Myth and Narrative: Resistance and Redemption Via
Narrative Elements and Counter-Myths in Sherman Alexie’s
Film Smoke Signals

By

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Abstract

The purpose of my text is to explore how this unique film, *Smoke Signals*, resists the mythic Western film narrative and gives voice to and presents a new kind of film or counter-narrative about American Indians. Alexie utilizes his film via narrative elements to orchestrate a response to those American Indian mythic stereotypes predominant in films of the Western genre. *Smoke Signals* offers a counter-narrative that resists and undermines the authority of the mythic Western and, in so doing, creates a counter-myth of empowerment that works to reclaim integral aspects of meaning over myth.
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Chapter One

Introduction

"The same thing occurs in the mythical signifier: its form is empty but present, its meaning absent but full.

Roland Barthes from "Mythologies"

"Witness the ways in which we have made the cowboy the exemplar of the American."

Jason P. Mitchell

"Those Indians are always gambling."

Sherman Alexie, "The Business of Fancydancing"

Released in 1998 and developed with help from both the Sundance Institute and Miramax Films, Smoke Signals is based on a screenplay written by the Coeur d’Alene Indian writer, Sherman Alexie. Chris Eyre, who is Cheyenne-Arapaho, directed the film and helped co-write the script. Alexie has stated in his text based on his screenplay that “it’s the first feature film written, directed and co-produced by Indians to ever receive a major distribution deal” (XI). In a country where its
films have both demonized and romanticized American Indian people with stories and scripts largely written and directed by non-Indians, I consider this a breakthrough film as there really hasn’t been a similar one produced which has received a major distribution deal that is about contemporary American Indians.

At the same time, I acknowledge there are excellent films created by indigenous people, in this country and in others, on similar subject manner that unfortunately haven’t, for one reason or another, received a major distribution deal and are thus limited as to who might have the opportunity to view them. Hopefully, a wider audience will get to view these films so they can receive the acknowledgement and recognition they deserve.

However, except for a few films like Smoke Signals, all the rich complexity and diversity that can complicate the lives of most contemporary North American Indians has yet to be meaningfully acknowledged by American cinema. For the most part, where film and contemporary American Indians are concerned, the Western film genre predominates with all its mythic stereotypes
based on the historic battles between cowboys or settlers and Indians. It's as though in film, time for the American Indian has stopped or somehow gotten caught at a place near the end of the eighteenth century. Whenever I've seen a movie that had American Indian characters it was as though they stepped out of a history text. As a result, I wanted to know what aspect of the colonial legacy perpetuated the kind of literary stereotypes or myth that kept American Indian characters in film looking as though they'd just stepped out of a Smithsonian exhibit.

In contrast to these past films, Smoke Signals is an obvious exception. In many respects, Smoke Signals is a response to those American Indian mythic stereotypes that dominate films of the Western genre. This makes Smoke Signals a counter narrative that resists the mythic colonial Western and, in so doing, works to create a counter-myth of indigenous empowerment. Though the film is centered on American Indian characters, it is set in more contemporary times on the C'oeur d'Alene Indian reservation or rez. Victor has gotten word that his father, Arnold Joseph, has
died. He and his friend Thomas journey to Phoenix to pick up Arnold Joseph’s remains and return him to the rez. Flashbacks of Arnold Joseph as well as the childhood past of both Thomas and Victor are interspersed throughout the main storyline. Upon arrival in Phoenix, Victor and Thomas encounter Suzy Song, who is a friend of Arnold Joseph. Though a fairly simple plot, Smoke Signals still has complexity, drama and humor.

In fact, some of the best moments in Smoke Signals are its comedic ones, especially when the film’s central characters address past cinematic stereotypes that tend to present North American Indians as either threatening Indian braves or romantic caricatures where only certain characteristics are exaggerated or dramatized, which means other more meaningful aspects of characterization are minimalized, ignored or hollowed out. While these stereotypes can be entertaining and therefore profitable at the box office, it’s time that the film industry makes more inroads with regards to how they portray American Indian characters, which is a central reason as to why Smoke Signals is such a breakthrough film.
With this in mind and in many respects, most Western film narratives were created, filmed and produced by non-Indians who wanted to pay homage to the American past and to its cast of characters that generally included cowboys, settlers and or explorers and also to celebrate the conquest and ultimate closing of the Western frontier. Generally, one perspective that has tended to be the focus, often to mythic proportions, is the narrative of the colonizer as epitomized by the cowboy, settler or explorer. While this perspective is a significant one, other narrative points of view such as that of the American Indian have largely been ignored, misconstrued or even trivialized. Yet, with regards to these predominating cinematic portrayals of American Indians what and how was this kind of myth created, and why is it continually perpetuated?

While the answers to these questions are complex and more than likely open-ended, this still makes them all the more worthwhile to explore, especially when this exploration of myth is linked to narrative elements, which are techniques or tactics that writers utilize when writing, organizing and revising their work.
Narrative elements include: setting, dialog, plot, conflict, and most importantly characters that somehow manage to captivate and entertain. Moreover, while the various components of narrative elements are discrete and separate, in any work of narrative they weave together to form a unique pattern that revolves around a core of emanating conflict.

In his landmark text *Mythology*, Roland Barthes postulated that a work of literature or film could, essentially, collaborate with or strive to resist myth via its utilization of narrative elements:

Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. (135)

What exactly does Barthes mean and how might a writer or filmmaker such as Alexie mythify myth and in turn create his own mythology from another? Barthes describes myth as a form of communication, “that it is a message” (109). Moreover, for Barthes, myth and history
are closely interrelated. At the same time, he refers to myth as a “second order semiological system” (114).

In direct relation to myth and according to Jonathon Bignell, words or signs and images that are grouped together “trigger a range of connotations attached to the sign,” which Barthes refers to as myth making (16). At the same time, these myth making signs are formed and linked together via a certain set of codes. Moreover, for Bignell, Barthes emphasizes the idea that myth “means things used as signs [words, images or objects organized into codes that] communicate a social and political message about the world” (21). Likewise, Bignell asserts, “Myth makes particular social meanings acceptable as the common sense truth about the world” (23).

To this end, Barthes believes that myth robs language and that the only way to counteract this is to rob myth: “All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth” (135). Barthes uses the example of Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pecuchet, where Flaubert’s “gaze upon the Bouvard
and Pecuchet text reveals their "ineffectual inclinations, their inability to feel satisfied" (136). This works to cast that text under another light that in turn reveals the illusionary foundation of its mythic structure:

[Accordingly] Flaubert has undertaken a real archaeological restoration of a given mythical speech: he is the Viollet-le-Duc of a certain bourgeois ideology. But less naïve than Viollet-le-Duc, he has strewn his reconstitution with supplementary ornaments which demystify it. (Barthes 136)

That is, the mythic codes of Bouvard and Pecuchet become a signifier that is related to a new concept, which is that of Flaubert’s gaze or viewpoint of their naivete. Thereby, a counter-myth is created from the first myth. At the same time, Flaubert uses certain narrative elements to counteract the original. Likewise, Alexie’s film Smoke Signals utilizes narrative elements to construct a new view or gaze that is directed at past Western films, which works to undermine that genre by
revealing relevant aspects of its naïve basis and point of view.

From a narrative standpoint, myth works to make its message and social meaning an unquestionable reality and norm and thus encourages a kind of conformity to certain cultural norms:

A voluntary acceptance of myth can in fact define the whole of our traditional Literature. According to our norms, this Literature is an undoubted mythical system: there is a meaning, that of the discourse; there is a signifier, which is the same discourse as form or writing; there is a signified, which is the concept of literature; there is signification, which is the literary discourse. (Barthes 134)

Essentially, in our modern high-tech world where we are inundated by both television and advertisement, we have modern myths all around us. Advertising, television commercials, magazines, and other similarly related events contain myth, which work to exert a certain influence on the audience or viewer. Accordingly, film
contains elements of myth. With film, we have myth-making going on at the verbal as well as the visual or iconic level. With all this in mind, it could be argued that more often than not, the visual, language or linguistic and narrative code that defines the myth of American Indian-ness in films, especially those of the Western genre, are based on a colonial presumption that also works to support the myth that is Manifest Destiny and the closing of the American west as a frontier.

Yet, if the American Western frontier supposedly closed in 1890 then why more than one hundred years later are American Indian cinematic characters still confined and defined by this particular moment in history?

To this end, few American films have challenged or questioned the manner that American Indian characters are portrayed in mythic Westerns. However, Smoke Signals creates a counter-myth based on its subject matter and setting. This film’s focus on contemporary American Indian characters goes against the cinematic tendency to confine these kinds of characters to roles that are limited by a myth related to Euro-American colonialism. Moreover, utilizing the setting of a modern
day American Indian reservation is uncommon. In addition, the dialog of both of the two main characters, Thomas and Victor, is at times directed at past cinematic stereotypes. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, as he explains in his text Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, double-voiced discourse is fictional character dialog that is directed “toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (185). An example from the film is the scene where Thomas and Victor discuss cowboys:

THOMAS: Man, the cowboys always win, enit?
VICTOR: The cowboys don’ always win.
THOMAS: Yeah, they do. The cowboys always win. Look at Tom Mix. Look at Roy Rogers. Look at Clint Eastwood. And what about John Wayne? Man, he was about the toughest cowboy of all, enit? (65-66)

At this point, Thomas sings a traditional powwow style song about John Wayne’s teeth: “Have you seen them? Are they false, are they real? Are they plastic, are they steel?” (66)
This film’s double-voiced discourse works to make the central conflicts of this film fairly provocative, which raises the important question as to who this film’s intended audience is. At the same time, this film’s dialog, at certain significant points, responds rather humorously and ironically to past cinematic stereotypes.

However, when a film such as Smoke Signals resists the predominant Western cinematic myths via utilization of certain narrative elements, new insight into the mechanisms of the Western’s mythic structure can be gained. That is, via character and conflict, a new gaze upon past Western films, especially with regard to how indigenous people are characterized, works to undo its power to manipulate. In relation to this, Smoke Signals allows for more complexity regarding the conflicts related to each of its indigenous characters.

For example, the film’s main characters, Thomas and Victor, journey across the American Western landscape in a quest for self. It is their journey, in and of itself, that allows for internal and external conflict regarding self and truth to unfold. Also, throughout this film,
Thomas and Victor define themselves against previous kinds of mythic characterizations predominant in the Western film genre. As the second chapter further elaborates, those scenes where Thomas and Victor discuss how an Indian man should behave are often quite humorous. Mikhail Bakhtin might refer to the humor that Alexie utilizes in Smoke Signals as carnival humor: “Carnivalistic laughter likewise is directed toward something higher—toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders” (127). Likewise, Alexie uses his humor to defy the colonial authority of past Western films.

