AMERICAN INDIANS AND THE MASS MEDIA
EDITED BY META G. CARSTARPHEN AND JOHN P. SANCHEZ
Smoke Signals offers Native people equipment for living, from their simple desire to see themselves in the media, to a way to fill the loneliness experienced in an urban environment. This chapter explores ways in which the film Smoke Signals uses Native humor, in-group jokes, and recognizable universal characters to fill the void and create a connection with Native viewers through familiar scenes of "home" on the reservation and universally recognizable characters. Resolution of the characters' problems and conflicts may offer viewers symbolic closure for their own experiences.

It's a good day to be Indigenous!
Randy Peonne, DJ for KREZ Radio, voice of the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation, in Smoke Signals

Smoke Signals premiered in 1998 in Park City, Utah, at the Sundance Film Festival. Based on Sherman Alexie's book The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven, the screenplay was written by Alexie and co-produced with Chris Eyre. Accolades garnered by the film at its premiere include the Audience Award for Dramatic Films, the Filmmakers Trophy, a nomination for the Grand Jury Prize, and a special showing and reception hosted by Robert Redford. Smoke Signals was the first film written, directed, and co-produced by American Indians to achieve such success. It features an almost exclusively Native cast, including American Indian actors in lead roles.

Through distribution by Miramax and Shadowcaster Entertainment, Smoke Signals soon reached Native and non-Native audiences. Mark Gill, president of Miramax Los Angeles explained, "Smoke Signals hit a human chord, which was very specific in its telling but was universally understandable to a broad audience. . . . Smoke Signals demonstrated that contemporary Native American stories could appeal to mainstream audiences." Amanda Cobb, author of This Is What It Means to Say "Smoke Signals": Native American Cultural
Sovereignty, remarked that “when placed in the context of the long and colonizing history of American Indians and film, [Smoke Signals] is an achievement because it exists at all.”

Hollywood has a long history of white people telling their versions of Native stories. They often use non-Native actors to portray Native people in stereotypical roles or use the voice and perspective of a non-Native character to tell the story. Dances with Wolves (1990), for example, was a story about a white Civil War hero, played by Kevin Costner, who “went Native” in the Western frontier. Thunderheart (1992), a story based on the incident at Oglala in South Dakota in 1973, relied on Val Kilmer’s character, a half-Native FBI agent referred to as the “Washington Redskin,” to awaken his “Indianness” and save the day. And Windtalkers (2002), a historically factual movie about how the Navajo Code Talkers helped the U.S. Marines gain an advantage in World War II, starred Nicholas Cage with Native actors again taking a supporting “Tonto” role. Lou Diamond Phillips, an ethnically ambiguous actor of Filipino, Japanese, and Hawaiian descent, has been frequently cast to play Native roles in several movies including Young Guns (1988) and Shadow of the Wolf (1992).

Alexie reports that he went through a lot to get Smoke Signals made the way he wanted. He explained to Mary Elizabeth Williams, who interviewed him about the process: “I had a lot of bullshit meetings with white producers and actors and executives, if that’s what you mean. It seems that every white person in Hollywood has a pet Indian project. It’s something that’s very appealing to white liberals.”

Alexie described meetings in which it was suggested that Lou Diamond Phillips play the lead, to which Alexie responded, “He’s a good actor, I like him a lot, but he’s not Indian. . . . As soon as somebody said anything about casting, or about casting whites, the meeting was over.” Alexie’s successful stand against Hollywood’s attempt to control his film was the first step toward reclaiming our stories, our voice, our cultures, and our people from mainstream exploitation. Alexie took this all-or-nothing approach with Hollywood because, as he put it, “I have a lucrative literary career, I made a lot of money from my writing. I’m one of the most critically acclaimed authors in America. I don’t need to do this.”

Smoke Signals was a major triumph in Indian Country because for the first time Native people were telling Native stories from our own perspective. Beverly Singer, author of Wiping the War Paint Off the Lens: Native American Film and Video, explains that being self-determined as an Indian is deeply connected to telling our own stories and writing our own literature. “It is part of a social movement I call ‘cultural sovereignty,’” Singer explained, “which involves trusting in the older ways and adapting them to our lives in the present.” Film and video revive storytelling and restore our foundation by helping Natives reconnect with relationships, traditions, beliefs, and feelings. Singer
goes on to write that "oral tradition is fundamental to understanding Native film and video and how we experience truth, impart knowledge, share information, and laugh. Traditional American Indian storytelling practices and oral histories are a key source of our recovery of our authentic identity."

THE COLLECTIVE "NATIVE AMERICAN"

As Native people, we know that there are many cultural differences among the tribes and nations and that we are not all the same. Customs, language, traditions, spiritual beliefs, food, clothing, dwellings, social structures, and physical features vary among tribes and geographical regions. The United States government has generally grouped all of these diverse tribes and nations together and structured policy that treats us all as one people. Although individually we maintain rich cultures and distinct tribal identities, we became the generic, collective "Native American" through these shared experiences as a result of U.S. policy.

