

Indigenous (Mis)Representation in Emerging LLM Research Methodologies

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ABSTRACT

The American road to the present has been dominated by injustice, massacre, and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. However, this past has been perpetually mythologized and whitewashed, ideologically reinforcing settler-colonial systems of control. Popular histories of the American westward expansion often allow the nation to evade responsibility for the injustices embedded in the U.S.'s nation-building. This study examines the perpetuation of Indigenous historical misrepresentations through cinematic portrayals of Native Americans and the reemerging accessibility of these portrayals through conversations with Large Language Models (LLMs) and related forms of layperson's historical research. Fifty-two progressive Western films were compiled by prompting OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini, in addition to scraping the top Wikipedia results from Google's search engine. These films were then analyzed on various aspects of positive, negative, and absent representation of Indigenous people. Through this analysis, the inadequacies of LLMs in understanding historical and cultural ethics are illuminated. By evaluating critical dimensions in casting practices, prevalence of tropes, and narrative framing in the selected films, an image of a continuing and evolving cultural genocide emerges. The findings suggest that the integration of LLMs in research practices only exacerbates the spread of misinformation, undermining efforts by Indigenous and activist academics and filmmakers to challenge reductive stereotypes. This research advocates for enhanced digital literacy and critical engagement with AI-driven tools to mitigate their detrimental effects on historical understanding and cultural representation, contributing to a broader discourse on the ethical implications of AI and its role in the preservation and dissemination of marginalized histories.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous representation, Western film history, Large Language Model (LLM), Artificial intelligence, Internet research efficacy, History education

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INTRODUCTION

Moments of victory largely define U.S. history as it is known to the layperson. Nearly any American could provide a clear sequence that contains the landing of the Pilgrims, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the success of the American Revolution, the drafting of the Constitution, the perseverance of the Union through the Civil War, the end of the “Wild West,” victory in the World Wars, and the fall of the Soviet Union. However, anything beyond the most basic ideas of these events is susceptible to and victim of perpetual propagandizing and mythologization.¹ Numerous causes, both antecedent and symptomatic, for this paradigm can be postulated and have filled thousands of volumes throughout the historiographical and sociological canons. Attributing the causes of this situation is not the focus of this paper. Instead, this study highlights cinema as one of the foremost tools of historical education for Americans outside of classrooms and provides ample opportunity for mythologization of U.S. history.²

For numerous Americans, western films provide context regarding this formational era of our nation’s history, while also demonstrating profoundly visible propagandization and glorification regarding the removal and genocide of American Indigenous peoples. Redface, the attempt by a non-Indigenous person to appear so, and the prototypical “Hollywood Indian” were both endlessly propagated in this genre, excluding Native peoples from participation in the production and storytelling of westerns.³ Numerous

academics from across various disciplines share a consensus on the harmful impacts of stereotyping in media, identifying the real-world discrimination and hate it can often produce. Due to centuries of erasure and suppression of Native voices in academia, sources authored by Indigenous peoples have fallen into greater and greater obscurity, particularly given the overwhelming quantity of sources now available through the World Wide Web. With little exposure to these perspectives, they are only rarely cited in academic studies.

As the digital and internet age has progressed, the advent of Large Language Models (LLMs), Artificial Intelligence programs with the ability to mimic human language to communicate with the user and other Artificial General Intelligences (AGI’s) has muddied the layperson’s research of history, a field already rife with misinformation and predatory rhetoric. This study seeks to understand, on a limited scale, the implications of this new method of information gathering as it pertains to the Indigenous peoples of America.⁴ Through interactions with Google’s Gemini chatbot and its integrated search engine, in addition to a shallow Wikipedia exploration, a list of fifty-two Western films was produced. These films were presented by the LLM as fair representations of the history of American Indigenous peoples, suggesting to a non-academic audience that they offer valid expressions of Indigenous perspectives. Through analysis of this dataset, alongside historical and academic literature about the portrayal of Indigenous peoples in film, this study produces a review of literature regarding Native Americans in the Western genre

