Contemporary American Indian Life in *The Owl's Song* and *Smoke Signals*

JIM CHARLES

At the 1998 Sundance Film Festival, *Smoke Signals* arrested the attention of participants, winning two awards—the Filmmakers Trophy and the Audience Award. Since its nationwide release, the film has enjoyed critical acclaim and success both at the box office and in video rentals. In 1974, Coeur d'Alene tribe member and novelist Janet Campbell Hale published *The Owl's Song,* a novel that has since been reprinted by the University of New Mexico Press. *Smoke Signals* and *The Owl's Song* feature young adult American Indian protagonists of the Coeur d'Alene tribe. The works are parallel in form and content, and teaching them in an integrated fashion is an effective instructional strategy for teachers of English language arts. Together, the works inform students about relevant literary, historical, social, and cultural topics in ways that undermine prevalent misunderstanding of contemporary American Indian people. At the same time, teachers can use these works to achieve standards-oriented objectives related to reading/literature, writing, visual/media literacy, and interdisciplinary academic content.

Partly because of misrepresentations perpetuated in popular culture and in schools, American Indians continue to be misunderstood and stereotyped. A recent hit song and popular music video on the country music charts is illustrative. In "Indian Outlaw," as performed by Tim McGraw, the "half Cherokee and Choctaw" speaker beats a "tom-tom" while passing around a pipe, offering to let listeners "smoke you some." Later, he asks all (the women?) to gather around his tepee to catch a peek at him "in nothing but buffalo briefs." The "medicine man" drags the speaker around by his headband because his "half Chippewa" girlfriend is not one of "his kind." Afterwards, he boasts that he can "kill a deer or buffalo" with an arrow from his "hickory bow." This ridiculous song is an amalgamation of stereotypes. Most American Indians consider the drum sacred, and it is "played" by singers in ceremonies and at powwows. It is not indiscriminately "beaten" outside the song/ceremony context. Among those American Indian tribes using them, sacred pipes are filled with tobacco and used in prayer. Pipes are never used for frivolous recreational purposes (as implied in the song) such as inhaling hallucinogens. The reference to "buffalo briefs" connects to the sex fiend subcategory of the "savage Indian" stereotype. Sadly, the song reinforces many students' stereotypical misrepresentations of American Indians. As damaging as the savage depiction in "Indian Outlaw," other misrepresentations of American Indians in popular culture have emerged. "New age" enthusiasts pay to learn about Native American spiritual and ecological wisdom from "shamans" at workshops, creating a new American Indian stereotype subcategory—"the ecological mystic," a function of the noble savage stereotype. A false duality, which insists that Indians are either barbaric (drum pounding, pipe smoking, sex fiends) or noble (ecology gurus), places American Indians between the proverbial rock and hard place. This duality finds expression in other forms. If American Indians attempt to live modern lives (by running gaming facilities or by watching satellite television,

for example), they are ridiculed as "nontraditional." If they engage in legitimate, traditional healing and religious practices (Navajo sings or the Lakota Sundance, for example), they are criticized for being superstitious and for failing to adapt to modern ways. In short, outsiders' contradictory, inaccurate, and stereotypical perceptions of American Indians necessitate continued attention to the American Indian experience in school curricula.

This article presents brief analytical synopses of *Smoke Signals* and *The Owl's Song;* in addition, it describes issues related to teaching the works in tandem. Teaching these works in an integrated unit of study presents for teachers a means to teach literary and cultural content in a manner that paints a realistic picture of contemporary American Indian life—a portrait that is, for non-Indian students, illuminating and instructive, and for American Indian students, affirming.

