Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

OVERSIGHT HEARING

"STOLEN IDENTITIES: THE IMPACT OF RACIST STEREOTYPES ON INDIGENEOUS PEOPLE"

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I am currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles and also teach at California State University, Long Beach. I received my Ph.D. in film history from Columbia University and am the author of the book *Making the White Man's Indian: Native Americans and Hollywood Movies* (2005). In 1994, I was a Fulbright Scholar as a part of the Canada-U.S. Fulbright Exchange Program at the University of Toronto where I studied Native Canadian images in film.

Chairman Akaka and honorable members of the committee, I am honored to have received your invitation to submit testimony on this important issue. My focus will be specifically on a few topics that are often overlooked but nevertheless influence today's Native American images in motion pictures.

One of the recurring and disturbing themes that I've noticed in my research is that Hollywood Westerns virtually dominate Native American images. That's not surprising given that Native Americans traditionally have been associated with the Western myth: from the Dime Novel tales and the paintings of Frederic Remington to the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill Cody and the popular Western movie and TV series, Indians appear to be inextricably linked to a remote frontier era. Their portrayals have ranged from negative to sympathetic; nevertheless, Indians rarely appear in contemporary stories. If I may say so, the confinement of Native Americans to nostalgic Westerns is a bit like restricting African Americans to the ante-bellum days in the Old South. The practice ignores the fact that Indians are people here among the rest of us with individual identities and problems of their own.

American audiences are partly to blame. Unfortunately, when non-Western films with an Indian theme do appear, moviegoers show little interest. When I researched my book, I was amazed to discover that throughout Hollywood history, box-office grosses for Native American stories in non-Westerns were considerably lower than Westerns. As far back as the 1930s, the unknown but compelling film *Eskimo* (the dialogue was in the Inuit language and subtitled in English) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning story of *Laughing Boy* disappeared from screens after barely a week in movie theaters. Conversely, a few years later, *The Plainsman*, a rousing Cecil B. DeMille Western about the exploits of Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickok, followed by *Stagecoach*, *Texas Rangers*, and *Union Pacific*, drew enormous lines at box offices. As the Native American filmmaker Chris Eyre (*Smoke Signals*, *Skins*, *Edge of America*) once told me, the problem in Hollywood is that supply and demand dictate that Indians are romanticized and continue to be romanticized in the Western.

The Westerns of today, although a far cry from the hostile warriors of *The Plainsman*, still dominate the Native American's image: *Dances With Wolves* earned a whopping domestic total gross of $184 million followed by *Maverick's* $102 million. But non-Western Indian-themed stories like *Powwow Highway* ($284,000), *Thunderheart* ($23 million), *Smoke Signals* ($7 million), *Windtalkers* ($41 million), *The Education of Little Tree* ($323,000), and *Flags of Our Fathers* ($34 million) continue to show that few Americans accept contemporary Indian life as entertainment. David Robb, former writer of minority and legal affairs for the *Hollywood Reporter*, believes that this pattern affects not only our perceptions of Native Americans but Indians themselves: "It relegates Indian people to a distinct past. It stigmatizes Indian people and makes them non-existent today."

That brings me to my next point. The novels and movies of the popular *Twilight* series are set in contemporary society and feature Quileute Indians who can transform into wolves. *Twilight's* supernatural stories have earned tremendous revenues. Others have already pointed out that *Twilight's* Native Americans have significant roles in the series.

But beyond *Twilight's* teen love triangle are a few disturbing traits of its Quileute characters. The theme of individual choice is essential to *Twilight:* the stories' vampire hero Edward consistently refers to his moral obligation to exercise individual choice. On the contrary, *Twilight's* Native Americans lack self control and the ability to choose: Edward's Quileute rival Jacob transforms into a wolf because, he says, "I was born this way. It's not a lifestyle choice. I can't help it." (*The Twilight Saga: New Moon*) Furthermore, Jacob's last name is Black and in the novel *New Moon*, he is described as having russet skin and a quick, uncontrollable temper.

Jacob's wolf traits can be dangerous. In *New Moon*, Jacob warns his human friend Bella that if he gets too upset, he will turn into a wolf and she might get hurt. Jacob's Quileute friend Sam Uley also has a capricious temper: in *New Moon*, Sam's fiancée Emily has three thick red lines on the right side of her face that "extend all the way down her arm to the back of her right hand." Apparently, Sam lost control during one of his wolf transformation episodes and left deep scars on Emily.

I doubt *Twilight's* author and filmmakers intended to invoke misleading stereotypes. But the references of "dark" to the Quileute, their impulsive and irrational nature, and their inclination toward violence are a reversion to the negative images we hope to eradicate. As a professor, scholar, and writer, I believe that cultural awareness and education will help curb these problematic representations.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to present this testimony before the Senate panel.