ILLUMINATIVE

THE NEW NATIVE NARRATIVE:
A GUIDE FOR ENTERTAINMENT PROFESSIONALS
OVERVIEW:

This short guide is a resource for writers, producers, directors, creators and others in the entertainment industry who seek to develop accurate stories and characters by and about Native Americans in television, film and other forms of media. Based on the largest public opinion and research project ever conducted on Native representation 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the help of many stakeholders both inside and outside Indian Country — this guide was developed to help move beyond the outdated, inaccurate and often offensive depictions of Native Americans in pop culture — to more compelling, more contemporary and more accurate portrayals of their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 about Native Americans 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 and 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. As a result of invisibility, perceptions of Native peoples 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.

Our research proves there is a 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.
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 our community.

Typically, stories about Native Americans focus on 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.
Content analyses of primetime television and popular films reveal that the inclusion of **Native American characters** ranges from zero to 0.4%.

**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**.

78% of Americans want to learn more about Native people, their histories, cultures and contemporary stories.
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.

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.

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.

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.
NATIVE AMERICAN OR AMERICAN INDIAN:

Either term is generally acceptable and can be used interchangeably, although individuals may have a preference. IllumiNative recommends the use of Native American. The terms Indian and Native are not predominately used by individuals outside the community to describe Native peoples. Additionally, Native American and American Indian should be used to describe groups of Native Americans – two or more individuals of different tribal affiliations. Best practice is to identify people by their preferred tribal affiliation when describing individuals or individual tribes.

INDIAN COUNTRY:

Indian Country is a legal term used in Title 18 of the U.S. Code. It broadly defines federal and tribal jurisdiction in issues affecting Native Americans on reservations. But it also has popular usage, describing reservations, land held within tribal jurisdictions and areas with Native American population.

TRIBAL AFFILIATION:

Entertainment professionals should identify Native peoples by their specific tribal nations. There are 573 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. each with their own distinct languages, cultures, forms of government and land base. Oftentimes, Americans believe that Native Americans are a monolithic population which is not true. Recognizing tribal affiliation of the individuals and/or tribes you are depicting ensures that you’re not perpetuating the invisibility of Native peoples.

RESERVATION:

A reservation is an area of land reserved for a tribe under treaty or other agreement with the United States. Approximately 56.2 million acres are held in trust by the United States for various Indian tribes and individuals. Most reservations were created when tribes were forced to relinquish enormous portions of their original landholdings in treaties with the federal government. The largest is the 16 million-acre Navajo Nation Reservation located in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Many of the smaller reservations are less than 1,000 acres. Some reservations are the remnants of a tribe’s original land base. Others were created by the federal government for the resettling of Indian people forcibly relocated from their homelands. Not every federally recognized tribe has a reservation. Federal Indian reservations are generally exempt from state jurisdiction, including taxation.
ALL NATIVE PEOPLES RECEIVE FREE GOVERNMENT BENEFITS JUST FOR BEING NATIVE.

The most persistent and toxic negative narrative is the myth that Native Americans receive government benefits, do not pay taxes, or that they attend college for free.

These perceptions are completely false. Native people do not get special benefits from the federal government just for being Native American. Native Americans are subject to income taxes just like all other Americans and they must pay for college like other Americans. At best, they have the same access to government services — though often worse. For example, the federal government’s rate of spending on health care for Native Americans is 50 percent less than for prisoners or Medicaid recipients, and 60 percent less than is spent annually on health care for the average American.

ALL NATIVE PEOPLES/TRIBES ARE RICH FROM TRIBAL GAMING.

This myth showcases the dual false narratives that often exist in representation of Native American communities. Native peoples are often shown living in poverty accepting government benefits while also being portrayed as flush with casino money. In reality, only 39.3% of tribes have casinos, and 12% of those tribes generate more than 68% of the revenue from gaming. Only 8.9% of the total Native American population profit from gaming, and these benefits mostly come in the form of tribal government services, economic, and community development.

MOST IF NOT ALL NATIVE PEOPLES LIVE ON RESERVATIONS.

