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# American Indians in Feature Films: Beyond the Big Screen

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## **American Indians in Feature Films: Beyond the Big Screen<sup>1</sup>**

Despite some progress in the portrayal of American Indians on the big screen, the most pervasive image comes to the general public courtesy of the Western, a genre that limits the depiction of this diverse population to 19<sup>th</sup> century Plains Indian culture (or some variation or distortion of it).<sup>2</sup> As is common in other feature films, Westerns have often lacked historical accuracy and context. Westerns have also tended to portray American Indians solely as aggressors or as vanquished peoples, without reference to historical accuracy (O’Conner xv-xv i). However, there is a significant body of films stretching back to Hollywood’s early days and still making its mark beyond Hollywood that counters this stereotypical image. These films show Native American experiences in greater breadth and depth and include American Indian protagonists, actors and directors. This paper will examine whether WorldCat library holdings reflect this alternative body of work by conducting a quantitative comparative analysis. It also offers relevant collection development resources for American Indian feature film production.

### **American Indians in Hollywood**

The main vehicle for the depiction of Native Americans in Hollywood has been the Western. Writers and scholars attribute its popularity to literary and artistic precursors going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. From explorer and captivity narratives; to dime novels; to artwork that depicted Indians as vanishing peoples; to Wild West shows – movie audiences were primed for the Western (Kilpatrick 1-15; Buscombe, 46-81; O’Conner ix), which has limited the portrayals of Indians geographically, chronologically, and culturally (Buscombe 181-3; Churchill, Hill and Hill, 37; Nolley, 47-48). Native American characters have often been played by non-Indian actors who have in turn been confined to several narrowly defined roles: the “good Indian” who sides or joins forces with whites, the “noble savage,” or the “hostile savage” (Gerster 143). Film critics cite John Ford’s 1939 film *Stagecoach*, where Indians are used as a menacing backdrop, as one of the most damaging examples of the latter. Another is *The Searchers* (1956) (Gerster 143), which is significant because it has also been lauded as a visual masterpiece and may be well represented in collections based on this merit alone. Scholars have attributed the continued popularity of Westerns to a variety of factors, suggesting that American Indians stood in for wartime enemies during World War II or for dissenting American youths during the Vietnam War, when these films attempted to portray a Native perspective (O’Conner 5, 13). Another reason for their popularity is their action-driven nature (O’Conner 10).

Beginning in the 1950s, some Westerns began to offer more sympathetic depictions. One of the films most often noted for a more nuanced portrayal of American Indians is *Little Big Man* (1970). Although the protagonist is a white man (played by Dustin Hoffman) adopted into the Cheyenne Nation as a child, the Native American characters are able to express a fuller range of emotions. A brief, but significant, respite from the Western came in 1975 with the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Set in a mental institution, the lone Native American character, Chief (played by Muscogee actor Will Sampson), is thought to be deaf and mute, until he takes a subtle yet profound action, rather symbolic of the ignored potential of American Indians in film and beyond. Twenty years after *Little Big Man*, the Western *Dances with Wolves* (1990) was critiqued because yet again, it is only

through a white character that we are, as it were, made to hear an Indian perspective (Churchill, Hill and Hill, 45; Gerster 144).

The watershed year for the portrayal of American Indians in Hollywood was 1998, with the success of Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* – a film written, directed and acted by Native Americans. However, since then, it is rare to see movies with American Indian leading characters or actors on the big screen. In 2012, the feature film *Crooked Arrows* about an underdog Native American lacrosse team received some publicity but did not have a long theatrical run. The most recent example is the remake of *The Long Ranger* (2013) with non-Native actor Johnny Depp playing the American Indian character Tonto.