Smoke Signals

Through references to "Indian cars," fry bread, and 49 songs, screenwriter Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d'Alene) and director Chris Eyre (Cheyenne-Arapaho) use an American Indian cast to ground the film in a distinctly Indian point of view. Humor abounds in the film, standing the "stoic Indian" stereotype on its head. In the opening scene, radio station KREZ's "traffic reporter," Lester Falls Apart, commenting on the solitude and isolation of life on an Indian reservation (or "rez"), reports, "A big truck just went by. Now it's gone . . . couple of cars went by earlier. Ain't no traffic really." Later, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the film's young adult Coeur d'Alene protagonists, catch a ride with two girls in an "Indian car" that drives only in reverse. The Indian car is a stock comic image in Indian country. Characterized by cardboard "windows," duct tape, may-pop tires, and no spare, the reverse-only transmission offers viewers a humorous variation on the Indian car motif. At the same time, it symbolically suggests that Thomas's attempt to move himself and his people forward by looking "backward" (through traditional storytelling) is a practical strategy. Another of the film's many humorous moments occurs when Victor and Thomas "memorialize" John Wayne in a 49 song. (The 49, a Kiowa song tradition that has extended across Indian Country, is an essential aspect of the contemporary intertribal powwow's social function.):

> John Wayne's teeth hey yah,
> John Wayne's teeth hey yah hey yah,
> Are they false;
> Are they real;
> Are they plastic;
> Are they steel?

Focusing on John Wayne's unseen teeth, the song reduces the archetypal cowboy to a humorless phony. In so doing, it reverses the "humorless Indian" stereotype, suggesting it may be more applicable to some white people. Of the stoic John Wayne, Victor comments, "You know in all those movies you never saw John Wayne's teeth. Not once. I think there's something wrong when you don't see a guy's teeth." Viewers wonder just what kind of hero would always hide the humanity of a smile in order to look tough.

The film follows Victor and Thomas, an unlikely pair, on a journey from the Coeur d'Alene reservation in Idaho to Phoenix, Arizona. Victor—tall, handsome, and practical—travels to Phoenix to retrieve his father's cremated remains. Thomas—short, eccentric, and nerdy—offers to finance the trip, so Victor relents and allows Thomas to accompany him. Together, the boys ride the bus to Phoenix and on the way—through their conversations, introspective flashbacks, and interactions with fellow passengers—come to understand one another. In the process, each matures emotionally, growing in knowledge of himself. Victor convinces Thomas to shed his nerdy suit and adopt more of the warrior's look and mentality: "You've got to look like you just got back from killing a buffalo, Thomas . . . This ain't 'Dances with Salmon,' you know." Later, Thomas emerges from a bus station restroom (like Superman from a phone booth) wearing a "Fry Bread Power" T-shirt. Each boy exerts positive influence over the other. Thomas helps Victor appreciate some of his deceased father's redeeming qualities through reminiscences of conversations he had with Victor's dad such as the time they ate breakfast together at Denny's. In the end, both boys develop a respect for one another that moves each toward a more fully integrated identity. They cement what viewers are left feeling will be a lifelong, albeit unlikely, friendship.

Unlike the rash of nostalgic films about American Indians from the early 1990s—*Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Last of the Mohicans* (1992), and Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), for example—*Smoke Signals* is set in the present. The audience sees American Indian kids in school; it witnesses them

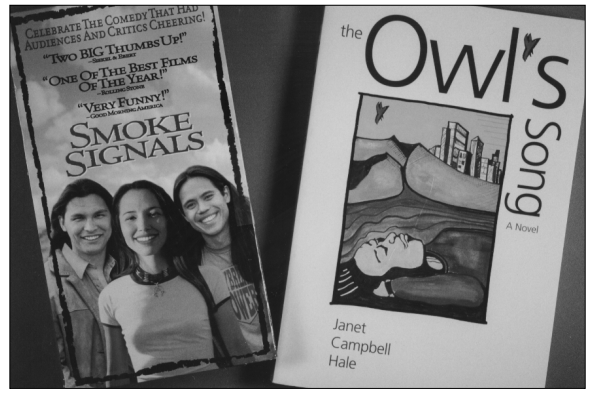
shooting hoops and ordering the "Grand Slam" breakfast at Denny's. Depicting Indians in contemporary situations living modern lives underscores their humanity, while undermining the "living fossil" stereotype—that view of American Indians that freezes them in the 1800s.

