

ILLUMINATIVE

## THE NEW NATIVE NARRATIVE: A SHORT GUIDE FOR ENTERTAINMENT PROFESSIONALS ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS

### OVERVIEW

This short guide, the New Native Narrative, is a resource for writers, producers, directors, creators and others in the entertainment industry seeking to develop characters, stories and storylines by and about Native Americans in television, film and other forms of media. Based on an extensive two-year research project titled Reclaiming Native Truth -- and with the help of many stakeholders both inside and outside Indian Country -- this guide was developed to help move beyond the outdated, inaccurate and often offensive depictions of Native Americans in pop culture – to more compelling, more contemporary and more accurate portrayals of their lives today. IllumiNative hopes this guide is used to increase Native American representation both in front of – and behind – the camera to illustrate these more humanizing stories and change the narrative around Indians within and across the entertainment industry.

### THE NEW NATIVE NARRATIVE

The stories and voices of more than 5 million Native people – both on the reservations of nearly 600 sovereign tribal nations as well as in cities in every state across the country today – connect with values that are core to American audiences.

These values relate to other characteristics that help to define Native people in the 21st Century – from innovative cultural movements in music, poetry, and fine art; to continuing the tradition of embedding humor and laughter into tribal storytelling; to incorporating both traditional and modern medicinal practices into daily life.

The history of Native Americans is our shared history – made visible today across all Native nations, and in our shared neighborhoods, schools, and communities. Native Americans are teachers, doctors, lawyers, artists, writers, scientists, politicians and more.

And yet, most Americans say they do not know any Native people personally and feel they do not understand their diverse cultures or communities. It is likely that their perceptions are formed by what they learned (or didn't) in school, and from what little they see in the news media, entertainment and pop culture.

However, even though most Americans do not fully understand the histories and diverse contemporary lives of Native people, a vast majority say they are open to learning, and feel frustrated when they realize that what they were taught in school was false or at best, incomplete.

The good news is that new research indicates that there is strong interest from a wide range of American audiences who want to connect with Native people, learn about their histories and cultures, and see more contemporary stories of Native people in entertainment and pop culture.

## NEW NATIVE VALUES

- CONNECTION TO HISTORY AND RICH CULTURE
- RESPECT FOR FAMILY AND COMMUNITY
- RESPONSIBILITY FOR LAND AND WATER
- RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF OPPRESSION AND DISCRIMINATION
- PATRIOTISM AND SERVICE IN THE UNITED STATES MILITARY



## THE CHALLENGE

Native people are broadly missing from American pop culture. When seen on television and in film, Native American stereotypes continue to grossly misinform the public about this population.

Typically, stories about Native Americans focus on their challenges and weaknesses whether real, exaggerated or completely false. Native Americans are rarely

portrayed in stories or images after 1900, and when they are, are mostly stereotypical. The few contemporary representations often portray alcoholism, dire poverty, tragedy or romanticized spiritual mysticism.

In a time when the entertainment industry is actively working towards diversity and authentic cultural vibrancy, accurate portrayals of Native Americans -- and the nearly 600 sovereign tribal nations with rich histories and communities -- will help broaden and enrich the stories being told.

**THIS IS THE NEW NATIVE NARRATIVE:  
NATIVE AMERICANS LIVE, THRIVE  
AND LEAD ALL ACROSS THE UNITED  
STATES - CONTRIBUTING TO EVERY  
ASPECT OF SOCIETY. ANCHORED  
IN VALUES, THEIRS IS A LIVING AND  
EVOLVING STORY OF RESISTANCE,  
RESILIENCE, ECONOMIC STRENGTH  
AND CULTURAL REVITALIZATION.**

# In 2018, there are **573** **FEDERALLY- RECOGNIZED** sovereign Indian nations in the U.S.

Approximately 5.2 million people, or 5.7% of the U.S. population, identify as being solely Native American or Native and another racial or ethnic group(s).

From 2000-2010, those self-identifying as having Indigenous American origins and community connections has grown 26.7% -- almost three times the national population growth of 9.7%.

While most Native people remain connected to their sovereign tribal communities,  
**APPROXIMATELY  
THREE-FOURTHS**  
also live in urban and suburban areas.

About 32% of Native people are under the age of 18, compared to only 24% of the total U.S. population who are under the age of 18.

## AMERICAN AUDIENCES ARE DISCONNECTED FROM NATIVE AMERICANS -- AND AREN'T HAPPY ABOUT IT

In addition to being underrepresented in pop culture, Native American depictions in television and film are often anachronistic, presenting them as if they still live in an earlier time period. Moreover, schools do not adequately teach students about Native history. When Americans learn about this, they're not happy about it.

