

Native American Representation Across 1,600 Popular Films: The Lily Gladstone Effect

Dr. Stacy L. Smith
&
The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

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USC Annenberg
Inclusion Initiative

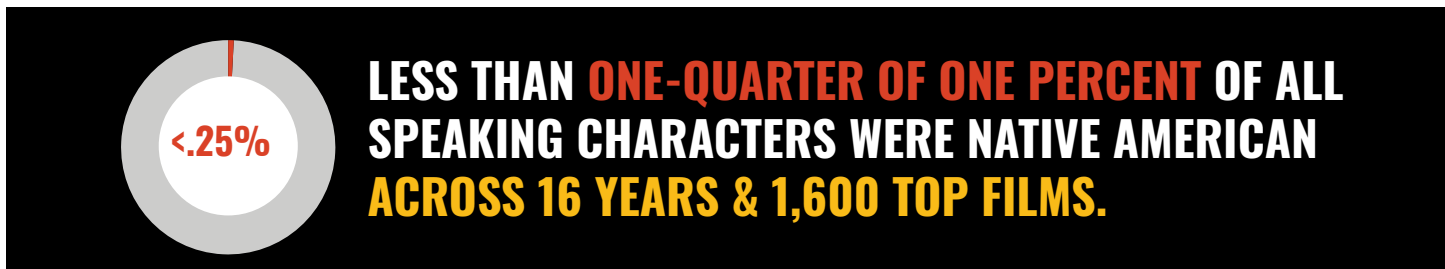
NATIVE AMERICAN REPRESENTATION ACROSS 1,600 POPULAR FILMS: THE LILY GLADSTONE EFFECT

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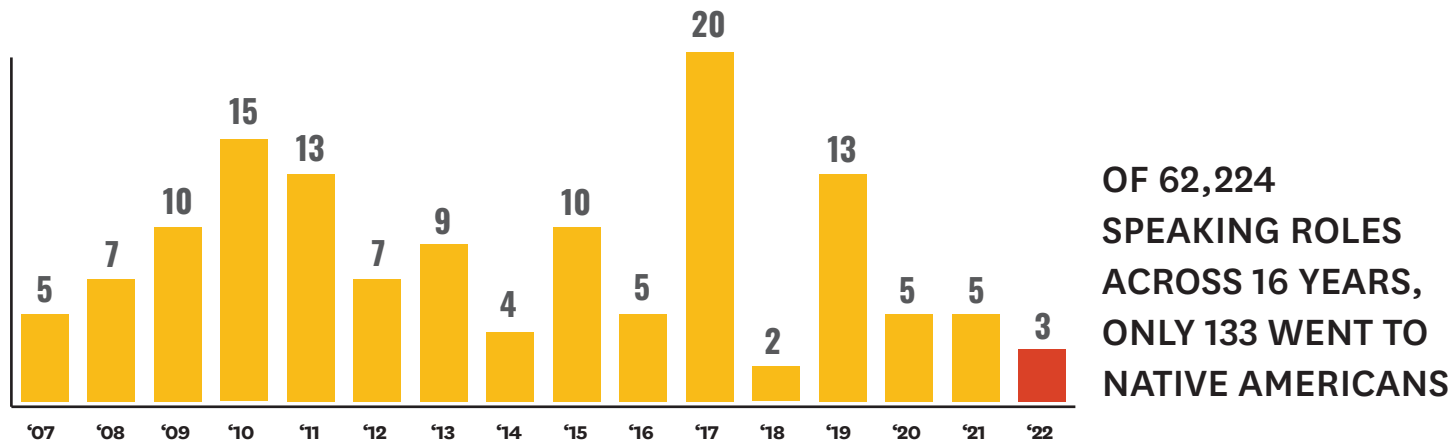
NATIVE AMERICAN CHARACTERS ARE NEARLY INVISIBLE IN TOP FILMS

Percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native characters across 1,600 top-grossing films from 2007-2022



