

# Common Portrayals of Aboriginal People

Aboriginal People, Diversity in Media, Stereotyping

For over a hundred years, Westerns and documentaries have shaped the public's perception of Native people. The wise elder (*Little Big Man*); the drunk (*Tom Sawyer*); the Indian princess (*Pocahontas*); the loyal sidekick (*Tonto*)—these images have become engrained in the consciousness of every North American.

Hollywood's versions of "how the West was won" relied totally on the presence of Native tribes, who were to be wiped out or reined in. "And, for the longest time," says Canadian Ojibway playwright Drew Hayden Taylor, "there wasn't a real 'Indian' to be seen on the movie sets: Native 'representation' was taken care of by Italians or Spaniards—anyone with dark enough skin to save on makeup." (For a real cultural mish-mash, picture American actor Lou Diamond Philips (who is of Filipino descent), Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune, and American actress Jennifer Tilly (whose parents were Finnish and Chinese) playing Inuit people in the 1992 film *Shadow of the Wolf*.)

Portrayals of Aboriginal people as being primitive, violent and devious, or passive and submissive, have become widespread in movies and TV programs and in literature ranging from books to comic strips. Such depictions have become a comfortable frame of reference for most of us each time there is a question about Aboriginal people, even though very few non-Natives have had the opportunity to meet a Native person in real life. Even if old Westerns rarely took place in Canada, the stereotypes they conveyed crossed borders.

"We were well into the second half of the 20th century before it occurred to filmmakers that Native people were still around, and even leading interesting lives," says Taylor.

"Groundbreaking films like *Pow Wow Highway*, *Dance Me Outside* and *Smoke Signals* provided fresh and contemporary—though still romanticized—portrayals of the Native community." Film-maker Arthur Lamothe broke new ground in Québec from 1973 to 1983, with his 13 part documentary series *La chronique du Nord-Est du Québec*. The series puts First Nations people centre-stage and provides them with a venue to tell their own stories. His career is marked with numerous films and projects whose purpose is to document the daily lives and struggles of First Nations people, especially the Innus.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) made a real effort to improve the portrayals of Aboriginal people in its television dramas. *Spirit Bay*, *The Beachcombers*, *North of 60* and *The Rez* used Native actors to portray their own people, living real lives and earning believable livelihoods in identifiable parts of the country. *The Beachcombers* and *North of 60* drew substantial audiences among Natives and non-Natives alike. Since 2000 – enabled by the development of online news content – Radio-Canada has devoted special dossiers to various themes relating to Aboriginal people: native residential schools, Aboriginal youth and territorial claims are among these capsules.

Television in the United States has been slower to respond to criticism. Indigenous faces are still almost entirely absent from the small screen, except in news or in documentaries. There have been a few efforts to change the situation, however. In the late 1990s, the American Indian Registry for the Performing Arts in Los Angeles published a directory of Native American performing arts professionals. And in 2001, after acknowledging that "Native Americans are virtually invisible on TV," CBS and NBC held talent showcases in major cities across North America to strengthen their databases of Aboriginal performers.

## Misrepresentation—How Many Ways?

A general climate of "political correctness" has dovetailed with genuine efforts being made by media producers to counter the more overt forms of racism in films and television—but subtle vestiges of Native stereotyping still remain. Some of the most common stereotyping traps are various forms of romanticization; historical inaccuracies; stereotyping by omission; and simplistic characterizations.

### Romanticization

Some images of Natives that have captured the imagination of the non-Aboriginal world for nearly a century are the *Indian Princess*, the *Native Warrior* and the *Noble Savage*.

- *The Indian Princess*

The Indian Princess is the Native beauty who is sympathetic enough to the white man's quest to be lured away from her group to marry into his culture and further his mission to civilize her people. "The Indian princess is strictly a European concept," writes Native American Joseph Riverwind. "The nations of this country never had a concept of royalty. We do not

have kings, queens or princesses."

Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, former director of research for Canada's Aboriginal Healing Foundation, agreed. In a 2000 exhibit called *Indian Princesses and Cowgirls—Stereotypes from the Frontier*, Valaskakis and Marilyn Burgess traced the use of the Indian Princess, from romanticized paintings intended to represent an "exotic, beautiful and dangerous New World" to gratuitous brand labels on fruit cans and cigar boxes. None of these women, said Valaskakis, remotely resembled the "powerful, competent, articulate" women she grew up with on her reserve in Wisconsin. However, the media image of the Indian princess is challenged through some Aboriginal cultural events like powwows where young women are elected as princess of the powwow because of their attachment to traditional values of respect, sharing and solidarity. This image of the princess does not reflect a romanced and stereotyped image, but rather a desire to reverse the trend: for a long time, the model of youth has been about self-destruction, vandalism and drug and alcohol consumption. Today, the models have changed and someone is honoured for his or her achievement, successes and commitment in defending the values of his or her group.