In 1870, residential schools were designed for cultural genocide under Captain Richard H. Pratt's doctrine of "Kill the Indian, save the man." Children were taken away from their families and placed in residential schools, many of which were run by churches, in an attempt to strip away the children's heritage and break their spirit so that they could be "civilized" and made "acceptable" in white society. The schools were overrun with diseases, and the children suffered under horrific conditions. Punishments included starvation, forced labor, sexual abuse, and torture, which resulted in the deaths of nearly half of the children who attended. The traumatized survivors of these schools often suffered from alcoholism and substance abuse, and many committed suicide. Damage caused by these boarding schools contributes to the continuing social disintegration in Native communities, because the results of the trauma were passed down to successive generations through spousal and child abuse and through neglect. The last residential school operating under this doctrine closed in 1989. Broken treaties, loss of rights, forced assimilation, and psychological trauma continued through government policies, including the Termination and Relocation Acts of the late 1940s to the early 1960s. The struggle to maintain what is left of our cultures and rights continues to this day.

In 1924 Native people were "granted" U.S. citizenship through the Indian Citizenship Act in another attempt to assimilate Native people. The civil rights movement of the 1960s made great strides toward equality for minorities, but Native people still are subjected to governmental and corporate discrimination to the present day. Institutionalized racism is perpetuated throughout mainstream American culture. Derogatory misrepresentation by Hollywood and dehumanizing sports team names (such as the Braves and the Redskins) and mascots create damaging stereotypes. Use of Native words such
as “squaw,” an Algonquian derogatory slang term for the vagina, improperly used to mean “woman,” and commercial use of tribal names (such as the Jeep Cherokee) demonstrate a complete lack of respect and consideration. Blatant disrespect is shown for our spiritual leaders by using their names or likeness to market products against which they spoke passionately, such as Crazy Horse Malt Liquor. These are but a few examples of how mainstream culture continues to mock and degrade our existence, a reality that until Smoke Signals was mirrored in the movies.

Shared conditions, experiences, and situations create a collective consciousness. As cultures continually grew, changed and adapted, a “pan-Indian” culture emerged. Self-recognition as collective Native Americans gave rise to intertribal traditions such as powwows. Powwows are social gatherings that allow Native peoples to come together and to celebrate culture through song, dance, storytelling, and traditional foods. Fry bread, for instance, is a traditional comfort food and staple of powwow cuisine; most tribes prepare some variation of this fried or baked dough staple. More than half of all Native people now live in urban areas, and many cannot return to their reservations as often as they would like. Attending powwows and celebrations cultivates a bond among members of the Native community and acts as a support system for displaced individuals and families by creating a substitute tribe or extended family. Just seeing other people of one’s own race helps one feel a cultural connection and at least temporarily soothes the longing for “home.”

AN ANALYSIS: PERSONAL USES FOR MEDIA
AS EQUIPMENT FOR LIVING

It is this pan-Indian collectiveness and the desire to connect with our own race that establishes Smoke Signals as equipment for living for Native people. Analysis of significant scenes reveals how familiar snapshots of reservation life invite us in to share the story of our “cousins.” Significant scenes from the movie may offer viewers symbolic satisfaction or closure as a means of coping with situations in real life.

Alexie explained, “The story line is a variation of the odyssey theme. In this instance, rather than focusing on a warrior/father struggling to return to his home, the plot turns on a warrior/son struggling to physically and emotionally find an alcoholic father who fled his home and died in self-exile.”

Alexie’s summary of the film’s story line echoes literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke’s suggestion of using anecdote as a method for literary criticism; it was Burke who introduced the theory of “literature as equipment for living.” Barry Brummett applied Burke’s theory of equipment for living as a way to analyze media. A second relevant premise is that of uses and gratifications theory, which considers how people find personal uses for the collective messages in the media. Applying these two theoretical approaches
in tandem, I demonstrate how the movie *Smoke Signals* becomes equipment for living specifically for Native people.

An ancient Lakota proverb tells us, "The longest journey a man will make is from his head to his heart." Burke posits that "proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations. Insofar as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them." The Lakota proverb symbolically parallels the genre of *Smoke Signals* (a road trip), as well as the characters' personal, psychological, and spiritual journeys to reconcile the realities and perceptions that exist in their minds with the truth and feelings in their hearts. The characters and audience share a universal human quest for personal resolution.

**A SYNOPSIS OF SMOKE SIGNALS**

Set on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in Idaho, *Smoke Signals* opens with a view of a remote intersection on the reservation, where Lester Falls Apartment's van has been broken down since 1972. Left right where it broke down, it became a scouting location for Lester, the weatherman and traffic reporter for the tribal radio station KREZ. He comments on traffic—"A big truck just went by... now it's gone"—as well as on cloud formations, local gossip, and who he saw arguing in what passing car.

On "white people's independence day," July 4, 1976, a house fire rages after a party. Baby Thomas Builds-the-Fire is thrown from the second story window of his parents' burning house. The baby is caught safely by Arnold Joseph and delivered into the arms of Thomas's grandmother. Thomas's parents are killed in the fire. Victor, Arnold's infant son, also is saved from the same house fire. It is through this event that the connection between Victor and Thomas is forged. Eighteen years later, Victor has grown up to be a handsome athlete with long, flowing hair. Thomas has been raised by his grandmother and, under the influence of the movie *Dances with Wolves*, has grown into an eccentric storyteller and wears his hair in two braids.