- 1). Joanne Esch, “Legitimizing the ‘War on Terror’: Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric: Political Myth in Official-Level Rhetoric,” *Political Psychology* 31, no. 3 (June 2010): 357–91, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00762.x>, 366-372; Jonathan Friedman, “Myth, History, and Political Identity,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 2 (1992), 202-204.
- 2). John E. O’Connor, “History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past,” *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (December 1988): 1200, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1873535>, 1202-1203; Debra Donnelly, “Using Films in the Development of Historical Consciousness: Research, Theory and Teacher Practice,” *History Education Research Journal* 17, no. 1 (April 1, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.17.1.09>, 116-117.
- 3). Laurence M. Hauptman, “Mythologizing Westward Expansion: Schoolbooks and the Image of the American Frontier before Turner,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (July 1977), <https://doi.org/10.2307/966995>, 272-275.
- 4). Scott Monteith et al., “Artificial Intelligence and Increasing Misinformation,” *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 224, no. 2 (February 2024): 33–35, <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2023.136>; Pranshu Verma, “The Rise of AI Fake News Is Creating a ‘Misinformation Superspreader,’” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 2023, <https://newsliteracymatters.commons.gc.cuny.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/8164/files/2024/10/How-AI-fake-news-is-creating-a-%E2%80%98misinformation-superspreader-The-Washington-Post.pdf>; Zhuoran Lu et al., “The Effects of AI-Based Credibility Indicators on the Detection and Spread of Misinformation under Social Influence,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6, no. CSCW2 (November 7, 2022): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3555562>.

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and develops an understanding of the implications of LLM development and usage on the accessibility of harmful, outdated films and the misinformation they present.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS AMERICANS IN THE WESTERN

For as long as humans have spoken, stories have been told. Integral to the survival of early humans, the desire to narrate one's experiences and feelings has been developed through hundreds of millennia of natural selection and evolutionary development.⁵ Videography, even as it has surpassed a century of success and progression, is yet another venue for this storytelling. As the cinema has commercialized and grown into a monumental economic powerhouse, accessible to nearly any American, screenwriters and directors have developed a profound influence on the popular consciousness, with the power to present or withhold information from the public. Mirroring the classic drama, the cantastoria, or any oration, filmmaking presents its creators with a unique control over allegory and its bounds, often reflecting the worldviews and desires of the artist.⁶ The world the film inhabits is manufactured, allowing imaginary realities to be presented as truth. Filmmakers' own perspectives and biases often shape their work, turning numerous attempts at historical authenticity in film into profoundly misguided historical fantasy.⁷

America's colonial expansion westward is a campaign brimming with tales of genocide and cultural destruction of Indigenous peoples. Hundreds of tribes, thousands of settlements, and hundreds of thousands of people lived on the land that the American empire sought. Through military

action, settler-colonial decimation of populations, civil persecution, rape, murder, and genocide, Americans forced the imaginary boundary of America through the ancestral lands of numerous Indigenous peoples. Despite centuries of waging war against the imperial machine, tribes were brutalized until they were forced to surrender, lest they face the fate of those in Sand Creek, Hynes Bay, Howonquet, or numerous other villages of Indigenous who were indiscriminately slaughtered.

By the mid eighteenth century, the dime novel was the predominant form of fiction consumed by Americans; early foundations of the Western Myth were established in these sensational, exploitative renditions of life on the frontier. The Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains were reduced to environmental antagonists or fetishized love interests overshadowed by the determined, rugged cowboy pushing forward America's territory.⁸ In 1869, Ned Buntline published *Buffalo Bill, The King of Border Men*, which was adapted for the stage by Frederick Maeder as *Buffalo Bill*, evolving into *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. Featuring the "real" Buffalo Bill, William Frederick Cody, the show was an immediate hit, immersing audiences in a glorified rendition of western life, featuring Indigenous characters played by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors. Touring internationally, the show cemented many of the stereotypes which would define western cinema.⁹ The show routinely acted out scalplings and village destruction, with the Indigenous peoples typically portrayed as bloodthirsty savages to be put down by Buffalo Bill. Off the stage, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody pressed further on these stereotypes, proclaiming himself an "Indian fighter," recounting tales of murdering and scalping Indigenous

5). Daniel Smith et al., "Cooperation and the Evolution of Hunter-Gatherer Storytelling," *Nature Communications* 8, no. 1 (December 5, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1038/541467-017-02036-8>.

6). Sean Cubitt, *Videography: Video Media as Art and Culture* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 174-176.