The Owl's Song

Janet Campbell Hale's *The Owl's Song* is a *bildungsroman,* "a novel that deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity" (Harmon and Holman 53). The novel traces the intellectual and moral growth as well as the identity development of its young adult protagonist, Billy White Hawk. Like *Smoke Signals,* the principal plot device in the novel is a journey. Billy leaves the reservation to escape the confusion that results from his mother's death and his best friend's suicide. He finds himself in a city, an urban world that is antithetical to much of his boyhood reservation experience. Billy lives with his half-sister, who has chosen to assimilate into white society. She drops "Hawk" from her last name (leaving only "White"), a not-so-subtle rejection of her American Indian heritage. In school, Billy encounters ignorance and racism. He struggles with his lack of understanding of his black and white classmates. However, it is in the urban environment and not on the reservation where Billy comes to realize the importance of his family, his upbringing, and the traditions of his people.

In a scene that beautifully and realistically indicates the manner in which the traditional American Indian worldview accommodates contemporary life, Hale describes Billy's attainment of his "manhood vision." Having been unsuccessful in trying to secure his vision, Billy discovers it stripped of mysticism or romance:

> He was hooked on the ocean . . . in a way. He liked the ocean. He liked watching it . . . [T]he ocean was something you knew was inside you all along. You watched the waves. You thought of the ocean. You *internalized* the ocean . . . It all had a calming effect. He remembered back home . . . When he went back and saw the golden oceans of grain, he would remember this ocean: the drizzle, the fog, the white caps, the constant movement . . . Old, old, everlasting, always-there ocean. Always changing, shifting, old things coming apart, new things forming, old life dying and new life coming into being. Always changing, still always there, remaining the same. Way in the mist there was a place where waves rose and fell all together and repeated the motion. Staring at that place it looked like it might be a big ocean-going fishing canoe heading out toward the open sea, the steady rise and fall . . . He kept watching that thing. An optical illusion he thought and nothing more. (127)



Photograph by Rebekah Gray

Billy returns to the reservation, and, following the death of his father, discovers the interrelation of all creation around him, as well as his place in it. He realizes that it was at the beach that his vision came to him. He comes to understand who he really is:

> It was his vision, he knew now. He remembered Sah-hult-sum, the warrior, the son of White Hawk and how sad he'd felt that Sah-hult-sum was at first unsure of his manhood vision, and later had forgotten it. Billy White Hawk was his man's name. He needed no other. He looked up into the blue summer skies where soft, billowy clouds drifted. He saw a bird soaring there, its black feathers glistening in the sunlight . . . He was Billy White Hawk . . . He was a man . . . It was all right, now. It was all right. Manitous, spirits of the earth, wind, rain, sun. Father and grandfather and unknown ancestors. [Indian] country . . . oceans, deserts, cities, it was all the same, now. It was all right. (151–53)

As with Victor and Thomas in *Smoke Signals,* Billy's return to the reservation signals the resolution of his internal identity conflict. His physical, emotional, and spiritual return to his people's homeland signifies his rejection of superficiality, materialism, and racism. Young American Indian students see in Victor, Thomas, and Billy mirror images of aspects of their own experience. They find solace in the realization that their culture provides stability in a chaotic, confusing, and contradictory world. Students who are not Indian benefit from reflection upon their heritages and upon their personal, familial, and identity-formation experiences. They grow from the knowledge that solutions to problems

of identity often lie in turning inward toward one's own cultural heritage and family teachings.

Teaching the Works in Tandem

Combining the film and the novel in an integrated unit of study provides teachers with a powerful approach to teaching literary and historical content. Immediately, students are transported to the western range or plateau/basin region of the United States, an area stretching from eastern Washington and Oregon south to western Colorado. This region supports a diverse array of American Indian cultures at once distinct from and similar to those of other American Indian tribes. Historically, for example, the Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene peoples utilized the horse to hunt buffalo, sharing with the Lakota many aspects of what has become known as the "plains horse culture." Unlike the Lakota, however, they relied on salmon as a food source and, as a result, shared many culture traits with Northwest Coast tribes. To the south of the Coeur d'Alene people, the Western Shoshones lived in an area too arid to support a horse-dominated culture. They ". . . continued to travel on foot and pursue [traditional] subsistence activities" (Woodhead 24) such as harvesting pine nuts. A comparison of these cultural similarities and differences helps set the cultural backdrop for the unit of study. Since the film and novel are set in the present, a range of contemporary Indian issues from education to culture preservation, from reservation life to substance abuse can be discussed. Discussing Indian affairs in present tense teaches students that American Indians are not members of a dead or dying race. Comparative analysis of the film and novel develops students' abilities in critical/analytical thinking and reinforces knowledge of literary/cinematic devices, as well as the methodology of explication. American Indian studies as an area of academic inquiry is, by nature, interdisciplinary and integrated. Simultaneously, students must examine historical, anthropological, cultural, literary, cinematic, linguistic, artistic, legal, and geographic material.

