, post World War II, *The Searchers* (1956), directed by John Ford and *Broken Arrow* (1950), directed by Delmer Daves.

In *The Searchers*, John Wayne plays Ethan Edwards who is a hero with a dark side. Quite clearly, he hates Indians and his racist attitudes are clearly seen. Ford presents Edwards' racism without praising or condemning it, it just is. Contrast this with the character of Tom Jeffords, played by Jimmy Stewart in *Broken Arrow*. Stewart is sympathetic towards Indians and takes the time to learn the Apache language and Apache customs in order to mediate disputes between the Apache and whites.

Though Jeffords is portrayed as a character who respects and empathizes with Native Americans, the film had a deeper message embedded, that of the inevitable demise of traditional Indian ways. As Aleiss (2005) comments, *Broken Arrow*, "signaled that tolerance was now Hollywood's weapon against frontier discrimination as well as the solution to hostile race relations. But beneath *Broken Arrow's* appeal for reform was a plea for Indian assimilation into white society. Hollywood Indians could now stand alongside the movie's white heroes, provided they compromised their heritage."

As we will see later, films such as *Broken Arrow* present the contrast of the 'good' Indian with the 'bad' Indian. The good Indian would learn to assimilate and conform to white society. The bad Indian would not. This motif of assimilation, though tragic, became one of the mantras of the Western.

Nolley (1998) discusses the legacy of John Ford and notes that critics are often sharply divided as to how to analyze Ford and his portrayal of Indians. Critics will point to both

the racist elements of his films and the sympathetic portrayal of Indian leaders in several of his films. Others will note that Ford's portrayals did develop over time for the better. We will not get into this debate here, suffice it to say that when it comes to Hollywood directors such as Ford or D. W. Griffith, who made several films in which Native Americans were portrayed, most often the result is a mixed bag – with some good and some bad.

However, in *The Searchers*, the cowboy is no longer completely good, He too is flawed. Though not the anti-hero of more contemporary Westerns such as *Unforgiven*, a dimension of moral complexity has been added. The idea of white hats and black hats has now merged closer to gray. In turn, heroes can be sympathetic or savage. As Aleiss (2005) notes of *The Searchers*, “the Western hero is lonely and obsessive, explosive and compulsive; he harbors a deep hatred for American Indians and slaughters them with a vengeance.”

The idea of accommodation, that Indians and whites could share the land, was extinguished. One had to give way to the other and it would not be the majority society. The indigenous peoples would have to learn white ways in order to survive. The idea of tolerance that surfaced briefly in the 1940s gave way to an attitude that Aleiss (2005) notes, believed, “Indian assimilation was impossible within a society marred by racial bigotry and social discrimination.” Indian identity and cultural survival had to be sacrificed.

In addition to the Western genre, other films were being made that incorporated Native Americans. Animation traced its beginnings to the early part of the silent era. Though animated films can cover adult subjects, most often they are aimed at younger audiences. As such, they have the potential to shape young minds with images of Native Americans where no image previously existed. One film that depicted Native Americans was Disney's *Peter Pan* (1953) directed by Hamilton Luske, Clyde Geronimi, and Wilfred Jackson. *Peter Pan* presented an Indian chief and his daughter Tiger Lily along with their tribe. These characters are featured in the song "Why is the red man red?" The song and the accompanying visuals serve as a microcosm for exploring Native American stereotypes. In the song and the visual portrayal one can see:

The chief depicted as bull-like and savage.

A sacred ceremonial pipe passed around carelessly.

An unattractive older squaw.

An Indian princess.

The subservience of Indian women.

The attraction of the Indian princess to a white male.

The centrality of white characters.

The mockery of Native history.

The use of nonsense syllables to substitute for Native language.

The use of broken English by the chief.

The mixing of a Native drum with non-Indian instrumentation and rhythms.

A Western tribal portrayal of attire and tipis.

All of these images fit into the stereotype of the Hollywood Indian. Later in this chapter when we look at the images of Native Americans that Hollywood has created, come back to this look at *Peter Pan* and compare scholarship with the images depicted here. It also raises the question, is it fair to critique a movie for a relatively brief stereotypical depiction of Native Americans when Native Americans are incidental to the plot? In most other respects, *Peter Pan* was well received and well reviewed. It also raises the question; do we hold animation to the same standards as other types of film? On the one hand, animation is supposed to be less realistic, it's supposed to bend convention. On the other hand, is the impact of its portrayal of stereotypes any less significant? Or, can stereotypes depicted in animation sneak past defenses whereas obvious stereotypes presented in realistic settings may be dismissed as such?

It is interesting to note that in the recent Platinum Edition DVD release of *Peter Pan* that the submenu that allows the user to access songs directly does not include a link to take the user directly to "Why is the red man red?" Disney has been reluctant to release *Song of the South* over concerns about its portrayal of African-Americans. Yet, a film that is blatantly stereotypical in its depiction of Indians seems okay to release. Is this a double standard? What do you think?

As film moved into the 1960s, civil rights and race relations were reaching a boiling point. The voices of minorities were screaming to be heard and the protests of the Vietnam War were placing government in an unfavorable light. Native Americans could

now be views as the unfortunate victims of a racist society. Films tended to respond to this notion in one of two ways. As Aleiss (2005) describes, “the Hollywood Indian could not rest in peace. As images of Indian/white coexistence collapsed, many fifties and sixties Westerns showed Native Americans fighting an embittered society and finding refuge only outside its boundaries.” Here is image number one, the quest for Indian identity outside of Native land and culture. Films such as *Billy Jack* (1970) and Chief Bromden as a modern day anti-hero in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) serve as illustrations of this trend.

