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Indigenous Films

Series Editors

David Delgado Shorter
Randolph Lewis

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Smoke Signals: Native Cinema Rising

JOANNA HEARNE

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Contents

List of Illustrations viii
Acknowledgments ix
Series Editors' Introduction xi
Introduction — "A Way to Sit at the Same Table":
Indigenizing Popular Culture xv
1. "Indians Watching Indians": Speaking to
and from Cinema History 1
2. "The Storyteller Is Part of the Story":
Making *Smoke Signals* 32
3. "Dances with Salmon": Reading *Smoke Signals* 76
4. "Take Your Dad's Pickup":
Smoke Signals's Reception 128
Conclusion — "Be a Crazy Horse of Filmmaking":
Smoke Signals and the Ongoing Production and
Reception of Native Cinema 158
Appendix — Remembering *Smoke Signals*:
Interviews with Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie 167
Notes 195
Bibliography 215
YouTube Videography 231
Index 233

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Illustrations

1. An old Western playing on the TV in Suzy Song's trailer . . . 2
2. John Trudell as DJ Randy Peone . . . 23
3. Thomas Builds-the-Fire's portable radio . . . 23
4. Lester FallsApart's van . . . 25
5. Victor gives half of his father's ashes to Thomas . . . 51
6. Thomas telling a story to Velma and Lucy . . . 62
7. Thomas assesses his audience while telling a story . . . 62
8. Thomas makes fry bread for his grandmother . . . 68
9. Thomas tries to follow Victor's instructions . . . 68
10. The burning house . . . 81
11. The Evergreen Stage Lines . . . 94
12. A bird's-eye view of Arnold Joseph's yellow truck . . . 94
13. An imposing small-town Western sheriff . . . 98
14. Thomas, intimidated by the sheriff's office . . . 98
15. Arnold Joseph finds Young Thomas at the bridge . . . 108
16. The Spokane River . . . 110
17. Victor Joseph on the bridge in the film's closing sequence . . . 110
18. Arlene Joseph divides a piece of fry bread . . . 121
19. Young Thomas and Young Victor examine a sparkler . . . 146
20. Cufe in his father's pickup truck . . . 146

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Acknowledgments

I want to thank Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie, most of all for making *Smoke Signals*, and also for making time to talk and correspond with me ten years later about the film and its production and reception. I'm also grateful to the indefatigable Christy Cox, Wendy Hathaway, and Tamera Miyasato for keeping communications flowing. Other filmmakers, including Georgina Lightning and Sterlin Harjo, also shared stories about their own films and about *Smoke Signals*, and my thinking has benefited from the performers' insights in print and online venues.

I liked *Smoke Signals* the first time I saw it, in a theater in Tucson, Arizona, in 1998, but I didn't begin to appreciate the film's depth and durability until I began teaching it in a range of contexts — to high school students on the Tohono O'odham Nation reservation, and to college students in southern Arizona and in central Missouri in film studies and Native American studies courses. The film appealed to these wide-ranging young audiences, and I had more to say about it each time I taught it. My thanks go out to all of my students for keeping me connected to their worlds and perspectives, and for helping me to see with fresh eyes.

I'm deeply grateful to series editors Randy Lewis and David Delgado Shorter, and to Matt Bokovoy at the University of Nebraska Press, for inviting me to expand my early work on *Smoke Signals* as part of the Indigenous Films book series. Their astute comments and enthusiastic support for the project — not to mention their patience during the writing process — have meant a great deal to me. I also appreciate the work of copyeditor Sue Breckenridge and the fantastic manuscript editing and production staff. Crucial guidance and suggestions also came from the anonymous reviewers for the press and from conversations emerging from conference panels at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the Native American Art Studies Association, and the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association.

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Along the way, a number of people shared ideas and important resources for primary and secondary research on *Smoke Signals*, including Aaron Bird Bear, Ned Blackhawk, Jim Cox, Maureen Konkle, Angelica Lawson, and Robert Warrior. Chad Allen, Susan Bernardin, Dean Rader, Michelle Raheja, Ken Roemer, Lisa Tatonetti, and Pam Wilson have been a wonderful and vital circle of support. This book is much the better for the feedback, time, and attention of my writing cohort — Elizabeth Chang, Sam Cohen, and Donna Strickland. Elaine Lawless deserves deep thanks for her unflagging encouragement, as does Anand Prahlad, for saying that *Smoke Signals* is the closest thing there is to a perfect movie. Elise Marubbio and Gerald Duchovnay provided a venue — the volume of *Post-Script* dedicated to Native American and Indigenous film — for the first publication of the interviews that appear in the appendix to this book. And this project took its first baby steps in an essay originally published in *Western Folklore*'s 2005 special double issue on film, which now forms a fragment of chapter 3.

My deepest and happiest debts of gratitude are to my family for their unconditional love and their generosity of all kinds — the daily phone calls, the many photographs, the feasts, the gifts of music, the long walks, the gloriously crowded holidays. My mother, Betsy Hearne, deserves special devotion always, for her sustaining comradeship and intellectual nurture. And my gladdest thanks are to my partner in life, Chris Morrey, for building such a good house in his heart and in the world to shelter us and our beautiful sons, Desmond and Leo, whose stories are just unfolding.

