



The Intersection of History and Race in American Media

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Abstract

As media consumers, individuals are directly influenced by the messages the media portrays. As a result, negative representations of minority groups have directly affected the social status of these communities in American culture. This research paper analyzes the portrayals of African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic-American groups in American media to argue that American films use the intersection of racist history and media between white and non-white groups in order to marginalize minorities. Specific U.S. commercials and films from the early twentieth century to the present will be used as case studies to support this argument. Comparisons are drawn from the media's usage of the history of slavery, stereotypical traits of these groups, and the U.S.-Mexican border to illustrate the different ways film misrepresents minorities.

Keywords: *Minority History, American Media, Marginalization, Stereotypes.*

INTRODUCTION

While the music and monochrome images of a 1960s Aunt Jemima TV commercial begin to roll, a young girl is shown eating pancakes for breakfast. When the narrator inquires about her thoughts on Aunt Jemima's new pancake syrup, she remarks, "Aunt Jemima, what *took* you so long?" Soon after, the camera zooms into the figure displayed on the advertised product, Aunt Jemima.¹ She is depicted wearing an apron, kerchief, and American headscarf, the common dress of enslaved women. This dress was what white families made enslaved women wear, further supported by a flat head scarf rather than a traditional African turban.² This raises the question of how benign this commercial and its product were, and how an understanding of American history can illuminate different aspects of racism found in the media.

Media has the power to influence the perceptions of groups of people directly. The content shown can construct status and dictate importance³, which is especially harmful to the self-esteem and self-worth of children when they see groups they identify with portrayed negatively, or not represented at all.⁴ This was, and is, the unfortunate reality for many minority groups in the history of the media. Beginning from the post-Civil War period, American cinema worked to appeal to white audiences as a result of white dominant history.⁵ Film industries valued decisions that maximized financial output, by labeling films that appealed to non-white audiences as insignificant. They allocated less of their budget to movies with a majority of minority actors. White actors were cast

in movies that were centered around the experiences of minorities, while minorities took on secondary and villain roles instead.⁶ This successfully kept minorities out of the industry, as directors assigned roles most suited for them to white actors.

The intersection of minorities and film can be studied by combining historical context with existing commentary on particular films. Understanding the intersection of media and racism requires a historical perspective that examines how American film has drawn upon the history of interaction between whites and non-whites in order to marginalize and mischaracterize minority groups. The following analysis shows that the media uses the history of slavery, the mistreatment of immigrants, and the landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border as the main tactics to draw distinctions between whites and minorities. One can only understand the subtleties of racism in U.S. film by exploring the history of these communities and how the media has exploited their experiences in order to differentiate them from the white majority.

CHARACTERIZATIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN MEDIA

To first address *Aunt Jemima's* full impact on Black film representation, history that seriously approaches the intersection of race and media must be considered. Cinema began with the American invention of the Kinetoscope in 1891, the first device that allowed people to view moving images. While these films were originally merely minutes

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long, by the early 20th century they had evolved into longer narratives that audiences paid to view; soon after, individuals began to experiment with elements such as sound and color.⁷ This period was also enforced by the Jim Crow law, where facilities infamously segregated black individuals from white individuals, framed by the phrase “separate but equal.”⁸ Spaces like movie theaters required separated physical spaces, such as black-only theaters. Other times, theaters split film screening times, where blacks were only allowed to squeeze into a balcony for special midnight showings; even then, the cushioned, front theater seats were prohibited.⁹ Black representation was indeed present in films; however, exhibitions included all-black comedies only and none of the other genres.

Examples of included films were slapstick and farce comedies, where whites appeared in blackface, or where blacks played robbers, gamblers, and beggars. In an attempt to redirect these representations and create realistic images of their race, African American film producers set out for success. Unfortunately, all of their movies had to pass censorship boards with a majority of white individuals who would require the deletion of many impactful scenes. This severely dampened the impacts of these films.¹⁰ Even later in the 2000s, large movie industries like Hollywood continually allocated less budget to black directors than white directors; this was their attempt at maximizing the industry’s financial return with films they believed would appeal to the public.¹¹