Aleiss (2005) also notes the second, “Hollywood Indians thus emerged as the screen’s persecuted victims while whites became the frontier’s bloodthirsty savages. Here is image number two. Native Americans as victims as cowboys became the proxy for corrupt government. These ‘anti-Westerns’ included such films as *Little Big Man* (1970) directed by Arthur Penn. Aleiss notes “Penn was determined to tell *Little Big Man* from the Native American point of view. He believed that Hollywood’s Indian images were based on a ‘pure, naked racism.’” According to Jojola (1998), “*Little Big Man* in fact, established a milestone in Hollywood cinema as the result of its three-dimensional character portrayal of Sioux people. This included what is perhaps one of the finest acting roles ever done by an Indian actor, Dan George, who portrayed Old Lodge Skins.”

The 1970s saw a sharp decline in the Western’s popularity. I will leave it for other scholars to debate as to why. Here I will simply raise the question. Is it because these ‘anti-Westerns’ simply weren’t good films? Or is it because they stretched conventional

ways of thinking in such a manner that mass audiences were prone to reject? Or, is it something else entirely?

The 1980s saw very few depictions of Hollywood Indians. The Western was out of favor and the Indian as outsider or as victim simply didn't play well anymore. At the end of the decade, the release of *Powwow Highway* (1989) depicted Native Americans in a contemporary setting. A low budget film, *Powwow Highway* didn't generate much in terms of box office revenues but it did move Native Americans closer to modern times on the big screen.

Appleford (1995) in analyzing *Powwow Highway* said, "Another film that weds a familiar mainstream formula with material specific to Indian culture is the 1989 U.S. film *Powwow Highway*, directed by Jonathan Wacks. The film follows the adventures of Buddy Redbow (played by actor A Martinez), a veteran of Wounded Knee II and a fiercely militant activist, and Philbert Bono (Gary Farmer, who hails from the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario), a child-like figure on a spiritual quest to become a traditional warrior. The film follows the standard road movie pattern, with Buddy and Philbert keeping one step ahead of the law as they attempt to free Buddy's sister from unlawful imprisonment in Santa Fe. With plenty of car chases and a spectacular explosion for a finale, the film appears generic on the surface. But one element that enriches the narrative is the depiction of contemporary Indian approaches to problem-solving. Buddy, the hot-blooded A.I.M. crusader, advocates open revolution to halt white encroachment on native lands and their valuable natural resources. Philbert, in

contrast, looks to his ancestors' traditional wisdom concerning passive resistance to help provide strategies for survival. The film's message is that the two approaches need to complement one another if Indian nations are to thrive in the coming years (a message that, because it serves to temper violent Indian 'overreactions,' could be criticized as being too amicable to a mainstream audience's sensibilities)."

Note how this idea brings back the idea of assimilation but with a twist, Indians can find ways to keep their traditional ways and even use them to benefit the majority society.

The 1990s brought with it perhaps the most talked about film in Hollywood history in terms of the portrayal of Native Americans. *Dances With Wolves* (1990), directed by Kevin Costner, told the story of Lieutenant John Dunbar and his interaction with Native Americans and whites. As the movie is described by its distributor, "Sent to protect a U. S. outpost on the desolate frontier, Lt. John Dunbar finds himself alone in the vast wilderness. Befriending the very people he's sent to protect the outpost from, the Sioux Indians, Dunbar slowly comes to revere those he once feared. But when the encroaching U. S. Army threatens to overrun the Sioux, he is forced to make a choice – one that will forever change his destiny and that of a proud and defiant nation." While overly dramatic, this description does make clear that the film's center is not the Sioux, it is the white character John Dunbar.

What were the reactions to *Dances With Wolves*?

Dances With Wolves is a film that has evoked both positive and negative sentiments within Native American communities. David Seals (1991), the writer of *Powwow Highway*, upon reading the script, said “There were some very poetic and nature-loving Indians all over the place, and a beautiful white babe who had been captured as a pioneer child – her whole family had been butchered by them sneaky Pawnees – but nowhere were there any of the complex intratribal feuds going on or whiskey traders and railroad men and land speculators who were everywhere out here. Mostly what we got was some pretty thoughts about living in harmony with nature, and each other. That’s O.K., I figured, what the hell, it’s at least pro-Indian and might bring in a few jobs for the troops.”

Seal (1991) found other problems with the film. For example, the male Indians generally speak Lakota in the feminine form and many elders were “mad about it.” Tribal members asked that the movie not represent the Pipe (a Lakota sacred ceremonial pipe) in the movie, but “they went right ahead and smoked it anyway.” And, “the filmically perfect village of tipis *Wolves* shows at one point is perched on a Belle Fourche River that is undrinkable and polluted from gold mine tailings.”

Of Dances With Wolves, Leuthold (1995) states, “Perhaps no other film representation of Indians has had a more varied reception.” On the positive side, the film included important authentic elements such as the “realistic staging of the buffalo hunt, minute accuracy in costuming and sets, reverent visual imagery of the traditional Lakota Plains

homeland, and a central focus given to the horse and other animals that symbolize the spirit of the Lakota.”

He continues, “Dances is one of very few Westerns to allow Indian audiences to identify with the native characters on the screen.” Dunbar’s (Costner’s) ability to empathize with Indian views and acknowledge the irresponsible actions of whites (and to admit white responsibility) “sets Dances apart from the majority of other Westerns.”

And finally he notes, “If nothing else, the varied responses to Dances within the native community point to the dangers of a reductionistic understanding of Native interpretation of recent films.” Further, “they reveal no consensus among Native Americans about recent film images of Indians, but they do point to a continuing discomfort with Hollywood’s portrayal of Indians.”

On a less positive note, Jojola (1998) says of *Dances With Wolves*, it “was devoid of any redeeming social merits. Rather, it was apolitical and subconsciously plied its appeal by professing a simple New Age homily about peace and Mother Earth.”

What are we to make of these varied reactions? One thing they demonstrate is that there is not consensus among Native Americans (or among scholars). Native communities are diverse in terms of culture and views as to how they should be depicted. To expect all Indians to have similar responses is naïve.

A second observation might be that Indians tend to focus in on different points of emphasis when evaluating films portraying Native Americans. Some will focus on historical accuracy, others in terms of relationships (for example, who is in power), and others will see any advancement in terms of humanizing Indians as a positive step forward, even if some negatives have to be absorbed along the way.