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Series Editors' Introduction

David Delgado Shorter, Randolph Lewis

From the earliest moments that we imagined the Indigenous Films series as an antidote to the canonical, Eurocentric approach to cinema studies, we knew we wanted to address *Smoke Signals* as soon as we could. We both believed that *Smoke Signals*'s release in 1998 had been a transformative event in the history of Indigenous media in the United States. Teaming up with the prolific and provocative Coeur d'Alene writer Sherman Alexie, Cheyenne director Chris Eyre, and a team of extraordinary actors had created the first Native film to reach a wide audience in North America. Not only that, but *Smoke Signals* was smart, funny, tragic, insightful, and politically resonant — and perhaps most significant for our purposes, it had pedagogical legs. As soon as it was available on DVD, it became one of the most popular Native films taught on college campuses and in high schools in the United States and Canada, where it was widely used to introduce students to contemporary Native issues in English, anthropology, history, Native American studies, and American studies courses from Maine to California. As if this were not enough pressure on a single text, at times *Smokes Signals* was forced to stand alone in a curriculum designed to exclude certain realities. In other words, college or high school students sometimes learned nothing about Native cultures other than what they saw in *Smoke Signals*.

Despite the unusual nature of this important film and its wide dissemination, scholars had not spoken at length about it. No one was helping students to understand the film in an accessible yet scholarly manner; no one was helping instructors to teach the film with the exception of a few scattered articles; no one was pushing the scholarly conversation forward with a book-length study. Such was the situation that we were hoping to remedy with this film series: we wanted to find the ideal authors to write small, affordable books that would interest scholars, help instructors, and guide students. Moreover, if handled properly, these books would serve

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as a portal to a deeper understanding of contemporary Indigenous lives. If so much was going to depend on *Smoke Signals*, we wanted to make sure that the film would be richly explicated and carefully situated in relevant contexts. We wanted to treat it with the same care that is afforded a film by Hitchcock or Ford.

Concomitantly with starting the series we were looking for a person to write the book on *Smoke Signals*. We literally could not imagine a series on Indigenous film without prioritizing this film among the many possibilities. We were seeking someone who could "open up" the film without reiterating the tried but true analyses of Native representations in Hollywood. Our hope was to find someone who could read the film as one reads a great work of literature, showing the shifting and lasting impacts across time. Such an author would engage English professors, film experts, and of course the college students fulfilling their required readings. As series editors looking at the complex landscape of scholarly publishing in the United States, we were well aware that not every book represents an ideal and happy marriage between author and subject.

When we came across Joanna Hearne's fascinating article on *Smoke Signals*, "'John Wayne's Teeth': Speech, Sound and Representation in *Smoke Signals* and *Imagining Indians*," in a 2005 issue of *Western Folklore*, we knew that we had found the right person. An English professor with a dual interest in Native literature and cinema, Hearne was already knee-deep in her forthcoming book *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western*. She had already established lines of communication with Sherman Alexie and Chris Eyre. In our first conversations with her, we were impressed by her seemingly frame-by-frame knowledge of *Smoke Signals* and her ability to sustain multiple interpretive readings of the film's significance. We suggested that *Smoke Signals* deserved the kind of book-length treatment we knew she could write. We claimed then, as we do now, that her book would be *the* book on this widely taught film for a long time.

We were very pleased when Joanna agreed to write the book you now hold. We were even more pleased when we saw the early

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drafts and eventually the final manuscript. We are confident that this book will be useful to the various readerships we described above. Moreover, we believe this to be the companion book that such an important film deserves.

In careful, clear prose, Hearne beautifully explores the complex place that *Smoke Signals* occupies on the contemporary U.S. mediascape. From *Time* magazine to tribal newspapers, *Smoke Signals* was understood as a significant cultural event when it appeared in theaters at the end of the Clinton era. No matter what reviewers thought of the merits of the film when it appeared in 1998 (and most were respectful if not laudatory), they seemed eager to agree that here was something new. Believing the hype that *Smoke Signals* somehow invented Native film in North America, some people imagined that the film was sui generis. Of course, the often-overlooked reality was that *Smoke Signals* was built on a long history of smaller films, going back several decades to the work of Sandra Day Osawa, Phil Lucas, Alanis Obomsawin, Gerald Vizenor, Victor Masayesva, Arlene Bowman, and other Native filmmakers who had made important contributions to the development of Native cinema in the 1970s and 1980s.

Of course, *Smoke Signals* was not sui generis — but it was a genuine breakthrough in terms of perception (and reception). It seemed to announce the arrival of a wry comic realism that could speak equally well to Native and non-Native audiences. Its crossover appeal made *Smoke Signals* an event worth studying, as did the unique combination of elements that went into it: acclaimed writer, a sharp-eyed director, and some extraordinary Native actors. The result of their collaboration was a film that spoke, and continues to speak, to audiences on multiple levels.

In the chapters ahead, Joanna Hearne is attentive to these various levels as well as the diverse relationships that viewers have to the world depicted in the film. Some viewers were astonished and delighted to see a respectful story that resonated with their personal experiences as Native people. Others were astonished and delighted to find themselves drawn into an unfamiliar world

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that they found compelling and meaningful. For cultural outsiders and insiders, and everyone somewhere in between, the film presented a refreshingly new take on contemporary Native life, one very different from the extremes of romanticism, stereotype, or outright demonization that had distorted mass media in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Coming right at the end of that century of transformation in how Native rights and identities were understood, *Smoke Signals* was a "landmark 'first' in American film history," as Hearne puts it. We are very pleased that Joanna Hearne decided to devote the last few years to working on this book. She helps us understand the film's intentions, receptions, and reflections. And the "landmark" status of the film, we believe, is met with a respectful, attentive, carefully written, and much-needed book.