ROLES ARE RESTRICTED FOR NATIVE CHARACTERS IN TOP MOVIES

Number of Native American characters per year, 2007-2022



ERASURE OF NATIVE AMERICAN FEMALES IS NORMATIVE IN MOVIES

Top-grossing films without a single speaking or named Native American female-identified character, 2007-2022

99% OR 1,581 OF 1,600 FILMS FEATURED **ZERO** NATIVE AMERICAN FEMALE-IDENTIFIED SPEAKING CHARACTERS

OPPORTUNITY NARROWS FOR NATIVE ACTORS IN TOP MOVIES

Speaking roles and acting opportunities for Native actors across 1,600 films, 2007-2022

ACROSS 16 YEARS AND 1,600 TOP-GROSSING FILMS...

133

SPEAKING ROLES FEATURED **NATIVE AMERICANS**

99

OF THOSE 133 ROLES FEATURED NATIVE **ACTORS**

64

INDIVIDUAL NATIVE ACTORS FILLED THOSE 99 ROLES

15

INDIVIDUAL NATIVE ACTORS **WORKED MORE THAN ONCE**

NATIVE AMERICAN MALES OUTNUMBER FEMALES ON SCREEN

Native American characters by gender across 1,600 top-grossing films, 2007-2022



77% OF NATIVE
CHARACTERS
WERE MALE-
IDENTIFIED



23% OF NATIVE
CHARACTERS
WERE FEMALE-
IDENTIFIED

No gender-nonbinary Native characters appeared across 1,600 top-grossing movies

FILMS FAIL TO CENTER ON NATIVE CHARACTERS

Native American leading characters across 1,600 top-grossing films, 2007-2022

ONE

LEADING ACTOR
ACROSS 1,600
FILMS WAS
NATIVE AMERICAN

65%

OF NATIVE AMERICAN
CHARACTERS WERE
INCONSEQUENTIAL
TO THE PLOT

Native American Representation Across 1,600 Popular Films: The Lily Gladstone Effect

Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

The purpose of this research brief is to punctuate the importance of Lily Gladstone's role in *Killers of the Flower Moon* by examining the prevalence of Native American characters on screen in popular film. We examined 1,600 movies from 2007 to 2022. The results are abysmal and reinforce the erasure and discrimination against Native Americans in storytelling. Below, we present findings on U.S.-focused Native American characters on screen in movies. We also examine actors' identities playing Native roles.

Key Findings

On Screen Portrayals. A total of 62,224 characters were coded for apparent race/ethnicity. Of these, <1% ($n=133$) were American Indian/Alaskan Native. This calculates to less than a quarter of one percent (0.21) of all speaking characters coded for race/ethnicity.

Given that roughly 1.3% of the U.S. identify as Native American, the portrayal in Hollywood is astonishingly below the real world statistic.

The prevalence of Native American characters has not changed over time. In 2022, there were 3 depictions and the number was not different from 2021 (5 characters) or 2007 (5 characters). The year with the most depictions was 2017, with 20 Native characters shown across the 100 top movies. The *Twilight* franchise accounts for the most portrayals, with 39 or 29.3% of all Native characters appearing in this series over the 16- year time frame sampled.

65% ($n=86$) of Native American characters were completely inconsequential to the plot. Only 1 protagonist (lead or co lead) across 1,600 movies was Native American. The remaining 46 characters or 34.6% were supporting or secondary to the plot.

77.4% ($n=103$) of all Native Americans on screen were male and only 22.6% ($n=30$) were female. This is a tilted gender ratio of 3.43 Native American males to every 1 Native American female.

Of the characters that could be assessed for age, Native Americans were more likely to be 21-39 ($n=47$, 35.9%) or 40-64 ($n=41$, 31.3%) than 13-20 (19.8%, $n=26$). Even fewer were elderly or 65 years of age or older (11.4%, $n=15$) or portrayed as elementary school aged children (1.5%, $n=2$).

