

# I'M WRITING A NATIVE CHARACTER, ...NOW WHAT?

The Do's and Do Not's  
of creating authentic  
Native representation

**NATIVE AMERICAN  
& INDIGENOUS  
WRITERS COMMITTEE**

**WGAW** WRITERS GUILD  
OF AMERICA WEST

# WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

The purpose of this document is to clarify the terms and descriptors used by those Indigenous to what is known as The United States of America or Canada.

## Indigenous

is an inclusive umbrella term for Indigenous People around the world, including in North America: Native Americans, First Nations, Inuit, and Indigenous Mexicans (Including Nahua & Maya). It includes Central and South American Indigenous people, Sami as well as Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiians (kanaka Maoli), and many more across the globe. In the case of the United States, "Indigenous" denotes tribal membership or citizenship or a strong connection to a specific tribe located in the US. The "I" in BIPOC is Indigenous. Specifically naming Black and Indigenous people signifies that Black and Indigenous populations are the ones who've suffered the most under white supremacy, imperialism, colonialism, classism, racial injustices and systemic oppression.

## Native American/ American Indian/Native

Native American (preferred term) includes Indigenous people of the continental United States, Canada, as well as Alaska Natives who are tribally enrolled citizens of their Nations or are 'claimed' or connected to their tribal community. The term does not include Native Hawaiians who are distinctly Kanaka Maoli.

Related terms:  
Native (preferred term)  
Indigenous (preferred term)  
American Indian (acceptable term)  
Indian (not preferred, used only within the Native community, never by a non-Native)

## First Nations

is an inclusive term for the Indigenous People of Canada. There are over 600 Nations in Canada, representing 60 distinct language groups. Inuit and Metis are distinct Indigenous groups. Presently, it's more common for Indigenous people in Canada to identify by their tribal or national identity.

## Tribe/Tribal Nation

A specific group of Indigenous, Native American or First Nations people, such as Tongva, Apache, Cree, Lakota, Ojibwe, Navajo/Diné, etc. In the United States and Canada tribes are sovereign political entities. Use a person's tribe when known, as opposed to an umbrella term like Native American, Indigenous or American Indian. There are over 600 tribes in the US, and over 600 in Canada, with their own dialects and cultural practices.

\*Do not use this term to describe work, friends, or wellness groups.\*

## AfroIndigenous/ Black Indigenous

A person who is both Indigenous and of African Descent.

## Aboriginal

(least common) While the term Aboriginal can frequently be used, it is rarely used by Native Americans and the least preferred way to refer to someone from a US or Canadian tribe. For Indigenous people of Australia, this is the common and preferred term.

## Native American "Descent"

Refers to people who are disconnected from their community due to historical trauma, or who have Native in their history but do not connect with their culture. This may also include people who are unclear of their Native ancestry and unable to prove a tribal affiliation.

(\*note: for anyone who is unclear, it is encouraged that you first look at your family ancestry, and once confirmed, connect with the community).

# OTHER TERMS YOU MAY HAVE HEARD:

## Indian Country

A legal term that broadly defines federal and tribal jurisdiction affecting Native Americans. It is also more widely used to describe reservations and land areas with Native American populations.

## Powwow

Is a primarily social gathering with food, dancing in regalia, drum circles, primarily representing the Plains culture. Do not use this term to describe meetings or gatherings.

## Turtle Island

The term used by Natives in the US & Canada to refer to North America.

## Two Spirit

The term Two-Spirit is a direct translation of the Ojibwe term Niizh mandidoowag, but used by many Native nations. The Two-Spirited term is an inclusive term unique to Native people who transcend the Eurocentric binary categorizations of male vs. female genders and sexuality. While it is not a synonymous term for queer, bi or trans, people who are 2S may also identify as such. This term should only be used by First Nations/US Native American Indigenous peoples.

## Urban Native

A Native person who resides in a city.

## Border Tribes

As Indigenous people precede borders, there are some tribes recognized on both sides of the border. On the Canada/US, this is recognized under the Jay Treaty and guarantees rights to all First Nations to live and work on both sides of the border. With the southern border, there are tribes such as Tohono O'odham, Huichol, and Yaqui that are present in both the US and Mexico and recognized as border tribes but with no guarantees or recognition similar to First Nations and the Jay Treaty.

## DID YOU KNOW?

While most Native characters are portrayed living “in the wild” or on a reservation, 60% of the NA population live in cities. NA reside on and off their traditional lands and across North America.