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Introduction — "A Way to Sit at the Same Table"

Indigenizing Popular Culture

Smoke Signals is the most widely recognized and frequently taught film in the field of Native American cinema. The creative duo behind the film's production, director Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho) and author/screenwriter Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), marketed it as "the first film to be directed, acted, and produced by Native Americans to have a major distribution deal." Among its many awards were the Audience Award and Filmmakers' Trophy at the Sundance Film Festival. The film has been a critical and financial success and has become a Native cinema classic, appreciated by Native and non-Native audiences and appearing frequently in high school and college course lists. Released in 1998, *Smoke Signals* is both an event — a historical milestone in the development of Native American filmmaking — and an innovative work of cinematic storytelling that calls for sustained critical attention.

For some viewers, this was the first film to tell a story they recognized; for others it was a gateway to understanding perspectives outside of their experience. The film can be seen as a landmark "first" in American film history — although it is important to remember the long history of Native filmmaking that came before *Smoke Signals* — and it can also be seen as a self-positioned first introduction to Native perspectives and Native filmmaking for many of its viewers. These "firsts," like stepping stones, invite us to move from celebrating the film's accomplishment to recognizing its activism. As an intervention, *Smoke Signals* challenges widely accepted misconceptions about Native Americans. Its "firsts" can be seen in different ways as inaugurating a new generation of Native film production; as an important but also problematic industry marketing category; as part of a critical paradigm based

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on sovereignty; and as a strategic creation of politicized space for Indigenous identity in the public mediascape.

Smoke Signals is a pivotal film for a host of reasons. It signaled a generational shift in Native artistic production toward young writers and artists immersed in the same media they set out to subvert, with its film-school-trained director and media-fluent literary star writer. The film's release in 1998 bookended a decade that began with the 1990 release of the nostalgic, romanticized representations of Plains Indians in *Dances with Wolves*, and the subsequent political struggle over representations of Native American and European contact surrounding the 1992 Columbus Quincentennary. The questions that emerged during that public conversation — Who should be celebrated in such an anniversary, and who should do the celebrating? Why is this history publicly celebrated at all? — are issues that *Smoke Signals* raises with equal intensity in its focus on another calendrical marker, U.S. Independence Day celebrations. *Smoke Signals* also consciously counters representations of Indians in conventional Westerns in iconoclastic, humorous ways. And with all its teasing and playful performativity, the film deflects a certain habit of intrusive public curiosity about Native Americans.

If *Smoke Signals* intervenes in mainstream media's representations of Indians, it also forges a connection between those images, with their mass audiences, and distinctively Indigenous points of view. This intervention is not just a counter-appropriation; to borrow Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's term, it is also an "Indigenization" of mass media. Yet *Smoke Signals* is an energetic and ambiguous film in part because it refuses to function as an outsider's guide to Native cultures. It reaches out to both Native and non-Native viewers, yet declines to answer questions or divulge cultural information; viewers are expected to keep up.

Smoke Signals may look like other American films in its use of established formulas — it's a road movie, a buddy movie, a comedy, a family drama — but when we look more closely we see that these familiar conventions take on different meanings, reshaping American cinema from within. Sherman Alexie refers to his pop-culture

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references as "cultural currency" because popular culture creates common ground: "It's a way for us to sit at the same table. I use pop culture like most poets use Latin." Yet at the same time, audiences are never allowed to forget that Native viewers take in the lingua franca of pop from a radically different position than other audiences: "Superman means something different to me than it does to a white guy from Ames, Iowa or New York City or L.A."[1] This difference is based in history, tribalism, and sovereignty, not appearance. As Alexie stated bluntly to a white reporter in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* in 1998, "We don't want to be like you. . . . The thing that people don't understand is that we're sitting here at the table with you, we're wearing the clothes you wear, we're speaking English, but we're not like you. We're fundamentally different, and we don't want to change that."[2] Alexie's assertion that Native peoples are "fundamentally different" from other Americans is key to understanding the distinctiveness of Native film and of *Smoke Signals*'s particular intervention in mainstream film. As I argue in this book, *Smoke Signals* creates an oppositional voice within what Stuart Hall calls the "contested arena" of popular culture, while cultivating a broad audience for Native cinematic storytelling.

Yet *Smoke Signals* also shows us that the "common ground" of popular culture is Native ground. The filmmakers invest a media space that has traditionally been hostile to Native people (such as Westerns) with Indigenous contemporary presence and historical imperatives, turning an established sign system to serve distinctly Indigenous political purposes. Taking over and "Indigenizing" the generic forms of American feature film in this way involves taking possession of feature-film production as a tool for telling Native stories, and establishing relationships of speaking and listening, in a venue that has traditionally silenced, ignored, or obsessively misrepresented Native voices and experiences.

Analyzing the way *Smoke Signals* makes meaning involves more than simply mapping the film's revision of past media stereotypes. We must also consider what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call "questions of address": "Who is speaking through a film? Who is imagined

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as listening? Who is actually listening? Who is looking? And what social desires are mobilized by the film?"[3] While understanding the way the film is woven into the world requires close attention to screen images and sounds, it also demands attention to information about the film's production and reception from the filmmakers and actors; reviews and articles about the film and filmmakers in the popular press; historical material; and scholarly studies of the film, Native media, and cinematic conventions like flashbacks and voice-over narration. These source materials illuminate different analytical models for interpreting *Smoke Signals* — within the context of the industry, of the film's production, of the film's reception in critical circles and by the general viewing audience, of the film "text" itself, and of authorship and literary adaptation. My goal is to provide not just a close textual reading but also a broad study of one Native film's meaning and effects in the world, with the understanding that contemporary film can function as a politicized way of remembering and forgetting elements of the past, a past that should matter to us as we remake our world in the present. *Smoke Signals* is an example of media wielded as not only entertainment but also a form of activist pedagogy. Eyre and Alexie take advantage of the power of cinema to teach viewers in order to make things happen in the world beyond the screen. My approach to the film in this book pays close attention to the practitioners' own frameworks, particularly their emphasis upon Indigenous political sovereignty. Thus I have tried wherever possible to highlight the voices of the artists themselves by quoting from interviews and other press materials.