Content analyses of primetime television and popular films reveal that the inclusion of

**NATIVE AMERICAN CHARACTERS RANGES FROM ZERO TO 0.4%.**

**78%**  
**OF AMERICANS**  
want to learn more about Native people, their histories, cultures and **CONTEMPORARY STORIES.**

**MOST AMERICANS**  
feel that what they learned — or are teaching — in school about Native culture is inaccurate, and they **STRONGLY SUPPORT** the need for curriculum change.

PEOPLE OFTEN EXPRESS **DISAPPOINTMENT OR ANGER** that what they were taught was so **SPARSE OR MISLEADING.**

87% of state-level history standards **FAIL TO COVER NATIVE PEOPLE HISTORY** in a post-1900 context.

72% believe it is necessary to make significant changes to school curricula on **NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE.**

## A WIDE RANGE OF AUDIENCES WANT MORE

For decades, many have suggested that mainstream audiences weren't interested in Native American history, culture, stories or storylines. However, new research conducted by narrative change and communications experts with the Reclaiming Native Truth project, indicates otherwise. The New Native Narrative – which is based on this research – resonates with a wide range of American audiences and increases their interest to learn more about Native people, and to see them accurately portrayed in pop culture.

When Americans learn about this New Native Narrative or are asked about ideas to support Native Americans, audiences of all kinds respond – urban and rural, progressive and conservative, younger and older, and people of all races and ethnicities.

# 78%

**OF ALL AMERICANS** believe it is important to feature more **STORIES ABOUT NATIVE AMERICANS** on television, in movies and in other entertainment (33% BELIEVE IT IS VERY IMPORTANT).

**88% FIND THIS NEW NATIVE NARRATIVE CREDIBLE,** AND **65% SAY THEY ARE** willing to share it with others.

African-Americans and Hispanics are among the most supportive and interested in Native issues, **WITH 79% AND 68%, RESPECTFULLY, WANTING TO “DO MORE”** to support Native people.

74% of all people under the age of 30 want to **“DO MORE” TO SUPPORT NATIVE PEOPLE.** Younger, white, non-college educated **ARE ALLIES ON SOME NATIVE ISSUES,** such as expanding national monuments to **PROTECT SACRED NATIVE LANDS.**

# 36%

**OF ALL AMERICANS** believe they have some **NATIVE AMERICAN ANCESTRY.** These respondents consistently demonstrate more interest and support for Native American issues **than other groups.**

# WHEN DEPICTING NATIVE PEOPLE, CONSIDER...

## WHAT'S IN!

- Contemporary, holistic lives
- Tribal and cultural specificity
- Mixed identities
- Humor and humanity
- Characters driven by values such as respect for family, community and the natural world
- Native voices used in writing and research

## WHAT'S OUT!

- Non-specific tribal identities
- Made-up languages
- Noble warriors/savages
- Poverty porn
- Native people as “problems to be solved”
- All Indians becoming wealthy from Casinos
- Over-sexualized Native women
- Playing Indian/Redface

# MODERN NATIVE AMERICANS...

- **Live and work among us.**
- **Reside in big cities and reservations.** About three-fourths of the population lives in urban and suburban areas like Seattle, Minneapolis, Denver, Phoenix, Tucson, Chicago, Oklahoma City, Houston, New York City and Rapid City.
- However, **cultural identity, tribal sovereignty and citizenship are anchored in Native peoples' reservations, tribal communities and traditional homelands.** There is often a fluid, dynamic and sometimes complex movement between urban and reservation-based Native Americans that are also fully enmeshed in modern global networks.
- **Are professionals** and/or business owners. As of 2007, there were **237,000 American Indian and Alaska Native-owned businesses**, up almost 18% from 2002, including thousands in professional, scientific and technical services. These businesses generated \$34.5 billion, up more than 28% from five years earlier in 2002.
- **Are diverse.** In 2018, there are 573 federally-recognized, sovereign Native nations in the U.S. Each has their own history, language, origin and customs.

## A LESSON IN LANGUAGE - IF YOU'RE NOT SURE, ASK!

- Many Native people would rather be referred to primarily by their tribal identity (e.g., Pawnee, Cherokee, Yupik) rather than generally as American Indian, Alaska Native or Native American.
- Native American or American Indian and/or Alaska Native, or just Indian, can be acceptable terms. This is a matter of personal preference. If you're not sure - ask!



## CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICANS

Although Native people have been powerful symbols to Hollywood audiences of the past -- dually romanticized and villainized -- there is also a wealth of stories, characters and talent that represents and reflects their multi-dimensional, contemporary lives while honoring their authentic and distinct cultures and histories.

The New Native Narrative is based on stories, storylines and characters that move beyond mythic notions of race, and uplift holistic stories about -- and by -- contemporary Native Americans. There is often a fluid experience for Native people experiencing life on reservations in Indian Country -- the cultural, spiritual and political power centers of sovereign tribal nations -- and moving through day-to-day life in American cities and suburbs, in college classes and on university campuses, and in political institutions and corporate structures.



# Examples of Contemporary NATIVE AMERICANS AND CREATIVE INFLUENCERS

- **WILSON PIPESTEM (OSAGE)**: Stanford University law graduate living on the Osage reservation whose career has been dedicated to protecting the rights of tribal governments and Native Americans.
- **DALLAS GOLDTOOTH (NAVAJO)**: Comedian and environmentalist who uses humor to draw attention to issues in modern life facing Indian Country.
- **LILY GLADSTONE (BLACK FEET, NEZ PERCE)**: Actress who grew up on the Blackfeet Reservation and who Rolling Stone described as giving a “performance of such piercing honesty and yearning, you almost can’t look at her” in the film *Certain Women*.
- **TOMMY ORANGE (CHEYENNE/ARAPAHO)**: Native American writer who teaches creative writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts and his debut novel, *There There*, is a New York Times bestseller.
- **MARY KATHRYN NAGLE (CHEROKEE)**: Playwright and Attorney, her 2018 play, “Sovereignty,” at the Arena Stage in Washington, DC, puts her Cherokee ancestors center stage.
- **TY DEFOE (OJIBWE, ONEIDA)**: Grammy-Award winning musician, actor, and trans activist.
- **STERLIN HARJO (CREEK)**: Award-winning filmmaker creating feature films and television about Indian Country.
- **ANTHONY TAMEZ (CREE/LAKOTA)**: Photojournalist and Chicago youth organizer who challenges misconceptions about urban Native youth.
- **DEBORAH PARKER (TULALIP)**: Nationally-respected advocate for the rights of Native women and has served as the Vice Chairwoman of her tribe.
- **BETHANY YELLOWTAIL (NORTHERN CHEYENNE)**: Highly successful fashion designer and advocate who has collaborated with big brands like Crate and Barrel.
- **Delanna Studi (CHEROKEE)**: Actress with television and film credits that include *Shameless*, *Z Nation*, *Dreamkeeper* and the Peabody Award-winning *Edge of America*; and playwright with a play appearing at Portland Center Stage.
- **Supaman (CROW)**: Rapper and traditional Native dancer featured (with MAG7) in the 2017 MTV VMA award-winning video “Stand Up / Stand N Rock #NoDAPL.”



# NATIVE PEOPLES: RECENT HEADLINES

- **Quietly, Indians Reshape Cities and Reservations.** New York Times (4/13/13).  
*“Though they are widely associated with rural life, more than 7 of 10 Indians and Alaska Natives now live in a metropolitan area...”*
- **Want to Fix U.S. Schools? Look to Native American Communities.** Equal Voice News (8/10/16).  
*“This focus on tribal identity is the heart of the Academy’s approach, which focuses on meeting students where they are, showing them the tribes they are from and getting them into college. This approach is working...”*
- **Powwow showcases the diversity of Native American creativity.** The Dartmouth (8/9/18).  
*“There’s over 200 native-identifying students representing over 75 tribes [at Dartmouth]...”*
- **The Standing Rock Resistance Is Unprecedented** (It’s Also Centuries Old). NPR (11/22/16)  
*“The scope of the resistance at Standing Rock exceeds just about every protest in Native American history. But that history itself, of indigenous people fighting to protect not just their land, but the land, is centuries old.”*
- **‘We get the kids back’: Native American grandmother fights to preserve families.** The Guardian (3/2/15).  
*“In South Dakota, 51% of children in foster care are Native American but one woman turned de facto legal counsellor is using the law to change that.”*
- **There’s Never Been a Native American Congresswoman. That Could Change in 2018** New York Times (3/19/18).  
*“In all, there are at least four indigenous women running for Congress, three more are bidding for governors’ offices and another 31 are campaigning for seats in state legislatures — from both sides of the aisle. The numbers far outstrip past election cycles...”*
- **Interview: Tommy Orange: ‘There’s a monolithic version of what a Native American is supposed to be.’** The Guardian, 6/30/15,  
*“Writing a polyphonic, multigenerational novel is resisting this one idea of what being Native is supposed to look like. If we all have to be historical, with a headdress, looking off into the distance, that’s hopeless as far as building a proper, complex, human identity.”*
- **Leonardo DiCaprio, Martin Scorsese Teaming Up Again for New Movie.** Variety (7/14/17)  
*Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio are developing a film adaptation of true-crime thriller “Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI” as the director’s next project...”*
- **6 Misconceptions About Native American People: Straight from six Native American girls.** Teen Vogue (11/29/16)  
*“#AskaNativeAmericanGirl series, we had the girls debunk the common myths about their people... Here, the girls talk about everything from tipis to the truth about government-assisted living...oh, and why you probably shouldn’t wear that \$12.99 “headdress” you bought as a cute accessory for Coachella.”*