Aunt Jemima in particular began as an advertising tactic in 1889. Charles Underwood and Christopher Rutt, two white men, purchased a flour mill and sold ready-to-make pancake batter. However, their sales were not ideal; in search of a better marketing strategy, they stumbled upon a minstrel show performance of a white man in blackface impersonating a black woman named Aunt Jemima, the exemplary image of a mammy. Underwood and Rutt thought this idea was ingenious, and made the image of their product Aunt Jemima. This physically replicated having a black servant by one’s side as if they’d made the pancakes directly. Aunt Jemima soon became a multi-million dollar brand, and using blackface characters as faces of commercials for products became widespread and successful in the marketing industry.¹²

CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ASIAN-AMERICANS IN FILM

While Aunt Jemima’s character conveys a stereotypical role African Americans play due to their history of slavery in the US, it is difficult to embody the racial experiences of Asian Americans with a singular character. As a result, looking at three specific films across different eras of perspectives on Asian Americans will clarify the correlation between the history of their portrayal in the media and their real-life treatment.

Beginning in the 19th century, Asians played a large role in developing the United States as laborers. Well-known was the influx of over 25,000 Chinese immigrants for the California

Gold Rush by 1851.¹³ By the 1870s, these Chinese immigrants accounted for around 20% of California’s workforce.¹⁴ But as these numbers grew without end, white workers complained that immigrants were stealing their jobs. Chinese immigrants flew to the US in hopes of becoming rich from gold mining, leaving their family members behind. News spread globally about gold mines in California that could make anyone who seized opportunities rich. In reality, mining was a difficult, scarce, and low-paying job.¹⁵ To make a living and support their families overseas, they took on any job opportunity. Immigrants took on jobs of any wage, called cheap labor, often earning 30% less than their white counterparts. This negatively impacted white laborers, having to bargain for higher wages to raise their families in the United States, now that employers hired lower pay workers instead.¹⁶ Tensions rose with protests from anti-Chinese advocates.

Prohibition acts were soon passed to curb the immigrant community, turning the United States into a gate keeping country. The Page Act of 1875 disallowed the recruitment of laborers from “any Oriental country” into the US,¹⁷ while the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 targeted the Chinese in particular (and was the first and only major legislation to do so).¹⁸

This first understanding of Asians, job takers who undercut wages and lowered societal standards, was what appeared in Western media. The derogatory term “yellow peril,” coined shortly afterward, represented the threat Asians posed to the West. A core example in media is Dr. Fu Manchu, an Asian super villain created in 1913 who quickly gained popularity in the US.¹⁹ His goal was to conquer the Western world and destroy their race. Manchu, a chemist, murdered Westerners with all types of concocted poisons. This character represented a clear separation of the West and East, pointing out a seemingly inherent evil. Manchu first appeared in the book *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu* and was described as anything but human. He and his Asian henchmen were, as explicitly stated, “yellow” octopi with “reptilian gazes” and “all-embracing tentacles.” Sax Rohmer, the author, writes that they were “more like dreadful animals...than human beings.”²⁰

As a result of prohibition acts, many Chinese male immigrants were not able to bring their spouses over as restrictions (particularly in the Page Act) were placed on female immigration.²¹ Later on, anti-miscegenation laws were passed, which forbade interracial marriages of any female US citizen with an Asian immigrant. The Expatriation Act of 1907 dictated that female citizens who married any foreigner would lose their citizenship; there were even extra consequences for women who married Chinese men.²² In short, Chinese men were undesired and perhaps asexual. To continue, Chinese men took on all kinds of cheap labor to make a living. Professions that were widely available to them included cooks, waiters, tailors, and laundrymen, all “feminized” professions. In particular, however, Chinese men opened laundry lots because of financial ease and

low requirements for the English language. By 1870, there were 2,899 Chinese laundry workers in California. Whites described laundry work as jobs for women that men shouldn't touch for fear of tainting their social location, thus believing Chinese men belonged to a feminized race.²³ Femininity and unattractiveness tags continue to cling to Asian men today.