Synopsis of *Smoke Signals*

Smoke Signals tells the story of two young Coeur d'Alene men — the tough Victor Joseph (Adam Beach, Saulteaux) and his nerdy, storytelling friend Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams, Coast Salish). When Victor's estranged father Arnold Joseph (Gary Farmer, Cayuga) dies far from home, in Phoenix, Arizona, Victor and Thomas

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travel together by bus from their Idaho reservation to Arizona to retrieve Arnold's belongings and his ashes, and return driving Arnold's pickup truck. In the film's complex chronology, the present (1998) road trip frames flashbacks: to 1976, when Victor and Thomas were babies and a devastating house fire killed Thomas's parents; to 1988, when Victor and Thomas were twelve years old and Arnold abandoned Victor and his mother, Arlene (Tantoo Cardinal, Métis); and to various years between 1988 and 1998, when Arnold Joseph met a mysterious woman, Suzy Song (Irene Bedard, Inuit/Métis) in Phoenix, Arizona. The "smoke signals" of the film's title refer to the house fire at the core of the story, but they are also symbolic — like the radio airwaves of the film's opening sequence — of a broader communication system that travels across boundaries. The image also reframes Western-genre stereotypes of Indians in terms of colonization. Alexie describes the title as "vaguely humorous[;] . . . on the surface, it's a stereotypical title, you think of Indians in blankets on the plains sending smoke signals . . . but in a contemporary sense, smoke signals are about calls of distress, calls for help."[4] Help with maintaining family ties (in the form of storytelling, fry bread, and car rides) also comes from Thomas's and Victor's different relationships with strong female characters, including Thomas's grandmother (Monique Mojica, Kuna/Rappahannock), Victor's mother, Arlene Joseph, Arnold Joseph's friend and neighbor Suzy Song, and their friends and cousins on the reservation, Lucy and Velma (Elaine Miles, Cayuse/Nez Perce; and Michelle St. John, Cree).

The film's emotional engine is the relationships between its key characters. Thomas has a special relationship with Victor's father, Arnold, who both caused the fire that killed his parents and also saved him from the fire and so became a substitute, and somewhat idealized, father figure. Despite Victor's occasional bullying, Victor and Thomas are friends. They are also what their community calls "cousins" (because their families are close, even though they are not related), and in a more symbolic way, "brothers" in their triangulated relationship with Arnold Joseph. This complex and

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changing relationship is central to the main action, the search for the lost father that motivates their road trip. These characters are also important to the filmmakers, mirroring the creation of the film from their close collaboration, and to Sherman Alexie's style of writing fictionalized self-portraiture especially in the early short stories from which *Smoke Signals*'s story was adapted.

Although the film seems to focus on Victor, we as audience members understand the film's story through Thomas's narration in voice-over, as well as his many stories as an on-screen character. His narration illustrates a critical element of *Smoke Signals*, as well as many other Native films: an emphasis upon the means of storytelling. Victor becomes a character in Thomas's stories, yet Thomas is often an unreliable narrator both for Victor and for the film's audience. This emphasis upon storytelling reveals the way that *Smoke Signals* is not just a passive response to a history of cinematic misrepresentations and geographic inaccuracies but rather a creation of Indigenous reality in a media-saturated world. Thomas is a figure who takes back the power to control Native stories in both public and private ways. And more than a decade after the film was released, his character is still a generative cultural touchstone, judging from the content of the many YouTube parodies and reenactments of *Smoke Signals*.

Media Images of Indians

Smoke Signals responds to both the history of Native tribes in the context of ongoing colonialism, and to the history of Native American images in the media. While an extensive overview of Native American history and representation is beyond the scope of this book, some terms and concepts related to *Smoke Signals*'s embeddedness in these histories need introduction here, and will be explored in greater depth in the chapters that follow. My approach to *Smoke Signals* adopts both film studies and Indigenous analytical paradigms, particularly those frameworks, categories, and imperatives articulated by the filmmakers themselves. In in-

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terviews, Alexie and Eyre repeatedly emphasize the importance of political sovereignty. In a dialogue about race with President Bill Clinton on the *McNeil/Lehrer News Hour* in 1998, the year *Smoke Signals* was released, Sherman Alexie again emphasized that "the primary thing that people need to know about Indians is that our identity is much less cultural now and much more political. That we really do exist as political entities and sovereign political nations."[5] We can see this assertion as an invitation to view *Smoke Signals* through a political and historical lens, rather than as an artifact of Spokane tribal culture; its primary aesthetic project is not cultural expression but rather a politicized intervention in the American mediascape. Chris Eyre notes that some audiences make the mistake of seeing *Smoke Signals* as "anthropological because it's about Indians": "One of the biggest misnomers is that *Smoke Signals* is a cultural movie. It's not a cultural movie at all."[6] The film as a product of Native self-representation and artistic vision is distinct, then, not because of culturally defined differences but rather because of political differences that we can begin to explain by thinking about the relationship of political sovereignty to visual culture, including the history of media images of Indians.