7). Cynthia D. Bond, "Laws of Race/Laws of Representation: The Construction of Race and Law in Contemporary American Film," *Texas Review of Entertainment & Sports Law* 11 (May 9, 2010): 241-243, 261-263.

8). Ralph E. Friar and Natasha Friar, *The Only Good Indian: The Hollywood Gospel* (New York, NY: Drama Book Specialists, 1972), 9-16.

9). Ed Buscombe, *Injuns! Native Americans in the Movies, Locations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 49-54.

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warriors.¹⁰ *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* brought the myth of the American frontier to the public, beginning a century of popular cultural interest in western fiction.

The first publicly screened American commercial film portraying a Native American, now lost, was Wallace McCutcheon's and Edward Porter's 1907 *Daniel Boone*, features the titular Boone seeking vengeance against an unnamed Indigenous tribe who previously attacked his cabin off-screen, getting captured and being tortured before escaping and killing the Chief in hand-to-hand combat.¹¹ In 1907 alone, six more silent westerns would be produced, marking an increase in popularity of the genre.¹² In this early period of film, few westerns with true character substance were produced. Instead, the focus was on the visual elements of the genre, including the characteristic costuming of Indigenous characters.¹³ James Young Deer was the first Indigenous commercial director, directing and acting in dozens of films about Indigenous culture and life. His work on *The Invaders*, directed by Francis Ford in 1912 is particularly notable, and James Young Deer served as one of the first true cultural ambassadors on a Hollywood film set.¹⁴ However, in 1913, D.W. Griffith, famed for directing and writing *The Birth of a Nation*, directed *The Red Man's View*, a sympathetic portrait of Native Americans as a

helpless peoples who are pushed further and further west by advancing Whites. Often heralded as the most progressive film regarding Native peoples during the silent film era, the film was the first commercially successful film focused on the Indigenous genocide.¹⁵

As Americans returned from the First World War and the economic upturn of the 1920s began, film production rapidly increased. By this time, westerns had already become the foremost genre of film, with a majority of them also featuring Indigenous Americans.¹⁶ The western satisfied a nostalgic interest in pre-industrial life, particularly in cities where movies were screened.¹⁷ In turn, the fictionalized domination and conquest in these films fulfilled a White fantasy for times when there was a *savage Indian*, allowing the audience the satisfaction of a fictional victory.¹⁸ When the Great Depression hit, this sentiment only became more intense.

By the 1950s, after nearly a half century of western film production, directors and writers who sought to push the boundaries of the genre began to experiment with its established tropes and stereotypes. John Ford was particularly noted for the complexity of his films, which often had a greater degree of moral ambiguity than did other

10). William Cody, *Buffalo Bill's Own Story of His Life and Deeds* (Chicago: Homewood Press, 1917), <http://archive.org/details/buffalobillsownsoobuffrich>.

11). Michael Hilger, *Native Americans in the Movies: Portrayals from Silent Films to the Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 407.

12). *Ibid*, 408-409.

13). Bob Herzberg, *Savages and Saints: The Changing Image of American Indians in Westerns* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 18-22.

14). Joanna Hearne, *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 44-53.

15). Michael Hilger, *Native Americans in the Movies*, 409.

16). Beverly R. Singer, *Wiping the War Paint off the Lens: Native American Film and Video*, 1st ed., Visible Evidence v. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 14-23.

17). Frederick Elkin, "The Psychological Appeal of the Hollywood Western," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 24, no. 2 (October 1950), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2263795>, 76-79.

18). Richard M. Wheelock, "Reconsidering America's Errand: Wilderness and 'Indians' in Cinema," in *Native Apparitions*, ed. Steve Pavlik, M. Elise Marubbio, and Tom Holm, Critical Perspectives on Hollywood's Indians (University of Arizona Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1gn3t9b.6>, 32-35.

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films of the era. Nonetheless, the films of this era reflected a different stereotype of Indigenous peoples, primarily that they were disappearing.¹⁹ Numerous films attempted to capture the plight of Indigenous Americans, but often fell back on White Savior or romantic plotlines to produce sympathy.²⁰ Further stifling progressive filmmaking at this time was the Hayes Code, which discouraged filmmakers from producing work which could be seen as Anti-American.

