

October 12, 2020

Dear Hollywood Colleagues and Allies,

The members of the Writers Guild of America West (WGAW) Native American and Indigenous Writers' Committee (NAIWC), feel compelled to discuss the continuing inaccurate narratives and erasure of our community by Hollywood, both onscreen and off.

According to Illuminatives, a non-profit dedicated to Native representation in media, Native American representation in film and entertainment is nearly invisible, making up 0.04% of all media, despite 78% of Americans wanting to see our stories told authentically. This statistic does not surprise our community, as we are often excluded from industry-wide diversity promises and rolled into the BIPOC acronym without recognition that Native and Indigenous people have a specific, necessary voice within this country. The history of Native American and Indigenous peoples in Hollywood mirrors our history with America — we helped create it only to be exploited and nearly erased from its memory. As America struggles with long overdue social reckoning, we believe now is the time to make amends for inadequate representation. As our society is utilizing media and stories to confront systemic racism, Hollywood must utilize its own power of story to implement equitable representation of Native American and Indigenous peoples. We challenge the film and television industry to commit to advancing Native and Indigenous representation, and actively support our qualified and emerging Guild writers who hold fresh perspectives, culturally rich and varying life experiences, and talent for authentic storytelling.

Across film and television we continue to see Native and Indigenous stories told by non-native writers who perpetuate inaccurate and racist representations. Modern and ingenious film and television shows that find a way to only portray Native and Indigenous characters in time capsules, as mythical creatures, spirit guides and victims of horrific trauma. There are currently lead actors and series regulars cast in Native American roles with no legitimate Native American background or heritage. This occurs because our industry's top decision makers — fellow union writers, producers, studio heads — continue to overlook and ignore the hiring of Native writers, directors or producers, who inherently come with an understanding of our community's nuance, cultural protocols and have our accurate representation in mind. This representation has real world consequences in perpetuating the unequal health, economic, and political outcomes of Native American and Indigenous peoples in this country and across the world.

Offensive portrayals of Native people began early in our profession. Narratives about the “savage race” began when ceremonial images captured by Thomas Edison in 1894 were purposefully mislabeled as the Ghost Dance in order to fuel ticket sales, justifying the Wounded Knee massacre by the United States government that killed 150 innocent Lakota men, women, and children. Although the “savage Indian” character was popularized by Buffalo Bill's “Wild West Show” in the 1880s, it exploded in the American imagination once Hollywood introduced talkies. In countless Westerns, audiences watched “red savages”

succumb to white supremacy by the end of the film. Portraying Tribes as aggressive and dying ethnic groups — relics going extinct to pave the way for civilization — was a convenient metaphor for Manifest Destiny.

Through the lucrative storytelling of the Hollywood Western, Native people and cultures were reduced to party costumes, sports mascots and caricatures, and a popular children's game — Cowboys and Indians — in which we are the villain. The caricature of the “savage Indian” adopted by major league sports teams as mascots is only now being recognized as the racist motif that it has been for nearly a century. These Hollywood stories — written by white men, directed by white men, and starring white men in red face — reinforced that what made America great was the triumph of the settler protecting his land despite the fact that these are our homelands that we have thrived in for time immemorial.

According to UCLA's 2020 Hollywood Diversity Report, Indigenous representation on and off-screen oscillated between “zero percent” to “nonexistent” in all categories. The 2020 WGAW Inclusion Report resembled UCLA's report by showing that with a 0.8% statistic in film, Native screenwriters have “no representation at all.” In television, Native TV writers are a mere 1.1% of all working writers.

By failing to tell contemporary and multi-dimensional Native stories, misconceptions continue regarding the legal rights of Native Nations and contributes to the harm of Native and Indigenous women. Erasure is felt as we continue the centuries old fight to have our treaties and sovereignty recognized.

Misinformation about tribal gaming and the law fuels present animosity, despite statistics which place Native Americans at higher rates of disease and mortality than other groups. The over-sexualized portrayal of Native women in media contributes to a rate of sexual assault 2.5 times greater than any other ethnicity. The Department of Justice found that Native and Indigenous women face murder rates 10 times higher than the national average. The consistent portrayal of Native and Indigenous women in film and television as victims of violent trauma contributes to this statistic. The image Hollywood has shaped of Native people denies and obscures actual inequality.

On an encouraging note, Native and Indigenous writers are changing this narrative and its consequences from within. Just this year, we have had our very first Native female show-runner, and there are currently two Native-led and created television shows in production replete with lead Native characters. Native-led film and television has the capacity to be economically viable and valuable to global audiences while maintaining authenticity and dignity. We are not relics of the past or useful props to fill out Westerns and period pieces. Native American and Indigenous people are alive, diverse, vibrant and culturally specific. We are the lead characters of our stories and we live right now in cities, on reservations, in suburbs, and in all walks of life. We are spouses, friends, bosses, and even superheroes. We are athletes, scholars, and service members. We are brilliant, intelligent, funny and successful. We have a lot to offer narratives across all genres and we want work alongside you to add our valuable, untapped perspectives and authenticity to your stories as well.

We call on our colleagues to move beyond the limiting practice of only hiring us as cultural consultants. We are not in the business of legitimizing scripts for free, or authorizing our stories for others to tell. We have seen this for more than a century, and it has only perpetuated racism toward our community by way of erasure and harmful stereotypes. We need you to zealously push for scripts written by Indigenous writers, TV shows run by Indigenous show-runners, filmed by Indigenous directors and portrayed by Indigenous actors to ensure we have the primary opportunity to portray our communities.

There are more than 574 federally recognized Tribes in the US and more than 476 million indigenous peoples worldwide. We, the Native American and Indigenous members of the Writer's Guild of America – a guild that sits on occupied Tongva and Kizh territory in what's known as Los Angeles – understand the power of words. We are the original story tellers of America, and we are here to reclaim our stories and join you in telling yours. We look forward to your commitment in working together to advance Native and Indigenous representation in all facets of film and television.

Sincerely,

**Native American & Indigenous Writers Committee**

Anthony Florez (Pyramid Lake Paiute (Numu), Washoe), **Co-Chair**

Azie Dungey (Pamunkey Indian Tribe of Virginia)

Billy Luther (Navajo /Hopi/Laguna Pueblo)

Bobby D Wilson (Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota)

Brian Wescott (Athabaskan/Yup'ik)

Christopher Courage Canole (Sac and Fox)

Derek Asaff

Jana Schmieding (Cheyenne River Lakota Sioux)

Jason Gavin (Blackfeet)

Jennifer Kennedy

Jonathon Roessler (Navajo)

Kelly Lynne D'Angelo (Tuscarora, Haudenosaunee)

Laura Nava (Chichimeca)

Laura Shamas (Chickasaw Nation)

Marilyn Thomas (Saulteux/Cree)

Michael January

Micah War Dog Wright (Muscogee Creek)

Migizi Pensoneau (Ponca/Ojibwe)

P. Carter Kristensen (Osage, Sak & Fox, Potawatomi)

Sierra Teller Ornelas (Navajo)

Sydney Freeland (Navajo)

Skye Knight Dent (Mississippi Choctaw)

Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Mvskoke-Creek)

Tai Leclair (Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk Nation)/Mi'kmaq)

Tazbah Rose Chavez (Bishop Paiute (Nüümü)/Navajo (Diné)/San Carlos Apache), **Co-Chair**

Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay)

Travis Adam Wright (Cherokee)

William Jehu Garroutte (Cherokee Nation)