Eyre and Alexie address ongoing media discourses of noble, savage, and vanishing Indians in Hollywood Westerns and in other media; their theme of forgiving absent fathers resonates with images of Indian absence, "vanishing," and loss in mainstream media but answers those images with a story about retrieval and return. The economic consequences of outsiders treating Native images as products or commodities, which takes place through industrial production of images, as well as in their reproduction and circulation, is often overlooked in textual analysis. This process of commodification has characterized Hollywood studio treatments of Indian characters from the earliest Westerns to contemporary films.

Smoke Signals speaks back to two films of the 1990s, *Dances with Wolves* (dir. Costner, 1990) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (dir. Mann, 1992), that had a major impact on the industry. These films represent Indians in a classically binary noble and savage formula-

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tion: the "good Indians" (the Lakotas in *Dances with Wolves*, the Mohicans in *Last of the Mohicans*) are romanticized and soon to vanish (hence the "last of" the Mohicans), while the "bad Indians" (the Pawnees in *Dances with Wolves*, the Hurons in *Last of the Mohicans*, led by characters played by Cherokee actor Wes Studi in both films) are demonized as "savage." While these films created a Hollywood vogue for Native American subjects and opened up roles for Native actors, the cycle of period films that followed resulted primarily in "loincloth" roles, parts without either emotional nuance or contemporary complexity. Further, control of these films' narratives and structuring scenarios remains with white focal characters, eliding the history of Native agency and resistance. This paradigm of civilization and savagery, or what First Nations scholar Emma LaRocque calls "the civ/sav canopy," has generated "provocations for Native scholars and artists" and at the same time functioned as a powerful "intellectual and recreational play box for the colonizer society."[7] Cinema images of Indians can function as categorizing machines, reducing Indigenous heterogeneity to a set of stock character types and marketing packages, and reducing historical and cultural complexity to an artificial separation of tradition from modernity. Lisa Tatonetti describes the resulting generic "edited-for-TV drama":

> *Front stage*: America is "discovered!"; *Backstage*: Indians, dispossessed of land and voice, are pushed to the outskirts, relegated to the "back walls" of their own countries; *Front stage left*: It's *The Last of the Mohicans*, and Natty Bumppo is sad, sad, sad; *Front stage right*: The Indians dance, "wild and crazy"; (Cue cavalry; swell strings); *Center stage*: The Indians die. As the credits roll, a voice-over in broken English — *the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead* — and the last words that Black Elk never spoke erroneously become the single version of Native "history" into which all Native pasts are subsumed. Pretty soon the whole damn thing is the only film on the all-day History Channel movie marathon.[8]

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The clichéd image of the "vanishing Indian" operates on the premise that Native peoples are locked in the past, unable to participate in contemporary time. This vague and generalized assumption carries enormous power in public narratives about Native peoples because it is disseminated across media through news stories, film and television, and books. Stereotypes, even when they seem "positive," actively erode Native sovereignty. Their totalizing constructions focus on a temporally and geographically limited idea of culture, to the exclusion of contemporary and heterogeneous political, economic, and aesthetic elements of Native American life. Influenced by the early anthropological focus on culture as a static category, this approach limits "Indianness" to a narrow range of culturally distinct and aestheticized images.

Contemporary films that romanticize and/or demonize Native characters — *Pocahontas* (dir. Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995), *The New World* (dir. Malick, 2005), *Apocalypto* (dir. Gibson, 2006), *Avatar* (dir. Cameron, 2009) — exemplify the new expansion of the imperialist adventure film (and its ur-genre, the Western) into other generic forms, such as the science fiction spectacular. The supernatural vampire film *New Moon* (dir. Weitz, 2009), for example, reimagines the Quileute tribe from the Pacific Northwest as a bestial "pack" of Indian werewolves. The Quileutes are an actual Native tribe — a self-governing political unit within the United States — but neither the novel's author Stephanie Meyers nor the film studio, Summit, offered compensation, or consulted with the tribal council for permission before using the name in the books, movies, and extensive franchise marketing and merchandise.[9] Indian characters in the film repeatedly refer to their "treaty" with the vampire Cullen family, subsuming historical Quileute treaties (the 1855 Treaty of Quinault River and 1856 Treaty of Olympia) within a familiar cinematic and literary racial schema of savage Indians and civilized whites. The public preoccupation with this image also suppresses the radical diversity of Native tribes and languages, including the many distinct tribes of the Pacific Northwest and the interior Salish tribes, such as Alexie's Spokane and

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Coeur d'Alene tribes of the upper Columbia River system. Further, the tribe itself and its individual members, some of whom live in poverty, are excluded from the monetary benefits reaped by those who appropriate their name.

Smoke Signals responds to the systemic extraction of profits away from Native artists and communities, and also to the oppressive ubiquity of mainstream representations of Indians as nineteenth-century, feather-wearing Plains tribes so common in the Western. The film works against fetishizing tendencies in commodified representations of Indians, yet also works within that same system of commodification to convert its audiences and redirect its resources, all the while speaking simultaneously to Native and non-Native audiences. Eyre and Alexie produce their vision of contemporary American cultural and political landscapes by depicting common experiences that assume distinct meanings in Native contexts of media misrepresentation, ongoing colonization, and claims to sovereignty. *Smoke Signals* commodifies Indian images differently, using cinema to break down social boundaries and at the same time to shore up tribal differences from other Americans. The film makes the Hollywood scenarios and generic codes accountable to Indigenous politics and histories; it does so by wielding established dramatic forms and sentiments to deliver intertextual critiques of imperialist media representations of Indians.[10]