Ten years earlier, Arnold had abandoned Victor and his wife, Arlene, and neither has heard from him since the day he left. Arlene receives a call from Suzy Song, Arnold's neighbor in Phoenix, Arizona, who informs her that Arnold has passed away: someone should come pick up his personal effects. Through flashbacks, we see Victor and Thomas as children who have very different memories of Arnold Joseph. Thomas has glorified memories of Arnold as a father figure winning fry bread eating contests and taking him out for breakfast at Denny's. But Victor resents Arnold's relationship with Thomas and remembers Arnold as a drunk, abusive father who often beat him and his mother. Arlene doesn't have enough money to send Victor to Phoenix, but Thomas offers to pay for the trip on the condition that Victor take him along. They embark on the journey via a Greyhound bus, on which they experience
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racism, explore their expectations of Indianness, and discover differences in their relationships with and memories of Arnold.

Later in the story, after the men arrive in Phoenix, Suzy reveals that Arnold had accidentally started the house fire that killed Thomas’s parents by shooting off fireworks while he was drunk. Arnold’s guilt and regret over starting the fire and killing Thomas’s parents contributed to his descent into alcoholism and the abuse that tore his family apart. It is not until Suzy reveals Arnold’s secret that Victor finally begins to understand the underlying cause of Arnold’s drinking and abusive behavior. After learning this truth, Victor is able to forgive his father, understand Arnold’s relationship with Thomas, and reconcile the missing pieces of his own life. Through understanding and forgiveness Victor completes the symbolic journey from his head to his heart.

UNDERSTANDING NATIVE HUMOR

Alexie was born with hydrocephalus that left him with severe complications, including an enlarged skull and seizures due to surgeries to correct this condition. Often teased and ridiculed as a result, from childhood he learned the value of humor as a way to deflect abuse from other children and also as a means of personal empowerment. “Humor is self-defense on the rez,” he claims. “You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak up on them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they’ll listen or laugh.”¹⁶ Using humor as self-defense, Alexie honed his wit.

Native people have a very different form of humor from mainstream culture. Smoke Signals was written for everyone to enjoy, and the film is successful in engaging the non-Native audience in what Roger Welsch, author of Enter Laughing: But Beware the Es-Ex Factor, discusses as the esoteric-exoteric concept: “The idea that some things are appropriate for insiders to say, but inappropriate for outsiders, is a common cultural distinction.”¹⁷ Some inclusionary examples of es-ex material are the use of in-group language and a form of teasing or acceptance, “when standard insults against one group are, in a humorous way, turned back toward a member of the usually offending group.”¹⁸ Welsch, who is non-Native, uses the example of being told by an American Indian friend that he was a “credit to his race.” Welsch explains, “What this friend was doing was essentially honoring me by insulting me just as so many of his kinsmen have been insulted. He knew that I understood the remark said seriously by a white man was a foolish insult. And he knew that I would like nothing more than to be included in the insulted group—his.”¹⁹

Throughout Smoke Signals Alexie makes Native es-ex jokes and shares them inclusively with non-Native audience members. Jokes that reference Custer, Columbus, the Catholic Church, broken treaties, and oppression are commonplace in Native humor. Cobb explains: “The political subtext succeeds because it is never overtly political. For non-Native viewers, Smoke Signals is
guilt free.” Joking about what would otherwise be sensitive topics becomes a way to defuse the tension as well as a way of remembering a shared past. Symbolic use of humor and sharing “in-group” humor becomes equipment for living because it satisfies the human need to feel connected.

An example of historical humor in the film occurs when Thomas says, “and then Columbus moves into the neighborhood, driving down all the property values.” Another example can be found in dialogue between Victor and his mother, during which she asks him to promise to return from Phoenix. Victor promises to return, then asks, “You want me to sign a paper or something?” His mother replies, “No way. You know how Indians feel about signing papers.”

In one of Thomas’s stories, Arnold is arrested at a protest against the Vietnam War, for assaulting a private in the National Guard. Thomas tells us, “First they charged him with attempted murder, but they plea-bargained that down to assault with a deadly weapon, and then they plea-bargained that down to being an Indian in the Twentieth Century, for which he got two years at Walla Walla.” Through teasing that merely being Indian is in itself a crime, the penalty for which is incarceration, Alexie gives a nod to the perception of Native people as subhuman and to the fact that, like other minorities, Native people are not always treated fairly by the judicial system.