- *The Native Warrior*

One of the most widely used stereotypes in cinematographic history, the Native Warrior is fierce and formidable and a threat to civilized society. Bare-chested and brandishing a war lance, this warrior is the epitome of the savagery that must be courageously overcome by "progressive elements" pushing West. A more recent incarnation is the romanticized (and eroticized) figure of the strong silent brave flashing, as journalist Paul Gessell notes, "a lot of skin, [and] looking for some White woman to ravish." A recent example is the character of Jacob Black in the *Twilight* books and series, a member of the Quileute people who, as a werewolf, represents the "noble savage" in a particularly literal way.

These images appear in many forms and in surprising places. In his photo exhibit *Scouting/For Indians, 1992-2000*, Jeff Thomas, from the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, captured images of the Warrior in forms ranging from historical statuary and coats of arms carved on the walls of Ottawa banks and office buildings, to contemporary book covers. Thomas says he took these photographs to raise awareness of the often unconscious "demonization and eroticization" of Indians. In Quebec, the Mohawk Flynt Eagle has taken part in several recent cinematographic productions that crystallize this image of the Warrior.

- *The Noble Savage*

In an effort to redress past wrongs, there has been an increase in another time-honoured romantic stereotype – the mythic Noble Savage. Elevated to a sphere of goodness unreachable by those in contaminated White society and usually possessing some spiritual connection to the land, the Noble Savage (whom American academic Rennard Strickland calls "the first ecologist") communes in a cloud of mysticism and places no value on material possessions. Not even the popular *Thunderheart* avoids the romantic brush. "That movie says that every time you get half a dozen Native people in a room, you can get a prophecy or a vision," says Canadian Cayuga actor Gary Farmer.

### Historical Inaccuracies

Farmer cites the successful Canadian film *Black Robe*, about a Jesuit missionary's quest to save the souls of the Hurons (known today as the Hurons-Wendat), as typical of the one-sided historical accounts that upset Aboriginal people. "*Black Robe* misses a key element," says Farmer. "Nobody explains the Iroquois Confederacy's five centuries of peace between the six nations. The Hurons saw the devastation from the alcohol brought by the newcomers as a decay that had to be rooted out. The Iroquois told the Hurons that everyone not affected should leave, and they would go in and clean the area out." Farmer contends that there has never been an understanding of why that was done—and so the true story of the conflict between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has never been told.

Film and TV producers have never let details get in the way of a good story. Nowhere is this truer than in depictions of Aboriginal life, where artistic license is liberally applied in portraying dress, customs, livelihoods and spiritual beliefs and ceremonies. This reduction of cultural heritage and diversity (which most audiences do not even notice) is seen by critics as both a symptom of the problem (not taking Aboriginal people seriously) and an unconscious yet systematic way of perpetuating erroneous stereotypes. What occurs in many films, says social critic Ward Churchill, "is roughly parallel to having a Catholic priest wear a Rabbi's headgear and Protestant cleric's garb while conducting High Mass before a Satanist pentagram, simply because each of these disparate physical manifestations of spiritual culture is visually interesting in its own right."

### Stereotyping by Omission

Most film depictions of Native people are set in a 50-year period in the mid-19th century. Where were Native North Americans before the coming of the White man, and where are they now? In popular media, "Indians" apparently did not survive the transition to modern society.

The article "Stereotyping Indians by Omission" notes that Indians are "the only population to be portrayed far more often in historical context than as contemporary people." Considering the size of Chicago's Native population, for instance, the article asks, "why has not one Indian ever received emergency care on ER? And where are the nurses, a primary career choice for many Native women?"

The most flagrant omission in movies and television is the Aboriginal woman. When she is included, it is most often as a "sexual savage" (who cannot be tamed and must therefore be degraded and eventually conquered). In Canada, the National Film Board of Canada tried to counter this cultural amnesia in 1986 with a four-part drama series entitled *Daughters of the Country*—produced to "re-open the history books" and document the evolution of the Métis people through the lives of four strong women. Despite this effort, Aboriginal women remain particularly under-represented in media.