The purpose of this text is to explore how this film resists the mythic Western’s narrative and therefore gives voice to and presents a new kind of film or counter-narrative about American Indians. In this way, Alexie’s film Smoke Signals resists cinematic stereotypes of American Indians, via his manipulation of certain narrative elements such as character, conflict, plot and setting in order to give voice to relevant issues related to the contemporary American Indian way of life. This film breaks free from cinematic
stereotypes and myths regarding the portrayal of its American Indian characters. Essentially, *Smoke Signals* is a response to American Indian mythic stereotypes predominant in films of the Western genre, and this is what helps to make *Smoke Signals* a counter-narrative in that this film resists the mythic Western and in so doing creates a counter-myth of empowerment that reclaims integral aspects of meaning over myth.
Chapter Two

Smoke Signals' Subversive Humor and Audience Effect

"One of the best ways to understand people is to know what makes them laugh."

Vine Deloria, "Indian Humor"

"According to Aristotle, a child does not begin to laugh before the fortieth day after his birth; only from that moment does it become a human being. Rabelais and his contemporaries were also familiar with the saying of Pliny that only one man, Zoraster, began to laugh at the time of his birth; this was interpreted as an omen of his divine wisdom."

Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His Word

"The tribal trickster is a liberator and healer in narrative, a comic sign, communal signification and a discourse with imagination."

Gerald Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games"
Most films aim for a more universal audience: “Audiences identify with characters in difficult situations and with characters they like or wish to be like” (Dancyger and Rush 109). However, what about characters and situations that a more general audience might not readily identify with? Such might be the case for Sherman Alexie’s film Smoke Signals, which focuses on contemporary American Indian characters and is set on a rez. It could be argued that Smoke Signals was created for a particular audience more familiar with its subject matter. However, even those more familiar with Smoke Signals’ subject matter might be surprised to find the stark economic bleakness of rez life juxtaposed with humor. Likewise, Western films that portray Indians tend to be dramatic rather than comedic. A notable exception is the 1970’s film Little Big Man, directed by Arthur Penn, which culminated in The Battle of Little Bighorn. While Smoke Signals certainly has its more dramatic moments, this only makes its more comedic elements standout. This juxtaposition of the polemic, past cinematic ventures and the harsh reality of contemporary reservation life with carnival humor works to cause
viewers of this film to alter their viewpoints on certain personal as well as cultural contexts, just as it also works to subvert mythic authority with laughter. At the same time, laughter diffuses anger just as it proclaims and celebrates survival and therefore renews.

First and foremost, an audience tends to view a film from a particular cultural perspective or viewpoint. That is, audiences culturally position themselves with regard to how they view any film. They have certain universal expectations. Jonathan Bignell in his text *Media Semiotics* elaborates on film signs and codes, which are related to how audiences view films and also are components of myth:

Cinema uses codes and conventions of representation which are shared by both filmmakers and audiences, so that the audience actively constructs meaning by reference to codes, which structure mythic meanings in the social world in which film-going exists (191). Signs are words and concepts or images that communicate meaning. According to Bignell and with regard to film, signs are organized into codes. Likewise, when certain
codes are grouped together they create connotations that can carry powerful political or cultural messages, which are characterized as myths. Whenever an audience views a film, they have certain expectations regarding how the film will unfold across the screen. For example, when audiences view films that have American Indian characters, they, generally, expect a Western or to see American Indian characters looking and acting like they might have one hundred years ago. These kinds of films carry mythic messages and are viewed as holding a certain amount of authority, even exaltation of their subject matter.

However, when the mythic authority of the North American Western film is put in a different light and is, perhaps, even mocked, this can challenge an audience’s standard acceptance of those kinds of films. For example, in Smoke Signals, humor is utilized to challenge the way an audience might view a film about American Indian people, just as it works to subvert the Western’s mythic authority with laughter. This laughter, which derives from the film’s usage of
carnival humor, proclaims and celebrates survival and therefore renews.

From exploring the writer Francois Rabelais’ (1494-1553) comedic elements, Mikhail Bakhtin developed his idea of carnival, which explores how humor or comedy is a way for literature to overturn authority. While Sue Vice explains that Bakhtin, in his text Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, lists twelve characteristics of carnival, it’s his ninth characteristic that relates strongly to aspects of Smoke Signals comedic elements: “Carnival laughter is directed at exalted objects and forces them to renew themselves” (153). Similarly, Simon Dentith concurs that Bakhtin’s view of literary humor or the carnival is a way to subvert or overturn authority:

It gives a name, carnival or the carnivalesque, to a range of otherwise dispersed activities and cultural forms which can now be seen to have real and historical connections—from Brueghel’s famous picture of the The Battle of Carnival and Lent, through . . . Renaissance drama, to Gulliver pissing on the palace in Lilliput to put out the fire,
...to the writing of Milan Kundera and his mobilization of the joke against the official pieties of Stalinism. (70)

Moreover for Dentith, Bakhtin chose Rabelais for the kind of writer he was in relation to the timeframe he lived, the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance:

Finally and above all is Bakhtin’s attempt to mobilize, at the conceptual level only of course, the rumbustious popular life of the carnival against the official but murderous pieties of Church and State in Renaissance Europe—laugher “does not build stakes,” he writes. (95)

Likewise, Julia Kristeva describes the more subversive aspects of carnival humor as a discourse of protest:

Carnivalesque discourse breaks the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantic and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law. (65)
One scene from *Smoke Signals* that links carnival humor with both protest and subversion against myth is when Victor and Thomas get back on the bus they’ve taken in order to get to/from their point of origin in Idaho to their destination, Phoenix, Arizona and find their seats have been taken by two white men. One of the men wears a cowboy hat while the other wears a hunting type hat. Thomas, with his Fry Bread Power shirt and new warrior look, and Victor communicate to the two men that have taken their bus seats that they’d like them back. One of the men uses derogatory comments such as calling Victor a “Super Indian,” and telling them they’d have to have their powwow somewhere else.

After a few tense moments, Victor and Thomas go and find other seats on the bus. At that point, Thomas tells Victor that the warrior look doesn’t seem to always work and that cowboys always seem to win. Victor sings and chants a song about John Wayne’s teeth, implying they weren’t real, which causes all the other non-Indian passengers on the bus to stare at them in a rather stunned manner:
Victor: 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./ (breaks into song while pounding a powwow rhythm on the seat)/ Oh, John Wayne’s teeth, John Wayne’s teeth, hey, hey,/ hey, hey, ye! Oh, John Wayne’s teeth, John Wayne’s teeth,/ hey, hey, hey, hey, ye! Are they false, are they real?/ Are they plastic, are they steel? Hey, hey, hey, hey,/ yeeeee. (66)

As Victor’s song fades, the Eagle Bear Singers continue with the song for which Alexie wrote the lyrics.

The white men’s derogatory comments, which inspired Victor’s song, had the potential to lead to a more serious situation. For example, the powwow comment insinuates an Indian on a bus could only be going to a powwow. There is an attempt by the two men on the bus to stereotype both Thomas and Victor about who they are as indigenous men. As a result, there’s something of a one-up-man-ship going on. However, the authority of the two white men to make their assumptions regarding
indigenous people is mocked. As a result, the viewpoint and behavior of these two men appear both boorish and ignorant. Yet, it's done in a more humorous manner, which works to diffuse the tense situation, just as it shows Thomas and Victor eventually making light of the men's insult and also challenging their authority to make the condescending judgments they made. While this scene certainly has its tense and serious moments, at the same time it's also a humorous scene that works to subvert and to protest earlier Western films where Indianness was narrowly defined and portrayed. Yet, as Victor sings about John Wayne, the ultimate cinematic cowboy, and focuses not on his heroic and more ideal traits and or cinematic codes, but instead on the fact that his teeth might be plastic goes against predominant myths related to cowboys. Another insinuation is that the cinematic John Wayne might not be real, which means other aspects of the myth surrounding him might not be either.

An equally humorous moment during this particular scene is when the people on the bus, in stunned disbelief, look back at both Victor, who is singing his
John Wayne song, and Thomas. Their faces are completely devoid of humor, making the scene all the funnier. It’s as though they can’t believe that John Wayne’s mythic cowboy image and character could not only be questioned, but mocked by the very people it was designed to subordinate.

From the perspective of myth, John Wayne’s cinematic image and surrounding codes become a signifier that is related to a new concept, Victor’s viewpoint as expressed by his humorous song. Thereby, a counter-myth or new myth is created. At the same time, Victor’s song is one of protest, as it is an effort to resist stereotyping. Also, it’s a place where this particular text answers back and counteracts a previous text, which is that of the Western.

Similarly, Vine Deloria, Jr. in his essay “Indian Humor” uses General George Armstrong Custer as an example of how humor can work to counteract myths and/or cause the first myth to become a signifier of a new one. In film, both Manifest Destiny and the Seventh Cavalry are often related to heroic people and acts that were, more or less, justified. However, Deloria mocks this.
notion with carnival humor, which makes the Custer myth a signifier for another. The Custer myth is introduced to a new concept, which is that of Deloria’s humorous perspective. As Barthes states in his Mythologies, “The power of the second myth is that gives the first its basis as a naivety which is looked at” (136). Essentially, Deloria’s Custer humor creates a counter-myth of the original:

Custer jokes, however, can barely be categorized, let alone sloganized. Indians say that Custer was well dressed for the occasion [the Battle for Little Bighorn]. When the Sioux found his body after the battle, he had on an Arrow shirt. (40)

Another Custer joke that Deloria utilizes is

My favorite last saying pictures Custer on top of the hill looking at a multitude of warriors charging up the slope at him. He turns resignedly to his aide and says, “Well, it’s better than going back to North Dakota”. (41)

While in more contemporary times Custer’s legacy has faced certain questioning, he was once viewed as a
fallen hero, a tragic victim of the Indian Wars. However, these humorous viewpoints of Custer cast his historical legacy in an even more questionable light. When Custer is cast as fallible, he is made more imperfectly human. For the colonial myth to work there has to be an almost perfectly inhuman element in order for it to deify the grand myth of colonial land acquisition. Perhaps it is better that Custer be more fallible than super-hero, as his actions and the man himself might be better understood.

In relation to this, for Kristeva, carnival humor could be construed as the ambivalent relationship between two texts: "That is, two texts meet, contradict, and relativize each other" (78). Likewise, since in many ways, *Smoke Signals* is a response back to other films of the Western genre, this establishes that it also double-voiced. Bakhtin describes double-voiced discourse as a text that is directed toward another text: "it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward another's discourse, toward someone else's speech" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 185).
In relation to the double-voiced aspect of carnival humor, Kristeva believes this ironic duel of words is where narrative challenges myth: "By the same token, it is proffered as the only space in which language escapes linearity (law) to live as drama in three dimensions" (79). This duel of words, when combined with carnival humor, allows for communication to open dialog that might otherwise remain closed:

In other words, such a scene is the only place where discourse attains its "potential infinity" (to use David Hilbert's term), where prohibitions (representation, "monologism") and their transgression (dream, body, "dialogism") coexist. (79)

It's important to keep in mind that carnival not only works to subvert, but also to liberate and to renew: "When it enters writing, the carnival spirit offers a liberation from 'all that is humdrum and universally accepted'" (Bakhtin 34). Bakhtin in his text Rabelais and His World elaborates more on his carnival, which he describes, "as the laughter of all the people" (11). He describes laughter as generating renewal:
Let us enlarge upon the second important trait of the people’s festive laughter: that it is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. (12)

For example, in another scene from *Smoke Signals* that is related to Custer, Thomas is watching Victor and two other friends play basketball. Once again Victor chants a song, which is about playing basketball with General George Armstrong Custer, who is guarding him:

> VICTOR: Oh, I took the ball to the hoop and what did I see? Oh, I took the ball to the hoop and what did I see? General George Armstrong Custer was guarding me! Way, ya, hi, ye! Way, y, hi, ye! (18)

With this particular scene, the volatile relationship between American Indians and their colonial counterparts is epitomized by a game of basketball. Song, basketball and humor, when combined to describe this relationship of colonized and their colonizers, works to cast things in a different light, especially
since this relationship is, generally, described in a more serious manner. In another sense, aspects of the colonizer are linked to teaching and authority, while the colonized are, generally, cast into the role of students beholden to their cultural instructors. To parody this challenges the authority not only of the people that created the myth, but the myth itself, just as it renews because the more tragic aspects of this mythic story are turned around to create laughter. Also, when the authority of this myth is challenged, it has lost its magical power to control.