Casting remained an issue in Indigenous portrayals in Hollywood even as filmmakers wrote more sympathetic Native characters. Jewish, Hispanic, or Black actors were primarily cast as Indigenous peoples in Western films. Language and behavioral traits were rarely accurate, if not caricatural.²¹ In many cases, the Native peoples in the films were played by White actors, particularly when a woman was sexualized in the plot.²² These casting issues persisted even as the genre declined in popularity.²³

By the Age of Revolutions in the 1960s and the 1970s, public interest in westerns had begun to fade. Spaghetti westerns and progressive westerns became the predominant films in the genre until they also fizzled out in the 1980s.

Films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Django Unchained* (2012) carry the legacy of the genre, while pushing racial and ethical boundaries. Despite this, the widespread popularity of the cowboy mythos has passed.

RESEARCH OUTSIDE THE ACADEMY IN THE 21ST CENTURY AMIDST THE RISE OF LLMs

An individual in the U.S. is guaranteed only twelve years of formal historical instruction, only the last few of which are spent researching difficult subject matters. Upon graduation from high schools, students are expected to have the capacity to read and critically understand historical sources and works. This is not the case.²⁴ Given this inadequacy in the comprehension and analytical skills of many American adults, a reliance on emerging tools, particularly LLMs is to be expected.²⁵ However, the inadequacies of accessible LLMs are particularly flawed in regards to informed research.²⁶ Models such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini often "hallucinate data," a term used by LLM engineers to describe a phenomena in which chatbots produce false, imagined information. This is in addition to lacking the

19). Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series; v. 26 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 120-125.

20). Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 75-77; M. Elise Marubbio, *Killing the Indian Maiden: Images of Native American Women in Film* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 169-174.

21). Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film*, Book Collections on Project MUSE. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 51-55.

22). M. Elise Marubbio, *Killing the Indian Maiden*, 93-101.

23). Bob Herzberg, *Savages and Saints*, 281-282.

24). Diana S. Hooley, Lee Ann Tysseling, and Beverly Ray, "Trapped in a Cycle of Low Expectations: An Exploration of High School Seniors' Perspectives About Academic Reading," *The High School Journal* 96, no. 4 (April 2013): 321-38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2013.0018>; George W. Moore et al., "High School Students and Their Lack of Preparedness for College: A Statewide Study," *Education and Urban Society* 42, no. 7 (November 2010): 817-38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124510379619>; Kathryn S. McCarthy and Eleanor F. Yan, "Reading Comprehension and Constructive Learning: Policy Considerations in the Age of Artificial Intelligence," *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 11, no. 1 (March 2024): 19-26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322231218891>.

25). Peter Brusilovsky, "AI in Education, Learner Control, and Human-AI Collaboration," *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education* 34, no. 1 (March 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40593-023-00356-z>, 126-129.

26). Donghee Shin, Amy Koerber, and Joon Soo Lim, "Impact of Misinformation from Generative AI on User Information Processing: How People Understand Misinformation from Generative AI," *New Media & Society*, March 20, 2024, 14614448241234040, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241234040>, 7-10.

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ability to understand human sensitivities and emotions to the same capacity a real person would.²⁷ Thus, it is necessary to analyze the data output a potential lay researcher may receive from these chatbots, in addition to surveying the complementary sources they would likely utilize.

Following the release of media such as *Westworld* (2016-2022), *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), *Yellowstone* (2018-2024), *The Power of the Dog* (2021), and *1883* (2021-2022), westerns have made a reentry into the popular consciousness. As fans of these franchises seek further experiences within the genre, the repolarization of older media is inevitable, permitting the harmful ideas expressed in earlier western films to reemerge. The age of many of these films is apparent, and this will likely discourage modern viewers. Regardless, this new popularity presents narratives which serve to produce incomplete and dangerous ideologies regarding American colonialism.

LLM chatbots allow the layperson to conduct research on an incredible scale within seconds; information which could take years of professional research to gather. To understand the output a lay researcher may receive, simple, non-technical phrasing was used in interactions with the LLMs. OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Bard were consulted for this study. Additionally, the Wikipedia pages for "Native Americans in Film" and "Revisionist Westerns" were scraped, as they were the first results to come up when searching "Native American Western Wikipedia" on Google, DuckDuckGo, Bing, and Yahoo.