While most Native people remain connected to their sovereign tribal nations, approximately 72% of Native Americans live in urban and suburban areas.

ALL NATIVE PEOPLES ARE ALCOHOLICS AND LIVE IN POVERTY.

Depictions of Native Americans as lazy alcoholics, communities rife with poverty and generally reliant on the US government for handouts is a harmful stereotype. Although Native communities are dealing with effects of historical trauma which often reflect itself in negative ways such as alcoholism, substance abuse, and economic issues, we do not let these representations define us. Native people have a richer, deeper story of resilience and strength that cannot be defined by negative representations.

ALL NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE IS THE SAME.

Since the early days of TV and film, if a Native American was onscreen he/she was predominantly represented as part of the culture of tribes from the Plains. This is inaccurate and does not reflect the rich cultural and geographic diversity of tribes. In 2018, there were 573 federally-recognized sovereign Indian nations in the U.S. Each of these almost 600 tribal nations possess their own unique language, culture, and clothing. In order to ensure authentic and accurate representation of tribes, their cultural lifeways and Native peoples, consult with cultural experts from the tribes you are wanting to depict.
Most Americans fail to recognize that Native Americans are distinct and sovereign nations with complex histories of governments and diplomatic relations that pre-date the existence of the United States. Many Americans are also unaware of the United States’ history of over 500 broken treaties with Native nations that were here long before the United States was founded.

There is often confusion surrounding sovereignty and how tribes can be both sovereign nations and “reliant on the government.” This misunderstanding held across the country – even amongst elected officials and policymakers – is one of the most damaging, fueling many of the negative narratives and misperceptions, including the notion that Native peoples receive government benefits just for being Native.

With more than 600 Native American nations within the United States today, their residents are both citizens of their own Native nations and the United States, and they pay federal taxes like all Americans.

“WHAT IS TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY?”

Tribal Sovereignty describes the right of federally recognized tribes to govern themselves and the existence of a government-to-government relationship with the United States. Thus a tribe is not a ward of the government, but an independent nation with the right to form its own government, adjudicate legal cases within its borders, levy taxes within its borders, establish its membership, and decide its own future fate. The federal government has a trust responsibility to protect tribal lands, assets, resources and treaty rights.
In 2019, 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.
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 characters driven by values such as respect for family, community, the land and preserving cultural lifeways.
- Native peoples being an integral part of the storytelling process from beginning to end-writers, directors, talent, consultants, research, etc.
- Bringing in Native peoples to pitch original content

WHAT’S OUT!

- Non-specific tribal identities
- Made-up languages
- Noble warriors/savages
- Poverty porn
- Native people as “problems to be solved”
- All Native people becoming wealthy from casinos
- Over-sexualized Native women
- Playing Indian/Redface
- Calling Native peoples to rubber stamp or help fix an issue at the end of the creative process
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.

• 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

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• 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!

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MODERN NATIVE AMERICANS…

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CREATE PATHWAYS FOR ORIGINAL CONTENT BY NATIVE CREATORS

• Bring in Native creators to pitch ORIGINAL content.

HIRE NATIVE PEOPLE

• Hire Native writers, directors, producters, actors, & consultants. On camera or in writers’ rooms, Native Americans can contribute accuracy, expertise, talent and richness to your stories.

• Hire Native people in pre-production rather than having non-Native development and later trying to fit a Native voice into the equation. IllumiNative stands ready as a partner to connect you with talent.

• Hire Native executives for internal development.

• Create pathways to develop new Native talent in all facets of production and development.
MORE SCREEN TIME

• Feature Native Americans in more predominant speaking roles and storylines.
• With hundreds of billions of dollars at state 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.

REACH OUT

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

In addition to our availability for consultation, we encourage you to visit our website, https://illuminatives.org, to find helpful tools to facilitate conversations about narrative change including our downloadable toolkits and action guides. Together, we can change the narrative about Native communities. With you, we are poised to change the story, and establish the New Native Narrative.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT
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VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT: WWW.ILLUMINATIVES.ORG

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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.