Although many Native people have embraced Christianity, and many of them are Catholic, there exists among many American Indians a deeply rooted love-hate relationship with the church, such that jokes about religion are not off-limits. In one instance, Thomas brags to Suzy that Victor’s mother makes the best fry bread in the whole world and that they use it for Communion on the reservation. Thomas exaggerates that “Arlene Joseph makes some Jesus fry bread, fry bread that can walk across water, fry bread risin’ from the dead.” Another example emerges in Arnold’s story about a two-on-two basketball game that he and twelve-year-old Victor played against two Jesuits. Arnold says, “By the way they were playin’ I could’ve swore they had seven of the twelve apostles on their side because every time I tried to shoot the ball, there was a storm of locusts come flyin’ in an’ blind me. . . . We were up against the Son and the Father and these two were gonna need the Holy Ghost to beat us.” Other forms of humor are self-deprecating or make jabs at oppressors. As the game continues, Victor makes the winning basket, and Arnold proclaims, “It was the Indians versus the Christians that day, and for at least one day, the Indians won!”

Woven throughout the film are subtle explanations and insights into the culture that help non-Native people become part of the in-group experience of the movie. For example, Thomas and Victor meet two female cousins driving down the road in a car that only runs backward. The women ask if the men want a ride, and then ask what they are going to trade for it. A Native person would be familiar with the system of exchanges; however, to cue the non-Native audience in on this custom, one of the women reminds the men,
"We’re Indians, remember—we barter." In another example, Thomas is talking to Suzy and Victor about Arlene’s fry bread when he says, “A good piece of fry bread could turn any meal into a feast.” The characters having the discussion and the Native audience would already know this, but making the statement tells the non-Native audience about the cultural significance and importance of fry bread.

**NDN KARZ**

While some of the “in” jokes and references may not be understood on the same level by non-Native audiences, they are presented in the film in a way that their humor on any level can be shared. Alexie describes the two women in the car driving backward as an in-joke: “It’s one of those moments that I think everybody can find amusing, but non-Indian audiences are going to say, ‘OK, this is funny, but what the hell’s going on?’ Because there is no explanation for it. Indian audiences are really going to laugh, however, because they’re going to completely understand it. I call those kinds of things Indian trapdoors, because an Indian will walk over them and fall in, but a non-Indian will keep on walking.”

To understand the full ramifications of this particular “trap door,” one must completely appreciate an “NDN Kar.” Julie Tharp, author of *Fine Ponies: Cars in American Indian Film and Literature*, explains that “for the Average American, the car is inseparable from individual freedom, an icon of social, sexual, and geographical mobility . . . you are what you drive.” For American society, a car is a class-based statement: the newer the car, the better the make and model, the greater image of success. The automobile as an expression of culture in American Indian film and literature differs radically from this American ideal. According to Tharp, “Automobiles serve, in much Native literature and film, as expressions of characters’ differences from and relationships to the larger culture.”

Reservation Indians are among the poorest of the poor, and by the time they can afford a vehicle, it is generally a beater in poor condition. Reservations generally do not require cars to be registered or even to have license plates and may not even require the driver to be licensed. Tharp states that reservations allow “any variety of impoverished transportation imaginable.” Whatever the condition of the car, it offers some sense of freedom, mobility, and escape.

**NDN Karz** are an integral part of reservation life. They may have any number of repurposed parts. For example, there may be a flashlight duct-taped into one of the wells where a headlight used to be, or a sheet of clear plastic may be taped up to create a back window, or a mirror from a broken cosmetic compact might be taped to what’s left of the rear-view mirror. Quarter panels of all different colors and homemade spray paint jobs may complement homemade wooden bumpers held in place with old belts. There are even stories of
people driving on the rims because they couldn't afford tires. The best NDN Karz have dented hoods from substituting for drums at the 49s. NDN Karz are also known as rez rides, war ponies, or painted ponies, and these cars are sometimes raffled off at powwows or traded for other items. These vehicles are so loved in Indian Country that stories about them are shared and songs are even written in their honor. Because of sporadic breakdowns and their awkward appearance, NDN Karz are often compared to the Trickster, a character in traditional stories. Tricksters are often likeable and good-hearted, but their mischievous characters complicate situations or change the natural course of events.

The song "NDN Kars" by Keith Secola has been universally accepted as the American Indian pop anthem. In discussing the song, Tharp writes that "the dilapidated condition of the car does not seem troubling; in fact, it contributes to the feeling of freedom—no responsibility for material possessions." These cars become symbolic equipment for living as representations of freedom, the Trickster, or the companionship of a somewhat trusty sidekick.

SIGNIFICANT SCENES AS EQUIPMENT FOR LIVING

As in other depressed communities, alcohol consumption is a problem on many reservations. Philip May, author of The Epidemiology of Alcohol Abuse among American Indians: The Mythical and Real Properties, comments that "at least two problem drinking patterns are common among subgroups or 'peer clusters' in many tribal communities. One is a chronic alcoholic drinking pattern... called 'anxiety drinking.' The other is the 'recreational' pattern." Anxiety drinkers are more typical of the chronic alcoholic; they may be unemployed, downwardly mobile, and socially marginal. They drink alone or with other buddies. Recreational drinkers are usually between the ages of 15 and 35, and they drink sporadically, on special occasions, at parties, and on weekends. Their pattern of drinking is comparable to the drinking habits of college fraternities.