Both chatbot models received the same question: "What are some movies that have well-written Native Americans?" Following the answer, the LLM was told to "Give me 5 more." This process was repeated until the recommendations began to repeat. From these sources, fifty-two films which featured Native Americans characters were produced. These films were compiled and analyzed based on:

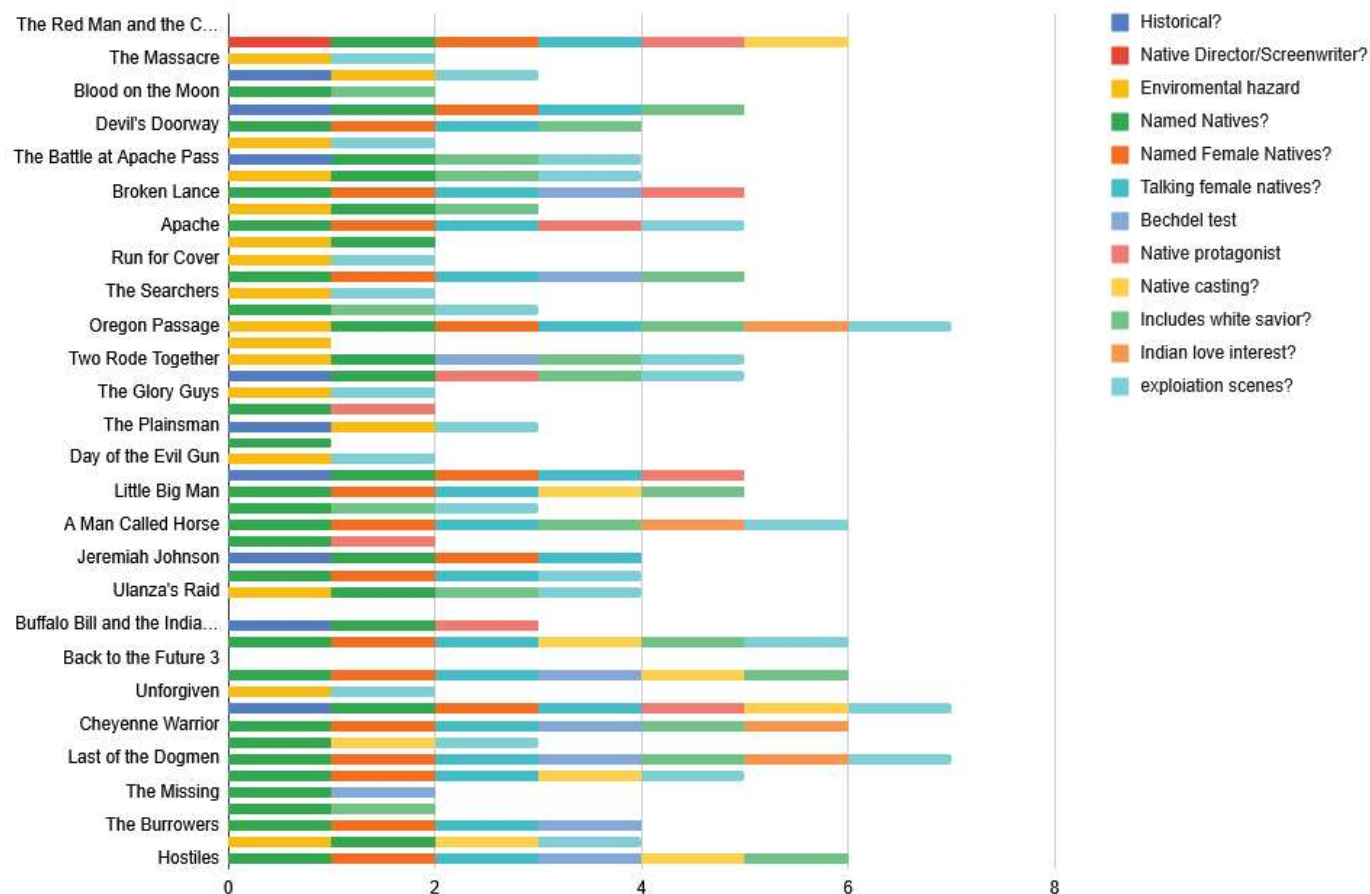
- the ethnicity of the director/screenwriters,
- the presence of the environmental hazard trope,
- if Native characters were credited with names,
- if female Native characters were credited with names,
- if any female Native characters had lines of dialogue,
- if the film passed the Bechdel test,²⁸
- if the film cast Indigenous actors,
- the critical reception,
- the box office success,
- the presence of the White Savior trope,
- the presence of an Indian seductress stereotype,
- if they contained any violent or sexual exploitation scenes.