Many Canadian Nations were near what is now the Canada/US border, separating Nations. Therefore many Nations exist in both the US and Canada. This allows for many tribally enrolled Natives to live and work on both sides of the border without a green card under what is known as the Jay Treaty.

Native people have a mix of anglo-Christian names and names traditional to their languages. Names may also be specific to families so you're better off using an Anglo name as opposed to a “nature” sounding name.

## WHERE ARE WE AT NOW?

Native feature writer representation at the WGA has been at **zero**. Native writers in television currently sit at just above 1%.

In 2020 the NAIWC (Native American and Indigenous Writers Committee) celebrated Maori filmmaker Taika Waititi for the first Indigenous feature film at the WGA for *JoJo Rabbit*, becoming the first Indigenous person to win an Oscar for Best Screenplay.

In 2020 Navajo writer Sierra Ornelas co-created the first modern day Native television series, **Rutherford Falls (Peacock)**. It is the first Native led, first Native starring series and the first writers room to hire more than one Native writer on staff. In addition, Creek and Seminole writer/director Sterlin Harjo co-created **Reservation Dogs (FX)**, a television series with the first all-Native lead cast, first Native directed pilot and the first all-Native writers room in US television history.

Due to its independent nature, there are many podcasts that can be a great avenue for Native voices. However, as they are mostly self-produced, very few major podcast networks have Native voices with shows.

# Stories that have us **TIRED**

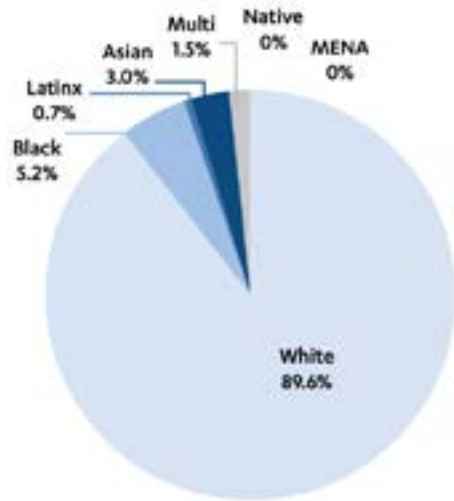
- Most often, feature films that include Native storylines can be characterized humorously as **“Leather & feathers”** movies. These depictions contribute to an epidemic of erasure that contemporary Native people face; relegating it to the 19th century or before.
- The complete **erasure** of Natives from the dominant (White) American narrative except for westerns.
- Period settings which amplify the ‘myth’ that Natives don’t exist in modern day or were ‘wiped out.’
- The **“White Savior”** narrative or the untamed savage. The ‘stoic’ Indian chief or the noble warrior.
- **Romanticizing Natives as magical and spiritual guides** for other non-Native characters, or where the NAIP (Native American or Indigenous Persons) character only attribute is being ‘in touch’ with the earth.
- Native characters who only wear “traditional” dress, even in the modern era.
- “Tonto talk”, even in modern settings.
- Showing Natives who only live in sovereign Tribal communities/Indian Country.
- Native characters who are unredeemable and only show them at their worst.
- **Perpetuating myths** about Native people benefiting financially from casinos or the federal government.
- Showing all Native characters only as alcoholic or drug addicts contributes to the harmful narrative that all **Native communities and people suffer from drug, alcohol and opioid addiction** without the understanding of the historical trauma that contributes to the proliferation of drugs and alcohol and the prohibition that many tribal nations have instituted as a result. This is actually a very damaging myth that unless you are digging deeply into the trauma of Native people, there is likely no reason to have this as a character.
- **Excluding Native women** completely from the narrative or only portraying her as the dutiful wife or the Stoic Indian Chief’s beautiful daughter (that has been waiting just for the white savior)
  - Note: One good test is the AILA test. Named after the strong female protagonist from Jeff Barnaby’s Rhymes for Young Ghouls:
    1. Is she an Indigenous woman who is a main character;
    2. who does not fall in love with a white man;
    3. and does not end up raped or murdered at any point in the story?
- Stories that only show **Native women and two-spirit people as victims** of assault, abuse, murder.
- Including the overused trope of an eagle cry or traditional flute music every time a Native character appears on screen.
- Primarily showing only narratives of the Great Plains Natives.
- Poverty or **“Trauma Porn”** only shows Natives as poor, downtrodden victims of the white man. The white gaze often sees Native people as impoverished, suffering, or a dying civilization in need of rescue.
- Horror tropes that have made up Native ‘mythology’ include **Indian burial grounds** while excluding any Native characters. NOTE: Natives do not refer to their stories as ‘mythology’ as it implies a falsehood.
- Stories that show **Natives as mythical beings** or “shapeshifters,” without grounding it in actual, tribally specific Native traditions.
- The **assumption that all Natives know their culture** & language intricately. Many Natives were separated from their culture, traditions and language. Many were forced to attend boarding schools, abused & beaten and separated from their families until the mid-1990’s and many Natives are in the process of reconnecting with their culture now.