In the 20th century, many Asian Americans struggled through bouts of racist targeting, primarily as a result of Japanese detainment camps and exclusion acts around WWII that portrayed all Asian immigrants in a negative light.²⁴ Amidst this, John Hughes produced *Sixteen Candles* in 1984, a film negatively portraying stereotypical Asian characteristics with the Chinese character Long Duk Dong. He was a Chinese foreign exchange student living in the suburban home of an American family.²⁵ Each time his character appeared on screen, an Asian percussion instrument called the gong was played. He made awkward attempts to flirt and ended up in gender-swapped scenarios, such as sitting on the lap of a woman while she did the biking, showing that he was socially and sexually inept.²⁶

It was not until the 20th century, after the Cold War, that the model minority myth began to spread. Its origins had to do with the US' discrimination against black and brown people, painting them as "problem minorities" and contrarily, Asians as "model minorities."²⁷

Asian-American writer Frank Chin wrote a famous line in 1974: "Whites love us because we're not black."²⁸ But the model minority myth is problematic for all minorities. It puts others down by stating that Asians are supposedly more successful. It paints Asians as intelligent, hard-working, and diligent, helping them become the more successful minority. While this myth may seem like it's attributing positive and desired traits, it brings unfair stress and expectations to Asians.²⁹

The Goonies (1985) shows a noticeable divide between the Asian character Data and his counterparts, caused by these "successful" traits the directors attributed to him. This show was about a group of young heroes embarking to find a long-lost treasure to save their family homes from destruction, but racist overtones begin to shine through before the plot just by learning about the characters. The main characters are Mickey, Mouth, Data, and Chunk who defeat villains in the way of their treasure with the help of other friends. Data in particular, played by Vietnamese-American actor Ke Huy Quan, is a Chinese-American boy who is passionate about inventing (like his father). He carries gadgets and inventions that provide the "data" to assist his team out of dangerous situations throughout their journey. He is bound to make many mistakes with his inventions, such as a suction cup reel that leaves him headfirst in his neighbor's trash can.³⁰ This is not the only way he is made a large humor outlet in the film. Many of Data's friends encounter crushes and kiss other girls on their journey; while they flirt with groups of girls, Data is indifferent and is portrayed with an asexual characteristic.³¹

He also speaks in a heavy accent and mispronounces words more often than not. At one point, he remarks, "I'm setting booty traps," before being corrected by his friend: "Booby traps?" Data replies, "That's what I said, I'm setting booty traps..."³² Beyond Data's character, the film includes Latino and Italian characters. Extreme emphases are placed on their race, and these three minorities are almost always used as points of humor.³³

Furthermore, it is important to note some common tactics in films that portray Asian characters. Makeup artists were important cast members of films that cast white actors in roles of Asian characters. With the help of skin-darkening pigments, tape, and rubberbands to imitate what they deemed was an "Oriental look" to achieve Asian appearances. In 1992, Jenny Egan published *Imaging the Role: Makeup as a Stage in Characterization*, a stage makeup tips textbook, with an entire section dedicated to achieving an "Oriental look." She described an Oriental person with five distinct features: straight black hair, epicanthic flap (mono-eyelids), round/flat face, button nose with low nose bridge, and rosebud mouth. In actuality, Asia contains 6 main origin groups and over 40 countries, each having varying skin colors and looks, making the Oriental look only inclusive of some ethnicities.³⁴ Finally, a persistent trend that continues to be found in media today is what is called "color-blind casting." Directors will interchangeably cast different ethnicities of Asians. Early examples include Japanese-American Gedde Watanabe playing Chinese Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*; more modern that employ this include *Fresh Off the Boat*, casting Korean-American Randall Park as a Taiwanese-American character, and even *Crazy Rich Asians*, where British-Malaysian Henry Gouling played a Singaporean-Chinese.³⁵ While details like these do not impact the film itself, they diminish and are disrespectful to the history and diversity behind the many Asian ethnicities.³⁶

CHARACTERIZATIONS OF HISPANIC-AMERICANS IN FILM

While examining the intersection of history and film for African and Asian Americans, actors/actresses were repeatedly given stereotypical traits, such as subordinate roles, social incapability, and intelligence. Less often though, do producers assign a background associated with the race to convey their image. A holistic examination of the history of the U.S.-Mexico border and the resulting perspectives of Hispanics will explain the representations reflected in the film industry. The United States-Mexico border first took shape after the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848.

