

## **SYMPOSIUM: Indigenous Rights in Narrative Film**

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*In a writing project for the Spring 2020 course “Indigenous Rights in Documentary Film,” students focused on three narrative films that were highlighted as “groundbreaking” in the documentary Reel Injun (2009). This symposium combines analysis of Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002), Smoke Signals (1998), and Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001).*



### ***Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) – Lien Dang**

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a film based on a biography written by Doris Pilkington, which depicts the journey of three young “half-castes”<sup>1</sup> escaping a settlement camp, one being Doris’ mother, Molly. This event takes place in Australia during the 1930s, when half-castes are separated from their family and home to be taught to fit into white society. Mr. Neville is the chief protector of Aborigines, and he believes that “the natives must be helped” and suggests that the Indigenous people must be “bred out” (Noyce, 2002). In short, he thinks that whites are superior and plans to erase the Indigenous population starting with the half-castes, which he views as an unwanted third race. Molly, her sister Daisy, and their cousin Gracie struggle to find their way back home by following a rabbit-proof farming fence while being closely followed by an Indigenous tracker named Moodoo.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “half caste” was used in this film to refer to children whose parents were from different races.

The film brings up many human rights issues as outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which stem from the white savior complex exhibited by white antagonist Mr. Neville. He states that he has the power to reject or accept marriages and thus plans to allow half-castes to only marry whites, for instance, which goes against Article 16: the right to marriage and a natural family. Although the half-castes are “legally” taken away from their family, this is an infringement of Article 12 (the freedom from interference with privacy, family, and home) because Indigenous communities did not give consent. When Molly, Daisy, and Gracie are taken to the settlement camp, they face the violation of Article 25: the right to an adequate living standard. They share a small space with many others, sleep on beach chairs while using towels as blankets, and everyone shares a dump bucket throughout the night. The living situation is not only highly unsanitary, but also uncomfortable. While at camp, the girls witness the violation of Article 5: the freedom from torture and degrading treatment (UN General Assembly, 1948). A girl who had escaped the settlement is forced to have a haircut, is whipped, and is isolated from the other girls. These examples of UDHR violations highlight how Indigenous communities were not treated fairly; they were treated like they were less than human and as if basic human rights did not apply to them.

In the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Article 7 and Article 8 serve as the main Indigenous rights themes throughout the film. Although Mr. Neville’s plans do not involve killing indigenous people, they do infringe on Article 7, “the right to not be subjected to any act of genocide” (UN General Assembly, 2007). Erasing a whole race, even if it is not through physical violence, is still a violation. By putting half-castes in a settlement, Mr. Neville also violates Article 8, which is “the right to not be subjected to forced assimilation” (UN General Assembly, 2007). The children at the settlement are forced to speak English and go to church and pray.

The representation of Indigenous people in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* provides an interesting juxtaposition because Indigenous people can be seen through both the lens of the oppressor and the

oppressed. At the beginning of the film, it is suggested that the half-castes are not worthy of having a proper family. The half-castes do not have any father figures and the Indigenous women do not have husbands. Without men present in the Indigenous community, they are viewed as socially handicapped. Physically, the half-castes are depicted as dirty throughout most of the film. The girls are portrayed in the same clothing they received when they entered the camp. Additionally, they are bathed by the nuns at the camp, which implies that whites are the “purer” race. Lastly, Mr. Neville views the Indigenous people as “neolithic” because of the tools they use, and their culture is represented as superstitious (Noyce, 2002). However, there are positive portrayals of Indigenous people, as well. The half-castes, along with the Indigenous women, are also shown as cunning, capable, and independent. Molly can outsmart Mr. Neville and the experienced tracker Moodoo. In addition to this, Indigenous people are very spiritually aligned with nature. Another way that indigenous people are represented is through the content of characters’ lines and the number of lines they have in the film. An interesting observation is that the white characters seem to have more lines, even though the focus is on the half-castes. Molly often stayed quiet when asked a question, and the Indigenous women were usually seen singing in their native language. It seems that even in this film, the voice of the minority is silenced.

It is interesting to see both the negative and positive portrayals of Indigenous people in one film. However, what is viewed as negative to the eyes of the oppressor may be a positive characteristic to the eyes of the oppressed. Molly and the Indigenous women are strong and independent because of the lack of men present in their lives. Despite being quiet, they can still communicate with each other. It is with their “neolithic tools” that Molly and the girls are able to escape the settlement camp, and their superstitious singing allows the Indigenous women to scare off the white man trying to capture Molly and the girls. Lastly, even though Molly, Daisy, and Gracie appear dirty in the majority of the film, this can symbolize that they cannot simply be whitewashed.