Which would you focus on when watching a film like *Dances With Wolves*? Would you focus on the fact that the story centers on a white character and is really a portrayal of Indians through his eyes? Or, that for the first time in a long time, Hollywood has made the effort to realistically portray Native Americans?

In surveying the history of Hollywood depictions of Native Americans, scholars have tried to summarize the image of Indians that is being portrayed. Many scholars call this depiction the “Hollywood Indian.” What do they mean by this term?

Rollins (1998): “The image of the American Indian, more than that of any other ethnic group, has been shaped by films. Why? Because the characteristics that define the American Indian are dramatically conveyed by this powerful twentieth-century medium. All American ethnic groups, of course, are defined – stereotyped, if you will – by Hollywood, but no other provides the opportunity to convey that image in a narrative form in terms of rapid physical movement, exotic appearance, violent confrontation, and a spirituality rooted in the natural environment.”

Jojola (1998): “The Hollywood Indian is a mythological being who exists nowhere but within the fertile imaginations of its movie actors, producers, and directors. The preponderance of such movie images have reduced native people to ignoble stereotypes.”

Buscombe (2006): “I don’t think there are any ‘Native Americans’ in the movies, nor for that matter any Indians either. The popular cinema has not sought to present the reality of Indian lives. Instead it has created a fiction for its own purposes...” Further, “Where do white people’s ideas about Indians come from? Undoubtedly, the most pervasive and potent contemporary source is the cinema. Throughout most of the history of Hollywood, until it began to lose its appeal in the 1960s, the Western was the major genre of American cinema, comprising between a fifth and a quarter of all feature films made in the period 1910-1960. In the last century, something like seven thousand Western feature films were produced in all, and a substantial portion of these dealt with Indians.”

Aleiss (2005): “From the earliest silent era to the present, motion pictures have created diverse Indian characters that have spanned the range from bloodthirsty savages or nymph-like children to a few notable portrayals of a people with their own distinct cultures and identities. Arguably, these Indian-themed films tell whites more about their own attitudes toward Indians than about Indians themselves.”

King (2006): Consequently, the Indians seen on the screen are not real, but projections, the white man’s Indian, who always has said more about Euro-American issues, ideals, and identities than indigenous values, concerns, or cultures.

Appleford (1995): many modern Hollywood films “conform to the traditional pattern of constructing the ‘Indian’ to embody mainly non-Indian concerns.”

What commonalities do you see in these various descriptions of the “Hollywood Indian?”
How would you respond to their observations?

As scholars flesh out the Hollywood Indian they have looked at a wide variety of concerns. One such concern is that of the Indian being stuck in time. Filmmakers, even if they hire Native advisors and actors, often tell stories confined to the 1800s. Rarely do non-Native filmmakers tackle the complexities of depicting Native Americans in a contemporary setting. Whether this is due to unfamiliarity, a lack of good scripts, or a reluctance to film stories that may not attract audiences is open to debate. What does this mean? Even if filmmakers, as a whole, do a better job in the future at portraying historical Native Americans realistically, the audience understanding of Native Americans will continue to be frozen in time.

Buscombe (2006) also notes “The historical spread of the films is as restricted as the geographical one. The great majority of Westerns take place within the period between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the turn of the century.” With this concentration in terms of time period, it is no wonder that Native Americans are often frozen in time.

Is any other contemporary culture frozen in time, as Native Americans tend to be? If there are other cultures, what has being frozen in time done to their images? If there aren't, why do you think Native Americans would have been singled out for this distinction?

Another concern is the use of Native Americans to represent white issues and concerns. In the structure of the Hollywood Western, Leuthold (1995) notes that “the central conflict...is between advancing ‘civilization,’ represented by the frontier town and especially, the educated white woman, and threats to civilization usually represented either by outlaws or ‘savage’ Indians. In this ideology, wilderness must first be discovered, then tamed, and Indians are convenient symbols for the untamed elements of the wilderness.”

Buscombe (2006) notes that “films made by white people for white audiences will inevitably produce an image of Indians designed to serve a white agenda...Almost invariably, if a film includes Indians, they will be shown in some sort of relationship with whites. Whereas whites in Westerns can comfortably exist without Indians being present, if Indians are shown then we see them in contact with white people, usually in a relationship of antagonism...it is clear that by and large Indians are found interesting only in so far as they relate to us, the whites, and not in and of themselves.”

Or, too often, the overarching message of films and television programs concerned with Native Americans and their interactions with whites and white society is that American Indians were (or are) doomed to vanish. It is never the other way around.

A third concern is the stereotyping of Indians as mainly those of the Plains Indians. One way to reduce complexity, simplify storytelling and appeal to images audiences already recognize is to create a vanilla pudding Indian culture on screen. In addition, as Vine Deloria states “With their emphasis on action and conflict, Westerns reductively emphasized the warrior image of Indians to the detriment of a fuller portrayal of the culture and usually represented Indians as losers in battle.” So, not only are Indians reduced to a “one size fits all” portrayal, that portrayal is often skewed toward a violent culture.

Buscombe (2006) notes, “In the movies only a fraction of this diversity gets onto the screen. Representation is confined to little more than half a dozen tribes: Sioux, Cheyenne, Blackfoot, Comanche, Apache, Kiowa, with an occasional appearance by Seminoles, Utes or Shoshone.”

One of the ways in which diversity is beginning to improve is through the use of indigenous languages. Language has always played a powerful role in representing indigenous peoples in films and television programs. The entertainment industry has often silenced Native Americans, representing them as stoic, unspeaking, aloof individuals. Equally common, these media have underscored the supposed inferiority of

American Indians through their use and control of the English language: Indian characters regularly have spoken in broken English, marked by improper conjugation, fragmented phrases, and clichés. Less often, filmmakers used indigenous languages. At their worst, these were inadequately or improperly translated and even made up... More recently, it has become common for filmmakers to incorporate indigenous languages, as in *Black Robe* and *Dances With Wolves*, providing subtitles for English-speaking audiences. This is a hopeful sign.