While the exalted objects that Alexie uses humor to overturn are Western genre films that have tended to stereotype American Indian characters, Joseph L. Coulombe believes Alexie’s humor reveals certain truths: “He uses humor—or his characters use humor—to reveal injustice, protect self-esteem, heal wounds, and create bonds” (94). Yet, perhaps it is more the sharp contrast between the economic bleakness of reservation life and Alexie’s usage of humor that works to challenge viewers more familiar with this subject matter as well as those that aren’t:
These 'contrary powers' often coexist simultaneously, requiring the characters and readers to position and then reposition themselves within shifting personal and cultural contexts. (95)

The rationale is that the juxtaposition of humor with the economically bleak reality of rez life causes viewers of this film to reposition themselves regarding their adherence to certain personal and cultural myths and contexts related to North American Indian people as well as the legacy of the American frontier. For Smoke Signals, the issue of audience repositioning with regards to myth takes on certain significance, as does the issue of character identification. P. Jane Hafen's article, "Rock and Roll, Redskins, and Blues: In Alexie’s Work," elaborates on Alexie’s subject matter as a writer in that he "present[s] a fusion of historical sensibilities and grim realisms of contemporary Indian life on the Spokane Reservation" (71). At the same time, he combines these "grim realisms" of rez life with carnival humor.
For example, towards the beginning of this film, when Victor and Thomas are getting ready to leave the rez, they encounter two women, Velma and Lucy, played by Michelle St. John and Elaine Miles, driving a beat-up 1965 Chevrolet Malibu in reverse. It appears as though the car’s drive gear is not working. Lucy, who is quite adroit at driving fast in reverse, asks Velma for a beer; Velma reminds Lucy that they don’t drink anymore. At that point, Lucy casually shrugs her shoulders and asks for a Coke. When they encounter Thomas and Victor walking along the road, they offer them a ride. Thomas relates one of his stories about how Arnold Joseph got arrested and how he plea-bargained his way down to “being an Indian in the twentieth century. He got two years in Walla Walla.” Later, Velma asks both men if they have their passports as they are about to enter “a whole different country . . . that’s as foreign as it gets.” After the two women drop off Thomas and Victor amid much laughter, they drive backwards towards the rez.

In mainstream arenas, serious issues such as alcoholism and indigenous people going to prison are,
generally, viewed from a more serious, even tragic perspective. This somber view of American Indians can be traced back to a distinctly nineteenth century colonial perspective. Patricia Nelson Limerick in her text *The Legacy of Conquest* discusses mid-1800’s Western painter George Catlin’s painted images of American Indians dressed in their traditional regalia and often portrayed them as noble, stoic and tragic victims of the White man’s aggressive ambitions:

A great deal of Catlin’s sentiment for these properly noble Indians had more to do with what they were not than with what they were. It especially gratified him that they were not businessmen . . . [Moreover] Indians, once in contact with the course of white settlement, became helpless and passive, acted on and never acting. (183-186)

This grim, bleak portrayal of indigenous people started an American trend that has stubbornly persisted. Accordingly and especially with regard to cinema, contemporary American Indian people are still portrayed from that somber, stoic perspective. Yet, how accurate
is this mythic viewpoint? Is it a naive notion? What better way is there to challenge this myth than to utilize carnival humor and to subvert its somber and grim intentions with laughter?

Once again juxtaposed with certain harsh circumstances, humor has a liberating effect. And while Ron McFarland describes Alexie’s writing as polemic or angry, he also discusses his usage of humor:

As I have argued, much of Alexie’s poetry and fiction works like a joke, and I do not mean this in any deprecatory sense. His jokes are both sharp-edged and perceptive and poignant. (33)

The idea that both Lucy and Velma are driving in reverse across the rez unconcerned about potential tribulations or related consequences might be surprising for some audiences. Aside from the fact their car only drives in reverse, these women seem unafraid, unconcerned about their lifestyle and situation. They have a cavalier attitude towards life that defies, even contradicts, what might be viewed as the harsh reality of their lives. Bakhtin might interpret the laughter, humor and
self-assurance of these two women as working to make their characters carnivalesque in that their carefree demeanor defies authority:

Besides universalism and freedom, the third important trait of laughter was its relation to the people's unofficial truth. The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation... Laughter, on the contrary overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority. (Rabelais and His World 90)

In relation to this aspect of carnivalesque, the film Thelma and Louise is about two women that go from uptight, conscientious abiders of the law to confident, carefree, post-modern-day outlaws. Yet, like Lucy and Velma, there's something wrong because women aren't supposed to be carefree outlaws. The happy-go-lucky, blithe attitude of Lucy and Velma and of Thelma and
Louise is, in and of itself, a kind of subversion of authority. This doesn’t mean these women aren’t concerned about things or aren’t complicated; they might even harbor anger towards others, yet their own emotions or those of others does not intimidate them. Also, they aren’t as concerned with the approval of others. Since the image of women in print is, generally, shaped for the approval of others, this lack of need for outside approval is a fairly significant act of rebellion.

When a serious situation is viewed from a more humorous perspective, it has the potential to allow an audience to alter long-held viewpoints. Bakhtin refers to this as seeing the world “anew”:

Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint . . . Certain essential aspects of the world are
accessible only to laughter. (Rabelais and His World 66)

In relation to carnival humor, in both film and plays dialog is either direct or concrete, which is referred to as being either on-the-nose or more indirect and related to subtext and "is the second meaning of a line of dialogue, the hidden meaning behind the words, the real reason a character chooses to speak" (Downs and Wright 76). Consequently, there are many ways to interpret subtext, especially more humorous lines of dialog, because of its metaphorical qualities. Also, humorous subtext is where a film can work to resist myth. In contrast to this, there is dialog that is more on-the-nose and straightforward with all meaning on the surface and has less metaphorical or poetical aspects or political connotation.

In Smoke Signals, important aspects of its more comedic dialog and scenes are intertextual and therefore double-voiced in that they respond to past films, especially those of the Western genre, which often portrayed American Indians as tragic, stoic victims or as dangerous challengers to American acquisition of the
Western landscape. This film’s central characters respond to, and or question and mock past cinematic stereotypes of American Indians using double-voiced discourse. To this end, Alexie’s usage of double-voiced discourse is a way to reclaim and or renew meaning. The juxtaposition of the polemic, past cinematic ventures and the harsh reality of rez life with carnival humor works to cause viewers to question long-held cultural beliefs regarding Indigenous people. Also, Alexie’s carnival humor subverts mythic authority with a laughter that proclaims and celebrates survival.

One of the more memorable scenes from this film is when Thomas and Victor discuss how an American Indian man is supposed to act. Victor advises Thomas to act or behave like a real Indian; that is, to act stoically, as this is how they, as Indian men, are supposed to act. This takes on a humorous tone, especially when Victor and Thomas discuss the film Dances With Wolves (Orion Pictures 1990), which portrays American Indians as warrior hunters on horseback. However, this film is based on the lifestyle of particular Plains tribes (Lakota, Cheyenne, etc.), not on the Coeur d’Alene
people. Accordingly, when Victor advises Thomas to act like a hunter that has just killed a buffalo, Thomas responds that their people weren’t buffalo hunters, that they were fishermen.
Chapter Three

The Rez as a Crossroads and Setting As Counter-
Myth

"To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at
your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination
comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun."
N. Scott Momaday from The Way To Rainy Mountain

"[The Taku] [river] flows like this;/ it landed here. It looks like
a human heart."
Elizabeth Nyman and Jeff Leer from, Gagiwdul.at: Brought Forth to
Reconfirm: The Legacy Of A Taku River Tlingit Clan

The settings or landscapes of the film Smoke
Signals are significant as both of its central
caracters, Victor’s and Thomas’s, lives change when
they leave the rez (reservation) and enter the seemingly
alien outside world. Also, the contrast of the
contemporary rez landscape with the world outside of its
borders brings certain underlying political issues to
the forefront. Though the nineteenth century Indian
wars over land might have concluded long ago, more than one hundred years later in the twenty-first century, those battles over land rights and landscape boundaries are still fought in courtrooms and in large corporate offices. More than likely, those volatile negotiations over land rights and boundaries will continue for a long time to come. For most indigenous people, a central issue is recognition that the landscape they've inhabited for time immemorial is a place that they have certain authority over. Since this isn't always readily forthcoming, these indigenous landscapes can be fraught with strife, which is why the borders of these lands are significant as they work to protect indigenous people from encroachment and exploitation by the outside world. According to Patricia Limerick it's important for people, in general, to acknowledge these land issues:

The conquest of Western America shapes the present as dramatically—and sometimes as perilously—as the old mines shape the mountainsides. To live with that legacy, contemporary Americans ought to be well informed and well warned about the connections
between the past and present. (18)

Rarely are contemporary American Indian reservations utilized for settings in film. Perhaps the landscape itself is still too unsettling, too political, too mysterious, too alien and too secret of a place for filmmakers not familiar such settings. For that reason, the contemporary Coeur d'Alene rez setting of Smoke Signals conveys connotations that unsettle and decenter past colonial, cinematic, historical and cultural contexts and myths related to American Indians as well as their colonizers regarding the relationship, political and otherwise, to landscape. Essentially, the contemporary rez landscape setting and that of its border is, in and of itself, a counter-myth.