A full 1,581 movies out of 1,600 erased Native girls and women completely. Significantly, in 2022, there was not one woman or girl coded on screen across the 100 top movies. 2021 and 2007 were equality problematic, with 98 and 99 movies (respectively) erasing Native girls and women.

Actors' Employment Patterns. 133 roles were filled with 124 credited actors with enough information about their identity to ascertain Native ancestry. Of these 124, 20 (16.1%) of the actors who filled these roles had their Native identity publicly contested. Five of these contested actors were counted as Native and 15 were not. In total, 99 (79.8%) of the 124 actors were from Native backgrounds.

The 99 roles credited across 1,600 movies were accounted for by 64 Native actors (who worked one or more times). Put differently, **only 64 individuals with Native heritage worked on the most popular 1,600 movies from 2007 to 2022.** Forty five of these actors were males and 19 were females. For Native women in Hollywood, it is clear that there is no viable pathway for career sustainability.

Most Native actors were only cast once whether they were male (71.1%) or female (89.5%). Only two Native women worked more than once: Julia Jones (4 films), Alex Rice (3 films).

For men, there were slightly more opportunities. The Native male actors working the most were Gil Birmingham (7 films), followed by Alex Meraz (4 films), Chakse Spencer (4 films), Adam Beach (4 films) and Graham Greene (4 films).

Two areas accounted for all of the Native actors' birthplaces: U.S. (62.5%, $n=40$) and Canada (37.5%, $n=24$). The 64 unique Native actors in our sample represented more than 45 Tribes or Nations.

Overall, the portrayal of U.S. centered Native American characters on screen is horribly low. In this report we only focused on U.S. depictions. As such, our numbers may have been slightly higher if we included indigenous characters from a variety of backgrounds. Even then, we would assume a floor effect (few portrayals) as Hollywood films have not prioritized inclusion of historically marginalized communities.

Native American Representation Across 1,600 Popular Films: The Lily Gladstone Effect

Dr. Stacy L. Smith
USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

This week, *Killers of the Flower Moon* opens in theaters in the United States. So far, it has received an outstanding score on Rotten Tomatoes (95%) across more than 100 reviews. At the center of this film is a compelling actor, Lily Gladstone. Given this performance, we decided to open our data files and see how often Native American characters, particularly girls and women, appeared across the top 1,600 movies from 2007 to 2022.

More than 62,000 speaking characters were evaluated as well as the protagonists of every storyline. The brief will overview what we did and what we found. Given the infrequency of characters, this summary will be short.

Since the mid to late 1990s, I (Stacy) have been collecting the gender and race/ethnicity of characters across dozens and dozens of investigations. In this report, we will focus on our race/ethnicity measure, which was derived from the U.S. Census. We adapted this approach and know it has limitations. However, the measure has enabled us to capture the prevalence of every “American Indian/Alaska Native” that has been depicted across the most popular films.¹ We focus on these characters for this analysis.

However, there are limitations with this approach.² We acknowledge those caveats and yet believe that this brief still has merit and will shed light on an egregious invisibility that is still too great, too costly, and too harmful for a community that has long been erased, mistreated, and ignored by Hollywood in specific and activists more broadly.

We first captured every speaking character with enough information that led us to code him/her/them as Native American. Here, ***we limited the analysis such that only characters from the U.S. were included.*** Characters in Canada as well as those from Mexico, Central or South America were not included in this brief. Native Hawaiians are also not captured in this report.

Our focus went beyond the character, however. We also looked up each actor’s race/ethnicity to see how many Native American roles were played by actors with any type of indigenous ancestry. Actors with a contested heritage were scrutinized and judged on a case-by-case basis. Tribal affiliation or nation was also noted for every actor when it was available.

We did this work in the way we always do, bringing in and talking to members of the community with lived experiences and reaching out to industry groups for insight. In future work, we desire to widen this analysis to the context surrounding Native American portrayals in addition to the prevalence measures we report on here.

To put our reason for releasing this report simply: this is Lily Gladstone's year. Due to the ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike, she is not permitted to participate in publicizing her role in the movie. We are releasing this data to illuminate the need for visibility of Native Americans and storylines that are as rich and varied as the members of this community.