### *Hidden Portrayals*

Given the prevalence of the Hollywood Western, it may be surprising to learn that in its early years, Hollywood features included American Indian protagonists and popular American Indian actors and directors. The most noted Native acting couple was Lillian Red Wing and James Young Deer, who is also the most frequently mentioned Native director. His films, which depicted American Indians in interracial relationships (Buscombe 87) as well as overcoming racial discrimination and assimilation and choosing to remain in their communities, offer alternatives to the stereotypical vision of the vanishing Indian in Westerns (Gish 43-47). Chicasaw director Edwin Carewe, was also active from 1914 through 1934 (Singer, 16). Other notable films of this period include the 1925 film *Braveheart* and the 1929 film *Redskin*, both of which deal with American Indian male protagonists going to white colleges but ultimately deciding to return to their tribes (Buscombe 94). In *Braveheart*, the lead is played by non-Indian actor Rod LaRocque. Another important film is 1930's *The Silent Enemy*, set prior to European colonization, which tells the story of a community struggling against hunger. The protagonist is played by Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, who was of mixed ancestry,<sup>3</sup> and the all-Native cast includes actors Chauncey Yellow Robe and Molly Spotted Elk.

### **American Indian Portrayals in Independent Film**

More recently, American Indian actors and directors have made their mark beyond Hollywood. American Indians are consistently portrayed in a more expansive way in feature films by Native filmmakers, which are mostly made independently. Included in this study are *Return of the Country* (1983) directed Bob Hicks (Creek/Seminole). More recent examples include Sherman Alexie's 2002 *The Business of Fancydancing*; the 2007 thriller *Imprint* produced by Chris Eyre; Cree director Georgina Lightning 2008 film *Older Than America*, about the trauma of Indian boarding schools; a romantic yet somber road trip with an older couple in Sterlin Harjo's 2009 *Barking Water*; and the 2012 Alaskan drama *On the Ice* by director Andrew Okpeaha MacLean. This body of work presents a wider variety of American Indian cultures. Even when these films explore Native American history, as in *Older Than America*, they do so by telling the story of contemporary American Indians living in urban as

well as rural settings who see their history from their own perspectives. American Indians in these films are in protagonist or central roles where their characters are allowed more nuance. In the best examples, these characters depict individuals with universal faults and virtues, neither vilified nor whitewashed. Their cultures are an integral part of their life, but are not represented using sartorial shorthand or halting speech. Speaking of contemporary American Indian filmmakers, Hearne and Schlachter note, "[u]nlike the self-conscious, direct engagement with media stereotypes that characterized films like *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, 1998), [Sterlin] Harjo (Seminole/Creek) and [Blackhorse] Lowe (Navajo) tell stories about ordinary people 'who just happen to be Native American.'" (265).

## **Literature Review**

Library science literature includes several valuable articles and books about film collection development in general, but I have found no works that focus on feature film collections by and about Native Americans. The majority of research related to American Indians on film has been done outside of library science. While this work is essential reading for collection development librarians because it explores the portrayal of American Indians in both Hollywood and independent film (Kilpatrick 1999; Singer 2001; Buscombe 2006; Marubbio and Buffalohead 2013), this literature does not examine library collections nor, for the most part, provide concrete collection development resources. One notable exception of the latter is the National Museum of the American Indian's Native Networks website, which I will discuss later.

This paper is most closely modeled after the article "'Yellowface' in Movies: A Survey of American Academic Collections," by Glenn Norio Masuchika for *Collection Building*, which compares holdings for "Yellowface" films versus critically acclaimed films about Asians and Asian Americans. Masuchika's survey focuses on library collections within a specific geographic location chosen based on Asian versus non-Asian demographics. I use a quantitative analysis to examine whether WorldCat library holdings reflect a breadth of representations. Since my principal aim is to promote greater awareness of alternative depictions of American Indians in feature films, this study does not include a granular geographic examination based on demographics. Also, while I contrast theatrically released films with independent films in order to question whether we rely too heavily on mainstream collection development sources, my study does not single out Hollywood films where white actors play Native Americans or even Hollywood films with negative representations. Rather, I want to acknowledge the hidden history of American Indian actors and directors in Hollywood (like *White Fawn's Devotion* and *The Silent Enemy*) and those theatrically released films that made strides in presenting a more nuanced depiction of Native Americans. Even though they did not go far enough in bringing authentic representations of American Indian experiences and are few and far between, they do reflect some shift in representations. Masuchika's article notes that there are not many studies of this type for films about minorities; this paper is my attempt to continue to work toward that end with respect to feature films by and about Native Americans.