# Stories that get us **WIRED!**

- Native characters in **modern stories** (IE: (doctor, lawyer, cop, teacher, social worker, shrink, stockbroker, petty thief, roofer, runway model, life coach, ANYTHING).
- Native women living full, contemporary lives.
- **Comedic** Native characters.
- Native characters in **futuristic, dystopian, sci-fi settings!** (Put us on the USS enterprise!)
- Natives cultural contributions to modern life, increasing representation and **moving past erasure** and old stereotypes.
- Native characters as **rounded human beings** with the same basic needs and wants as anyone else (love, validation, success) and face the same challenges (a tough economy, needing to feed and house our families and pay the cellphone bill, trying to get ahead in our careers, heartbreak, etc.).
- **Natives from all walks of life**, representing different tribes, nations, and communities & experiences. We are a diverse people with many differences.
- Showcasing the intricacies of our **various cultures** and communities today, including calls to action against ongoing injustices to Natives (ie broken treaties, mascots & slurs, poverty, exploitation of natural resources, violence against Native women & children)
- Accurate and factual stories about American history, specifically Native history, **told through an Indigenous lens.**
- Stories that include Two-Spirit characters included in **LGBT+ storylines.**
- **Stories written by, directed by, and starring Natives.** We want to work. We want to be included in all shows, not just our own stories. We have lived experiences outside of just being 'Native'.

## Recommended Reading

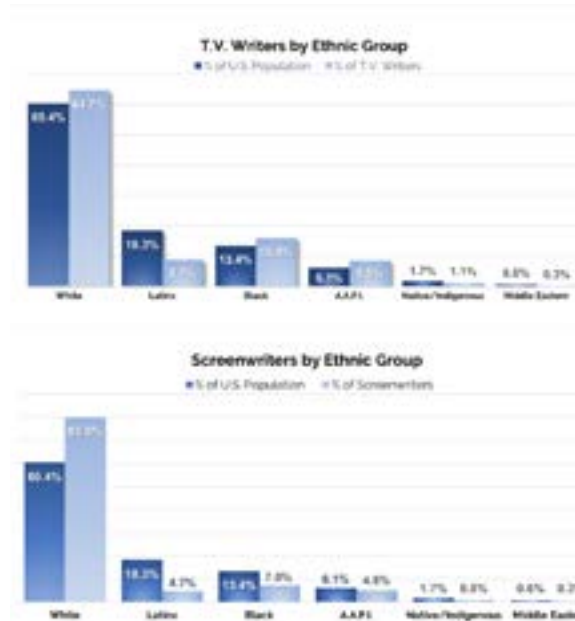
# NATIVE REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA



## 2020 UCLA Study Hollywood Diversity Report

[Click for link](#)

Note: There is more representation in Canada due to a dedicated Native channel (APTN) a government funded network with a mandate to have Native shows owned by Native producers/creators



## 2020 WGA Diversity and Inclusion Report

[Click for link](#)

In the WGA, there are 98 writers who self-identify primarily as Native American/First Nations and/or Indigenous.

Note: False representation can directly affect opportunities for under served groups in addition to providing the Guild with inaccurate data.

## ADDITIONAL READING:



### RECLAIMING NATIVE TRUTH

A project to dispel American's Myths and Misconceptions

[Click for link](#)



### FROZEN IN TIME

The Impact of Native American Media Representations on Identity and Self-Understanding

[Click for link](#)



### INDIGENOUS FILM OFFICE (CANADA)

On Screen Protocols and Pathways

[Click for link](#)

# OKAY, YOU HAVE A NATIVE CHARACTER OR INDIGENOUS PLOT LINE, SO WHAT NOW?

We strongly want to encourage people to create space for Native characters in their existing stories. However, when writing Native stories ask yourself:

- Is this a distinctly Native story that I, a non-Native person, fully understand?
- Am I the best person to tell this story?
- Is there a Native filmmaker that IS telling these stories that might not be getting the same platform? Can I work with them or help amplify their voice?
- With so many Natives representing different lived experiences, it's important to hire the right Native for the right job!



**And...**  
**Hire Native writers.**

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