Through their reading, viewing, and responding, students come to better understand and appreciate culturally-specific as well as universal aspects of the contemporary American Indian experience. They will appreciate the manner in which understanding a work of art from one genre informs and enhances their understanding of a work in another genre. Further, they will gain a better understanding of the integrated nature of knowledge. Affectively, students will grow in self-awareness as they compare and contrast their life experiences to those of the young adult protagonists in both works. And, of course, students will improve their competence in thinking, reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

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Suggested Instructional Strategies

By planning a variety of learning experiences that integrate these two works, teachers help students practice, reinforce, and sharpen these competencies. One practical way to accomplish the integration of content from both works is through the use of a "guided viewing sheet/viewing notes." (See Figure 1.) On the guided viewing sheet, students record data that allow them to compare and contrast Victor and Thomas physically, emotionally, and intellectually. This sets the stage for a written or graphic comparative analysis of the characters, as well as a comparison of them to Billy White Hawk. Another means of integrating the material is through the use of cooperative learning. In groups, students research aspects of Coeur d'Alene (or more broadly, what anthropologists label "western range" or "plateau/basin") culture. Aspects of that culture depicted in the film and novel can be identified, listed, categorized, and evaluated. Again in groups, students discuss and reach consensus on literal, interpretive, and evaluative questions on chapter clusters of the novel and/or segments of the film. Students explore, compare, contrast, and evaluate common themes in both works (such as coming of age, intergenerational conflict, and friendship) in their groups and in teacher-led discussions. Characteristics of structural elements common to both works—as the journey motif, the *bildungsroman,*

FIGURE 1.
GUIDED VIEWING SHEET/"VIEWING NOTES"

Film: _____

Sights (here note particularly vivid or poignant images, "things" that catch your eye)

_____

_____

Sounds (here note sources of sound [narration, dialogue, etc.], nature of sound, elements of the underscoring)

_____

_____

EVENTS	CHARACTERS
Plot, rising action, climax, resolution	Psychological, physical, and emotional dimensions of main characters

LITERARY	DRAMATIC	CINEMATIC
Characters, setting, plot, point of view, theme, mood, symbols	Actors, quality of acting, make-up, costuming, sets, flaws	Types of shots, camera angles, camera movement, duration of shots, editing, sources of sound

imagery, symbols, and themes—must be defined, described, discussed, analyzed, and evaluated. Students may also consider the role of place—landscape and geography—in both works. N. Scott Momaday's classic essay, "A Vision beyond Time and Place," conveys to students the importance of place in the American Indian worldview. After reading this essay, students ponder how landscape shapes a culture and influences the worldview of a people. This is a critical concern of both Janet Campbell Hall and Sherman Alexie, as well as other American Indian writers and filmmakers.

Conclusion

The best teaching addresses students' intellectual and affective needs simultaneously. Avoiding the "either-or" dichotomies that plague much of education today, an integrated treatment of *Smoke Signals* and *The Owl's Song* enhances students' understanding of themselves, as well as their knowledge of and appreciation for contemporary American Indian cultures while they master standards-based knowledge, skills, and competencies. Through an integrated approach that blends genres with reading, viewing, writing, thinking, culture study, history, and geography, students better understand the interdisciplinary nature of the English language arts. Because they relate to the experiences and emotions of the young adult protagonists of each work, students grow in both self-awareness and appreciation of others.

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A former high school teacher, JIM CHARLES teaches in the English education program at the University of South Carolina, Spartanburg.