## **Design/methodology/approach**

My contention is that, in general, librarians are not consulting the scholarship on American Indian film in order to round out their Native American film collections. My objective is to share and compare data on the availability of theatrically released films that portray American Indians to films that portray American Indians but were not theatrically released.

Although the popular image of Native Americans comes mainly from Westerns, I purposely included theatrical releases that are set in contemporary and urban or suburban settings in order not to skew results to predictable conclusions. None of the films without theatrical release, which are mostly made by Indian directors and/or actors, are Westerns because I am unaware of any. I chose to compare eleven films because I wanted to choose one film per decade when possible. Since independent films made by or about American Indian are a more recent phenomenon, these selections are more recent and include a larger number from the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

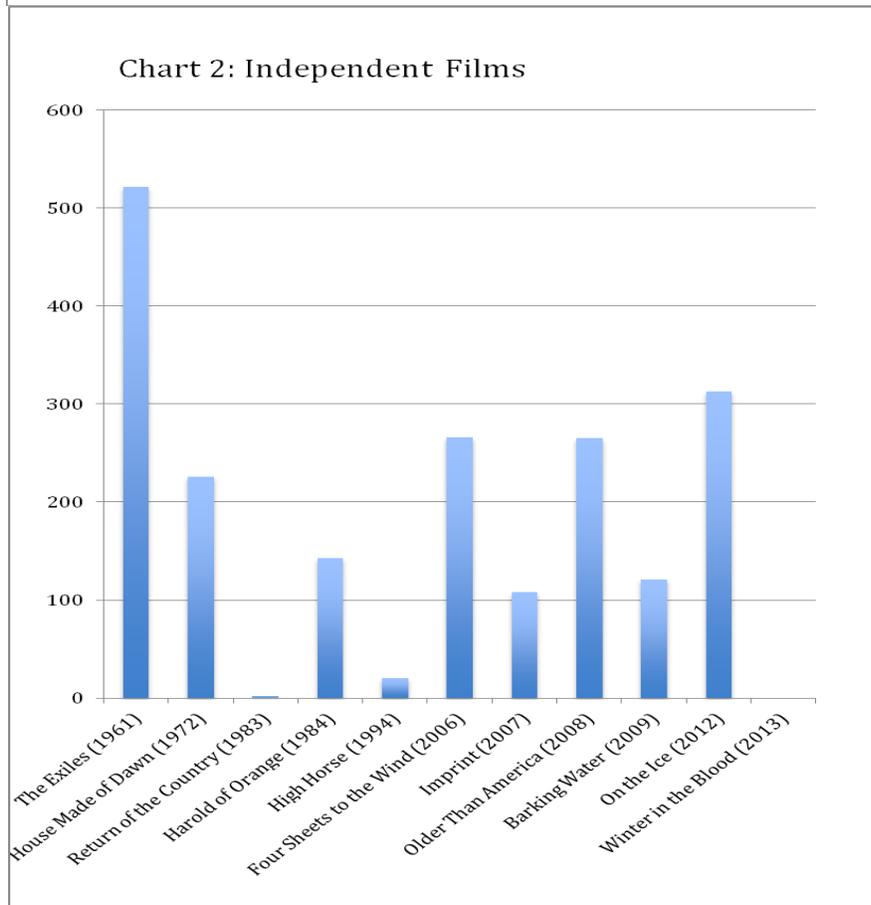
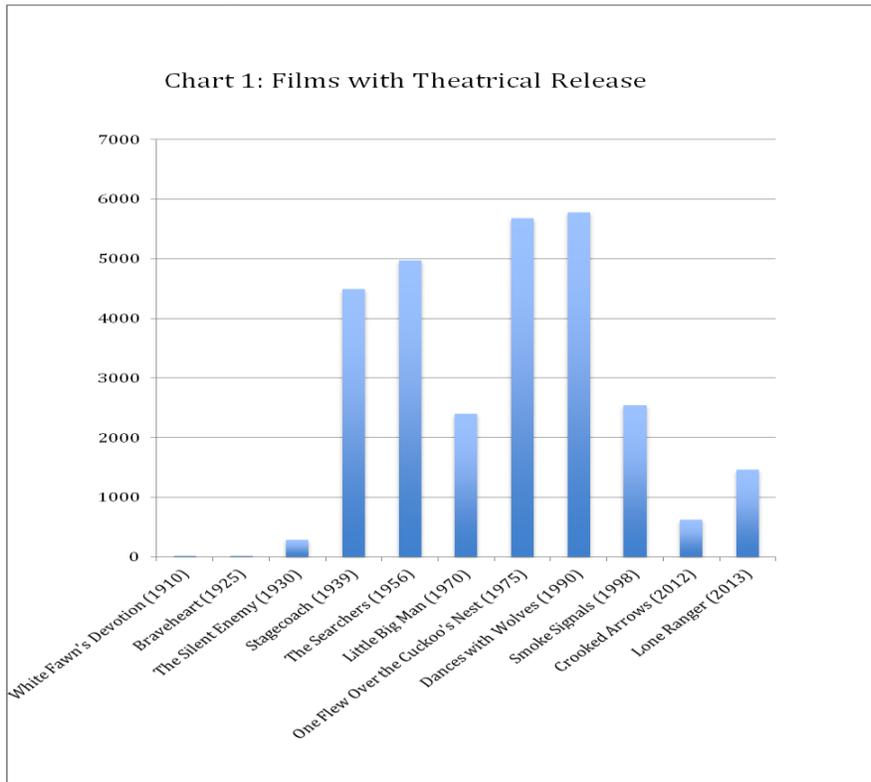
Table 1