## WHAT YOU CAN DO

### **MORE SCREEN TIME**

Feature Native Americans in more predominant speaking roles and storylines. With hundreds of billions of dollars at stake in the television and film industries, and with a rapidly evolving and diverse media landscape, the time is ripe for more accurate and compelling depictions of Native Americans.

### **MODERN, NUANCED DEPICTIONS**

Native Americans have made countless contributions to modern life including advancements in science, engineering, food, politics, and medicine. Their histories can be directly linked to contemporary American life.

### **HIRE NATIVE PEOPLE**

On camera or in writers' rooms, Native Americans can contribute accuracy, expertise, talent and richness to your stories. IllumiNative stands ready as a partner to connect you with talent.

### **REACH OUT**

If you're not sure – contact us. We can connect you to Native American people and experts to help ensure your depictions are accurate, culturally sensitive and uphold the New Native Narrative.

### **BOTTOM LINE**

The way in which stories are crafted influences whether harmful stereotypes are reinforced or flipped on their heads. New research shows that the television and film industries have an historic window of opportunity to both build audiences and affect public perception by engaging with, and accurately portraying, Native Americans. IllumiNative is here to help.

## DISCLAIMER

The primary purpose of this document is to educate and inform. IllumiNative assumes no responsibility or liability for the content herein and accuracy of the New Native Narrative or any use made of it by the subscriber or user. IllumiNative also assumes no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions in the content of this document. The information contained in this document is provided on an “as is” basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness. This guide will be edited periodically. Please direct any questions or concerns to [Connect@IllumiNative.org](mailto:Connect@IllumiNative.org)



