

New animated films challenge false representation of Native Americans in the media

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Popular film and television shows have shaped the way Americans view American history - especially the frontier encounters between settlers and Native Americans. Examining the ways Native Americans are portrayed negatively in Westerns and other film genres, Joanna Hearne, assistant professor of English at the University of Missouri, describes recently produced animated films by Native directors that are countering media misrepresentations and helping promote Native-American stories and languages.

"When non-Native audiences see Native-Americans in Westerns, they often view them as part of the background, as if the actors are not really acting," Hearne said. "Westerns rarely portray Native Americans as having families or children, presenting images of dying or 'vanishing' Indians instead of Native family continuity. This can have a negative impact on Native children who watch the films, because these popular images are hostile to Native families."

In her examination of Native-American representations, Hearne documents many film and television programs that dramatize Native-American subjects but that were produced by non-Native-American directors. Even popular Disney films like Pocahontas and Peter Pan rely upon stereotypes, representing Native characters as threatening aggressors or passive, wise sages, Hearne said.

Animation films based on Native stories, including both digital and clay-animated productions, are growing in popularity. When produced by Native-American directors, animated films tell contemporary and traditional tribal stories accurately. Hearne says this helps youth relate to their communities and offers alternatives to English-language, mass media cartoons.

"Children are invited to learn values and language skills from animated images of storytellers, images that model relationships between younger and older generations," Hearne said. "Indigenous animated films such as *Stories from the Seventh Fire* and *Raven Tales* have been able to effectively represent and share Native-American stories from a Native-American perspective. These films address concerns about social accountability both in the languages and cultural values."

Hearne recently published her work on indigenous animated films in the chapter, "Indigenous Animation: Educational Programming, Narrative Interventions, and Children's Cultures," published in *Global Indigenous Media*.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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