Films with Theatrical Release	Independent Films
1. 1910 <i>White Fawn's Devotion</i>	1. 1961 <i>The Exiles</i>
2. 1925 <i>Braveheart</i>	2. 1972 <i>House Made of Dawn</i>
3. 1930 <i>The Silent Enemy</i>	3. 1983 <i>Return of the Country</i>
4. 1939 <i>Stagecoach</i>	4. 1984 <i>Harold of Orange</i>
5. 1956 <i>The Searchers</i>	5. 1994 <i>High Horse</i>
6. 1970 <i>Little Big Man</i>	6. 2006 <i>Four Sheets to the Wind</i>
7. 1975 <i>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</i>	7. 2007 <i>Imprint</i>
8. 1990 <i>Dances with Wolves</i>	8. 2008 <i>Older Than America</i>
9. 1998 <i>Smoke Signals</i>	9. 2009 <i>Barking Water</i>
10. 2012 <i>Crooked Arrows</i>	10. 2012 <i>On the Ice</i>
11. 2013 <i>Lone Ranger</i>	11. 2013 <i>Winter in the Blood</i>

## Findings

The most striking thing one notices when comparing charts 1 and 2 is that holdings for most of the theatrically released films in this survey number in the thousands while independent movies with American Indian directors, producers, and/or actors which were not theatrically released number only in the hundreds. For the most part, the low number of holdings cannot be attributed to unavailability since most of the films in both charts are in distribution (with the exception of *White Fawn's Devotion*, *House Made of Dawn*, and *Winter in the Blood*). Because films without theatrical release are not as well publicized as those on the big screen, it would appear that publicity, rather than availability, is the determining factor in whether these films make it to library collections. The films in Chart 1 that number only in the double digits (there are 11 copies of *White Fawn's Devotion* and 7 copies of *Braveheart*) or hundreds (there are 619 copies of the 2012 film *Crooked Arrow*) are also films that are not generally known to the public. The first film was made in Hollywood's early years when it was more common to have American Indian actors and directors. The second film is one example of a film about a Native American that is outside the Western genre. Only one theater in my area

screened the film *Crooked Arrows* and I suspect that this was only because of the popularity of lacrosse in that region.