May continues: "the flamboyant drinking styles that are very common in a number of Indian peer clusters (recreational and anxiety drinkers) emphasize abusive drinking and high blood alcohol levels. Further, heavy drinking peer groups among many tribes encourage, or do not discourage, the frequent mixing of alcohol impairment, risky behavior, and risky environments. Driving while intoxicated, sleeping outside in the winter, aggression, and other unsafe practices are examples of this element." Suicides, homicides, and accidents resulting in death are committed more frequently under the influence of alcohol. Aggression, confrontation, and violence are intensified by alcohol and sometimes result in permanent physical loss of teeth, eyes, and limbs.

We return to a significant scene in the movie, set on the Fourth of July eight years after the fire that killed Thomas's parents. Eight-year-old Victor and
Arnold seem to be sharing a father-son bonding moment as they ride home from the trading post in Arnold’s truck. Victor looks up at Arnold with deep admiration and adoration. Arnold is drinking bottles of beer as he drives, and the mood becomes uncertain as Arnold says he feels independent and hints at making himself disappear. Because Independence Day marks the anniversary of the house fire that killed Thomas’s parents, Arnold’s guilt is welling up inwardly. When they arrive home, Arnold asks Victor to hand him his beer, but Victor accidentally drops the bottle and beer spills all over the floor of the truck. In anger, Arnold hits Victor in the face with his fist. As Victor weeps, Arnold tells him, “Quit cryin’. I didn’t hit you that hard.”

Later that night we see the Fourth of July party at Arnold and Arlene’s house, and they are both drunk. Arnold calls Victor to come dance with him and Arlene. He then asks Victor, “Who is your favorite Indian?”—to which Victor several times defiantly replies, “Nobody,” angering Arnold.

The next morning, Arlene and Arnold are lying passed out in bed when Arlene is awakened by a repeated banging noise. Looking out her bedroom window, she sees Victor repeatedly smashing full beer bottles against the tailgate of Arnold’s pickup truck. Because Victor cannot physically confront his father or articulate his feelings, he takes out his frustration and anger toward his father, the drinking, and the abuse by hitting the truck, a symbolic representation of Arnold. At that moment, Arlene understands how much their drinking hurts Victor. She turns around, kicks the bed where Arnold is sleeping, and yells “We ain’t doin’ this no more! No more! We’re done with it!”

Stephen Young, author of *Movies as Equipment for Living: A Developmental Analysis of the Importance of Film in Everyday Life*, writes, “It is likely that different movies have different functions for different viewers, and the commonly cited functions of movies probably have many manifestations.” A Native person watching *Smoke Signals* may be reminded of similar parties where someone ended up passed out in an unusual place. From a different perspective, the scene may be reminiscent of being at one of those parties as a child, recalling the disgust, anger, and neglect that kids feel when they see their parents intoxicated. It may also bring back related memories of sexual abuse, which although not addressed in the movie, sometimes occurs at drunken parties. Sexual assault and abuse happen to children, adolescents, and adults after everyone else has passed out and there is no one coherent enough to hear the victims or stop the offenders. The perpetrators are usually extended family or community members, and their actions are not discussed or prosecuted, in order to “keep the peace.” Viewers with no personal frame of reference for such experiences may merely see the party in the movie as an event in the unfolding story.

Viewing such party scenes could be used as equipment for living from several perspectives or from a combination of experience and perspective. Young relates that a person “might view a particular film at just the right time
and find [his or] her perspective on life altered. Watching these scenes with memories of attending similar parties, one could see from a sober perspective how children react to being at such a party and seeing their parents drunk. This scene may open the viewer’s eyes and cause regrets about what similar events in real life may be doing to the viewer’s own children by placing them in such a harmful environment. From the perspective of remembering such parties as a child, the viewer may be able to resolve uncomfortable feelings symbolically through watching young Victor take out his aggression and frustration over his parents’ drinking by smashing bottles of beer against his father’s truck. Adult viewers might then be equipped with a new understanding that could lead to a change in their behavior.

Continuing the sequence, in the next scene, later the same day, young Victor is watching TV when his parents enter the living room, arguing. Arnold is rummaging through Arlene’s purse, looking for money to buy booze. Arlene attempts to wrestle the purse away from Arnold, yelling, “It’s over, no more drinkin’! Did you hear me? No more!” Arnold yells, “Let go!” and backhands her across the face so hard that her feet fly off the floor and her whole body falls like a rag doll. Epitomizing the strength and will in Native women, she stands up and faces Arnold. “Hit me again! Come on!” Victor stands up in protest to his father’s actions, symbolically ready to defend his mother. Arnold glares at him and then storms out of the room.

Unfortunately, spousal abuse is not uncommon in reservation life. Women’s Health Weekly discusses a study based in southwestern Oklahoma in which 312 Native American women, from twenty-nine different tribes, who were patients of a clinic for low-income pregnant women and women of child-bearing age, were asked to fill out a questionnaire relating to their experiences of assault by a partner. (About three-fifths, 59 percent, of the women had non-Native partners.) The study found that “thirty-nine percent of the women questioned had been severely assaulted by a partner at some point in their life. This included being kicked, bitten, or hit with a fist, being choked, or being hit with an object. One in five of the women reported that they had been ‘beaten up’ and almost one in nine had been threatened with a knife or a gun.”