In Smoke Signals there are two landscapes: the rez and the world outside of its boundaries. Both places tend to be rural outposts connected to other places via long, isolated stretches of highways. Likewise, the rez is at a crossroads with the outside landscape that it borders. With regards to rez settings that are utilized in literature, Rita Ferrari discusses Chippawa writer
Louise Erdrich's use of landscape borders to convey its more metaphoric aspects:

In her novels about Native American characters confined within and defined by the borders of a reservation and the boundaries of ethnic definition, Erdrich (who is herself part Chippewa, part German American) uses the concept of border as metaphor and narrative strategy for a newly imagined negotiation of individual and cultural identity. (145)

Borders, though definitive, are also metaphoric as landscape means different things to different people. Relationship to a particular landscape works to shape the lives of the people that inhabit it. At first, the vast rural isolation of the C'oeur d'Alene setting obscures its borders. Yet, inside the perimeters of the C'oeur d'Alene rez there seems to exist a different set of rules, in contrast to the world outside. For example, in an early scene from Smoke Signals, a radio disc jockey played by John Trudell, who adds memorable depth and humor to his brief role, discusses the traffic report with fellow contributor Lester FallsApart,
excellently played by Leonard George. He describes Lester as waiting at the crossroads to report traffic and weather from his broken-down van, which is parked there. Trudell’s radio headquarters are a rundown trailer, and George makes his local traffic report from the top of his van. Lester, as he reports on local traffic, is a kind of border monitor for the reservation. When he’s not watching for the few cars that drive by the rural landscape, he’s watching the clouds and cars for signs of unusual activity. Yet, since it is a rural landscape, not much happens and time moves slowly and at a different pace from the world outside. When disc jockey Randy Peone asks Lester for his report he responds: “A couple of cars drove by earlier. Kimmy and James were in the green car. Looked like they were arguing./ Ain’t no traffic, really” (33).

For those unfamiliar with rez settings, this different, slower pace can be unsettling. Generally, rez’s are located far from urban settings and seem to exist by a whole different set of cultural and economic rules and priorities. The idea that nothing might be happening or that things happen at a slower pace around
rez settings suggests that people there might not possess the same aims or goals of the world outside its borders.

And though similar with regards to terrain, the rural landscape outside the borders of the C’oeur d’Alene rez is also a kind of a border world. At his crossroads location, Lester waits and watches for signs of unusual activity such as traffic related to the occasional passerby who might have strayed off the common track. Generally, the outside world is viewed as more privileged than the other. However, while the C’oeur d’Alene rez setting of Smoke Signals is not affluent or middle class, there doesn’t seem to be any aspiration towards that particular lifestyle. Moreover, the borders of this rez though invisible, are startling definitive, as the world outside of the rez is like a whole other world. In relation to Alexie and to Smoke Signals and with regards to its unsettling contemporary rez borders and to the duality of its landscape, Ferrari feels Erdrich uses the rez setting as a landscape where the whole notion of duality is realigned, as is the Western notion of locus of power and privilege:
And there have been liberating effects of moving from the language of alienation (otherness) to that of decentering (difference), because the center used to function as the pivot between binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity. (148)

What helps to realign the binary that favors the Western notion of locus of power and privilege is *Smoke Signals'* focus on contemporary American Indians amid their humble rez setting as opposed to portraying nineteenth-century indigenous braves riding horseback across vast expanses of open land. Though humble, the rez links contemporary indigenous people to their place of origin.

Notions of superiority have often been linked to colonial culture, which they used to justify pervasive land acquisition across the American frontier. Also, this colonial sense of superiority worked to establish their privileged position with regards to conquering and assimilating various indigenous peoples. The myth that indigenous culture was somehow inferior and not as
civilized as that of their colonizers was set in history and mirrored by cinema.

Essentially, this worked to keep indigenous people as other, and as the lesser half of a binary code of opposites. As Shari Huhndorf states in her text Going Native, the motive was, in part, to appropriate any original sense or trace of their original culture:

Because real Indians were destined to disappear, European Americans are the proper heirs of ‘Indianness’ as well as of the land and resources of the conquered Natives. (5)

This process of appropriation included indigenous land, culture and traditional stories. This colonial appropriation of traditional stories and also expressing the historical indigenous experience from their viewpoint implies they have the authority and privilege to do so. When this premise of privilege is questioned or put in a different light, as Smoke Signals does, it calls to attention its illusionary foundation. That is, when the authority of this myth is challenged, its power to coerce is lessened. And instead of indigenous people questioning their own worthiness, they question the
merits of giving anyone the authority to take important elements of their culture and utilize this for their own gain, material or otherwise. Perhaps, this is why in film, American Indian people and their landscapes are often cast around the turn of the nineteenth century, as this supports the colonial sense of privilege to do so and erases the long-term, often destructive consequences of the American colonial legacy. In Western films, it seems as though time has stopped on the edge of the American frontier. As Limerick has stated, the contemporary image of the American past is based on illusion: “Reorganized, the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences” (26).

From another perspective, the very integrity of the American dream and its consumer culture is put into question. At the heart of this question is who has access to this dream and who does not. This leads to the question as to why haven’t the people of the rez embraced the middle class lifestyle in which people are often defined by the objects they have the affluence to consume.
The very presence of the contemporary C’oer d’Alene rez setting shows that Indianness, especially the landscapes they inhabit or are related to, have resisted and found ways to turn the dominant commodity-as-culture into something else of their own making. Indigenous people who have found a way to profit from their unique relationship to land have not necessarily assimilated themselves into the colonial commodity culture, but instead have found a way to manipulate this towards their own means.

While lucrative casino operations can be highly profitable for tribal members, their route to enterprise has often been daunting and laden with adverse obstacles. At the same time, the economic success of some American indigenous groups can be unsettling for the descendents of their colonizers as this upsets the old colonial balance of power. When the authority of colonial myth and its related balance of power is questioned or even turned around and the colonized have tapped into their own dormant power, the consequence for them can be a strengthened sense of self-assurance and autonomy. Somehow a balance has been struck between
aspects of the traditional indigenous culture and that of their colonizers whereupon notions of privilege and superiority have been realigned. This means the descendents of the indigenous colonized have tapped into their own authority, especially with regard to their landscapes, which remains a viable source of connection and strength, just as it remains a powerful metaphor for many essential elements of traditional indigenous culture.

At the same time, there is an unsettling aspect of indigenous landscapes that is related to how the people who live there relate to their own land. Accordingly, Richard Stoffle, David Halmo and Dianne Austin have devised five categories to describe American Indian landscapes:

In terms of both size and function, there are five types of Native American cultural landscapes; (1) holy landscape, (2) storyscapes, (3) regional landscapes, (4) ecoscapes, and (5) landmarks. (234)

How might the C’oeur d’alene rez setting of Smoke Signals fit into these five categories? First, it is a
holy land based on how Stoffle, Halmo and Austin define holy landscape as a place linked to a people’s sense of sacred origins:

A holy land is created by a supernatural being who establishes a birthright relationship between a people . . . and that portion of the earth where they were created . . . The relationship between a people and their holy land cannot be broken, even by a Diaspora. Forced relocation by another ethnic group will not break a relationship created by the supernatural, so holy land ties tend to be viewed similarly by contemporary occupants and those who have moved away. (234)

Second, *Smoke Signals’s* rez setting is a storyscape as it is a place where certain stories, like the film itself, are based. The narrative itself, though it has a definitive relationship to a certain locale, can travel far from its place of origin. Third, it is a regional landscape in that it is a place defined by certain distinct geographical features:
Typically, regional landscapes are spatially expansive... A regional landscape... defined by a major geographical feature like the Black Hills of South Dakota or the Grand Canyon of Arizona. A major river like the Columbia may define a regional landscape, as can a desert like the Mohave. (236)

Fourth, the C'oeur d'Alene rez is an ecoscape, as this term refers to distinct landmarks and to a certain specific indigenous groups unique relationship to that particular locale (237).

Though utilized as a film's setting, it is relevant to discuss the fact that the Coeur d'Alene rez is a real place unique to a certain group of people. Most relevant to the film Smoke Signals and its setting are the terms holy landscapes and storyscapes. Throughout this film, the rez is both a spiritual point of departure and a point of return. A central focus of both Victor's and Thomas's journey is to bring Arnold Joseph's body back to the rez. His return is important for his family as well as his community. While Arnold Joseph left the rez of his own accord, he seemed more an
exile that was cast out. Arnold Joseph’s return will bring closure to his own journey and to those whose destiny has been shaped by his positive and negative actions. Also, his return is important in that the land that created him will also reclaim him. This spiritual act related to landscape has the power to redeem him and those he left behind, as it brings his loss and his community’s full circle to a place of return and redemption.

The film challenges the colonial authority and privilege to define the indigenous experience. Likewise, Thomas’s storyscapes work to anchor and connect its central characters to the rez. Similar to Stoffle’s, Halmo’s and Austin’s focus on indigenous cultural landscapes as places of story, Thomas’s stories revolve around the rez landscape just as they rise from its unique interaction with its long-time inhabitants:

The term storyscape refers to a portion of a holy land that is delineated by Native story or song. Storyscapes may even exist outside of holy lands, a point that raises questions about whether
storyscapes can serve to integrate humankind as well as the Indian people who hold them. (235)

Stories related to place and to a particular people are often powerful, even across cultural boundaries. Loss and return are universal concepts that inspire humankind, regardless of culture, landscape or national origin. Accordingly, Thomas’s stories bring meaning to any audience open to this film’s subject matter. In relation to this, Stoffle, Halmo and Austin refer to storyscapes as “internal maps” (236). This concept of external landmarks put into metaphor and related to another more internal, more mysterious perspective, which is that of consciousness, reflects how landscape has the power to shape the spiritual and psychological destiny of its inhabitants.

As the film Smoke Signals reveals, for most indigenous people their place of tribal origin can evoke a wide array of powerful emotions. This can be true whether they are returning or departing from that particular place. I believe it doesn’t matter whether they are more orientated towards the urban or towards
the rural. Perhaps this is related to a sense of loss that is profoundly connected to a specific place. There is no doubt that for people, a landscape can retain a trace of past events, especially those related to moments that trigger strong emotions.

Even with all the discord and loss that can be connected to their land and though indigenous people may leave the landscape of their origins, they often remain defined with regards to self by the place from whence they came. In relation to indigenous landscapes and on another more personal level, writer Louise Erdrich describes them as landscapes of family history: “In a tribal view of the world, where one place has been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history” (1). In the end, rez landscapes are historical sites as well as family and personal landmarks. As those landscapes are where individual as well as family histories and stories are perpetuated by descendents that tend to look at their land with a certain reverence, as this has the power to impart connection, relevance and meaning to their lives. Though the relationship of a certain
landscape to its inhabitant’s personal as well as group sense of consciousness and destiny can be esoteric and mystical, this goes to the heart and power of place, which emanates from its visual and palpable geographical characteristics such as appearance, weather and terrain and to the kind of fish, birds and other animals that might wander across a particular terrain. Likewise, often the artwork created by such people will reflect their relationship to land, as will their storyscapes.

The contemporary Coeur d’Alene rez setting of Smoke Signals conveys connotations that unsettle past colonial, cinematic, historical and cultural myths related to American Indians as well as their colonizers regarding the relationship, political and otherwise, to landscape. That is, the contemporary rez landscape setting of Smoke Signals and that of its border is, in and of itself, a counter-myth. Also, indigenous people created the film’s narrative, which challenges the colonial privilege to relate and define that story and landscape.

The persistence of indigenous landscapes mirrors the same resilience in the people that inhabit or remain
connected to those places. The borders of those places remain significant especially for those people that still recognize and retain familial and holy ties there. And even though a colonial authority created these borders in order to limit the power and legacy of its original inhabitants, the land and the people inside those borders persist. In the end, the landscape itself is a kind of geographical text that relates the unique history of its long-time inhabitants, and no matter where these people go they will always return, one way or another, to the landscape that created them and that embodies them.
Chapter Four
Smoke Signals and Thomas’s Recreation Stories

"He dazzles you right out of the water/right out of the moon, the sun and fire./Cocksure smooth talker, good looker,/Raven makes a name for himself/ up and down the coast from Nass River./stirs things up."