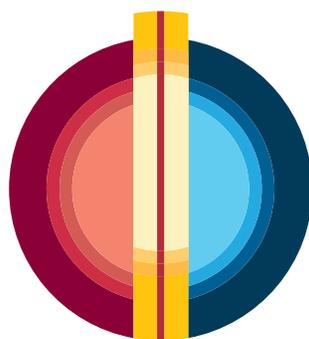
## REFERENCES AND END NOTES

1. **RECLAIMING NATIVE TRUTH: A PROJECT TO DISPEL AMERICA'S MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS** (JUNE 2018). [HTTPS://WWW.RECLAIMINGNATIVETRUTH.COM](https://www.reclaimingnativetruth.com)
2. **U.S. CENSUS, THE AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE POPULATION, 2010** (JANUARY 2012). [HTTPS://WWW.CENSUS.GOV/HISTORY/PDF/C2010BR-10.PDF](https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/c2010br-10.pdf)
3. **BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS** (AUGUST, 2018). [HTTPS://WWW.BIA.GOV](https://www.bia.gov)
4. **NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS** (AUGUST, 2018). [WWW.NCAI.ORG](http://www.ncai.org)
5. **U.S. CENSUS, 2007 SURVEY OF BUSINESS OWNERS**. [HTTPS://WWW.CENSUS.GOV/PROGRAMS-SURVEYS/SBO.HTML](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sbo.html)
6. **WHERE ARE THE MAINSTREAM TV SHOWS ABOUT AMERICAN INDIANS? MASHABLE** (MARCH 2015). [HTTPS://MASHABLE.COM/2015/03/24/AMERICAN-INDIANS-TV/#Y3SPDK2HTGQU](https://mashable.com/2015/03/24/american-indians-tv/#Y3SPDK2HTGQU)
7. **NATIVE AMERICANS IN FILM AND TELEVISION**. **MICHAEL KUBIK & MATTHEW GARRETT, PHD., BAKERSFIELD COLLEGE**. (DECEMBER 2014) [HTTP://WWW2.BAKERSFIELDCOLLEGE.EDU/ROUGHNECK/4-1/MICHAELKUBIK.PDF](http://www2.bakersfieldcollege.edu/roughneck/4-1/michaelkubik.pdf)
8. **THE LACK OF AMERICAN INDIAN REPRESENTATION IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY AND ITS AFFECTS**. **COMICSVERSE** (JANUARY 2017). [HTTPS://COMICSVERSE.COM/THE-LACK-OF-AMERICAN-INDIAN-REPRESENTATION-IN-THE-ENTERTAINMENT-INDUSTRY/](https://comicsverse.com/the-lack-of-american-indian-representation-in-the-entertainment-industry/)
9. **HOLLYWOOD INDIANS**. **JAY TAVARE, HUFFINGTON POST** (MAY 2011). [HTTPS://WWW.HUFFINGTONPOST.COM/JAY-TAVARE/NATIVE-AMERICAN-ACTORS\\_B\\_846930.HTML](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-tavare/native-american-actors_b_846930.html)
10. **WHY THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA KEEPS SCREWING UP IN REPRESENTING NATIVE AMERICANS**. **ELLY HIGGINS, JULIE SCHREIBER, AND CLAUDIA SCOTT, COMPARATIVE STUDIES DEPARTMENT AT OBERLIN COLLEGE; MEDIUM**. (APRIL 2017). [HTTPS://MEDIUM.COM/@CASOBERLIN/WHY-THE-MEDIA-NEEDS-TO-DO-A-BETTER-JOB-REPRESENTING-NATIVE-AMERICANS-465D488448C1](https://medium.com/@CASOBERLIN/why-the-media-needs-to-do-a-better-job-representing-native-americans-465d488448c1)
11. **NATIVE AMERICANS: NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF MEDIA PORTRAYALS, STEREOTYPES**. **FARAH QURESHI, JOURNALIST'S RESOURCE**. (FEBRUARY 2016). [HTTPS://JOURNALISTSRESOURCE.ORG/STUDIES/SOCIETY/RACE-SOCIETY/NATIVE-AMERICANS-MEDIA-STEREOTYPE-REDSKINS](https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/race-society/native-americans-media-stereotype-redskins)
12. **FILM AND MOVIE INDUSTRY REVENUE**. **STATISTA: THE STATISTICS PORTAL**. (AUGUST, 2018). [HTTPS://WWW.STATISTA.COM/TOPICS/964/FILM/](https://www.statista.com/topics/964/film/); [HTTPS://WWW.STATISTA.COM/STATISTICS/265983/GLOBAL-TV-INDUSTRY-REVENUE/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/265983/global-tv-industry-revenue/)
13. **VERY GOOD MEDICINE: INDIGENOUS HUMOR AND LAUGHTER**. **CYNTHIA LINDQUIST MALA, TRIBAL COLLEGE: JOURNAL OF AMERICAN INDIAN MEDICINE**. (MAY 2016) [HTTPS://TRIBALCOLLEGEJOURNAL.ORG/VERY-GOOD-MEDICINE-INDIGENOUS-HUMOR-AND-LAUGHTER/](https://tribalcollegejournal.org/very-good-medicine-indigenous-humor-and-laughter/)
14. **MUSIC OF THE FIRST NATIONS: TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN NATIVE NORTH AMERICA**. **TARA BROWNER**. (APRIL, 2009) [HTTPS://WWW.PRESS.UILLINOIS.EDU/BOOKS/CATALOG/55RXE7NP9780252022210.HTML](https://www.press.uillinois.edu/books/catalog/55RXE7NP9780252022210.html)
15. **NATIVE INNOVATION AT POET'S HOUSE, POETRY FOUNDATION** (MARCH 2013) [HTTPS://WWW.POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG/HARRIET/2013/03/NATIVE-INNOVATION-AT-POETS-HOUSE](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/03/native-innovation-at-poets-house)



IllumiNative is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the presence and accurate portrayal of Native Americans in pop culture and entertainment. Our mission is to create a narrative shift in pop culture about, by and for Native peoples and seek to change the conversation and set the record straight about Native peoples in the U.S.

For more information please email us at [Connect@IllumiNative.org](mailto:Connect@IllumiNative.org)



**ILLUMINATIVE**

[www.illuminatives.org](http://www.illuminatives.org)

Special thanks to Hollywood, Health & Society at USC's Norman Lear Center for their key insights and involvement in developing this guide.

**HOLLYWOOD, HEALTH & SOCIETY**  
**USC ANNENBERG NORMAN LEAR CENTER**