### Simplistic Characterizations

Perhaps most destructive to the image of Aboriginal people is the lack of character and personality afforded them by the media. Aboriginal people are almost always cast in supporting roles or relegated to the background, and are rarely allowed to speak or display their complexity and richness as human beings. Whatever character they do have, tends to reveal itself only in terms of their interactions with White people. Rarely is an Aboriginal portrayed as having personal strengths and weaknesses, or shown acting on his or her own values and judgements.

Nor is the Native ever permitted to tell his or her own story. Most stories are conveyed through the lens of the European experience. A common device used by Hollywood to attach familiar values to Native acts has been to script a White character as narrator (*Dances with Wolves*, *Little Big Man*). While this purports to treat the American Indian sympathetically, the reality is that the Aboriginal is robbed of voice.

### The Bigger Picture

A number of academics contend that Hollywood's depictions of Aboriginal people are based on much broader motives than simply winning audiences. In *American Indians: Goodbye to Tonto*, J.R. Howard says that in the American psyche, Native people have fulfilled their purpose: "Indian resistance having served to fuel the myths of conquest and glory, and the American divine right to conquest."

In addition, there's a whole school of thought that believes that the stereotypes of Native people and the "Wild West" must still be maintained in today's society. "Somebody is benefiting by having Americans ignorant [about] what European Americans have done to them," writes Wendy Rose in her *New Yorker* article, "Who Gets to Tell Their Stories?"

Ward Churchill argues that the myths and stereotypes built up around the Native American were no accident. He maintains that they served to explain in positive terms the decimation of Native tribes and their ways of life by "advanced" cultures in the name of progress, thereby making it necessary to erase the achievements and very humanity of the conquered people. "Dehumanization, obliteration or appropriation of identity, political subordination and material colonization are all elements of a common process of imperialism," he says. "The meaning of Hollywood's stereotyping of American Indians can be truly comprehended only against this backdrop."

Robert Harding, a Professor of Social Work and Human Services at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, and an expert on Aboriginal issues and media, investigates the sometimes contentious portrayal of Aboriginal people in Canadian media. In a lecture entitled, "Comparative analysis of coverage of Canadian Aboriginal issues in mainstream newspapers and the Aboriginal press," Mr. Harding presented the results of research conducted between 1996 and 2002 on the Stó:lō, a First Nations community living in the Canadian Pacific countryside near the American border. He analyzed 90 articles of information published in certain Canadian newspapers, including the *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Province* and *The Globe and Mail*. This research addressed two questions: How do media portray Aboriginal people? What are the recurring themes in media coverage of Aboriginal people?

The research showed that Aboriginals are most often portrayed as noble ecologists, unwelcome warriors or political victims. To refute these false ideas, he suggested, in particular, disseminating more information about the Aboriginal reality, improving the training of communicators, involving Aboriginals in change processes, and using international media to affect local affairs. Before the Association of Journalists, Professor Harding presented a refined analysis of Canada's Aboriginal people to Costa Rican journalists as well as his findings on how Aboriginal people are portrayed in Canadian media. His analysis of the Canadian experience served as a warning against the stereotyped presentation of Aboriginal people by the media in other countries.

But it is undoubtedly Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond who offers the most insightful take on the relationship between Hollywood and Aboriginals. His documentary *Reel Injun* (2010) won several awards by attacking the portrayals of Aboriginals in Hollywood films. Through numerous interviews with producers like Clint Eastwood and extracts of relevant films, Diamond explores how the myth of "the Injun" has influenced our understanding and misunderstanding of Aboriginal people. The celebrities that appear in *Reel Injun* include Robbie Robertson, Jewish and Mohawk musician (The Band), Cherokee actor Wes Studi (*The Last of the Mohicans*, *Geronimo*), filmmakers Jim Jarmusch (*Dead Man*) and Chris Eyre (*Phoenix, Arizona*) and acclaimed Aboriginal actors Graham Greene (*Dances with Wolves*, *Thunderheart*) and Adam Beach (*Phoenix, Arizona*; Clint Eastwood's *Flags of our Fathers*). Diamond also made his way to the North in Igloodik, an isolated

village in Nunavut with 1,500 residents where he interviewed Zacharias Kunuk, Director of the film *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*, winner of the Caméra d'or.

Article can be found here - <http://mediasmarts.ca/diversity-media/aboriginal-people/common-portrayals-aboriginal-people>

Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

Location/Phase: Part 3: Toronto

Witness: Jerde Wente

Submitted by: Christa Big Canoe/Commission

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