

5 Common Native American Stereotypes in Film and Television

The remake of “The Lone Ranger,” featuring Native American sidekick Tonto (Johnny Depp), renewed concerns about whether the media promotes stereotypical images of Native Americans. In film and television, American Indians have long been portrayed as people of few words with magical powers.

Often the Indians in Hollywood are dressed as “warriors,” which perpetuates the notion that Natives are savages. On the other hand, Native American women are depicted as beautiful maidens sexually available to white men. Collectively, the stereotypical images of American Indians in Hollywood continue to influence public perception about this racial group.

Beautiful Maidens

While the media often portrays Native American men as warriors and medicine men, their female counterparts are typically portrayed as beautiful Indian maidens. There is the maiden on the cover of Land O’ Lakes butter products, Hollywood’s various representations of “Pocahontas” and Gwen Stefani’s controversial portrayal of an Indian princess for No Doubt’s 2012 music video for “Looking Hot.”

Native American author Sherman Alexie tweeted that with the video No Doubt turned “500 years of colonialism into a silly dance song and fashion show.”

Representations of Native American women as “easy squaws” have real world consequences. American Indian women suffer from high rates of sexual assaults, often perpetrated by non-Native men.

According to the book *Feminisms and Womanisms: A Women’s Studies Reader*, American Indian girls are also often subjected to derogatory sexual comments.

“Whether princess or squaw, Native femininity is sexualized,” writes Kim Anderson in the book. “This understanding finds its way into our lives and our communities. Sometimes, it means constantly having to fend off the advances of people with an appetite for the ‘Other.’ It may involve a continual struggle to resist crass, sexualized interpretations of one’s being...”

Stoic Indians

Unsmiling Indians who speak few words can be found in classical cinema as well as in cinema of the 21st century. This representation of Native Americans paints them as a one-dimensional people who lack the full range of emotions that other groups display.

Adrienne Keene of the Native Appropriations blog says that portrayals of indigenous peoples as stoic can largely be traced to the pictures of Edward Curtis, who photographed American Indians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

“The common theme throughout Edward Curtis’s portraits is stoicism,” Keene explains. “None of his subjects smile. Ever. ...To anyone who has spent anytime with Indians, you know that the ‘stoic Indian’ stereotype couldn’t be further from the truth. Natives joke, tease, and laugh more than anyone I know—I often leave Native events with my sides hurting from laughing so much.”

Magical Medicine Men

Like the “Magical Negro,” Native American males are often portrayed as wise men with magical powers in film and television shows. Usually medicine men of some sort, these characters have little function other than to guide white characters in the right direction.

Oliver Stone’s 1991 film “The Doors” is a case in point. In this film about the famed rock group a medicine man appears at key moments in Jim Morrison’s life to shape the singer’s consciousness.

The real Jim Morrison may have really felt that he connected with a medicine man, but his thinking was likely influenced by Hollywood depictions of American Indians. In all cultures there have traditionally been individuals with impressive knowledge of the healing qualities of plants and herbs. Yet, Native Americans have been portrayed in film and television time and time again as medicine men who have no other purpose but to rescue hapless white people from harm.

Bloodthirsty Warriors

In films such as “The Last of The Mohicans,” based on James Fenimore Cooper’s book of the same name, there is no shortage of Indian warriors. Hollywood has traditionally portrayed Native Americans as tomahawk-wielding savages thirsty for the white man’s blood. These brutes engage in barbaric practices such as scalping and sexually violate white women. The Anti-Defamation League has attempted to set this stereotype straight, however.

“While warfare and conflict did exist among Native Americans, the majority of tribes were peaceful and only attacked in self defense,” the ADL reports. “Just like European nations, American Indian tribes had complex histories and relationships with one another that sometimes involved combat, but also included alliances, trade, intermarriage and the full spectrum of human ventures.”

As the character Thomas-Builds-the Fire notes in the film “Smoke Signals,” many First Nations peoples have no history of being warriors. Thomas points out that he came from a tribe of fishermen. The warrior stereotype is a “shallow” one the ADL asserts, as it “obscures family and community life, spirituality, and the intricacies inherent in every human society.”

In The Wild and on The Rez

In Hollywood films, Native Americans are typically found living in the wilderness and on reservations. In reality, considerable numbers of First Nations peoples live off the reservation and in major U.S. cities. According to Washington University in St. Louis, 60 percent of the Native American population lives in cities. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that New York, Los Angeles and Phoenix boast the largest populations of Native Americans. In Hollywood, however, it’s rare to see an aboriginal character living in a metropolitan area.

5 Common Native American Stereotypes in Film and Television

Beautiful Maidens

1. How are females typically portrayed?

2. What are three negative examples that the article provides for this stereotype?

3. What is the 'real world' consequence of this portrayal?

Stoic Indians

1. How is this stereotype portrayed?

2. What is this stereotype based on?

3. How is this untrue?

Magical Medicine Men

1. How is this stereotype portrayed?

2. What is their limited function in film or television?

Bloodthirsty Warriors

1. How is this stereotype portrayed?

2. How is this stereotype misinformed?

3. What does the character Thomas-Builds-the-Fire say about First Nations people?

In the Wild and on The Rez

1. Where are Native Americans typically found?

2. What is the reality?