"History. History is never the truth."

Sherman Alexie, "Crazy Horse Speaks"

"o, the glorious things/ we do to survive."

Sherman Alexie’s, “Toward Conception”

All films contain conflict. This is the central driving force behind plot. The creative process of weaving conflict into character is a complex one. In their informative text on playwriting, William Missouri Downs and Lou Ann Wright relate conflict to the crisis of human struggle: “plays [or films] are about conflict occurring in crisis” (60). Likewise, Downs and Wright
identify obstacles and complications as important components of conflict. At the same time, Janet Burroway elaborates on the idea that while conflict is all about opposing forces, it is also about desire: "In fiction, in order to engage our attention and sympathy, the central character must want, and want intensely" (40).

With regards to character conflict, in the film Smoke Signals, there is an interesting polyphonic repartee that goes on between Victor and Thomas. Mikhail Bakhtin relates polyphony to fictional characterization where there is a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses . . . rather a plurality of consciousnesses" (6). Likewise, there is also a certain duality in relation to the more concrete aspects of Victor's personality, which threatens to overshadow his, as well as Thomas's more abstract and metaphoric qualities.

This inner struggle is mirrored by Victor's volatile relationship with Thomas, whose recreation stories embody those very abstract and metaphoric aspects that Victor very much wants to suppress. Thomas's recreation stories are in conflict with or at
odds with a colonial perspective that threatens to overshadow that of his traditional culture, just as it does the concrete over the abstract, the verifiable over the imaginary, the known over the unknown and the perceptible over the imperceptible. Thomas’s recreation stories, due to their more abstract, metaphoric nature and connection to indigenous traditional oral narrative, mirror a struggle over words and consciousness that is played out via his central conflicts with Victor, just as his stories strive to recreate and reconfirm a reality not reconciled, diminished or beholden to the myth of his colonizers.

In contrast to Victor, the key aspect of Thomas’s duality is that the side that reflects the English language as well as Western culture does not determine or lessen his indigenous side. In relation to this sense of duality, Euroamerican colonization suppressed many aspects of traditional indigenous culture. Unfortunately, a fair amount of dehumanization was an integral part of the colonial process. Any process of dehumanization will retain a certain legacy. As Paulo Freire relates in his text Pedagogy of the Oppressed,
Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human. (30)

Freire believes that colonized people experience certain aspects of dehumanization that can traumatize and linger for generations. He postulates that this gives rise to a dual sense of self in which one side is dominated by and lessened by the colonial aspect:

A particular problem is the duality of the oppressed: they are contradictory, divided beings, shaped by and existing in a concrete situation of oppression and violence. (37)

Freire suggests there is a way to overcome or resolve this: “The correct method lies in dialog” (49). While Freire focuses more on aspects of teaching or pedagogy, the kind of dialog he refers to can occur in any work of literature and art. The basis for this dialog is counter-myth, which works to recreate the reality that myth always contrives to present. Likewise, Freire has explored the importance of language with regards to
people finding a coherent outlet for their feelings and thoughts: "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it" (69). When the colonized achieve a better sense of awareness about the origins of their duality, this can strengthen their sense of balance regarding this: "As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creaters" (51).

In relation to this, Thomas's recreation stories are empowering as they link his indigenous past with the present. Unlike Victor, Thomas has achieved a certain balance regarding his own sense of duality. From another perspective, his stories present American Indian people striving to forge a more autonomous sense of self in more modern times, as they are a counter-myth to Western narrative.

At the same time, Thomas's recreation stories are entertaining, just as they present a sophisticated play of words utilized to add depth to both meaning and reality. For example, towards the beginning of the film, Thomas tells a story about how Victor's father Arnold Joseph was a hippie during the sixties:
THOMAS (Voiceover): During the sixties, Arnold Joseph was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians anyway. Both because of that, he was always wondering how anybody would recognize when an Indian was trying to make a social statement. But there’s proof, you know? Back during the Vietnam War, he was demonstrating against it, and there was this photographer there. He took a picture of Arnold that day it made it onto the wire services and was reprinted in newspapers throughout the country. It even made the cover of Time magazine . . . [Later] Arnold got arrested . . . He got two years in Walla Walla. (39)

Upon hearing this story, Victor becomes angry because he feels Thomas’s story is not completely accurate. When asked if the story is true, Victor responds, “Thomas is full of shit” (39). One of Victor’s central issues with Thomas’s stories is that he doesn’t feel they are truthful or factual accounts of the past. However, Victor doesn’t relate what he
believes might be a more accurate rendition. At other times, Victor complains that he doesn’t understand Thomas’s stories.

Perhaps, Thomas’s recreation stories tell another kind of truth, just as they strive for a greater sense of meaning beyond the concrete. For example, Thomas’s story about Arnold Joseph plays with the issue of image directly related to how people dress and wear their hair, which he connects to how American Indian people are often stereotyped with regard to their appearance and demeanor. The idea that sixties hippies dressed and wore their hair similarly to American Indians is an interesting point, especially when the hippie style of clothing and hair was meant to express discontent with middle class mores and values. Later, Arnold Joseph has his picture taken at a Vietnam War protest, which makes the cover of Time. He is arrested and sent off to the Walla Walla penitentiary for two years.

This story plays with the concept of appearance as related to photography and publicity. That is, a photographic image and its surrounding headlines can convey a powerful message or myth to its viewers. Also,
the idea that Arnold Joseph gets incarcerated carries the potential implication that he is, in some way, already imprisoned or confined by his own image, which has been created by his colonizers and is epitomized in film.

It could be that the truth Victor seeks is an illusion. That is, truth is related and meant to reflect reality; yet isn’t there more than one way to interpret this and aren’t there greater as well as lesser truths? Also, a thoroughly accurate account of an event, while informative, is made more meaningful when taken to the level of metaphor. It could be argued that only through metaphor can a greater sense of truth be realized. At the same time, there is the discrepancy of the colonial mythic truth that distorts and limits other relevant aspects of historical truth, therefore controlling this sense of truth. *Smoke Signals*, via Thomas’s metaphoric, recreation stories, which contrast with Victor’s more concrete sense of reality, reflect differing aspects of a duality that can be related to a colonized people. As is expressed via their polyphonic dialog, Thomas’s duality is more balanced than Victor’s.
This indicates that Victor's sense of indigenous self is overshadowed by the colonizing culture. In relation to this sense of indigenous duality, American history, especially that of the West, has tended to reflect the colonial side. Simon Ortiz discusses aspects of his Acoma, Pueblo culture's traditional storytelling, which he views as a way to create a deeper sense of meaning with regard to the indigenous historical past:

Throughout the difficult experience of colonization to the present, Indian women and men have struggled to create meaning of their lives in very definite systematic ways. The ways or methods have been important, but they are important only because of the reason for the struggle. (122)

Also, Ortiz acknowledges this struggle with regard to the indigenous educational experience, which was a central creator of a duality that diminished and oppressed their traditional culture:

Some would argue that this means that Indian people have succumbed or become educated into a different linguistic system and have
forgotten or have been forced to forsake their native selves. This is simply not true. (122)

While the English language is the dominant language of the North American continent, and it has become the language through which its contemporary indigenous people often express their voice, elements of their traditional culture still exert a fairly powerful influence. Though Thomas is a fictional character in a film, his recreation stories represent the contemporary indigenous writer’s hybrid fusion and the balance of at least two languages and cultures. At the same time, his recreation stories reflect a resistance to allowing the colonizing culture to take over or dictate aspects of self that are related to traditional culture.

The supplanting of traditional indigenous language and culture with English was not and is not a completed process. More than likely, it never will be, as this would mean indigenous people would have to relinquish all ties to their traditional culture. However, when a balance can be found where the best of both cultures can be utilized to achieve a certain verbal fluency, this can translate into new innovations regarding narrative.
Likewise, Thomas’s recreation stories, due to their metaphoric as well as dialogic nature and connection to indigenous traditional oral narrative, strive to recreate the world.

Even so, it is important to add relevant context to Thomas’s recreation stories by acknowledging that the early process of eradicating traditional indigenous languages and replacing them with English was a dehumanizing one that utilized shame to oppress innocent children. At those schools, young indigenous students were punished for speaking their traditional language. Likewise, the quality of education was questionable as it was designed not to raise the consciousness or intellect of its students, but to limit it so they might go out into the world as newly assimilated, eager-to-conform proletariat workers for the colonial capitalistic owners of the new modes of production that now defined the American economy. It was of great importance they not be educated to the point where they might question the exploitation of their labor, land, rights or selves. Unfortunately, at many of these schools, the basic doctrines of Christianity were
combined with shame, hard labor and a rudimentary sense of spelling. Freire refers to this oppressive educational indoctrination and one-sided dialogue as a key characteristic of the legacy of cultural invasion:

The theory of antidialogical action has one last fundamental characteristic: cultural invasion, which like divisive tactics and manipulation also serves the ends of conquest. In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression.

(133)

This antidialogical action represents only the voice of the colonizer and dominates only so long as it diminishes the voice and sense of self-expression of the colonized. This creation of a duality that is imbalanced towards the colonizer is a key aspect. For the colonized, the route to fluency in the dominant colonizing language and culture is not only lined with
obstacles, but comes at great sacrifice, which is, generally, the diminishment of traditional language and culture. As a result, the duality that forms is one where the traditional culture is viewed as less than that of the colonizer's.

At the same time, Freire's antidualogical action conforms to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the monologic, which he defines in his text Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics as something that strives to dominate verbal interaction and which therefore places limits on avenues of self-expression:

Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) another person remains wholly and merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness. Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force . . . and therefore to
some degree materializes reality...[and]
pretends to be the ultimate word. (293)

Monologism epitomizes the manner in which the history of the American West has often been related, just as its antidialogic action strove to create a colonized that didn’t answer back or challenge that monologue. In contrast to this and opposed to a single voice of authority, Bakhtin and Freire refer to as dialogic or “the very fact of a plurality (in this case a duality) of unmerged consciousnesses” (17). In part, Bakhtin is referring to a dialogue that is directed at others and where no voice has authority over others and meaning emerges as more multi-faceted. At the same time, Bakhtin defines double-voiced discourse as consisting of a series of related categories, including discourse “directed toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (DDP 185). He acknowledges heteroglossia or the layers of different languages and language styles that permeate any language: “Everywhere a specific sum of total ideas, thoughts, and words is passed through several unmerged voices, sounding differently in each” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 278).
Freire does not believe that dialogical action intends to end the dominant culture's dialectic:

Dialogical cultural action does not have as its aim the disappearance of the permanence-change dialectic . . . it aims, rather, at surmounting the antagonistic contradictions of the social structure, thereby achieving the liberation of human beings. (160)

Otherwise, the dialogic would become the monologic and fall into that same oppressive role.