This treaty ended the Mexican-American war of 1846,³⁷ and as a result, the border became a symbol of the history of conflict between both nations. Furthermore, the treaty allotted the U.S. an additional 525,000 square miles of new territory, eventually becoming the states of California, Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. While the border was constructed to establish this new

divide between the U.S. and Mexico, it did not serve the role of limiting Mexican immigrants traveling into the U.S. at the time. Mexican immigrants then were able to travel freely across the border, in part because U.S. authorities were more focused on keeping Chinese immigrants from entering.³⁸ But when the number of Mexicans searching for cheap labor grew exponentially in the 1920s, governments set visa and public health requirements for immigrants of Mexican descent. Patrols were also added, requiring border crossers to pay fees.³⁹ After one Mexican immigrant came down with typhus, many Mexican laborers were put in camps with poor conditions. Several contracted the disease, and a total of 5 Mexicans died from it. According to the *1916 California State Board of Health Monthly Bulletin*, Mexicans were “the type of people who are bringing typhus and other diseases into California from Mexico;” this disease was even labeled as Mexican.

By the time the Great Depression rolled around in 1929, large-scale deportation programs had sent an estimated 1.6 million Mexicans back across the border, a relatively peaceful area at the time, as the idea that Mexicans brought diseases continued to spread and shape immigration policies.⁴⁰ Before 1929, entering the U.S. without authorization was not a crime. Authorities could deport immigrants, but they would never be charged or prosecuted. This changed with Section 1325 from 1929, which criminalized illegal entry, making it a federal misdemeanor.⁴¹ Within 10 years of Section 1325, over 44,000 immigrants were prosecuted. However, compared to the Great Depression’s “repatriation drives”, this was a small number. This was when Americans believed that Mexican immigrants were stealing their resources and jobs, all of which became scarce as a result of the Great Depression. A total of 1.8 million Mexican immigrants were deported from resulting raids.⁴² The 1980s was another period of large economic recession. A surge of Mexican immigrants came to the US looking for work, and border security quickly became a large concern of the nation.⁴³ Many operations were started to control the borders.

Border Patrol also began to enlist the use of modern technology and manpower, such as infrared night-vision scopes, seismic sensors, and computer processing systems.⁴⁴ Acts that aim to secure the border and limit illegal immigrants continue to grow today, and immigration has become the most politically discussed issue in our nation.⁴⁵

The ways in which the media has used the border as a landscape to draw associations between Mexicans and violence reflects the two nation’s long history of conflict. Extensive research on this relationship has been done since the 1990s, but movies representing the border have continued for centuries before then.⁴⁶ To focus on one example back from the 20th century, Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969) was centered around the Mexico-United States border and the violence during the Mexican Revolution in 1913. This film received controversial feedback about Mexican depictions.⁴⁷ *The Wild Bunch* showcases a group of American bandits who

seek refuge in Mexico after barely surviving a bank robbery in America.⁴⁸ While there were more Mexican than American actors in the film,⁴⁹ Peckinpah characterized the Mexican characters with the same broken English (speaking primarily in Spanish with no subtitles), bad breath, and humorous role stereotypes.⁵⁰ Arguably, the Mexican gang is displayed as the “bad killers” simply because they aren’t part of the film’s main focus, the Wild Bunch (the American gang).⁵¹ Many of the film’s scenes were cut against his wishes while critics were screening them; many details and violent scenes were left out in the 1969 released version, before being restored in the 1995 version.⁵² Moreover, the film’s location (set in Mexico) is highlighted. A magazine from 1969 on Peckinpah reads, “Peckinpah’s Mexico is a place where violence is not only plausible but inescapable.”⁵³ As a director, he followed the ongoing tradition of Mexico being a place driven by violence.⁵⁴ In this way, the border landscape has formed a powerful way in which the media has “othered” Mexicans or people of Hispanic descent. By framing questions about identity through borders and political topics, the media furthers negative characterizations (such as violence) of this racial group by isolating their physicality from whites in the media.

The history of hypersexualizing Hispanic women has its roots in a troubled realm of conflict between whites and Mexicans in the late 19th century. On July 5, 1891, Josefa Segovia, a Mexican, became the first (and only) woman lynched in California. On the day before her lynching, a gold miner named Frederick Cannon had entered Segovia’s house and assaulted her. After returning to Segovia’s house a second time the next day, she stabbed him with a knife.