27. Fadi Aljamaan et al., "Reference Hallucination Score for Medical Artificial Intelligence Chatbots: Development and Usability Study," *JMIR Medical Informatics* 12 (July 31, 2024): e54345, <https://doi.org/10.2196/54345>.

28. Bechdel Test (Bechdel-Wallace Test): Method of media analysis regarding representation of women in film created as a joke in 1985 by cartoonist Allison Bechdel. The Bechdel Test asks if a film features two women talking to each other about something that is not a man or concerning a man.

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Aggregate Tropes



The results are as follows:

- One film, James Young Deer's *White Fawn's Devotion*, was directed by an Indigenous filmmaker.
- Seventeen films included the "environmental hazard" trope.
- Thirty-eight featured named Indigenous characters, while twenty featured named Indigenous women, and of those, twenty also had speaking lines.
- Nine films passed the Bechdel test.
- Nine films featured a Native protagonist.
- Three featured a mixed-race protagonist.
- Nine featured full Native casting.
- Eight featured partial Native casting.

In terms of critical reception:

- Fifteen films received overwhelming acclaim.
- Seven were well received.
- Eighteen had mixed reviews.
- Five received a negative reception.
- Three were critically panned.

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At the box office:

- Twelve films earned more than triple their budget.
- Four earned more than double.
- Nine surpassed their budget.
- Five underperformed.
- Seventeen earned less than half their production costs.

Narratively:

- Twenty-one films included a White Savior figure.
- Four featured an indigenous love interest.
- Twenty-six depicted scenes of violent or sexual exploitation.

From this list, only seven were pulled from Wikipedia, four of which were highly progressive films which fulfilled nearly every category. The first film both chatbots typically recommended was the infamous 1970 *Soldier Blue*, whose concluding scene portraying the Massacre at Sand Creek is one of the most shocking ever put on tape. Amidst graphic technicolor footage of simulated rape and child murder, a White protagonist gawks and cries at the scene before him while a White woman serves as the central bond between him and the tribe. Although powerful in its grotesqueness and shocking nature, it fails to capture the humanity of the Cheyenne people. Instead, it revels in their slaughter, fetishizing one of the worst incidents in American history.

When compiling and categorizing this list, the blatant inability of the LLM to produce results which treated Indigenous characters respectfully was shocking. The chatbot was especially ineffective at recommending films which treated Indigenous women favorably, with only nine passing the Bechdel test. This inadequacy is troubling, given the current prevalence of historic misinformation on the internet. With AI's growing role as a journalist, writer, blogger, historian, and internet media creator, this lack of

critical analytical ability is troubling.²⁹ The future of popular history will likely see a surge in misrepresentations if these issues are not addressed.

CONCLUSION

The presence of these westerns is not the problem, but the confident pushing of them by “reliable” tools is highly detrimental to the work of Indigenous academics and filmmakers who are attempting to repair these fields. Outside of the arts, the real lives of Indigenous peoples are deeply affected by these portrayals; individuals are often stereotyped and confined according to the imagery within the films. Native children and youth are particularly likely to be victims of this, both in school and in their own self-image.

For as long as popular media has proliferated in the United States, Indigenous peoples have been otherized and marginalized through these works. Misrepresentation is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that will continue until tools of society are adapted to prevent its continued spread. Given the profit incentive of LLM and AGI companies, significant change which does not contribute to their bottom line is unlikely. However, through educating our peers and the public about these issues, the uncritical proliferation of historically inaccurate and dehumanizing materials may be slowed.

29). Begüm Aydın and Mustafa İnce, “Can Artificial Intelligence Write News: A Research On Determining The Effect Of Artificial Intelligence On News Writing Practice,” *Intermedia International E-Journal* 11, no. 20 (June 28, 2024): 24–41, <https://doi.org/10.56133/intermedia.1436647>.

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