It is also surprising that the number of copies of *Smoke Signals*, the most successful and popular Native-made film in contemporary times, is dwarfed by the number of copies of Westerns like *Stagecoach*, *The Searchers*, and *Dances with Wolves*. It seems likely that the average contemporary movie-goer would be more likely to recognize this film over a 1939 or 1956 Western, although I have noticed *The Searchers* on cable on several occasions. The only film in this survey other than *Smoke Signals* with a more nuanced portrayal of American Indian characters that compares to the availability of those three Westerns is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and that likely has more to do with the fact that it won the Academy Award for best picture. On the other hand, it is notable that there are slightly more copies of *Smoke Signals* (2,543) than the 1970 film *Little Big Man* (2,395).

Because it is important to acquire films that show a full spectrum of depictions

of American Indians, libraries must go beyond Hollywood, whose portrayal of Indians has changed some, but not enough. If librarians do not make it a point to seek out less well known Native filmmakers, this work may be lost to future generations. For example, James Young Deer's *White Fawn's Devotion* (1910) is only available in 11 libraries. Luckily, it is also available online on the Internet Archive ([https://archive.org/details/white\\_fawn\\_1910](https://archive.org/details/white_fawn_1910)). More surprisingly, I was unable to obtain a copy of the 1983 feature *Return of the Country*, by Creek/Seminole director Bob Hicks, because the only copy available on WorldCat is non-circulating. In my recent study of films about Native American sports and athletes, which included films about Canadian Aboriginal and Latin American indigenous athletes, several films were unavailable due to restrictive lending practices (2013).

For those interested in indigenous film from other parts of the Americas, collection development becomes even more interesting. Although certain features (like *Atanarjuat/The Fast Runner*, 2001) are available for purchase and via Netflix and/or Hulu, other films, particularly those made by Latin American indigenous groups, can be very difficult to obtain. To cite just one example, there are currently only six WorldCat holdings for the Bolivian feature *Llanthupi Munakuy/Loving Each other in the Shadows* (2001), which was only picked up by Third World Newsreel for a limited time distribution in 2013.

### **Collection Development Resources**

Some distribution companies include a number of documentary films by and about American Indians, but there is no single source for American Indian feature film. Therefore, librarians will need to use several methods to identify these works; this includes searching specialized sources, using specific Library of Congress subject headings, and reading scholarly works. Librarians interested in building or developing indigenous feature film collections will find annotated lists of library holdings on LibGuides or reviews of films on other websites.<sup>4</sup> However, the most established and comprehensive online clearinghouse for both feature and documentary American Indian film is the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) Film & Media Catalog (<http://filmcatalog.nmai.si.edu/intro/>). This website specializes in American Indian film and includes annotations and articles on films, directors, actors and organizations that support American Indian film, including distributor contact information. The NMAI Film and Video Center has hosted a biennial film festival for over 30 years and the website also links to articles that cover production companies and traveling festivals in greater depth. Another frequently updated resource for learning about upcoming films by and about American Indians is Indian Country Today Media Network's Arts & Entertainment section at: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/department/ae> Those interested in building strong American Indian collections should also consult the scholarship in my bibliography.

Another way to discover feature films is to search WorldCat using Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) such as the ones below, including the nation, tribe or state in the parenthesis:

Indians of North America – [State] – Drama.

[Tribe/Nation]—[State] -- Drama.

[Tribe/Nation] -- Drama.