A fourth concern has been the stereotyping of Indians as “one with nature.” As King (2006) discusses, “The Hollywood Indian has long been pictured more natural than his white counterpart, living in greater harmony with the natural world... at least since the late 1960s, the environmental sensibilities imagined to be a part of Native life have proven instrumental to a romantic recasting of the noble savage.”

King (2006) cautions, “Even though the connection between Indians and nature is cast in positive terms, it is important to note that such images are stereotypes that limit the humanity of indigenous peoples to a small set of attributes, qualities, and capacities and should be seen as just as debilitating as ideas that appear negative and harmful.” So, even if the image is positive it can still be just as distorted as a negative image.

Should Hollywood simply be condemned for its conception and depiction of the Hollywood Indian? Aleiss (2005) says, not so fast, “Previous works on Hollywood’s Indian portrayals have been especially critical of the industry’s seemingly endless

patterns of negative stereotypes. No doubt some of Hollywood's filmmakers were blatantly racist. But 'Hollywood bashing' has become, in some circles, an acceptable trend at the expense of a more serious inquiry into the industry's history."

That more serious inquiry has led a quest to find patterns in the portrayals of the Hollywood Indian. One possible categorization suggests three standard stereotypes:

- 1) the good Indian,
- 2) the noble Indian,
- 3) and the savage Indian.

The good Indian is the Indian who has adopted white ways. In many senses he has ceased to be Indian and is now a sidekick and a servant. The noble Indian exists to critique American values. He is an Indian that can be trusted in that he portrays white standards of honor and nobility that whites can be measured by. He is thus Indian, but ultimately white. The savage Indian, who almost always outnumbers any other kind of Indian is filled with rage and anger and wants to take it out on any whites he can.

Larson (2006) offers her own version of the three major stereotypes: They are the 'good Indian,' the 'bad Indian,' and the 'degraded Indian.'"

The good Indian is friendly, courteous, hospitable, attractive, strong, modest, calm, dignified, brave, tender, and appreciative of nature. The bad Indian is lecherous, vane, promiscuous, brutal, cruel, cannibalistic, dirty, lazy, dishonest, and superstitious. The

degraded Indian has succumbed to white influence and lost his 'Indianness' without being able to assimilate. He carries the vices of both societies. He is degenerate, poor, often drunken, and beyond redemption.

The notion of a noble savage encompasses both the 'good' and the 'bad' Indian.

Rather than tackle the complexity of individual Indians being both noble and savage, most television and film tends to represent some Indians as 'good' (the noble ones) and others as 'bad' (the savage ones).

Fleshing out these categorizations,

The good Indian:

- has alliances with whites,

- has something to offer whites (which may or may not be accepted) such as

 - knowledge, assistance, material goods, or compliance,

- accommodates white aggression,

- is romanticized but powerless,

- can be the 'cooperative helper' the 'child of nature' and the 'stoic victim',

- knows much about nature,

- can be the 'wise elder,' a desexualized, peace-loving man portrayed as isolated

 - from other Indians and helpful to whites who seek spiritual redemption

 - and truth,

- and can be the 'doomed Indian' who knows his time is past, but accepts it with

honorable resignation.

Women can be good Indians when they take the form of Indian princesses who are attracted and devoted to white men.

The bad Indian:

gets in the way of white people and their interests,
is an evil, sadistic, bloodthirsty warrior in war paint and feathers,
is ready to ravish white women and massacre white folk trying to carve new
homes for themselves on the new frontier,
doesn't fight fairly and commit inhuman acts of violence.

Degraded Indians:

are weak, unsuccessful, mentally deficient, chemically dependent,
are inherently inferior to whites,
are infantilized, shown as children incapable of taking on adult responsibilities,
and are naïve and gullible.

King (2006) notes four distinct Indian characters that could serve as a framework for analyzing portrayals that is more specific. He finds:

- 1) the noble savage.
- 2) the somewhat less noble, but praiseworthy sidekick.
- 3) the ignoble savage (the most common).

4) mythic Indian princess (though the Hollywood Indian was decidedly male).

What do you think of these categorizations? Can you think of Native American portrayals that fit with these images? Can you think of portrayals that don't seem to fit with any of the categories?

Both Larson (2006) and King (2006) mention specific stereotypes for Indian women. It is well worth exploring those stereotypes.

When looking at the portrayal of Native Americans in film, the vast majority are centered around Indian males. When female Indians are depicted it is often in terms of one of two portrayals; the henpecking squaw or the Indian princess. The squaw is older, physically unattractive and essentially drives her man out of their living quarters. The Indian princess is sexy and almost always more interested in the white male hero of the film than in men of her own tribe.

Leuthold (1995) talks about the portrayal of Native American women. "The stereotype of Indian women as dim-witted servants to males – either lustful and seductive or fat and unattractive – has yet to be challenged. Often this means that producers simply don't consider women's roles essential when depicting Indians. The impact of this is that Indian actresses don't have as many opportunities to find roles.

This is in opposition to the role of women in Native cultures where equality is a strong value and women traditionally have the right to vote in councils and “are central to the continuity of cultural traditions in a way that is never represented in mainstream media.”

The Indian princess stereotype also tends to favor lighter skinned Indian women (regardless of whether the part is played by a Native or a non-Native) who look less Indian than the Indian men. Leuthold (1995) says, “Equally prevalent is the image of the Indian woman as helpless, requiring the protection of the valiant white male.” The Indian woman is often “doomed to a tragic love for a white man.” In fact, two lessons are often taught through this type of portrayal. First, “Indian women are expendable dramatic devices” and second, the death of the Indian woman, often as wife to the white man, “strengthens the resolve and justifies the action of the male lead.” Interracial intimacies invariably turn out badly for Indian characters. Rather than living happily ever after, they die as a result of their love across the color-line.

Buscombe (2006) states “For female parts, casting directors often looked south of the border, to Europe or even further afield to fill Indian roles. Exoticism was in demand, a beauty which differed from the chocolate-box prettiness of Doris Day or Debbie Reynolds and which suggested the smoldering passion assumed to be the invariable possession of ‘savage’ people.”