The stakes of this critique are high because screen images of Indians are so influential in public thinking and debates about Indigenous peoples. N. Bird Runningwater (Cheyenne/Mescalero Apache), programmer for the Native Initiative at the Sundance Institute, writes,

> Inaccuracies and stereotypes undermine Indigenous languages and cultures because the mainstream media promotes assimilation. The inaccuracies also affect the political process that is so vital to upholding tribal sovereignty and the relations between the 557 tribal nations in the U.S. and the federal government. Former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation Wilma Mankiller

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> says "It's hardly any wonder you can go speak with a senator or Congressman and have them know anything about Indians. What little they do know, they get from the media and from movies." . . . The most serious effect media stereotypes have, however, is on Native individuals' thoughts and perceptions of ourselves and the world we live in.[11]

Runningwater's articulation of the real-world effects of media stereotypes — effects on government policy-makers, effects on Native individuals — works to dismantle those stereotypes by exposing their costs. *Smoke Signals* demonstrates this process of dismantling at the level of individual viewers by exploring the ways that its young protagonists become conscious of the dissonance between media images and their own experiences. This process resonates with the experience of Sherman Alexie, who grew up on the Spokane reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, but now lives in urban Seattle; he describes his youthful immersion in a world saturated by popular culture, from sitcoms like *The Brady Bunch* to games like Dungeons and Dragons, and also in the small-town, distinctly Native world of the Spokane reservation.

Political Sovereignty and Visual Sovereignty

The action in *Smoke Signals* is located both on the Coeur d'Alene reservation and off-reservation in rural and urban areas of the American West. Most of the film's characters identify as Coeur d'Alene, and also as part of an intertribal pan-Indian culture (often with English as the common language) that arose during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the result of different tribes coming into contact through government boarding-school experiences, relocation to urban neighborhoods, collective political allegiances and activism, and cultural sharing at events such as powwows. James Cox argues convincingly that the reservation is the "privileged landscape and narrative center" of *Smoke Signals*, and further that by emphasizing this land base and community, Alexie "decreases the number of audience members who are cultural insid-

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ers."[12] About half of the current Spokane Tribe's 2,441 members live on a 157,376-acre reservation, with the tribal headquarters located in the small town of Wellpinit, Washington. The Coeur d'Alene Tribe, with 2,190 members, has a 345,000-acre reservation. Both tribes now have casinos that provide jobs and income, mitigating the high unemployment and poverty that marked Alexie's childhood. Although their reservations are rural, many tribal members live off the reservation, in cities like Spokane and Seattle, or in other parts of the world.[13] Of course, their sovereignty as politically self-governing entities predates the formal recognition of their nationhood by European and American governments; all of the land in the Americas is Indigenous land, and before colonization was governed completely by tribes with distinct languages, cultures, economies, and systems of law. The Salishan-speaking Spokane and Coeur d'Alene tribes together originally occupied tribal territories of more than 8 million acres across what is now central and eastern Washington, western Montana, and northern Idaho.

My reading of *Smoke Signals* is influenced by Sherman Alexie's assertion that among the most serious problems confronting Native Americans is "the challenge to our sovereignty — artistically, politically, socially, economically. We are and always have been nations within this nation, and any threats to that are dangerous."[14] Alexie's emphatic foregrounding of sovereignty as a primary framework for understanding his script for *Smoke Signals* is temporally specific to the late 1990s, when the film was made; after 9/11 he began to focus more on commonalities between Native and non-Native youth in many of his talks and readings. But attending to different iterations and definitions of sovereignty helps to clarify the ways that *Smoke Signals* articulated a distinct Indigenous perspective.

Native American sovereignty is the recognition of Native tribes as separate and sovereign political entities — and as nations that exist within the larger nation of the United States — as defined in formal treaties made with European nations and with the United States, and as acknowledged in the U.S. Constitution. Scholarly conversations about the history of Native sovereignty stress the

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tension between tribal nations' political rights to self-government and their relationships with the United States, relationships that have often been characterized by violence and paternalism.[15] Sovereignty is a complex concept with a long history in European thought and international law, and with a specific, contested history and contemporary meaning for Indigenous nations and for Indigenous-U.S. relations. In many cases, Indigenous tribes' nation-to-nation relationship with the United States is acknowledged in legally binding treaties. Political theorist Kevin Bruyneel defines sovereignty, in the context of Native political goals, as a social and political construction that asserts "collective autonomy"; it is "the ability of a group of people to make their own decisions and control their own lives in relation to the space where they reside and/or that they envision as their own."[16] Robert Warrior (Osage), drawing from the historical writing of Native intellectuals such as John Joseph Mathews (Osage) and Vine Deloria Jr. (Sioux), suggests that political and "intellectual sovereignty" advocates a humanizing and "process-centered understanding of sovereignty" in place of "making the rhetoric of sovereignty and tradition a final rather than beginning step."[17] The economic expression of Indigenous sovereignty takes place, for example, in the development of tribal casino gaming, in the tribal management of reservation lands and natural resources, and in the assertion of fishing and other rights to wild harvests guaranteed by treaty. Reclaiming sovereignty in a social context has meant fighting the institutional interventions in Native families, such as the aggressive removal of children from their families through foster care systems and residential schools.[18] The definition and development of aesthetic and intellectual concepts of Indigenous sovereignty are particularly important to the production of *Smoke Signals* as an Indigenous artistic and intellectual work of art.

