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# It's Time for More Native Americans in Hollywood



Protesting at Standing Rock (Photo courtesy of Heather Rae)

by [Chris Eyre](#), [Joely Proudfit](#) and [Heather Rae](#) in [Issues](#), [Line Items](#) on Apr 13, 2017

[Akicita](#), [Bird Runningwater](#), [Cody Lucich](#), [Drunktown's Finest](#), [Michelle Latimer](#), [Rise](#), [Sherman Alexie](#), [Spring 2017](#), [Sterlin Harjo](#), [Sundance Institute](#),

“I'm just not going to be the Indian they want me to be.” — Sherman Alexie

Native American culture is part of our everyday lives, from the Iroquois confederacy modeled in the U.S. Constitution to half of the U.S. states named in a Native language. It's in our streets and cities, our sports teams, even the food we eat. Yet, Native people are rarely represented in the stories we see onscreen. Why is that?

Well, there are several reasons. One is that America maintains a profound mythology about herself. You could say that she has her own “creation story,” starring the classic Puritan hero with earnest goals who sees the strange Natives as obstacles and villains. Cinema has been one of the most powerful forces upholding this

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story over time.

In film, Native people are still largely portrayed as a backdrop for white men trying to figure out their lives — not unlike the 19th century. In television, Native people rarely exist, and never as dimensional human beings. Often non-Native actors are cast to play dated caricatures of Native people on both film and television, leaving the characters void of cultural nuance.

Another reason Natives are largely absent from film and television is because Native people are not driving the content we see. It's not because they aren't out there creating content; it's because Native filmmakers face two key obstacles in America: distribution and inclusion.

For generations, filmmakers have created innovative, authentic, insightful and worthy work only to encounter a marketplace that fails to embrace their work, often deeming it “noncommercial” or lacking value. In some cases, this is because the work doesn't fit the ideologies non-Native audiences and buyers have about Native people. In other cases, buyers assume non-Native audiences will not be interested. This could not be further from the truth. Consider content created by other minority groups. More than half the viewers of ABC's *Blackish* and HBO's *Insecure* are not black. Netflix's *Master of None* is watched by many more than just Asians; in fact, the show blatantly uses comedy to call out Hollywood for its lack of progress when considering minorities.

With such limitations in the marketplace, Native filmmakers face great challenges in getting their projects financed and taken seriously. Sterlin Harjo's 2015 feature *Mekko* is a perfect example of a well-made thriller that played worldwide festivals and found success with audiences, yet it still does not have U.S. distribution. To date, Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals*, which broke the mold for Native American stereotypes, is the only Native-directed feature film to have broad theatrical distribution — and that was in 1998. While Eyre — one of this article's authors — has since enjoyed a long career as an award-winning producer and film/TV director, he is one of few Natives who has managed to maintain traction within the industry.

One entity that has consistently led the way in identifying and uplifting Native voices within the industry has been the Sundance Institute. They have done so since the beginning, when Larry Littlebird and Chris Spotted Eagle were involved in the founding meetings to support Robert Redford's vision for a Native initiative to Native filmmaking.

In addressing the body of Native filmmaking talent, Bird Runningwater, program director of the Native American and Indigenous Program at the Sundance Institute, identified three generations of Native and indigenous filmmakers, including the late Phil Lucas, Sandy Osawa, George Burdeau, Chris Eyre, Sherman Alexie, Randy Redroad, Sterlin Harjo, Blackhorse Lowe, Billy Luther, Sydney Freeland, Taika Waititi and many others. Now, he is working on the fourth.

“In recent years, Sundance has set its sights on identifying this fourth generation of Native filmmakers, and new talent is emerging, such as Lyle Corbine Jr., Sky Hopinka and Razelle Benally, whose works illuminate new forms, characters and styles,” says Runningwater, whose work in developing indigenous voices is in itself visionary and bold. “This new generation continues to chip away at the historical misrepresentation and exclusion of Native voices from popular American culture and the articulation of the Native experience in modern American life.”

Although there is a vital community of creative talent over the four generations that Runningwater references, Native writers and directors have rarely found themselves in the system. Few are directing studio films or episodic television, even when Native material is being developed.

The precedent set with indigenous content has been non-indigenous people telling the stories. When non-Native people lead the charge, they inevitably perpetuate an outsider’s perspective. It is as if an anthropologist is guiding the narrative. The early documentary *Nanook of the North* was an ethnographic look at Inuit culture that secured a fascination with the exotic. This fascination continues today through film, literature, fashion and art. *Standing Rock* is a perfect contemporary example of this; there are more than 30 documentaries being made about *Standing Rock*, and nearly all are being made by non-Natives.

“Native filmmakers have been telling these stories for years now,” says Harjo, who was recently asked to support non-Native documentaries about *Standing Rock*. “Our films have played festivals, traveled overseas, garnered critical acclaim, but eventually die on the distribution vine because the sentiment is that there is no audience for our work. Now the sentiment is, ‘Oh, there’s an audience, just let us show you how to tell your stories.’ It’s a complete colonization of story and a medium that has always gotten it wrong when it comes to Native people. They will continue to get it wrong until Native people are supported in creating content.”