Although this film focuses on Indigenous people, the representation of white people in the film affects the representation of the Indigenous, as well. Personally, the film played a lot with my bias as a viewer watching in 2020. It is very difficult to watch *Rabbit-Proof Fence* without assuming that every white character is an antagonist and that every non-white character (who is not a main character) is a person that helps the protagonist. However, this film does not provide the satisfaction of confirmation bias, and this is important to note because it shows that history is not black and white; history is complicated. Some scenes provide the notion that not every white person agreed with Mr. Neville's ideas, and not every non-white person supported the half-castes.

Overall, the production of this film was very good, especially considering that it was released in 2002. Most of the movie is very serious and tense, which is an accurate reflection of the pressing rights issues that Indigenous people face. There is no comedic relief that would alleviate one's uneasiness; the film did a good job of capturing this reality. However, although *Rabbit-Proof Fence* depicts a specific event, there is still some missing context information. The film focuses a lot on Indigenous women, yet barely addresses indigenous men. Half-caste boys are also not seen, or even addressed in the film. One of the most important characters in the film is the tracker Moodoo, but we as viewers know very little about him. Why is he in the position that he is in? Do his values align with those he works for? Is he okay with his daughter being in a settlement camp?

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* is not a film one would watch for relaxation and fun. Rather, it addresses many human rights issues while also exposing a part of history that few people are aware of. It is an important film because it tackles hard issues and does not shy away from them.

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### ***Smoke Signals* (1998) – Ashley Indelicato**

Twentieth century films did little justice to Indigenous peoples.

White people dominated the entertainment industry, so onscreen portrayals of non-white people tended to be caricaturized, stereotyped, dehumanized, one- or two-dimensional characters, often as villains or for comic relief. This still occurs today. Indigenous writers, designers, and filmmakers like Chris Eyre, director of *Smoke Signals*, help introduce

Indigenous perspectives in media and provide much more accurate, culturally informed portrayals of native characters and their stories.

*Smoke Signals* (Alexie et al., 1998) is about two young men who live on a Coeur d'Alene reservation. Victor is generally stoic, withdrawn, athletic and sometimes angry; Thomas is livelier, more talkative, and nerdy. This dichotomy makes for three-dimensional character development, humanization, and humor throughout the film. Earlier Hollywood portrayals of Indigenous people did not allow for individual uniqueness, development, conflict resolution, humanity, or humor (unless at the expense of indigeneity). Victor's father had left him and his mother several years prior and had been living in Arizona. When his father dies, Victor has to go to Arizona to retrieve his ashes and his old pickup truck, but he and his mother do not have the money for such a trip. Thomas gives Victor money for this journey, on the condition that Thomas can accompany him.

The human rights theme was less prominent than I anticipated – it was more focused on personal struggles and identity. Still, there were visible allusions to various types of human rights. One

instance, in which a prejudicial passenger tells Thomas and Victor to “find someplace else to have a powwow,” making them sit at the back of the bus, calls back to the American Civil Rights movement. There were frequent references to Coeur d’Alene culture, or at least what is left of it. Colonialism scraped Indigenous culture from North America and pushed it into sporadic reservations throughout the land, which has led to the continual ostracization of Indigenous people. In a flashback, Arnold tells Victor he could make anything disappear, including all the white people and the reservations. If the colonizers disappeared, Arnold and his family wouldn’t be living on the Coeur d’Alene reservation in Idaho; the land would still belong to the Indigenous people. Indigenous rights to land compose a portion of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP), particularly Articles 25-32 (see United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Arnold's comment reflects his frustration with the colonial government that had committed genocide and stolen their land and culture. Freedom from discrimination is asserted in Article 7 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) and reaffirmed by UNDRIP Articles 2, 8, 9, 14-17, 22, 24, & 29. I also absolutely expected Victor to be arrested for assault and drunk driving. Based on other articles and documentaries I have seen regarding Indigenous experiences with the U.S. government, I anticipated that the officer, as an agent of the state, would discriminate against these two men. When Victor says he has never had one drop of alcohol in his life, the police officer asks, “What kind of Injun are you?” The officer, clearly prejudiced, seemed to believe they weren't guilty, but mostly based on the words of other white people at the scene.

Common stereotypes of indigenous people in the media include spirituality/wisdom, alcoholism, “savagery,” stoicism, cultural homogeneity, and the application of cultural props like headdresses, braids, teepees, horses, animal hides, feathers, and war paint. Hollywood ignores the diversity and quantity of different Indigenous cultures. In film, native people are generally depicted as caricatures of Plains Indians, leading viewers to apply this caricature to all native people regardless of tribal affiliation,

identification, and customs. *Smoke Signals* was groundbreaking in that, unlike earlier films, the main characters were portrayed as human beings with real individualized thoughts, feelings, personalities, cultures, personal histories, and interests. In *Smoke Signals*, Victor and Thomas have their own unique personalities.