Prevalence On Screen

A total of 62,224 characters were coded for apparent race/ethnicity. Of these, <1% ($n=133$) were American Indian/Alaska Native. This calculates to less than a quarter of one percent (0.21) of all speaking characters coded for race/ethnicity. Given that roughly 1.3% of individuals in the U.S. identify as Native American, the portrayal in Hollywood is astonishingly below the real world statistic.³

Table 1
Native American Characters by Year

Year	# of NA Characters	% of NA Characters	Total Characters
2007	5	0.12%	4,129
2008	7	0.17%	4,017
2009	10	0.25%	4,014
2010	15	0.39%	3,848
2011	13	0.33%	3,941
2012	7	0.17%	4,048
2013	9	0.23%	3,932
2014	4	0.10%	4,025
2015	10	0.25%	3,975
2016	5	0.13%	3,758
2017	20	0.54%	3,691
2018	2	0.05%	3,895
2019	13	0.33%	3,890
2020	5	0.15%	3,318
2021	5	0.13%	3,941
2022	3	0.08%	3,802
Total	133	<1%	62,224

Note: Native American characters in the table represent those with U.S. origin.

The prevalence of Native American characters by year is shown in Table 1. In 2022, only 3 characters were coded as Native American. This number did not differ from 2021 nor 2007. ***Surely, there has been no meaningful and sustained change over time.*** The year with the most depictions was 2017, with 20 Native characters shown across the 100 top movies.

In terms of importance, 65% ($n=86$) of Native American characters were completely inconsequential to the plot. Only 1 protagonist (lead or co lead) across 1,600 movies was Native American. That protagonist was Dani Moonstar (i.e., female, young adult, lesbian) in the film

The New Mutants. Dani's character was played by Blu Hunt. The remaining 46 characters or 34.6% were supporting or secondary to the plot.

A few other attributes of Native American characters are worth noting. 77.4% ($n=103$) of all Native Americans on screen were male and only 22.6% ($n=30$) were female. This is a tilted gender ratio of 3.43 Native American males to every 1 Native American female. Of the characters that could be assessed for age, Native Americans were more likely to be 21-39 ($n=47$, 35.9%) or 40-64 ($n=41$, 31.3%) than 13-20 (19.8%, $n=26$). Even fewer were elderly or 65 years of age or older (11.4%, $n=15$) or portrayed as elementary school aged children (1.5%, $n=2$).

Table 2
Films Missing Native American Female Speaking Characters

Year	# of films missing NA Female Characters	Total Films
2007	99	100
2008	100	100
2009	98	100
2010	99	100
2011	99	100
2012	99	100
2013	99	100
2014	99	100
2015	99	100
2016	99	100
2017	98	100
2018	99	100
2019	98	100
2020	98	100
2021	98	100
2022	100	100
Total	1,581	1,600

Above, the findings reveal that there were far fewer Native American girls and women on screen than boys and men. To see how this imbalance affects erasure, we conducted an invisibility analysis. Invisibility captures the number of films that do not depict at least one speaking Native girl or woman on screen. The bar is very low, as the character only has to speak one word to be counted as visible.

As shown in Table 2, a full 1,581 movies out of 1,600 erased Native girls and women completely. Significantly, in 2022, there was not one woman or girl coded on screen across the 100 top movies. 2021 and 2007 were equality problematic, with 98 and 99 movies (respectively) erasing Native girls and women (see Table 2). Clearly, there is an epidemic of

invisibility of Native female characters perpetuated by Hollywood writers, directors, and producers.

Actors' Employment Attributes

For every actor, we were interested in whether their identity aligned with the character they played on screen. More directly, we asked if each actor was of Native descent.⁴ Of the 133 actors in this study, 9 did not have enough information listed in the credits (i.e., names not credited on film or on IMDb.Pro) to research their native ancestry. For the remaining 124, we identified whether they were Native actors from online sources. Of these 124, 99 (79.8%) were actors from Native backgrounds.