Thomas's recreation stories personify Freire's dialogic as they overcome the colonizer's "antagonistic contradictions" by not allowing it to dominate important aspects of his traditional culture. While Thomas's dialogic, heteroglossic, double-voiced stories represent the contemporary indigenous writer's fusion of at least two languages and cultures, his opposite counterpart is Victor. Victor's uncompromising tendency to want only the truth and nothing less causes him to be insensitive to the needs of others.

While riding on the bus to Phoenix, Victor and Thomas encounter a fellow passenger, a white woman who
regales Thomas with her story about being an alternate on the United States Olympic gymnastic team. Due to a U.S. boycott, she says that she was unable to compete and missed her chance at Olympic gold. Thomas is sympathetic to her story while Victor, in his quest for absolute truth, accuses the woman of lying because as an alternate, she most likely would not have been able to attend the Olympics unless someone else on the team was unable to do so. The woman, hurt by Victor’s negative insinuations, moves to another seat, whereupon, Victor tells Thomas that he can’t trust anyone.

Victor’s high standard of the truth leaves little room for creative self-expression or any other kind of digression. While the woman exaggerates her gymnastic skills and Olympic moment, it doesn’t really matter to Thomas, who was simply making casual conversation with her. Thomas respects and accepts the woman’s story for what it is and, perhaps, for what it reveals: that she lives with a certain amount of regret. Thomas empathizes with the woman, whereas, Victor, due to his strong sense of adherence to fact and truth as well his sense of mistrust, does not. Freire might go so far as
to describe Victor’s actions towards Thomas and the woman on the bus as reflecting or refracting a certain level of oppression. Victor’s excessive reliance on concrete truth causes him to oppress those that don’t fall into line or, essentially, to identify with the oppressor, which derives from the legacy of a colonial-based experience:

The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity. (27)

Freire might view Victor’s zeal for truth as an illusion that he only utilizes to oppress others as he has been. That is, Victor’s struggle is evidence of his own internal one-sided duality of self in relation to who he is an indigenous man. He identifies with aspects of his colonial oppressors and then manifests this behavior by displacing it, rather ironically, onto his concept of truth, in which he gains power via oppressing those who don’t conform to his high expectations.
Likewise, his high expectations cause most to fall short, which leaves Victor always in the strong role of oppressor and all others as oppressed. Since Victor appears to view the oppressor as strong and the oppressed as weak, his innate survival skills have inspired him to forge a connection to the oppressor, which he feels is better and leaves him feeling more powerful.

At one point during *Smoke Signals*, when Victor and Thomas are walking through the desolate Arizona desert toward Arnold Joseph’s place, Thomas relates his comments on their journey so far:

I mean, I just want to know if you have any idea how long it’s going to take. We’ve been traveling a long time, enit? I mean, Columbus shows up and we start walking away from that beach, trying to get away, and then Custer moves into the neighborhood, driving down all the property values, and we have to walk some more, then old Harry Truman drops the bomb and we have to keep on walking somewhere, except it’s all bright now so we can see exactly
where we’re going, and then you and I get a beach house on the moon, but old Neil Armstrong shows up and kicks us off into space. And then your mom gets that phone call about your dad being dead, and jeez, he had to be living in Mars, Arizona, and we ain’t got no money, no car, no horse, so we have to take the bus, all the way down here. I mean, we ain’t got nobody can help us at all. No Superman, no Batman, no Wonder Woman, not even Charles Bronson, man. (beat) Hey, did you ever notice how much your dad looks like Charles Bronson? (68)

Victor ignores most of Thomas’s interesting outlook on their situation, and his terse response is directed only at Thomas’s very last statement about how Arnold Joseph looks like Charles Bronson. Victor doesn’t think that his father looked anything like Bronson. Once again, Victor only focuses on the smallest, most concrete aspect of Thomas’s dialog, just as he almost compulsively negates and strives to oppress his friend’s discourse.
However, the rest of Thomas’s humorous and metaphoric take on their trip is actually quite interesting and revealing. He compares his and Victor’s journey to that of the larger indigenous colonization experience, which is characterized by displacement of self, language, culture and land. Thomas links Columbus arriving on the shores of the New World and Custer’s fateful stand at the Little Big Horn and to the legacy of indigenous displacement. From there, he links it to the post-war nuclear era, which mushroomed across the American landscape with far-reaching effect. Then Thomas and Victor get kicked off the moon and now they’re walking the desolate Martian-like terrain of the Arizona desert with no money and with no way to save themselves. Yet, Thomas believes Arnold Joseph, the man that inspired their journey, is capable of saving them. Thomas subtly implies that Arnold Joseph is a hero waiting to be recognized. However, Victor is not ready to recognize the more positive traits of his father.

One of the more interesting aspects of the character conflict between Victor and Thomas, which is expressed via polyphonic dialog, is that Victor is an
angry young man while Thomas is less so, and Thomas is, perhaps, more sensitive, creative, and abstract. Karen Jorgensen discusses Alexie’s use of doppelgangers or doubles or twins with regards to his central characters in his novel Reservation Blues:

In Reservation Blues, Alexie makes . . . use of Doppelgangers; they serve as foils to each other, reflecting and elucidating the personality differences of the characters in the novel. (20)

In Smoke Signals, Victor is angry; Thomas is not. Victor is more concrete; Thomas is not. Victor desires the truth, whereas Thomas is more open to the idea that truth is relative. Similar to the characters in Reservation Blues, Thomas and Victor serve as foils to one another, which works to make the unique proclivities of each man stand out more. This intensifies and adds complexity to the element of conflict that exists between these two characters. Their relationship is similar to that found in certain American Indian oral traditions, which focus on a good brother and a bad one undergoing some kind of experience or journey together,
such as the Navajo creation stories that focus on twins. For Jorgenson, the conflict and contrast of Alexie’s two opposing characters strengthens their individual characteristics:

 Analogous to the implementation of intense chiaroscuro in a work of art, this side-by-side placement of character pairs by virtue of their differences accentuates the unique meanings of either one alone. (20)

 The duality between Smoke Signals two dissimilar characters presents an elemental aspect of their conflicted relationship, in which one character is more akin to light while the other is to shadow:

 Alexie’s use of Doppelgangers, then, provides character doubles with greater texture and definition, much like light and shadow sharpens the dimension in a work of art. (Jorgenson 24)

 While Jorgenson is referring to the conflicting complements of Alexie’s characters, there is a shadow related to Victor’s more oppressive nature, just as there is light and renewal related to Thomas and his
stories. Victor’s concrete outlook on life and his tendency to oppress any digression from this in others shows this shadowy aspect of his personality. Victor throws his shadow around by oppressing Thomas’s recreation stories, which epitomizes all that Victor is not.

Yet, Thomas’s recreation stories resist being overshadowed by Victor, as they continue to reveal different levels of meaning from seemingly ordinary events. For example, Thomas’s story about Arlene’s magic fry bread is life affirming. According to Thomas, there once was a feast on the rez, but there wasn’t enough fry bread to go around:

THOMAS: You see, there was a hundred Indians at that feast and there were only fifty pieces of fry bread. Arlene kept trying to figure out what to do. I mean, it was her magical fry bread that everybody wanted. I mean, you know what happens when there are too many Indians and not enough fry bread. (beat) A fry bread riot. (beat) But Arlene knew what to do
... You see, Arlene's fry bread was magic. Arlene was magic (74-75).

Arlene's answer is to split the fry bread in two; that way there would be enough to go around the feast. That way everyone there got to have some of Arlene's magic fry bread. Perhaps her fry bread is magic because it nourishes and heals those that partake of it, just as it symbolizes the importance of traditional indigenous feasts, an important link to traditional culture.

At the end of the film, when Victor tosses his father's ashes into the Spokane Falls River, he sends Arnold Joseph's spirit into the water to join the ghosts of salmon. For the moment, Victor realizes that with regard to his father, truth can be relative and complicated and open to meaning, as is demonstrated by the metaphor inherent in the recreation stories Thomas relates. Just as the recreation stories metaphorically play with the concept of truth, just as his stories shed new light on the past, the film plays with Western cinematic illusions or sets of codes that create the myth that is American Indian. Thomas's recreation stories reflect a duality of self that show he has
achieved a certain balance, which he imparts to a reluctant, resistant Victor. Thomas's conflicts with Victor work to recreate a new cinematic sense of Indianness.

Ultimately, as Freire notes and Thomas’s recreation stories reveal, words have two components, "reflection and action" (68). For Freire, when a language is utilized oppressively and restricts access to its center of meaning, the people negatively affected exist powerlessly on the periphery of the language of their colonizers:

But while to say the true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone—nor can she say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. (69)

Thomas’s recreation stories strive to recreate a reality that is not diminished or beholden to the myth of his colonizers. They don’t gain strength or meaning from
oppression; instead, they create a dialogue that challenges the monologue of his colonizers but does not aspire to silence it. Likewise, Freire believes that, ultimately, dialogue must answer oppression with love and hope, which must be reclaimed by the colonized, or for that matter anyone disenfranchised from the power of the dominant language:

Nor yet can dialogue exist without hope. Hope is rooted in men’s incompletion, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others. (72)

Thomas’s recreation stories reclaim just as they impart love, hope, humor and survival. Though his stories drift from concrete fact, they find a greater sense of metaphoric truth that reflects his people’s experience on the American West, a place composed of many stories, some true, some not. Thomas is also a messenger whose recreation stories mirror a struggle over words and consciousness. At the same time, his stories strive to recreate and reconfirm a reality not
diminished by or beholden to the myth of his colonizers, which for Ortiz is of great import:

This perception and meaningfulness has to happen; otherwise, the hard experience of the Euroamerican colonization of the lands and people of the Western Hemisphere would be driven into the dark recesses of the indigenous mind and psyche. And this kind of repression is always a poison and detriment to creative growth and expression. (121-122)

In the end, Thomas’s recreation stories liberate and impart hope and communion where there is doubt and loss, and light where there is darkness. As Thomas’s grandmother Builds-the-Fire says to Thomas, “Tell me what happened Thomas. Tell me what’s going to happen” (146).
Chapter Five

Smoke Signals: Plot Flashbacks and the Cosmic,

Open Boundaries between the Living and Dead

"And then the half-human said, 'I am one of the things which the humans you call Campfire People call evil,' he said. 'But you came to me and treated me well,' he said. 'And now, turn back into whatever you really are,' he told Raven. And he turned back into a raven."

Peter Kalifornsky, “Raven And The Half-Human”

"I'm going to travel to Spokane Falls one last time and toss these ashes into the water. And your father will rise like a salmon, leap over the bridge, over me, and find his way home. It will be beautiful. His teeth will shine like silver, like a rainbow. He will rise, Victor, he will rise."

Sherman Alexie, “This is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona”

While the plot of Alexie’s film Smoke Signals might be perceived as a standard, three-part structure, this film’s central conflicts, which propel the narrative forward, are unique, especially with regard to its focus on contemporary North American Indian issues. With
regard to plot, this film has a single foreground story that is combined with a background story consisting of flashbacks. Together, they form a narrative that, at times, goes both forward and backward.