As a recent example, consider a film like the Disney version of *Pocahontas* (1995). In the film, Pocahontas is very much the Indian princess. With a Barbie-like figure and an “off-

the-shoulder miniskirt” suited for a sexy young woman, Pocahontas is smitten by John Smith, an Adonis type white male. In reality however, Pocahontas was most likely 10 to 12 years old, and Smith was decidedly not ruggedly handsome (and in fact, Pocahontas would marry another white man, John Rolfe, rather than Smith). Other historical details are distorted or left out of the movie, so what one sees of Pocahontas is not the Pocahontas of history but the Pocahontas of the Disney imagination.

Kilpatrick (1999) notes a comment by the producer James Pentecost who said that “We decided to dramatize what we felt was the essence of Pocahontas.” To which Kilpatrick comments “evidently what that means is that they changed her age, her body, and gave her a motive for her actions that boils down to going gaga over the first white man she sees.”

Kilpatrick (1999) goes on to note that Disney did make an effort to consult with Native Americans during the filmmaking process. Russell Means, noted Indian activist and the voice of Powhatan in the movie stated “they (Disney) were willing to take his advice about a detail such as the father referring to Pocahontas as Daughter instead of her name, but were unwilling to change important aspects of the image of the Indians as warlike.”

Shirley (Little Dove) Custalow-McGowan was also a consultant on the film. Kilpatrick (1999) notes her reaction to seeing the early rushes, “My heart sorrowed within me... Ten year-old Pocahontas has become twenty-year old Pocahontas. The movie was no longer

historically accurate.” Custlow-McGowan also said “History is history; You’re not honoring a nation of people when you change their history.”

Edgerton (1996) looked at *Pocahontas* and offers interesting insights on the design of the Pocahontas character. Glen Keane, supervising animator, “drew on four successive women for inspiration, beginning with paintings of Pocahontas herself; then Native American consultant Shirley ‘Little Dove’ Custalow-McGowan; then 21-year-old Filipino model Dyna Taylor; and finally white supermodel Christy Turlington. After studio animators spent months sketching her, their Pocahontas emerged as a multicultural pastiche. They started with Native American faces but eventually gravitated to the more familiar and Anglicized looks of the statuesque Turlington. Not surprisingly, all the key decision makers and supervising artists on *Pocahontas* were white males.” Edgerton further notes that many critics have called Disney’s Pocahontas a “Native American Barbie.”

How would you respond to the stereotypes of Native American women? Does this stereotype impact other women in American society and not just Indian women?

Beyond stereotypes another serious concern is raised when non-Native actors are used to depict Indians. Leuthold (1995) says “Another glaring Hollywood practice that undermines the credibility of many films is the prevalence of non-Indians in Indian roles...the appearance of white actors in Indian roles undermines these films’ credibility.” “The casting of whites as Indians reinforces a long tradition in American

drama and popular culture of ‘playing Indians’ and allows whites to insist on certain aspects of Indian personality, culture and behavior. This play-acting also is evident in roles where whites ‘go native.’”

Buscombe (2006) observes about the 1950s, “If an Indian role was a leading part, then invariably it went to a white actor. In casting such roles Hollywood had a fixed idea of what it was looking for. In the case of males, the actor should be tall, dark and handsome, but only in a certain manner, with looks that tended toward a certain gravitas, avoiding any suspicion of prettiness. He should be measured in his movements, and have a deep, resonant voice, speaking slowly. He should exude a kind of stoical dignity, his expression solemn but suggestive of a fierceness never far below the surface.” One example of this is Jeff Chandler playing the Apache chief Cochise in *Broken Arrow*.

Continuing on, Buscombe (2006) says, “Doubtless producers at the time would have defended their casting on the grounds that sufficiently competent Indian actors did not exist, although this is hardly surprising if Indians were never cast. But one suspects that casting a non-Indian woman of exotic appearance was a way of having one’s cake and eating it too. The audience enjoyed the daring taboo attached to interracial sex, but was comforted by the knowledge that it was only make-believe.”

In the 1930s the Indian Actors Association was formed and demanded that only real Indians play Indians. The Association condemned the practice among some studios of engaging non-Natives for leading roles that served to misrepresent cultural identity. The

problem in terms of representation is that many actors can pass themselves off as Indian without being Indian. This problem is still with us today. One of the more famous examples from relatively recent times was Iron Eyes Cody, born Oscar DiCorte, of Italian-American descent, Cody is best known as the weeping “Indian” in a series of “Keep America Beautiful” television ads that ran during the 1970s.

When scripts call for the portrayal of Native Americans, should non-Natives be given those roles? What impact does it have when people of other ethnic backgrounds play Indians? Would Hollywood engage in such practices with other ethnic heritages? For example, the practice of using “blackface” to portray African-Americans was once an accepted convention. Now, when from time to time, someone thinks it’s a good idea to use blackface (even in parody), the practice is widely condemned. What makes the portrayal of Native Americans by non-Natives any different?

Kilpatrick (1999) says, “The result is a very confused image of American Indians. If one chooses to be wildly optimistic, it is possible to think that this is a good thing. Perhaps confusion is better than certainty when the certainty is based on fallacy. At the end of the twentieth century, ‘sympathy’ for American Indians, for different and sometimes odd reasons, exists generally, but mainstream Hollywood filmmakers who have attempted to portray that sympathy have failed in one or more ways to portray Native peoples realistically. Their failure can be partly explained by the cultural and communicative gap between filmmakers and the people they are depicting. It must seem to filmmakers telling a story about Indians that they are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. Tell a story about a mixed couple who cannot be together and live – it’s racist. Tell the same

story and let them live happily ever after – the love story becomes a deadly form of assimilation. Make the Indians good guys and you're producing the noble savage stereotype. Show the Indians being bloodthirsty and you are likely to be shot by your own friends in Hollywood." Perhaps the problem is in telling a story about Indians."