In the next scene, Arnold is leaving the house with a small suitcase and his hat. Arlene throws all his clothes out the door behind him, and they scatter on the lawn. She yells, “If you leave now, don’t you ever come back! You hear me? Don’t you ever come back!” Arnold gets in his truck, slams it into reverse, and angrily backs out of the driveway. Young Victor runs after him, yelling, “Don’t leave, Dad! Don’t leave, Dad!” He runs down the road after the truck, catches on to the tailgate, and swings into the truck’s bed. Arnold stops the truck, gets out, lifts Victor out of the back and hugs him tightly. “Oh, Papa!” Victor sobs. Arnold puts Victor down on the road. Arlene pulls Victor away and hugs him while Arnold speeds off in the truck. That is the last time Victor and Arlene see Arnold.
An abused woman may fantasize about standing up to her abuser. She may even fantasize about leaving him, or about throwing him out. Watching that sequence in *Smoke Signals* as equipment for living, she can symbolically live the fantasy. Abused women often stay with their abusers, but watching Arlene stand up to Arnold could be symbolically satisfying and may encourage a woman to take a stand in her own situation. A woman who is a survivor of abuse may watch that sequence and relate to her own escape from an abusive situation. She may recognize a past version of herself in that situation and realize how far she has come. A woman who has been abandoned may find symbolic closure in Arlene's actions. A man who is abusive may see throughout that sequence how much pain he causes, and perhaps because of it he will someday walk away from an abusive situation before the violence escalates and he inflicts severe physical harm or commits murder.

Watching Arnold leave Victor is heart-wrenching. The scene is Alexie's way of "exploring the feeling of abandonment" and his belief that fathers are missing in every ethnic community. He points out that "brown artists—African American, Chicano, Indian, and so on—write about fathers who physically leave and don't come back. White artists deal with fathers who leave emotionally, who sit in the chair in the living room but are gone. It's a theme that resonates. The actual physical presence of the father varies with ethnicity... my father did leave to drink but he always came back." 34

Expanding on this theme, the scene could be symbolically interpreted as abandonment in other areas of the viewer's life. Young states that people value film for its ability to "facilitate emotional connections to their lives even if they [are] not sure what to do with these connections." 35 They may describe the feelings created by the films as identifying, relating, understanding, or emphasizing.

Perhaps the most humorous and well-known scene in the movie takes place between Victor and Thomas on the bus to Phoenix. Within this exchange, as the characters explore media stereotypes of American Indians, we see how they affect the characters' identities.

**Victor:** Why can't you have a normal conversation? You're always tryin' to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen *Dances with Wolves*? A hundred, two hundred? Aw, geez. You have seen it that many times, haven't you? Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?

**Thomas:** I guess not.

**Victor:** Well, shit, no wonder, geez. I guess I'll have to teach you then, enit?

*(Thomas gives a wide grin and nods his head enthusiastically.)*
First of all, quit grinnin' like an idiot. Indians ain't supposed to smile like that. Get stoic.

You gotta look mean, or people won't respect you. White people will run all over you if you don't look mean. You gotta look like a warrior. You gotta look like you just came back from killing a buffalo.

Thomas: But our tribe never hunted buffalo. We were fishermen.
Victor: What? You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? This ain't *Dances with Salmon*, you know. Thomas, you gotta look like a warrior.

And second, you gotta know how to use your hair. You gotta free it. An Indian man ain't nothing without his hair.36

In this sequence, Victor derides Thomas for internalizing a stereotypical medicine man role from repeatedly watching *Dances with Wolves*. In fact, Victor attempts to make Thomas exchange the medicine man stereotype for his own internalized stoic warrior stereotype. According to Young, “The viewing of a film multiple times over a period of years becomes a central ingredient in how a person makes sense out of an aspect of their experience and identity.” Cobb adds to the argument, writing that “unfortunately for Native Americans, fictional representations of Indians from a past century have become a litmus for ‘authenticity’ of contemporary Indian identity. ... it also illustrates the true insidiousness of Hollywood images of Indians—these images are often internalized by the very people they objectify.”38 We understand how the character of Thomas has internalized the medicine man stereotype from *Dances with Wolves* to create his identity. But through this same process, the pan-Indian culture has embraced and internalized the characters of Thomas and Victor and used them to shape and define their own Native identities.

Later in the film, Thomas comments to Suzy about a Western playing on TV, “You know the only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV ... is Indians watching Indians on TV.” This could be an influence from the warrior lesson on the bus, and Thomas is finally rejecting his own internalization of Indians portrayed in mass media. It could be that all that exists in the media are stereotypes, and Indians learning to be Indians from watching TV is indeed “pathetic.” Or perhaps Alexie is instructing Native people to reject the internalization of his own characters. Eyre discussed this phenomenon: “I grew up watching all the movies with Indians in them, and I love them ... we loved just to see ourselves on screen. We were starved for our own image.”39

It was interesting to observe the influence of the movie *Smoke Signals* on pan-Indian culture and how we learned to be “more Indian” through the characters. After the movie, I noticed an increase of exaggerated “Indian” cadence in conversation with Native people that mimicked the characters in *Smoke Signals*. In Indian Country, internalization of the characters was evident as
people imitated Thomas and Victor's mannerisms and speech patterns. Some spoke with more stories and analogies like seer/storyteller Thomas; others acted more like the hardened, bad-ass Victor. The expression "Enit?" became so popular in Indian Country that I remember hearing it used to replace a similar regional or tribal expression. At times I would call this adopted expression to another Native friend's attention by teasing, "You're Mohawk, don't you say 'unh?' [with a rise in the palate], or I'd gently remind a Navajo friend that the Navajo word is 'na?"