In order to find records for films that are not classified this way, librarians may use a combination of subject keywords such as “Indians of North America” and “Drama” and include the nation, tribe or state in the default or keyword field. Other keywords in the genre/form field that may be combined with tribal or geographic keywords include: “feature films,” “fiction films,” and/or “animated films.” Another quick way to get started is to search for notable American Indian and Aboriginal actors like Adam Beach, Tantoo Cardinal, Gary Farmer, Casey Camp-Horinek, Chaske Spencer, Wes Studi, and Richard Ray Whitman.

In addition to these collection development tools, there are several documentaries – made by Native filmmakers – that deal with Hollywood’s depiction of American Indians and may be mined for historical titles. These include the 1979 five-part series *Images of Indians* directed by Phil Lucas (Choctaw) and Robert Hagopian; Victor Masayesva Jr.’s 1992 *Imagining Indians*; *Reel Injun* made by Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond in 2009; and the 2010 documentary *Tonto Plays Himself* by Jacob Floyd. There are also two shorts freely available online. The first is a 2008 short directed by Kevin Cloud Brechner in which the late comedian Charlie Hill and actress Kateri Walker stroll through the Hollywood Walk of Fame, pointing out American Indian actors and making recommendations about who should be added to the Walk. The second is Sterlin Harjo’s 2010 *American Indian Actors*, in which several contemporary Native American actors talk about their professional experiences, noting both the challenges of limited roles but also their historical experiences and potential to transcend them. These productions are not a contemporary phenomenon, but rather, part of a long history of Native Americans – both moviegoers and actors – advocating for more realistic depictions of themselves going back to the silent movie era.

## Conclusion

The success of *Smoke Signals* demonstrated that mainstream audiences are interested in films by and about American Indians. However, with the exception of a film like *Smoke Signals*, these stories are still not widely available in libraries, as reflected by their holdings in WorldCat. As if to bring home this point, the summer of 2013 ushered in yet another Western: a remake of *The Lone Ranger* in which the Indian character Tonto was played by the actor Johnny Depp. It does signal a sign of the times that Johnny Depp, recently adopted by the Comanche Nation, sought approval from the Native American community, whose leaders were said to have been consulted throughout the filming (Siegal and McClintock). But, the fact remains that this film is yet another Western.

In the summer of 2013, at the same time that *The Lone Ranger* was premiering, a feature called *Winter in the Blood*, based on the novel by Native American writer James Welch and featuring American

Indian actors in starring roles, was screened at the Los Angeles Film Festival. *Winter in the Blood* screened in New York City in June 2014 – a full year later. Also one year later, Depp's recent remake of *The Lone Ranger* is available at 1,464 WorldCat libraries, while *Winter in the Blood* is available at none. Some may consider this an unfair comparison, since *Winter in the Blood* is not yet in distribution. However, based on the holdings examined above, it is probable that once it is under distribution, holdings for *Winter in the Blood*, a film that has not had the commercial success of a film like *Smoke Signals*, will be pale in comparison to *Lone Ranger* holdings. Rather than bemoan the dearth of authentic (by which I mean nuanced, polemic, and multi-temporal) depictions of American Indians on the big screen, this study posits the need for librarians to go outside the boundaries of Hollywood to seek that diverse portrayal of Indians which does exist and which will make our collections more complete.

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<sup>2</sup> Film scholars have documented inaccuracies in cultural representations, like the premise that scalping was originally a Native American practice or the fact that the "blood-mingling ritual" in the film *Broken Arrow* is not really an Apache one (Gerster 151).

<sup>3</sup> In the documentary *Reel Injun*, Seminole film historian Melinda Micco states that Long Lance was triracial (Indian, Black and white) and Nancy Cook further elaborates that while Long Lance claimed to be a full-blooded Blackfeet, in reality, he could have claimed to be at least in part "a Croatan, a Lumbee, an Eastern Cherokee, an Oklahoma Cherokee, or a Cree, ... by birthright or adoption" (pp. 152).

<sup>4</sup> For example, readers may also be interested in my blog, Cine Runa: Indigenous Film and Video of the Americas (<http://www.cineruna.org/>).