How would you respond to Kilpatrick? Should Hollywood simply abandon stories about Native Americans? Should it leave these stories to be told by Native filmmakers? Judging from Indian reactions to Hollywood films, are Hollywood filmmakers really "damned if they do and damned if they don't?"

At the same time, the stereotypes and stories comprising the Hollywood Indian have been profitable and entertaining. This is because the American public needs myths about themselves, specifically stories and symbols that allow them to reconcile a past marked by forced removal, ethnoviolence cultural repression, and demands that Indians assimilate with the ideals many believe make America great and unique, including liberty, equality, and opportunity.

What about the stories Indians tell of themselves? Are they better at depicting accurate images of Native Americans? Or do they fall into the same conventions as mainstream films? Is film well suited for this task as a medium that can communicate traditional Native culture? If so, can the stories Native Americans tell be accessible to the economically necessary mainstream audience while still holding true to a Native voice? The answer is yes – they can. However, it is only now becoming possible because only

recently have Natives been found in all areas of professional filmmaking. Only recently has it become possible to assemble a team composed of Native Americans as screenwriters, directors, producers, and actors.”

This idea, of Indians taking greater roles in producing films is important to Native communities. As Vine Deloria observed, “Indian children are presented with two models: the Indian they learn about through the electronic media and the Indian they encounter through their everyday experience.” This, according to Deloria, is “tremendously detrimental” to the development of Native American youth” and highlights the importance of Native voices being heard in the world of film.

What can we learn from these depictions of Native Americans in Hollywood films?

Leuthold (1995) provides 12 key values that Natives (and others) might use in analyzing and responding to the depiction of Native Americans in film. They are:

- 1) the degree of historical accuracy,
- 2) the potential benefit of the film, economic or otherwise to native communities,
- 3) the tendency of Hollywood to commodify the image of Indians,
- 4) the determination of who has the power to control the representation of Indians,
- 5) the complexity and sensitivity with which films represent contemporary Indians’ lives,
- 6) the degree to which films empathize with Indians in their struggle against white racism and mistreatment,
- 7) the role models that films provide for Native American youths,
- 8) notions of historical progress,

- 9) the idealization of Indian life and whether this is a positive or negative aspect,
- 10) the degree and quality of native participation in the artistic process,
- 11) issues of gender representation,
- 12) and the presence of a native perspective.

Would you add anything to this list based on what you've read in this chapter?

Native Americans haven't yet been successful in reaching the filmgoing public with films that depict contemporary Indian life that contains both traditional and contemporary elements. Some progress has been made through the production and distribution of documentaries but documentaries often don't have the broad impact that feature films do. Although some progress is being made in terms of Native participation in the filmmaking process, the reality remains that the representation of Native Americans on screen is still primarily in the hands of non-Native filmmakers.

As we've seen movies have a long history of having "Indians" in a lead role played by non-Indians. Native Americans have tried to convince people in Hollywood to change the way they depict Indians. In 1966, Jay Silverheels led the formation of two Los Angeles groups, the Indian Actors Guild and the Indian Actors Workshop, to teach acting to natives and promote the use of native people in native roles. The American Indian Registry for the Performing Arts was established in the 1980s. Both organizations were committed to promoting Native actors in Native roles.

And yet, despite these efforts, casting non-Indians to play Native parts actually spiked in the 1980s. At present, the Stage Actors Guild reported that only 0.37 percent of acting roles in 2001 went to Native Americans. With acting representation at such low levels, it will be difficult for Native Americans to make significant inroads into acting roles.

If not actors, how about consultants? As mainstream Hollywood filmmakers make films that depict Native Americans, should they consult with Indians to make sure that representations are accurate and realistic? One issue is that the presence of a Native American as a technical consultant does not mean that the native's advice will be accepted. The issue gets stickier when Native American consultants might be asked to read a script and approve it. Much can happen between the time a script is approved and when the film is actually shot. It leaves the door open for a film to be endorsed by a Native consultant and be a stereotypical portrayal or have depiction issues. So, the presence of consultants is potentially a mixed bag. On the one hand, Native consultants could help films better portray Native Americans. On the other hand, filmmakers could tout the use of consultants as helping make their films more authentic, even if they ignore the consultants advice.

It seems that potentially the best way for Native Americans to ensure accurate representation is to become filmmakers themselves. Many organizations have been formed to help Native filmmakers develop.

One of the economic realities is that making feature films is expensive. This often means that what funding is available goes toward less costly projects. The documentary format lends itself to lower production costs, but also to lower audiences and lower revenues that might be channeled back into the resource stream.

As Native filmmakers emerge, they are immediately confronted with a critical question. Should they make films about Native peoples and issues? Or, should they simply tell stories, regardless of whether they have an Indian theme or not?

At this stage in Native American filmmaking, the emphasis has been on the former. King (2006) says, "Native American cinema invariably contemplates, reflects upon, and struggles with Indianness, questioning competing interpretations of Native identity. They ask in both simple and complex, blatant and subtle ways: What does it mean to be an American Indian?" These films typically draw upon Native ways of telling stories and feature Native perspectives on the world.

Even if Native filmmakers concentrate on telling Native stories, if these stories can reach out to broader audiences, they have the potential to educate mainstream society as to the realities of being Indian. As this process develops, lines of intercultural dialogue can open and perceptions of Native Americans can change.

Leuthold (1995) tells of Indian filmmakers in the seventies such as George Burdeau and Phil Lucas who had "a desire to counteract mainstream imagery." As Leuthold notes,

“often, when members of minorities or subcultures become aware of the dominant society’s negative attitudes toward them, they respond by asserting their own cultural identity.

Many Native filmmakers agree that the one of the first things that needs to happen in developing a Native film industry is finding Native writers to write good scripts that depict American Indian experiences in meaningful ways. Once these scripts are written, asserting cultural identity in positive ways becomes possible.

Over the past two decades, the number of Native American directors and producers has been growing. Many of these professionals have learned their craft by working in the mainstream industry first, then branching out to their own projects. Sources such as the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium and other organizations are working to provide the resources necessary for this transition.