First Nations scholar Taiaiake Alfred (Mohawk) points out the problematic origins of the idea of sovereignty in a European colonial legal tradition, a discourse that historically does not invite a "fundamental questioning of the assumptions that underlie the

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state's approach to power, the bad assumptions of colonialism that will continue to structure the relationship,"[19] excluding other frameworks for discourse that come from Indigenous traditions, languages, philosophies and forms of government. Joanne Barker (Lenape) writes that although sovereignty as a concept is "incomplete, inaccurate, and troubled" it has also been "rearticulated to mean altogether different things by Indigenous peoples. In its links to concepts of self-determination and self-government, it insists on the recognition of inherent rights to the respect for political affiliations that are historical and located and for the unique cultural identities that continue to find meaning in those histories and relations."[20] Sovereignty, then, can be seen as a Euro-American construct that has been taken up by Indigenous peoples in tribal, nationalist, and global contexts. While the concept of sovereignty doesn't adequately articulate distinctive, traditional Indigenous social and political structures, it has been an extremely important social justice and legal tool for speaking across the boundaries between peoples to assert Indigenous minority rights. It has served as a discursive marker of the expansion or limitation of tribal autonomy and self-government in the face of ongoing and shifting forms of U.S. colonization.

Indigenous sovereignty is not only, and not simply, an Indigenous issue; it is foundational to the origin of settler nations and central to the ongoing lives of all people now residing in those nations. Canadian journalist and stateswoman Adrienne Clarkson makes this point by emphasizing the reciprocity inherent in nation-to-nation treaties: "In fact, we are all treaty people because it takes two sides to make a treaty, and that's what we agreed to do."[21] Historical studies of treaty-making show us that Natives and newcomers have had changing relationships over time, and have codified those relationships in different ways through trade, kinship (including both blood relations and protocols establishing fictive kinship), oral and written agreements, and military conflicts and alliances. In addition to the extensive critical literature on the international history of U.S., European, and Canadian treaty-making with In-

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digenous Nations, filmmakers like Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki) have produced an extraordinary body of documentary film work that historicizes contemporary land and treaty rights disputes in terms of their roots in past violations of treaty agreements.[22]

Sovereignty is not only one of the discourses that "sets Native American studies apart from other critical race discourses," as Michelle Raheja (Seneca) has written;[23] sovereignty is also an important framework for considering the ways that Native arts, such as cinema, take up the colonizers' language, such as cinematic genres and lexicons, for the purposes of shoring up an Indigenous aesthetic autonomy. A number of scholars and artists have expanded upon legal and historical definitions of sovereignty in order to demonstrate the political dimensions of Indigenous identity and nationhood in Native media. Beverly Singer (Tewa/Navajo) defines "cultural sovereignty" as a process involving "trusting the older ways and adapting them to our lives in the present." Amanda Cobb (Chickasaw) has taken up Singer's term in relation to *Smoke Signals* specifically, arguing that the film, as an act of Native self-definition, is also an act of cultural sovereignty.[24] Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) describes sovereignty in the context of visual art as "the border that shifts Indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one. . . . Today, sovereignty is taking shape in visual thought as Indigenous artists negotiate cultural space."[25] Scholars translating the concept of sovereignty to cinema include Randolph Lewis, who discusses Native media in terms of "representational sovereignty," and Michelle Raheja, who argues that the concept of sovereignty begins to account for "the space between resistance and compliance" within which Native filmmakers often work. "Visual sovereignty," she writes, "recognizes the paradox of creating media for multiple audiences, critiquing filmic representations of Native Americans at the same time that it participates in some of the conventions that have produced those representations."[26] Visual sovereignty, then, can refer to the way relationships between nations influence (and are influenced by) the shared spaces of visual culture, and to the way Indigenous visual media work to

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redefine the parameters and significations of mainstream mass media communications.[27]

Although *Smoke Signals* organizes its cinematic discourse explicitly in terms of American Indian relations with the United States — with its frequent references to the U.S. Independence Day holiday and 1976 Bicentennial celebrations, for example — broader frameworks of international cinema circulation and of transnational Indigenism are relevant to the film in a number of ways. Despite their unique histories, there are interrelated and shared patterns of historical colonization among the settler states and Indigenous minority groups across Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and the trans-Arctic (such as the Sapmi, or Sami homelands of northern Europe, and northern Asia). Indigenous scholars and artists such as Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay have taken up this transnational perspective to create political and artistic alliances among the Fourth World, or Indigenous minority peoples of settler states. Barclay coined the term "Fourth Cinema" to describe the films by Indigenous minorities working "outside of the national orthodoxies" of colonizing nations.[28] Linked by their assertions of sovereignty and tribal nationhood in relation to specific land claims and treaty documents, Fourth World cinemas also involve considerable regional and international mobility in both production and reception. Film scholar Corinn Columpar describes the "transnational flows" of cinema products that have had an impact on Indigenous peoples, both through dominant film industry products (such as Hollywood's global export of Westerns and British production of colonial epics) and, more recently, the rise of Indigenous filmmaking internationally. This Fourth World cinema has a newly expanded reach through film festivals, digital media, satellite broadcast and other means.[29] *Smoke Signals* provides an example of this, as it circulated worldwide through the festival circuit, in theaters, and, later, through distribution on VHS and DVD. Ultimately, the film should be understood in all of these contexts of media history, political and visual sovereignty, and the historical expansion of Indigenous cinema in North American and beyond.