Those flashback scenes run parallel with the action or foreground line of this story. Also, the flashbacks narrate the childhoods of both Thomas and Victor. Though Victor’s father Arnold Joseph is dead, he is a central figure in those flashback narratives, which haunt his son. Likewise, Smoke Signals emphasizes not just the past of the central protagonists and the rez they live on, but an overall historic past related to American cinematic stereotypes of indigenous people that supports the myth of the American frontier.

At the same time, there is a unique, even mystical relationship between past and present and the living and the dead. A traumatic sense of past continues to shadow the present lives of the film’s central protagonists, especially Victor. An important plot complication is that Victor can’t move forward until he deals with the ghosts of his own past, especially those aspects related to his father. His past is complicated by the recent
death of his father. And though at the end of this film, Victor better understands his father, his journey is a circular one that leaves Victor at the same place and life he left behind.

This makes the conclusion of Smoke Signals open-ended. The circular journey that is Smoke Signals develops toward a more open-ended conclusion, just as its flashbacks leave open the boundaries between the living and the dead. In discussing his film’s conclusion Alexie has stated, “Instead of a ‘happy ending’ we now have ending that’s much more poetic, much more emotional, much more unpredictable and open-ended” (168). Smoke Signals’ cosmic and open boundaries between the living and the dead create a unique and circular journey where life has no ultimate or finite answers because the plot of the living intersects and encircles that of the dead, just as those two plots challenge the illusion of linearity that we apply to reality, time and consciousness.

Moreover, though there is clearly a circular structural aspect that predominates the journey that is Smoke Signals, the film still appears to follow the
classic three-act structure generally applied to film. In the following excerpt from his book *Smoke Signals*, which is in screenplay format, Alexie discusses how film, in a similar manner to plays, adheres to a certain form or plot structure:

I mean screenplays are more like poetry than fiction. Screenplays rely on imagery to carry the narrative, rather than the other way around. And screenplays have form. Like sonnets, actually. (x)

Films are built up of a series of related scenes. For *Smoke Signals*, this translates into a main plot, which follows both Victor and Thomas as they make their way to Phoenix. However, Arnold Joseph’s ghost flashbacks are inextricably linked to this main storyline. The use of flashbacks as opposed to subplots appears to thwart Victor’s ability to move forward from his own past.

From another perspective, the foreground story, which follows Victor’s and Thomas’s journey to Phoenix is related more to this film’s external conflict: “The foreground story is the plot that embraces people and action outside the character” (Dancyger and Rush 134).
In contrast, the background story is related to a character’s internal emotional conflicts: “The background story, which yields the subtext, relates [more] to the main character’s interior problem or issue” (134).

*Smoke Signals* starts out with a fire that Arnold Joseph inadvertently set at a July 4th party, which kills Thomas’s parents. From there, the film jumps forward in time, some twenty years, to where both Victor and Thomas are adults on the C’oeur d’Alene rez, when they receive the news that Arnold Joseph has suddenly died. The death of Arnold Joseph becomes the catalyst for both Victor and Thomas as they journey to Phoenix in order to return Arnold Joseph’s remains back to the rez. A series of flashbacks related to the deceased Arnold Joseph intersects with and encircles the two men as they embark upon their journey.

Some of these flashbacks appear to emanate from Victor’s thoughts. Especially significant is that Arnold Joseph left when Victor was a child, thus leaving Victor with feelings of abandonment and anger. In one
of the early flashback scenes, Arnold Joseph foreshadows aspects of his ghostlike intangibility:


Wave my hand and the reservation is gone. The trading post and the post office, the tribal school and the pine trees, the dogs and cans, the drunks and the Catholics, and the drunk Catholics. Poof! And all the little Indian boys named Victor... I'm magic. I'm magic. I just wave my hand and make it disappear, send it somewhere else. I can make you disappear. Where do you want to go, Victor? You want to go Disneyland? The moon? The North Pole? I'm so good, I can make myself disappear. Poof! And I'm gone. (26)
Arnold Joseph's dialogue is layered with a subtext that reflects a sense that he is overwhelmed with his responsibilities and, perhaps, in a state of despair. He states that he's feeling independent and wants everything to disappear, but then he will be alone. His drinking and partying have reached excesses that his wife Arlene will no longer tolerate. Also, Arnold Joseph is driven by a secret guilt and by the fact a fire he accidentally started at a July 4th party killed Thomas's parents. He keeps his guilt to himself where it relentlessly burns away inside him.

His inability to deal with his own guilt is only made worse by the presence of those he loves. For example, Arnold Joseph hints to his young son that he is a troubled man, yet his vagueness and emotional distance from his son and others will cause his son to experience a painful alienation, as well as send Victor on a relentless quest for an illusionary truth. As a result, Arnold Joseph's lack of ability to deal with his guilt ends up burdening his young son with emotional responsibilities beyond his capacity to handle. Victor, in an effort to lessen that responsibility, distances
himself and becomes estranged from his father. This is worsened by Victor’s father’s subsequent abandonment of him.

While Arnold Joseph is not referred to as a ghost in this film, his presence, like his son’s quest for truth, is an illusionary one in that Arnold Joseph emanates only from memory. Arnold Joseph’s presence exudes a certain otherness and intangibility that is related to his cosmic existence on the periphery of the living. Lois Parkinson Zamora discusses how, in literature, the apparitions of the dead impart certain elements of magical realism that unsettle our concept of linearity:

Magical realist apparitions also unsettle modernity’s and the novel’s basis in progressive, linear history: they float free in time, not just here and now but then and there, eternal and everywhere. (498)

In many ways, Arnold Joseph epitomizes many of those imaginary otherworldly concepts related to a ghost’s ability to traverse realms that the living cannot. Because he’s an integral part of his son’s past, Arnold
Joseph’s ghost follows Victor everywhere. Though he’s no longer alive, Arnold Joseph continues to encircle his son’s life and the realm of the living. Also, even though Arnold Joseph left the rez and has died, he, like his son, must return to that particular place, as it is inexorably intertwined with their past. In order for Victor to exorcise his father’s spirit, he must first recognize his unresolved issues related to his father and make an effort to understand the significance of his relationship with his father.

Zamora believes that for the living, fictional ghosts symbolize a variety of unresolved issues, just as their presence is metaphoric:

They, too, are often bearers of cultural and historical burdens, for they represent the dangers, anxieties, and passional forces that civilization banishes. They may signal primal and primordial experience, the return of the oppressed, the externalization of internalized terrors... They bring absence into presence, maintaining at once the ‘is’ and the ‘is not’ of metaphorical truth. (497)
Arnold Joseph’s presence, via flashbacks, represents the traumatic surfacing of Victor’s past or “return of the oppressed” (Zamora 497). Victor has suppressed his unresolved issues in order to ease the excessive burden upon his psyche, which has prevented Victor from taking the time to acknowledge or reflect upon his troubled relationship with his father. However, until he reconciles himself with his past, Victor must go to great lengths to suppress his childhood trauma. At the same time, the death of Victor’s father opens the door to the dark labyrinth of all that he has suppressed. Arnold Joseph’s story unfolds side-by-side with his son’s; one plot is related to the present while the other is related to the past.

At least two circular plot lines intersect. In addition, other, more periphery plot circles are woven into those two central narratives. Alexie’s usage of interrelated circular plots might also be linked to traditional indigenous stories. Kimberly Blaeser elaborates on Leslie Marmon Silko’s suggestion that the usage of circular plot structures by contemporary American Indian writers might be connected to their
traditional stories: “Aesthetic form, [Silko] suggests, has a cultural origin . . . The circle itself takes many forms, and therefore involves multiple relationships” (557). Moreover, Blaeser believes that Native stories are more about relationships encircling and intersecting than about a discrete or separate sense of self or related narrative:

Native stories are seldom about separate, parallel existences, but instead are about intricately linked relationships about intersections. Spatial, temporal, and spiritual realities of Native people reflect a fluidity that disallows complete segregation between experiences of life and death, physical and spiritual, past and present, human and nonhuman. (557)

The intersection between Victor and the ghost of his father Arnold Joseph reflects this kind of continuance and circularity between the living and the dead. Also, though it seems that Victor even disparages and would like to forget his father, he can’t stop thinking of him, which indicates that he would like to reconnect
with his father or at least achieve a better understanding of the man. However, Victor’s pervasive sense of feeling overburdened by his father’s unresolved issues causes Victor to avoid that sense of reconnection. Even so, he keeps returning to his past and to his father. Arnold Joseph’s presence is like that of someone between two worlds:

Ghosts are liminal, metamorphic, intermediary:
They exist in/between/on modernity’s
boundaries of physical and spiritual, magical
and real, and challenge the lines of demarcation. (Zamora 498)

Rather ironically, when Arnold Joseph dies, he is more of a presence in his estranged son’s life than he was before. For Victor, his father now has the ability to return in a more powerful manner than ever. Also, the act of having to travel far to retrieve his father’s body gives Victor the opportunity to reflect more on his father. When Victor reaches Phoenix, a city whose name is linked to fire and to return, he also approaches the man that he has taken great strides to avoid. Towards the end of Smoke Signals, Suzy Song, who has befriended
Arnold Joseph in Phoenix, tells Victor a story that he related to her about a basketball game. The scene flashbacks to Arnold Joseph:

ARNOLD JOSEPH: You know, this one time, me and my son Victor, we was playing this two-on-two basketball game against these Jesuits. Man, those Jesuits were in their white collars, in their black robes, and they was pretty damn good . . . But my boy, Victor, he was magical. He couldn’t miss . . . He flew, man, he flew, right over that Jesuit. Twelve years old and he was like some kind of indigenous angel. Except maybe his wings were made from TV dinner trays! . . . It was the Indians versus the Christians that day and for at least one day, the Indians won. (87)

Victor promptly informs Suzy that Arnold’s story is not an accurate account of the events that occurred at the basketball game. As Victor explains, he wasn’t able to make the important shot and lost the game. Victor acknowledges his father lied to Suzy about the game to make Victor look good. Suzy replies, “He was a
magician, you know" (89). Suzy’s comment contains important layers of meaning that are significant for Victor. One layer relates to the fact that Arnold Joseph wanted his son to look good and to win where he could not. Also, there is the implication that Arnold Joseph is not only a ghost, but that he is also a magician who has the power to reach across the boundaries that separate life from death.

Arnold Joseph’s rather poetic account of the basketball game is metaphorically related to several key issues that continue to impact Victor’s life. Also, these issues relate to the film’s overall focus, which challenges the myth that has fashioned past characterizations of indigenous people. The issue of indigenous conversion to Christianity is a troubling one, especially since this religious conversion was not one of choice. In this sense it parallels Native history in that wherever religious conversion occurred, it was always at the expense of important elements related to traditional indigenous religious practices and beliefs. Arnold Joseph’s dialog opens the door to these disturbing issues.
Arnold Joseph establishes his presence and his view of the past and of the present as linked more to his traditional sense of spirituality. The religious conversion of indigenous people silenced important and sacred elements of their traditional culture. However, Arnold Joseph’s dialog envisions a certain circularity regarding this religious conversion, which indicates that it is not an absolute or static process, but one ongoing and subject to influence from a traditional cultural perspective.