Sydney Freeland, a courageous voice in the Native filmmaking community, wrote and directed the award-winning film *Drunktown’s Finest*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and led to her sophomore effort this year, the Netflix original *Deidra & Laney Rob a Train*.

“My first feature, *Drunktown’s Finest*, was very hard to find funding for,” Freeland says. “The film is about three Native American teenagers growing up on a reservation — kind of like *Amores Perros* with Indians. It’s based on the place I grew up, and there was a very specific dynamic I was going for. [...] However, one of the notes we consistently got from investors was to ‘make it white.’ One suggestion was to try and cast a Taylor Lautner-type actor and have the character find out they have ‘Indian DNA.’” (Lautner, a Michigan native with mixed European heritage, reportedly discovered that he had distant Native American ancestry while preparing for *Twilight*.)

“The story could then be about this white person learning to live among Indians,” Freeland continues. “This was not the film I was trying to make at all. We stuck to our guns, and I was able to make the film I wanted to make, but it was for far less money than we had hoped for.”

Harjo and Freeland’s past works are solid examples of Native-driven content that warrant distribution. By contrast, in Canada, there is national support available to First Nation filmmakers. *RISE*, a new series developed by VICE Canada, takes on global indigenous activism and explores issues of land encroachment, environmental racism, contemporary culture and the uprising at Standing Rock. The eight-episode series is Native-made, which is unprecedented for either U.S. or Canadian television.

“Many people have asked me what it was like to make *RISE*,” says series producer and director Michelle Latimer. “That’s a loaded question — it was so many things at once: empowering, hopeful, enraging, unifying. The very making of the series was an act of resistance and rebellion. It was the chance I have fought for as a filmmaker my entire career — the opportunity to tell indigenous stories, our stories, from an indigenous point of view and have those stories be broadcast to millions of viewers around the world.”

She continues, “Indigenous people have spent a long time being silenced. So when our work is championed, especially on an international stage or by a mainstream media outlet such as VICE, it helps raise our voice not only as individual artists, but more importantly, as a collective. Our stories need to be told, and they need to be told by us. We must value the voice behind the storytelling because how we tell our stories is how we take one step closer towards decolonization.”

Filmmaker Cody Lucich, whose work explores community, decolonization and indigenous resistance, also documented Standing Rock with support from the Sundance Institute’s Documentary Fund. His upcoming film, *Akicita*, is one of the only Native-made feature documentaries about the uprising. While Standing Rock was a battleground for the protection of water and treaty rights, it was also a battleground for the narrative.

“I went to Standing Rock to be in solidarity on the frontline and participate in the battle of resistance,” Lucich says. “The decision to make a film was difficult because my priority was the movement, but in my conversations with Sundance they stressed the importance of the story being told from an indigenous perspective.”

“We as Native filmmakers have to take back our narrative,” Lucich adds. “By not carrying our stories, one may not readily recognize the harm this has done to our culture and even the way we even see ourselves through film and media. The harm it has caused is deeply rooted, and I am truly impacted by the importance of this.”

Sherman Alexie, an internationally celebrated author and screenwriter who is currently developing his best-selling novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* with a major

studio, was recently asked about the state of Native cinema. He said he had been contacted three times in one day by non-Native filmmakers requesting that he narrate their Standing Rock documentary.

“Wouldn’t it be amazing if a white filmmaker sent me an email that said, ‘Hey, I was thinking about making a documentary about Native Americans, but then I realized that I should financially support an indigenous filmmaker instead. Who do you recommend, Sherman?’ I have *never* received a letter like that,” he says.

Ultimately, Native voices need to be sought out and prioritized when creating Native content, and Native-made films should be financed and distributed along with the rest of the filmmaking community at large. When non-Natives, networks, studios and independent companies make content about Natives, they benefit most by bringing Native people on right away — not after the fact.

Television and film has the power not just to entertain but also to transcend race, culture and class — to bring people together by sharing our authentic stories. Because Hollywood generates so much of the world’s consumable media content, there is a vital need for the industry to reflect the authentic fabric of our world — and acknowledge the subcultural relevance of Native Americans to the tapestry of America at large. That nearly 80 percent of roles onscreen are white while the ethnically European population is the minority population of this planet sends a message that white supremacy is systemic and deeply woven into the construct of the collective psyche.

Contrary to what many people believe today, Native Americans are not a vanishing minority. We are a thriving population of human beings who live not just on reservations but also within your communities. There are 1.3 billion indigenous people on this planet, second to the world’s largest population of 4.5 billion people of Asian descent. Millions of these indigenous people live in North America, which has a deep wealth of experienced Native writers, producers, directors and storytellers.

By including, supporting and distributing our stories in the mainstream, we can finally evolve our collective worldview from the 19th century to the 21st century. Without this evolution, we as Americans — especially those who believe they have Native American blood — will never truly understand ourselves and will be doomed to repeat mistakes from the past. Now is the time to build a true American identity — one that further defines and binds our collective humanity through one of our oldest art forms: storytelling.



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