Within two hours, judges and juries demanded she is executed for murder.⁵⁵ Later accounts referred to Segovia as ‘Juanita,’ a generic Mexican name, while dwelling on her beauty. William Downie, the Major of the town where this occurred, recalled this moment within his memoir under a chapter titled ‘Lynching a Beauty.’ Many individuals called Segovia a prostitute and a whore, her tale a consequence of her character and looks.⁵⁶ In films, it’s extremely common to see Hispanic women sexualized, displaying curvaceous and exotic bodies while having ill-tempered personalities.⁵⁷ This stereotype has tailed the shadows of Hispanic women long before Segovia’s legacy. Latina women’s bodies are shown as exotic and desired; they often played roles of forbidden love interests, with their bodies being the focus of the screen.⁵⁸

The movie, *Frida* (2002), provides an example of the intersection of sexuality and Latina film because it puts Latina sexuality at the center of its plot. In real life, Frida was a renowned individual in the feminist movement;⁵⁹ her work explored themes of gender, sexuality, nationality, and socialism, topics that were minimally touched upon in the 20th century.⁶⁰ However, in the movie about Frida Kahlo, her beliefs are overshadowed by the spotlight drawn on her sex appeal. Her body is consistently exposed throughout the film, particularly during the major turning points in her life,

such as a trolley accident that leaves her in a full-body cast and disabled. This scene was shot with a crane holding the camera at a high angle to capture the entire scene and Frida's body better⁶¹ as she lay in the middle of the street with her blouse undone and chest to the sky in blood and golden glitter. Throughout the rest of the film, Frida is shown engaging with several different love interests, from homosexual to heterosexual to transsexual. Scenes, where Frida engaged in lesbian dances with photographer Tina Modotti (played by Ashley Judd) to gain the attention of artist Diego Rivera (played by Alfred Molina), show the power 'male gaze' plays in films stereotyping women.⁶² Frida Kahlo is played by Salma Hayek, one of the first Mexican-American actresses to establish a successful career in the film industry back in the 1990s.⁶³ She is also known for talking publicly about the inherent racism she had faced as a result of her race. Numerous producers had told her that "[she] will only play a prostitute or drug dealer's wife or girlfriend and housekeeper because there are no other roles for [her]."⁶⁴ At the beginning of her career, she was offered roles that showcased the misogyny and racism she faced, such as playing a "sexy maid" in the 1990 film *Dream On*.⁶⁵ Even while filming *Frida*, Hayek was sexually harassed by the film's producer, Harvey Weinstein, having to constantly refuse his absurd sexual requests, which she revealed in a painful op-ed. She was excited about showcasing Mexican heritage through her role in *Frida*, but Weinstein said the "only thing [going for Hayek] was her sex appeal."⁶⁶ Even the most successful actors/actresses today sport racially challenging histories in this field; among Latina actresses, they faced the most stereotyping as a result of the hypersexualization of Latina bodies.

While movies in particular often paint Latinas as seducers, they portray Mexican men as dirty outlaws and bandits.⁶⁷ During the 19th century when discrimination against Mexicans increased as their population increased, Mexican men in particular were referred to with the slur "greasers." This was made to represent their greasy appearance and shiny, greased-back hair from their common jobs as mechanics.⁶⁸ Similar to the influx of Asian immigrants,

Anglo-Americans were off-put when large numbers of Mexican immigrants moved West in the 1800s. As a result of competition for land and resources, Anglo-Americans felt the need to classify respective borders for both cultures. In early literature, Americans were superior to Mexicans, portraying a "fictional need for villains who [offered] maximum contrast to the heroes."⁶⁹ Among these fictional characters were greasers, with easily identified stereotypical looks. They sported greasy hair under sombreros, scraggly mustaches, stained fingers and teeth, and dark complexions. During the 19th century, Jeremiah Clemens, a US Senator and novelist from Alaska who served from 1849 to 1853,⁷⁰ said, "The people are greasy, their dogs are greasy, their houses are greasy."⁷¹ Thus, "greaser" portrayals of Mexicans in the media aren't surprising, given the openness of American politicians explicitly describing Mexicans in such a way.