Carter Revard elaborates on the indigenous traditional perspective regarding spirituality: Succinctly put, that way’s ceremonies embodied a unified way of life: what was Indian was the seamlessness of human life, in which it would not make sense to speak of religion on the one hand, and warfare on the other, of hunting here and naming a new chief there, of the Creation of the Universe on this side and the Naming of a Child on that. “History” and “village arrangement,” “Cosmos” as stories and art work; the inside of a lodge, as well as
placement of houses in the camp, carried historic and cosmic meanings. (134)

This casts Arnold Joseph’s return from the dead in yet another light. Though he is a contemporary indigenous person, his return, as expressed via flashbacks, can be related to Revard’s indigenous view of cosmic reality, especially that of the mystical or divine, which focuses on a seamless connection between the realms of the living and the dead, as well as other related aspects. This also goes back to Arnold Joseph’s dialog regarding the cosmos fitting inside a basketball:

   Everything in the world can fit inside this ball. God and the Devil, cowboys and Indians, husbands and wives, fathers and sons. (beat) And how does it all fit? It’s about magic, man. It’s about faith. It’s about holding this ball in one hand, and in the other hand, you’re holding the hearts of everybody who’s ever loved you. (86-87)

Arnold Joseph’s basketball metaphor regarding the universe around him implies that everything is somehow connected and that it is bad if there is some kind of
loss of balance or of interrelatedness. It could be inferred that Arnold Joseph has returned from the dead to reconnect with his son and also to restore his son's faith in both himself and his father. Arnold Joseph must somehow explain to his son about the fire he accidentally set so many years ago but which continues to affect people today. Suzy becomes the voice for Arnold Joseph as she tells Victor that his father accidentally set a fire that killed Thomas's parents:

SUZY SONG: Listen to me, Victor. Your dad talked about that fire every day. He cried about it. He always wished he could change it. He wished he hadn't run away. But you have to remember something, Victor. Your dad ran into that burning house looking for you. He did one good thing. He came back for you. (beat) He didn't mean to die here. He wanted to go home, Victor. He always wanted to go home. (98)

Suzy's account of the fire and how it burdened Arnold Joseph with guilt that he held inside himself for years reveals an important facet of his personality to Victor.
This enables Victor to enter the house of the dead, which is the trailer where his father has died. Victor explores the trailer and finds that everything is arranged as though his father might momentarily return. There is a poignant aspect to this, as the objects that Arnold Joseph left behind somehow continue to personify or represent him and are therefore still connected to him. Though dead, Arnold Joseph hasn’t gone far; somehow he is still nearby, hovering on the threshold of the living. Even so, the smell of death has permeated the trailer. Despite this, Victor goes through Arnold Joseph’s wallet and finds a photo of his father, his mother and himself; on the other side of the photo is the word “home.”

When Victor is traveling back to the rez, he has to run for help after he encounters a car accident on a remote desolate road. He imagines or dreams that the ghost of his father helps him. It is a significant moment for Victor as he accepts the helping hand that his father offers him.

Later, Suzy, in a powerful gesture, sets fire to Arnold Joseph’s trailer, which soon is consumed in
flames. In contrast to Arnold Joseph’s fire, which caused him immense guilt, Suzy’s fire is a defiant act that is done with purpose, which is to release Arnold Joseph from his earthly sense of regret and longing. As Alexie states in his screenplay text of Smoke Signals, “A bad fire destroyed Arnold’s life. A good fire redeems him” (167).

In the end, this film’s cosmic open boundaries between the living and the dead make for a circular journey where there are no ultimate or finite answers because the plot of the living intersects with that of the dead, just as those dual plots challenge the illusion of linearity that we apply to reality. As Blaeser elaborates with regard to contemporary indigenous narrative, reality can be portrayed as more complex and circular, as various storylines intertwine with one another:

The interweaving of the realities of this world and time with that of other worlds and other times. The transgressing of the boundaries of genre. The use of the circle as an aesthetic form instead of the use of a
straight line. The refusal to write an end to story because story always continues. (564)

Revard reveals an esoteric and poetic example of the Osage sense of cosmic origin, which is similar to other indigenous groups’ viewpoint that existence is circular and interrelated:

[This] tells of how the Osages came from the mid-heavens, the stars, to become a people on this earth. In this journey they were directed by various powers through three “divisions” of the heavens . . . in the fourth “division” they met “the Man of Mystery, the god of the clouds” . . . He said to them: I am a person of whom your little ones may make their bodies. When they make of me their bodies, they shall cause themselves to become deathless. (131)

Once again, a certain, circularity as well as open borders link to a certain indigenous traditional philosophical outlook. This can be related to Smoke Signals and to Arnold Joseph’s return from the dead to find his son so that he might attain both balance and
faith regarding his sense of self and place amongst his people. At the end of this film, the destination to which Victor finally arrives is a circular one that has given him a deeper understanding of his father, yet he is still left with an unresolved sense of grief, just as he realizes that sometimes the dead are unfortunately easier to hear than the living. The dark labyrinth of all that he suppressed is somewhat brighter. Perhaps this indicates that Victor is free of his father’s burden or that he is now better able to bear it. The conclusion of *Smoke Signals* includes a voice-over from Thomas, which follows the actions of Victor, who takes his father’s ashes and tosses them into the Spokane River. As Alexie notes in his screenplay, his film began with fire and ends with water, just as it began with death and ends with life only to circle back and start again.
Chapter Six

Afterword

"From that moment, and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky. Whatever they were in the mountains, they could be no more. However tenuous their well-being, however much they had suffered and would suffer again, they had found a way out of the wilderness."

N. Scott Momaday, "The Way To Rainy Mountain"

"There is a salmon swimming from star to star/ some name it Comet, some name it Distant Light."

Sherman Alexie, "Apocalypse"

In spring, 2001, I had the opportunity to hear Sherman Alexie give a humorous and provocative talk about his work. The day of his talk, Anchorage, Alaska was finally thawing after a long, cold winter. That evening, Alexie’s humor imparted a much needed warmth and sense of perspective regarding indigenous people. I saw where his sense of humor and insight might have influenced the creation and production of his film. When I first saw the film Smoke Signals, it was great to
see contemporary American Indian characters on screen poking fun at their own past cinematic stereotypes. Though it was a road trip movie, much of the setting focuses on a contemporary American Indian rez.

Also, while the indigenous cultural past was honored, the elements of nobility expressed had little to do with a time long gone, but had more to do with achieving a moment of grace with regards to a more immediate, more personal sense of loss and crisis. At the same time, the central characters were flawed and compelling. The central conflicts resonated strongly between the two central characters via an unresolved and painful past that overshadowed their present lives. In the end, it all came together to create a film that explored relevant issues many contemporary North American Indians are still trying to come to terms with.

In direct relation to this, Alexie's film inspired the purpose of my text, which was to explore how this unique film, Smoke Signals, resists the mythic Western film narrative and therefore gives voice to a new kind of film or counter-narrative and myth about American Indians. Alexie utilizes his film to orchestrate a
response to those American Indian mythic stereotypes predominant in films of the Western genre. *Smoke Signals* offers a counter narrative that resists and undermines the authority of the mythic Western and, in so doing, creates a counter-myth of empowerment that works to reclaim integral aspects of meaning over myth.

At the same time and with regard to Roland Barthes’ view of Western myth, Alexie’s film *Smoke Signals* utilizes narrative elements to construct a new view or gaze that is directed at past Western films, which challenges that genre’s basis by revealing important aspects of its naïve point of view. Similarly, Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin in his text *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* has devised the term double-voiced discourse, which is fictional character dialog that is directed “toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (185). This film’s double-voiced discourse works to make the central conflicts of this film fairly provocative, as important scenes from this film are responses to past Westerns. Also, Bakhtin addresses other discourse-related issues, such as the dialogic, which he refers to as the complex
relationships within any communication. Certain aspects of Bakhtin’s dialogic and carnival humor can be directly related to texts such as Smoke Signals which challenge narrative myth with humorous scenes. Ultimately, Smoke Signals with its dialogic, double-voiced discourse and carnival humor challenges the colonial myth of Western genre films in which character portrayals of Indigenous people are often reduced to one-dimensional or flat stereotypes of nineteenth-century Indian braves.

Alexie’s use of narrative elements to subvert those kinds of cinematic stereotypes is an important aspect of his film. Even those audiences that might be more familiar with Smoke Signals’ subject matter might find the film’s more humorous moments unsettling. Some of the dialog in this film is addressed to and responds to past films of the Western genre. The film’s more humorous scenes are, often, responses to past Westerns where Indigenous people tend to be stereotyped as stoic or tragic figures or as aggressive opponents. At other times, the film’s humor is directed at certain colonial historical figures. Essentially, the humor works to bring aspects of myth down to earth where they can be
viewed from another perspective. I am reminded of Vine Deloria, Jr.’s take on contemporary indigenous humor and narrative:

Humor, all Indians will agree, is the cement by which the coming Indian movement is held together. When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive. (53)

Likewise, setting is an important aspect of this film. For Smoke Signals the rez setting sets it off from the vast majority of mainstream American films. This setting presents a world, a kind of reality that the central protagonists leave as they go into the outer, other world that exists off the rez. Though invisible, the border around the film’s rez setting presents landscape in an unsettling manner, just as the contemporary world of the rez is rarely seen in films. Also, the contemporary Coeur d’Alene Reservation or rez setting of Smoke Signals works to convey connotations that unsettle and decenter past colonial, cinematic,
historical and cultural contexts and myths related to American Indians as well as their colonizers regarding the relationship, political and otherwise, to landscape. The contemporary C'oeur d'Alene rez landscape setting and that of its border is, in and of itself, a counter-myth.

In *Smoke Signals*, Thomas is often telling metaphoric stories that Victor, with his adherence to the concrete, doesn't like or believe to be accurate or truthful. Some of the dialog between these two characters revolves around the issue of factual truth and how Thomas's stories deviate from this concreteness and, yet somehow manage to communicate a greater truth. Victor's volatile relationship with Thomas is related to his recreation stories, which embody those very abstract and metaphoric aspects that Victor very much wants to suppress.

Conflict is what propels plot forward. Some of the central conflicts expressed in *Smoke Signals* are related to Victor and to his tumultuous relationship with Thomas as well as his father. Also, both Thomas and Victor have a relationship with the rez and to a traumatic past,
just as both men are wary of leaving the rez and going into the outside, alien world. The plot of *Smoke Signals* follows the journey of both Victor and Thomas, which turns out to be a more circular one where the predominant storyline is interwoven with flashbacks of the deceased Arnold Joseph, who haunts his son Victor.

In the end, *Smoke Signals* is an important film for indigenous people because the colonial process of appropriation includes indigenous land, culture, traditional stories and language. This colonial appropriation of traditional stories and also expressing the historical indigenous experience from their viewpoint implies they have the authority and privilege to do so. When this premise of privilege is challenged, as *Smoke Signals* does, the authority of the colonial myth is challenged and its power to coerce is lessened. And instead of indigenous people questioning their own worthiness, they question the merits of giving anyone the right or authority to take important elements of their culture and utilize this for their own gain, material or otherwise.
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