As Stephen Young suggests,

One of the issues that should be important to audience research is the self-other distinction. In regard to film viewing, audience members are conceived of as possessing a sense of self that engages and interacts with a film, an externalized "other" or "object," yet when film becomes equipment for living, this symbolic object is taken into the self and takes part in altering the self, at least in minor ways. As viewers apply their interpretations, they are necessarily looking to symbols located in the world outside of themselves to find relevance for their own experience.\(^{40}\)

Native people living in urban areas do not always have the opportunity to feel connected through an intertribal community. S. Elizabeth Bird writes, "Indian people do believe media representations are important, both for their sense of personal identity and literally as mediators, filtering relationships between themselves and others."\(^{41}\) The pan-Indian community can be very small. These actors were community members long before they made it to Hollywood, and they continue to be part of the community after their success. Knowing these actors on any level, meeting them at a powwow, watching them play hockey, or seeing them speak at other events personalizes the movie-viewing experience. It can also blur the lines drawn between a Native actor playing a Native role and an Indian being his authentic self.

After Victor and Thomas dialogue about stereotypes, in the next scene we see Thomas emerging from a rest stop, transformed, long hair flowing in the wind behind him, stone cold look on his face, wearing a Fry Bread Power t-shirt. The tension is broken when he puts on his glasses and flashes his toothy smile, and we see that while he may have adopted the warrior look on the outside to please Victor, it hasn't changed who Thomas really is.

As the two get back on the bus, they find that their seats are now occupied by two white men, one wearing a white cowboy hat and the other a gruff-looking fellow wearing a ball cap that reads My Gun Cleaning Hat. Thomas points out politely that they are in his and Victor's seats. After a rude reply from the man, Victor tries to be the warrior and backs Thomas, which results in a stare down. The gruff-looking white man replies, "These are our seats now, and there ain't a damn thing you can do about it. So why don't you and
Super Injun there find yourself someplace else to have a powwow. Okay?” The displacement of Victor and Thomas by white men who have claimed their seats indicates that Native people are still marginalized. The displacement also symbolizes governmental and corporate injunctures of tribal lands. As Victor and Thomas retreat to empty seats at the back of the bus, the following exchange takes place:

Thomas: Geez, Victor, I guess your warrior look doesn’t work every time.
Victor: Shut up, Thomas!
Thomas: Man, the cowboys always win!
Victor: The cowboys don’t always win!
Thomas: Yeah, they do. The cowboys always win. Look at Tom Mix.
   What about John Wayne? Man, he was about the toughest cowboy of them all, enit?
Victor: You know in all those movies, you never saw John Wayne’s teeth. Not once. I think there is something wrong when you don’t see a guy’s teeth.
   (Victor taps on the seat and begins singing in the “49” style.)
   John Wayne’s teeth, hey-ya
   John Wayne’s teeth, hey-ya
   Hey ya, hey ya hey
Thomas: (Thomas joins in, both are singing)
   John Wayne’s teeth, hey-ya
   John Wayne’s teeth hey-ya
   Hey ya, hey ya hey
   Are they false, are they real?
   Are they plastic, are they steel?
   Hey ya, hey ya hey
   Whoop!

“Counting coup” in battle traditionally means that it is more honorable and takes more bravery and courage to humiliate an enemy than to kill him. Cobb comments that “Ironically, this is one of the most self-determining moments of the film. Victor sits at the back of the bus in defeat, but he does not do so silently. Instead of just moving to the back of the bus and chalking up another one for the cowboys, Victor uses humor to count coup in this ‘battle.’” This “defeat” may be another instance that contributes to Victor and Thomas’s experience of what Desjarlait calls Historical Trauma Response (HRT): “Descendants of people who have suffered genocide not only identify with the past, but also emotionally re-experience it in the present. Thus, as a result of their loss as protectors and providers, Indian men in succeeding generations were affected with emotional pain, anger, and powerlessness.”
The after-effects of HRT seriously impact the entire culture by affecting the physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being of individuals, which also affects their families.

In symbolically besting the white men by making fun of the ultimate cowboy, John Wayne, Victor and Thomas are able to keep their pride and dignity. Their making up a 49 song and singing it loudly annoys the other people on the bus and makes them uncomfortable. But through this act Victor and Thomas prove that "there is more than one way to win." This solution, as equipment for living, offers the use of traditional humor and symbolically counting coup as coping mechanisms. By making fun of and thereby "one-upping" an enemy, one can still win symbolically.