It is important to note that some actors Native descent is contested online.⁵ We studied available information taking into account self disclosure, participation in Native industry events, backlash from members of the Native community, tribal communication about actors' identity, guidelines for affiliation by different tribes, and other details to render a case-by-case distinction. Of the 124 acting jobs, 20 (16.1%) of the actors who filled these roles had their identity publicly contested. Five of these contested actors were counted as Native and 15 were not.

The 99 roles credited across 1,600 movies were accounted for by 64 Native actors. Put differently, only 64 individuals with Native heritage worked on the most popular 1,600 movies from 2007 to 2022. Forty five of these actors were males and 19 were females. For Native women in Hollywood, it is clear that there is no viable pathway for career sustainability.

Table 3
Number of Roles Held by Native American Actors by Gender: 2007-2022

# of Roles	NA Male Actors	NA Female Actors	Total
1	71.1% (n=32)	89.5% (n=17)	76.6% (n=49)
2	8.9% (n=4)	0	6.2% (n=4)
3	8.9% (n=4)	5.3% (n=1)	7.8% (n=5)
4	8.9% (n=4)	5.3% (n=1)	7.8% (n=5)
5+	2.2% (n=1)	0	1.6% (n=1)
Total	45	19	64

We looked to see how often these 64 Native characters worked. As shown in Table 3, most Native actors were only cast once whether they were male (71.1%) or female (89.5%). Only two Native women worked more than once: Julia Jones (4 films), Alex Rice (3 films). For men, there were slightly more opportunities. The Native male actors working the most were Gil Birmingham (7 films), followed by Alex Meraz (4 films), Chakse Spencer (4 films), Adam Beach (4 films) and Graham Greene (4 films).

The 64 Native actors were also coded for their country of origin or birthplace. Two areas accounted for all of the actors' birthplaces: U.S. (62.5%, $n=40$) and Canada (37.5%, $n=24$). Finally, we looked at the tribal affiliation or nation of the 64 unique Native actors in our sample (see Table 4). As depicted in Table 4, more than 45 Tribes or Nations were listed.

Table 4
A List of Actor Tribal Affiliation Across 1,600 Popular Films

Akimel O'otham	Cree	Mi'kmaq	Secwépemc
Anishinaabe	Da'naxda'xw	Mohawk	Seminole
Apache	Dakota	Muscogee	Sioux
Assiniboine	Denesuline (Dene)	Navajo	Tarahumara
Bearfoot Onondaga	Harakmbut	Nez Perce	Tlaxcaltec
Blackfeet	Hualapai	Nuu-chah-nulth	Tlingit
Caddo	Iñupiaq	Omaha	Tsilhqot'in
Cherokee	Káínai	Oneida	Ute
Chickasaw	Koyukon Athabaskan	Plains Cree	Wasco
Chiricahua Apache	Lakota	Pueblo	Yaqui
Choctaw	Menominee	Purépecha	Yup'ik
Chumash	Meskwaki	Quechua	
Comanche	Métis	Sauk	

Note: The above list includes but is not exhaustive of all tribal affiliations of actors. Actors may identify with more than one tribe or nation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research brief was to examine Native American representation in popular films over the past 16 years. The results are disheartening at best or tragic at worst. Across 1,600 popular movies and more than 62,000 speaking characters, less than one-quarter of one percent were held by Native Americans. This falls below population metrics and reflects a distinct lack of imagination on the part of filmmakers to view Native Americans as indelible members of our historical *and current* society. To drive this point home, nearly 99% of all the films in the study did not feature *even one* Native girl or woman in a speaking role on screen. At even this most basic level, Hollywood has failed.

The miniscule representation afforded to Native characters means that Native actors have little opportunity to build career sustainability. A mere 15 actors worked more than once across top movies in the decade and a half covered in this study. And, only 19 Native girls and women worked across the 30 roles afforded to female characters since 2007. Only 1 leading actor was Native. One.