One work that helps shed light on the matter is Victor Masayesva Jr's. documentary *Imagining Indians* (1992). Kilpatrick (1999) calls it “a cleverly constructed commentary on issues involved in the making of films about or including Native Americans. It is technically well done, with creative and artistic editing, framing, and manipulation. More importantly, it addresses in very powerful ways the problems and responsibilities involved in presenting Indians and in having Indians represent themselves.” She says the film “clearly makes the point that mainstream films commodify the Indian existence just

as Indian ‘artifacts’ and spirituality have always been commodified and sold to the highest bidder.”

According to Victor Masayesva Jr., “That’s where we’re at as Indian filmmakers. We want to start participating and developing an Indian aesthetic. And there is such a thing as an Indian aesthetic, and it begins in the sacred.”

A key question is funding. Where does the money come from to produce feature films? Fundamentally, this is the biggest obstacle to Native feature filmmaking. This is a weak point and for the foreseeable future doesn’t have an answer.

According to Aaron Carr, a producer, director, and writer of screenplays and novels, “Right now there is no Native American cinema; there are no Native American studios...Until that changes, we are still pretty much at the mercy of the studio system. That’s for the commercial films. For documentaries there is a strong voice, definitely a strong Native voice, and growing even more so, but that’s not as visible as commercial films. It’s important for us to get hold of and use [commercial film] for our own purposes.”

Carr sees “a great need for more Native women in the film industry. He notes that filmmaking in general has many more men in control than women, and that it is even more so in Native American filmmaking. He finds that strange since so many tribes are actually matriarchal – it would seem that there would be more women’s voices being

heard. He points out that women in Native societies are very strong voices, and their voices are different from those of the men.”

Perhaps the first step toward a true Native American cinema was the release of *Smoke Signals* (1998) directed by Chris Eyre. *Smoke Signals* is the first feature film written, directed, produced and acted by Native Americans.”

Based on short stories written by Sherman Alexie, *Smoke Signals* tells the story of Victor and Thomas. Thomas’ parents were killed in a fire when Thomas was young. Victor’s father, Arnold Joseph, saved Thomas from that same fire. Later on we learn that Arnold was the one who started the fire. A haunted Arnold eventually abandons his wife and son and leaves the reservation. The next time he would be heard of is when his family finds out he is dead. Victor and Thomas set off on a journey to retrieve Arnold’s remains. It is the journey that is really at the heart of the story. Victor is angry with his father and is questioning what it means to be Indian. Thomas is happy go lucky, and his stories often tie the present to the past. In one sense, Victor is the stoic Indian, so often portrayed in Hollywood stereotypes, but here, a real character with real feelings and a depth and complexity of personality. Thomas is a storyteller, who humorously tries to relate Indian culture to the present day. Thomas tells stories that make Arnold almost a mythic character, even though Victor knows the truth is that Arnold was a very flawed, tragic person. Thomas doesn’t know and never finds out, that Arnold was responsible for his parents’ death.

The trip to reclaim Arnold's remains has elements of a road trip and a buddy movie. The two have humorous times and serious ones in their first trip off the reservation. As Anne Kern notes "Throughout the film there is a humorous acknowledgement of the way white society imagines American Indians and its effect on the way Thomas and Victor see themselves. But the characters in *Smoke Signals* constantly transform such images for their own use...[and] reveals contemporary Native American identities to be a hybrid of traditional and pop cultures."

The story contains several elements that reflect a Native way of storytelling. The film opens with images and words of fire and ash. Fire and ash are also used to describe Victor and Thomas. Thomas narrates, "You know, there are some children who aren't really children at all. They're just pillars of flame that burn everything they touch. And there are some children who are just pillars of ash, that fall apart if you touch 'em. Me and Victor, we were children born of flame and ash." And Victor's ashes, scattered into the Spokane River at the end of the movie, bring the cycle back to the beginning. This also continues the cycle of fathers and sons that has been present from the beginning of the film. A Native view of time is also seen in the ending of the film, when Thomas's grandmother asks Thomas to "Tell me what happened, Thomas, tell me what's going to happen."

Much of the movie is told through Thomas' narration, though the story is more focused on Victor and his need to reconcile his relationship with his father, it is Thomas' voice that advances the story. Oftentimes, Thomas' stories are used to flashback to events of

the past. These flashbacks are often tied to place or relationship. This non-linear, non-chronological approach, though not unique to Native storytelling, does fit very well with Native ways of knowing.

What was the reaction to *Smoke Signals*?

Religion professor Mara Donaldson says, “*Smoke Signals* is about the Native characters’ redemption, showing how they transcend ‘the apocalyptic history of their tribe.’ and find ‘reconciliation with their past.’

Buscombe (2006) states, “Though there are some interactions with whites, it’s not fundamentally a film about white-Indian relations but about Indians together, specific enough to give a glimpse for non-Indian audiences into reservation life but general enough to have a universal appeal.” Which the film did, generating almost seven million dollars at the box office, an unheard of sum for a Native produced movie. *Smoke Signals* demonstrated that contemporary Native American stories could appeal to mainstream audiences.

Kilpatrick (1999) notes, “the audience for this film is not a Native American audience but ‘everybody in the world.’” However, it is doubtful that Eyre or Alexie will be overly criticized for it. For one thing, American Indian audiences are used to that, and for another, it is a very funny story told in a way that is at least partially recognizable as ‘Indian.’ But in some important ways they probably should be ‘taken to the rug’ for

letting the opportunity to make a high-profile film with a truly American Indian aesthetic pass them by.”

What did the filmmakers themselves say about the film? Sherman Alexie said, “I want everybody in the world to see this movie. I’m not interested in making movies that don’t appeal to a lot of people. So in some ways Chris and I are in the unique position of having to make this be a very accessible film in order for this to happen. Perhaps now, based on the success of this film, Indian filmmakers can get a little more adventurous and still find an audience. But we simply don’t have the luxury right now. This film has to be safer in a sense and we’re going to get taken to the rug [in Indian country] because of it.”