CONCLUSION

As Native people, we desire to see ourselves on-screen. Our insecurities about ourselves as a people and even our identities will continue to be influenced by our use of the media. Edward Buscombe, author of Injuns! Native Americans in the Movies, writes encouragingly, "These modest beginnings show that an Indian cinema is possible. Digital technology will make independent filmmaking cheaper." But he also warns that "access to distribution networks will still be difficult." He continues: "Indian films will never change Hollywood on its own ground. We won't get alterNative westerns, in which the Indians win, because if Indians make films it seems unlikely that they would want to make westerns. They have their own stories." Sharing stories satisfies a hunger of spirit, and feeding this hunger is necessary for our survival as Native people.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Uses and gratifications theory posits that people use media for personal purposes and that they receive some satisfaction or gratification from the media they choose. It has been demonstrated that mass media shape attitudes and teach us about societal expectations. From your own experience, how have movies, scenes from movies, television shows, or songs contributed to shaping personal identity? In what way do you use media for gratification? For example, songs can bring back memories and affect mood, television shows may remind you of familiar times and places, and characters may remind you of people you know or once knew.

2. *Smoke Signals* uses in-group humor and jokes with cultural references to create familiarity and bond with the Native audience. What are some patterns of in-group humor, and how is it used to build a bond among participants? For example, think about the difference in the humor when the group
is all men or all women. What types of jokes are shared that the “other”
group would not understand because of their lack of in-group knowledge?
Discuss other examples. What other purpose does in-group humor serve?
3. NDN Karz play a significant role in Native culture, as do automobiles in
mainstream culture. In what way is your vehicle a reflection of who you are?
Have you modified your vehicle in any way to make it unique? Does it have
a name? What attachment, if any, do you have to your car? What does your
vehicle symbolize? What role does it play in your life?
4. Think about what you know about Native people. How were those attitudes
and opinions formed? Where did those ideas originate? Think about what
mainstream culture has taught the general public about Native people. Dis-
cuss ways in which media influence mainstream formation of opinions,
values, and attitudes. How can media be used to create a more realistic por-
trayal of Native people?
5. Alexie comments that it is imperative for Native people to be cast in Native
roles, to make the characters believable. Reflect on how many Native people
you have seen in Native roles, either on television or in movies, and discuss
the difference their cultural life experience makes to the characters they
play.

NOTES

1. Smoke Signals, motion picture produced by Chris Eyre and Alexie Sherman,
Directed by Chris Eyre (Plummer Ida.: Shadowcatcher Entertainment; Seattle:
Welb Film Pursuits; distributed by Miramax Films, New York and Los Angeles,
1998). All citations of the film in this chapter refer to this edition.
2. Quoted in Aleiss 2005, 159.
9. A powwow is a pan-Indian gathering that celebrates life. Alcohol is not al-
lowed on the powwow grounds, and an arena director makes sure that no one
is intoxicated at the event. Powwows are family gatherings, and children are en-
couraged to participate in the dances. Traditional songs and social dances are
shared, as well as honor songs for veterans and other causes, occasions, and ac-
complishments such as birthdays and graduations. Other honoring events, such as
a “give-away,” may take place. A person may show appreciation for an honor by
presenting blankets full of gifts to significant people as well as to dancers, singers,
and the general community. A powwow can be either traditional, where most
songs are “intertribals” and everyone is invited to dance, or a competition, where
singers and dancers compete for cash and prizes for song and dance categories broken down by dance style and age. There is always food at a powwow, including pan-Indian favorites: fry bread, Indian tacos (taco fixings on top of fry bread instead of a tortilla or shell), and other traditional foods that vary by nation and region. In the Southwest mutton might be traditional fare, but in the North selections may include wild rice and venison stew or fried fish.

10. "Cousin" is a way Native people may address each other, whether they are actually related or not.

14. Uses and gratifications theory says that people use media to fulfill needs and that those needs motivate media use. The theory also assumes that people have an active role in their use and choice of media. The theory was first assembled in Jay Blumer and Elihu Katz’s *The Uses of Mass Communication: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1974).


25. A 49 is a social gathering that takes place after a powwow and usually includes alcohol and"snagging" which means trying to meet members of the opposite sex. The name 49 comes from a story about 50 warriors who went into battle, but only 49 returned. The 49 returning warriors honored their fallen brother by singing songs in memory and celebration of his life. Songs for 49s have a different drumbeat than powwow songs, similar to the hard/soft, hard/soft cadence of a heartbeat. Many 49 songs exist as part of the culture, and new songs are made up all the time. Because the songs follow a specific call/response pattern, it is easy to sing along. In *Smoke Signals*, "John Wayne's Teeth" and the "Basketball Song" are examples of spontaneous 49 songs.

27. Tharp 2007, 90.
32. Young 2000, 452.

34. Quoted in West and West 1998, 30.

35. Young 2000, 459.

36. Long hair is valued among most tribes. Traditions include the belief that hair is a gift from Creator and that it is an extension of the heart and only to be cut as a sign of mourning. An in-group joke among Native men is that the length of one's hair corresponds to the length of one's penis.


39. Quoted in Cobb 2003, 216–

40. Young 2000, 454.


45. Buscombe 2006, 150.

46. Buscombe 2006, 150.