Against this backdrop, a film like *Killers of the Flower Moon* has significance beyond how it may be reported in the press. The movie represents a critical chance to see a story centered on Native women's experiences and for Native women to work in Hollywood. But this cannot and

should not be the only such film to offer employment to Native women and men. There are several solutions available to ensure that this is not the last time we see Lily Gladstone– or others like her– in storytelling on the biggest and most prominent screens.

A few ideas include the following– some offered first by others and restated here to emphasize their importance:

- Hire, fund, and support Native filmmakers at all levels of the industry, from film schools to film festivals, and into independent and studio fare.
- Support existing programs to shepherd Native writers and filmmakers and recognize their talent.
- Audition and cast Native talent across all roles– even when roles that are not specifically written for Native actors.
- Ensure that Native filmmakers and actors have opportunities outside film alone– across television, streaming and even branded content and advertising– to develop their skills and be seen by audiences.
- Designate specific funding for Native talent, whether via current film funding schemes, new philanthropic initiatives, or other programs.
- Include Native critics in the process of reviewing films and other stories.
- Nominate Lily Gladstone for all awards that recognize extraordinary performances and ensure her work is seen and supported. #letsmakehistory

These are a few ways to expand Native representation on screen and behind the camera and there are undoubtedly more, particularly when it comes to not only the prevalence of roles for Native talent but the portrayal of these characters on screen. And yet, the most important solution is this one: don't make audiences wait for another 1,600 movies to be released before bringing a compelling story featuring Native characters to the screen.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance of Joey Clift (Cowlitz), and other members of Native groups who advised on this report. We are also grateful to the support of our team for their work on this brief.

Footnotes

1. Coders are asked to evaluate the race/ethnicity of every independent speaking or named character that is discernible on screen. To this end, characters are placed into one of the following categories: White, Hispanic/Latino, Black, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern/North African, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Other (Multiracial/Multiethnic). For this report, we only focus on those characters coded American Indian/Alaska Native.

2. There are at least two major limitations with our approach to coding. First, we only evaluated “American Indians/Alaska Natives” for this analysis. Thus, characters that may disclose during the context of the plot that they are part Native American (multiracial/multiethnic) would *not* be captured. We do not anticipate that we missed many characters with this approach, given the abysmal prevalence of Native characters across the 16-year sample.

Second, we only focused on characters with linkages to a U.S. origin story. As such, indigenous characters from Canada, Mexico, Central and South America were excluded from analysis. It is important to note that we focus on indigenous representation in our Hispanic/Latino report and incorporate Native Hawaiian characters within our API research brief. In future work, we are looking to expand our analysis of Native representation across the Americas. That was not possible for this non-funded report, however.

3. U.S. Census. (n.d.) *Quick Facts*. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/>

4. Native descent and ancestry is complex and information on some actors was difficult to obtain. We privileged tribal affiliation as the most clear indicator of Native descent, but also relied upon other ways of acknowledging descent or ancestry. Those included statements regarding actors’ ancestry in press materials (even when the actor was not enrolled or recognized by a tribe), actors’ participation in industry events related to Native identification, and acknowledgements by tribal communities or other resource groups.

5. For each actor, we asked whether Native identity was contested online. We know that perceptions of identity can be deeply personal and wanted to both respect actors’ self disclosures as well as the beliefs of members within the broader Native American community.

To this end, we scrutinized information in a variety of ways taking into account the source of disclosure (actor, another individual), time of disclosure (did it correspond with a particular role on screen or not), participation in culturally relevant events inside or outside the entertainment

industry (panels, interviews), parents and grandparents ancestry, residence as a child, and any other information that may shed light on this measure.

After reading through compiled information, four members of the senior leadership of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative from a variety of different races/ethnicities rendered a judgment. We then consulted with Native activists about these decisions to ensure our thoughts aligned with members of the broader Native community. We recognize that our decisions may also be contested but wanted to be transparent about our approach and process.