Kilpatrick (1999) believes, “This film is a story that is partially the story of a storyteller telling stories...Listening to Thomas tell his stories would seem profoundly uncinematic, especially since the camera sometimes stays stock-still while he does so, but they are actually usually rather touching. Other times, the audience sees the stories he tells as well as the scenes from his childhood in flashbacks.” Alexie in talking about these flashbacks said that this is the way time works in Indian culture, it’s a lot more circular, so that the past, present, and the future are all the same thing.

Kilpatrick (1999) notes that “Eyre uses the flashbacks skillfully, presenting a story that unfolds in reverse, a story of Victor’s parents’ lives, particularly his father’s descent into alcoholism and the trauma this causes Victor and his mother. As Victor and Thomas travel to Arizona to take care of Victor’s father’s affairs, we learn what it was like for the

boys on the reservation of their childhood, and Victor rediscovers his father through flashbacks narrated by his father's new friend. This rediscovery and Victor's emerging ability to forgive provide the focus of the film, and except for the rather clunky, didactic inclusion of a poem about forgiving fathers at the film's end, this works rather well."

Film critics have seen a similarity to *Powwow Highway* in that both center around two Native Americans on the road. Buddy and Victor share several characteristics, and so do Philbert and Thomas.

If *Smoke Signals* is aimed at more general audiences, *Skins* (2002) is a film aimed at Native Americans. It's much lower box office receipts would suggest that non-native audiences got the message. *Skins* is based on the novel by Adrian C. Louis and tells the story of two brothers on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. Rudy is a reservation police officer and Mogie, his older brother, is a Vietnam vet and an alcoholic. Rudy is going through a variety of personal crisis, even enlisting the village healer to help him get right. As the healer helps Rudy, he recognizes that Iktomi, a trickster that comes in the form of the spider is present in Rudy's life. This presence leads Rudy to seek justice outside of the justice system and ultimately leads to the fatal injury and death of Mogie. The film closes with an act of "justice" outside of the justice system. The act, a tribute to his brother, is freeing for Rudy, though non-Native viewers may not necessarily see it that way.

Skins was Eyre's 'unofficial sequel to *Dances With Wolves*.' Eyre says "These are the same Indians that Hollywood made a movie about twelve years earlier. *Skins* is the reality of what happened 120 years later."

Two elements of the movie stand out in terms of a Native way of storytelling. First, the relationship between spirits, humans, animals and the land is well told. When Rudy approaches the healer to address his physical and spiritual needs, Rudy confesses that he has been messing around with a married woman, and earlier had hit his head on a rock. The healer responds "Rocks can be very spiritual things, Rudy. Our sacred Black Hills...where America carved its Presidents into the sacred rocks." Rudy responds "I've never given much thought to rocks, at least on a spiritual level." To which the healer replies, "Skins have forgotten the forces that live around them." Rudy interjects, "I think Iktomi's playing with me." and the healer continues, "Most people think of Iktomi coming in the form of a spider. It could just as easily be a rock. And maybe he entered your brains when you hit that rock. Some offerings of chanli wapathe would be a good start. And make some tobacco ties. If things don't get better I'll hold a healing ceremony for you. Remember, human beings don't control anything, spirits do."

Second, recall that when *Dances With Wolves* was being shot tribal members asked that the Pipe not be shown, and it was anyway. In contrast, Eyre reflects a respect for Native ceremony and tradition in how he films the sweat lodge scene. When Rudy doesn't get better, he returns to the healer for a healing ceremony. This ceremony is sacred. What goes on inside the sweat lodge is not for outsiders to see. So how does Eyre film the

scene? In black screen. The viewer can hear what is going on inside, but can't see what is going on inside. This is a respectful way to "show" a Native ceremony while still honoring its sacredness. It reflects a very different view than most Hollywood films which not only show Native rituals on screen, but oftentimes show them in stereotypical fashion.

Chris Eyre said of *Skins*, that this movie "defines what the word means to Indians." Graham Greene, who played Mogie, quotes Lyle Longclaws, who said, "Before the healing can take place, the poison must be exposed." Eyre says, "These characters need to be seen by the world...It's brother loves brother, no matter what. The setting is Native America, but it's about the humanity and it's about the spirit and it's about the people, the individuals behind those things."

Eyre also weighs in on the question of the role of Native American filmmakers. Should they make films primarily based on Native themes or should they simply tell good stories, no matter what the context? Eyre says, "I don't have a responsibility to represent Indians in movies. It's what I enjoy doing. And, I'm gonna keep doing it because I'm really as an artist trying to scratch beneath the surface of representing contemporary Native America to a world that needs it."

Given what you've learned in this chapter, how would you respond to Eyre's viewpoint?

What are we to make of films like *Smoke Signals* and *Skins*? Aleiss (2005) quotes Native American filmmaker Edwin Carewe “It seems that every twenty years or so, a powerful Native American film comes out and awakens audiences to the truth about Indian life ways...it’s a cyclical occurrence. But after awhile, audiences seem to get the message and they stop going.”

Are *Smoke Signals* and *Skins* destined to be those once in every twenty years kind of films? *Christmas in the Clouds* (2004), directed by Kate Montgomery, gives hope that this cycle will be broken. The film tells the story of “a surprise visit to the Sky Mountain Resort by a major travel guide.” This visit “sparks mayhem, romance and comedy.” The Resort Manager “must deal with his vegetarian chef, his lovestruck assistant and his jeep-obsessed father while struggling with his own romantic feelings for the woman he mistakes as the Worthington Travel Guide guest. In the midst of all the mayhem, the real reviewer and secret guest befalls a myriad of problems that leave him questioning not only the resort, but his own sanity.”

This tried and true genre of a comedy based on mistaken identity has long roots in Hollywood history. It doesn’t require an ethnic cast, let alone a Native American one. Yet, here is a film in a contemporary setting, casting Native American actors, to tell a story that didn’t necessitate such casting. It can be seen as a step forward; that Native Americans can make and star in “normal” films rather than be stuck in history.