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Scope and Organization of the Book

Listening to these Native voices in cinema involves paying close attention both to the films themselves and to the connections between the films and the producers' and consumers' social and material "media worlds"[30] — including politics and histories as well as production situations, funding, distribution, and audiences. Looking at *Smoke Signals* through these multiple lenses allows us to see the film in conversation not only with mainstream popular culture and the history of Hollywood representations of Indians but also with tribal, regional, and pan-tribal Native issues, including sovereignty, social justice, and environmental history.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that *Smoke Signals*, with its action taking place largely off the reservation on land that was appropriated by the United States, seeks to transform that "public" space back into Native space. Through its reflexivity and wide-ranging historical and popular culture references, *Smoke Signals* "Indigenizes" mainstream cinema, a term Linda Tuhiwai Smith uses to describe a practice that "centres a politics of Indigenous identity and Indigenous cultural action."[31] Projects that privilege Indigenous voices even when borrowing from Western models also provide, as M. Annette Jaimes (Juaneno/Yaqui) writes, "a basis for conceptualization of Indigenism that counters the negative connotations of its meanings."[32] These negative connotations, I argue, circulate through stereotypes circulated in the media. Thinking of *Smoke Signals* as an Indigenizing production brings into focus the ways that this film reappropriates cinematic images of Indians, shifting the meanings and stakes of popular culture images through an insistence that audiences recognize a Native perspective.

I have organized this book into four chapters, which address the historical representation of Indians in the Western and the emergence of "visual sovereignty" in Indigenous media; the production of *Smoke Signals*, from Alexie's literary adaptation of his short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* through Chris Eyre's short film *Someone Kept Saying Powwow* and his work with the actors; a chapter on *Smoke Signals*'s intertextual

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references to popular culture; and an assessment of its reception. In the conclusion, I discuss the way *Smoke Signals* has been positioned within the widely varying definitions of Native cinema from scholars and practicing artists.

Chapter 1 offers a brief history of the Western, an essential background for understanding *Smoke Signals*'s intertextual references to the genre and for unpacking the ways the opening sequences self-consciously position the film as an Indigenous intervention that "speaks back" to the Western's representational history. This chapter foregrounds issues of voice — the voices of media representations as well as relations of speaking and listening in storytelling. The film's opening focus on the radio station DJ demonstrates the power of media to make Native voices heard, just as Thomas Builds-the-Fire's Coeur d'Alene stories become part of a shared public memory through the film's voice-over narration. This overt emphasis on storytelling is the film's most obvious strategy for offering "Indigenizing" perspectives in the public mediascape.

Subsequent chapters follow the trajectory of the film's production, circulation, and reception with discussions of the script, performances, formal images and soundtrack, and reviews. Chapter 2 describes the context of *Smoke Signals*'s production, including Sherman Alexie's screenplay adaptation of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the development of *Smoke Signals* through the Sundance Film Institute, and the way the filmmakers and actors drew upon personal life stories for their performances. *Smoke Signals* imagines its characters' and its viewers' relationships to cinematic images and stereotypes in terms of both the heterogeneity and the commonalities of Native experiences, especially those of the writer, director, and performers. Their comments about the film tell a cumulative story of seeking social justice through performance and the arts. By engaging as activists in the pervasive field of popular culture, the filmmakers and actors bring the specificity of individual Native histories to bear on a common aesthetic project.

Chapter 3 offers a close analysis of *Smoke Signals*'s images, sounds, editing structure, and location shooting, showing how the film ap-

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propriates Hollywood genre conventions and the building blocks of cinematic language itself — such as principles of continuity — to tell a contemporary Indigenous story about events from the past. Both thematically and in its locations, the film embeds politicized references and densely woven allusions to historical events, including the origin of the United States as a nation with the Declaration of Independence and the closing off of Spokane tribal fishing sites with white settlement and dam construction in the Columbia River basin. This extra-cinematic history of nations and lands informs the film's "Indigenizing" perspective on mainstream American culture when characters reflect upon celebrations of Independence Day, discuss revisionist Westerns like *Dances with Wolves*, or tell stories about such mundane activities as basketball games and eating at Denny's.

The final chapter traces *Smoke Signals*'s reception by Native and non-Native audiences, its impact on the careers of the filmmakers and actors, and its influence on the emergence and visibility of new work by Native filmmakers. A key point in discussions about *Smoke Signals* has been its broad appeal; the film is especially significant for its ability to generate shared emotion while keeping the particularities of Indigenous experience at its center. Sherman Alexie has rejected the term "universal" in describing the film, stressing instead its tribalism and the specificity of the characters' experiences.[33] Yet both Alexie and director Chris Eyre have discussed the film as their attempt to reach a mass audience, and its structure conforms to Hollywood road-movie genre conventions and forms.

Not only is *Smoke Signals* one of the most prominent Native American feature films, but it has also functioned historically and politically as a bellwether, a Native cinema "first." The conclusion returns to the issue of *Smoke Signals*'s historical status. What do we mean by "Native cinema" — a category that means different things to different people — and why has it been important to talk about groundbreaking Native features as "firsts"? The book's closing discussion considers these terms beyond scholarly critical constructions to assess their meaning in the practical landscape

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of industrial and independent film production and distribution, and for Native artists and their networks.

Eyre and Alexie's facility with American pop cultural currency, and their ability to bring so many different viewers to "sit at the same table," has also allowed them to reveal cinema's imperialist history. They ask us to recognize popular culture's colonizing misrepresentations while at the same time inviting us to take pleasure in playing with its field of references, and through that play and humor (as well as drama and affect) to assert power over its exclusions and distortions. In the wake of this media history and in the toxic afterlife of media products, they excel at finding opportunities to resignify an American popular culture imperium to tell a different story. Like changing the captions on old photographs, they offer us a new narration.

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