The stereotyping of Mexicans in media extends beyond films, including popular advertisements and commercials. In American history, many commercials have capitalized upon associations between food and Hispanic culture to promote stereotypes. While one could turn to a number of example commercials, Frito-Lay's use of the character Frito Bandito in the 1970s intriguingly encompasses a larger scope of stereotypes held against Mexican men. This short cartoon mascot donned a large sombrero, pistols and bandoleers, a golden tooth, and a 'classic' handlebar mustache.⁷² His role was to steal frito chips from the citizens by threatening them at gunpoint. "Ai yi yi, oh I am dee Frito Bandito, hee hee!" he sang in a strong Mexican accent.⁷³ In the advertisement's plot, Frito Bandito was wanted by the FBI (Frito Bureau of Investigation) as a "bad man" who stole Frito chips; he was an "outlaw."⁷⁴ Frito Bandito was voiced by American voice actor Mel Blanc. This is a clear example of "brown-voicing," the racialized vocal performance of a Mexican accent.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Frito Bandito's advertisements primarily played between children's broadcasted TV shows. As it gained popularity, it eventually spread to numerous shows.⁷⁶ Frito-Lay refused to take down their Frito Bandito campaign, using statistics collected (85% of Mexican Americans liking the Frito Bandito character) as their reason to deny criticism their mascot had received.⁷⁷ However, they were soon after shut down by appeals from the National Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee and Involvement of Mexican-Americans in Gainful Endeavors in 1969.⁷⁸

Even after Frito Bandito was formally withdrawn from the market in 1971,⁷⁹ poor stereotypical depictions of Mexicans (such as greasers and outlaws) became a "trend" in the marketing industry. In 1975, Tequila Gavalin created a poster that featured a shaggy Mexican man with a sombrero and bandolier of bullets seated next to a woman. "One taste... and you're not a Gringo anymore... Want your own bullet cleverly designed as a salt shaker? You'll never know when you'll need one," the poster reads, using a derogatory Latin American term, Gringo, for a foreigner.⁸⁰ Racial stereotypes are commonly paired with representations of Mexican men, from a mustache and a sombrero to mentions of guns and bullets. These representations continue to appear in the modern film industry, such as in the *Despicable Me* series (displayed by villain El Macho's accent, attire, and physique) and more.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

The value of analyzing the different ways in which the media has represented minority groups lies in the specificities and nuances of landscapes and historical processes. Whereas the media has drawn upon the history of slavery in order to characterize African Americans and frame them as subordinates, films use the border to "other" Hispanics and isolate them from the Anglo-American majority much like political standings on immigration and the border. In film, Aunt Jemima was demanded by a white child for orders at the breakfast table; Fu Manchu and his minions were yellow

reptiles; Data was the brain of his group; Frida Kahlo's activism and groundbreaking ideas were diminished down to her bodily characteristics; Frito Bandito was a fusion of all Mexican male stereotypes to draw in customers. There is an extensive history of film for minority groups, yet producers continually find ways to outdo themselves in harsh representations of them.

At the same time, while these differences form an important part of the representation of minorities, this analysis also shows that a common strategy that film uses is language and humor. American films in the 20th century regularly characterized non-whites as having strong accents or struggling to pronounce specific words in the English language. They are catalysts for laughter, whether this relates to their language abilities or not. By doing so, producers portray white characters in a more sophisticated light, where they have character arcs, love interests, and successes. Minorities are used as tools to further plot and keep audiences engaged.

Finally, an emphasis on portraying these groups in American films raises questions about how other groups have been depicted or even minimized in the media. For instance, while the history of Native Americans precedes the founding of the U.S., there is an overall dearth of representation of this group in American film.⁸² Native Americans rarely have main roles in films; they accounted for less than 0.25% of speaking roles in films for the past 16 years.⁸³ They only make entrances outside of standard scenes, such as modern-day time periods and social/cultural contexts. The media mostly uses Native Americans as symbols of the American past and presents them as a dying, vanishing race situated in conquered or lost landscapes.⁸⁴ This aspect of the absence or characterization of Native Americans in film only points to the need for further research that builds upon the arguments made in the present study.

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