The Native American protagonists deal with issues such as prejudice and discrimination, identity development, family problems, personal struggles, death, and abandonment. Many of these things are experienced by an immeasurable amount of people, regardless of race and origin. I did not *personally* relate to the characters' cultural identity conflict, yet I thought the film did an exceptional job interweaving the human experience with those unique to Indigenous people. *Smoke Signals* humanized the characters in ways Hollywood hadn't achieved before. Additionally, they depicted Indigenous culture, identity, and struggles in emotional and humorous ways that allow viewers to sympathize with them even if they can't personally relate.

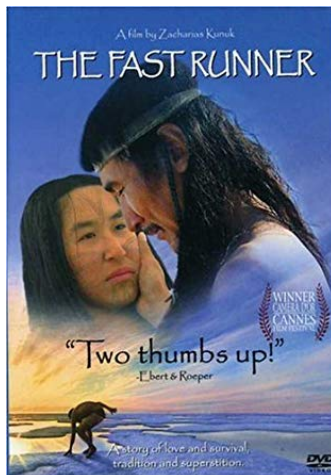
*Smoke Signals* distances itself from earlier Hollywood westerns in its centering of actual Indigenous people in real-life, relatable, modern situations with well-developed Indigenous protagonists, and its deliberate departure from harmful stereotypes. Content created by Indigenous people serves to bring representation to an underrepresented, undervalued group and combats existing stereotypes. It is easy for me, as a white woman, to find representations of myself in all kinds of fields such as fashion, pornography, television, politics, and more. Though still often plagued with stereotypes of femininity, white women are easy to find in these areas, and we have the privilege of being three-dimensional, prominent characters with accurate, relatable depictions in media. For decades, native people did not have this luxury. Indigenous films like *Smoke Signals* broke ground in this regard as they give space to real Indigenous people and allow Indigenous viewers to see themselves on screen.

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### ***Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) – William M. Schenck**

The Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in Canada stands comfortably amongst its Cannes, Sundance, and Venice counterparts as an annual, internationally recognized showcase of the film industry's best and brightest from around the globe. Decided by ballot, TIFF compiles periodic lists based on varied subsets of film and filmmaking. One such list, the "Top 10 Canadian Films of All Time," features Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) at the number one spot. From *Atanarjuat's* 2001 release to the time of the 2015 poll, the movie had, by TIFF's measure, surpassed the entire history of Canadian cinema in terms of quality. While the efficacy of TIFF's polling methods has been called into question, the immediate resonance experienced by viewers of the film nevertheless speaks to the nature of traditional Indigenous people's storytelling and the role of that tradition in the modern age. While the universe that *Atanarjuat* pulls its audience into is foreign to most, the broad strokes of its story are familiar to all. It is in this juxtaposition of what is known and unknown that Kunuk both honors the reality of the Indigenous experience, while relating it to the general public.

Though *Atanarjuat* was released in 2001, the origins of the story it tells can be traced back centuries. The film is a visual adaption of a tale that has been orally passed down by Inuit for



generations. Although the film features some modifications to the traditional legend, much of the key themes, characters, and plot points remain the same. Set in the Eastern Arctic wilderness in a village called Igloolik, the film begins when the protagonist of the film, Atanarjuat, is an infant. Though his father, Tulimaq, is portrayed as a push-over and an incompetent hunter subjected to torment at the hands of the other inhabitants of Igloolik, there is a sense throughout the community that Atanarjuat and his brother, Amaqjuaq, are destined for greatness. In a scene that depicts Tulimaq on the receiving end of ridicule over his inadequate bounty, he says to his wife: "When my sons grow up, I'll never be treated like this again." It is shown in the film that the mean-streak present within the community, evident by the mistreatment of Tulimaq, is the result of a shaman stranger introducing hateful magic into the village by vanquishing their former tribal leader years earlier. Later in the film, when Atanarjuat and Amaqjuaq have reached adulthood, Atanarjuat is well-regarded for his swiftness. He is a *fast runner*, and envied for this by a rival character named Oki. Oki is betrothed to Atuat, a woman who is reluctant to marry Oki, but is shown to have romantic chemistry with Atanarjuat. In a ritualized battle-of-strength, Atanarjuat defeats Oki and is subsequently awarded Atuat's hand in marriage.

Over time, Atanarjuat takes a second wife, Puja, who is the sister of Oki. When Puja is caught having sex with Amaqjuaq, Atanarjuat enraged, strikes Puja. In an act of retaliation (and in cahoots with his sister), Oki and his cronies sneak up to Atanarjuat and Amaqjuaq's tent and began to stab through the exterior of the tent with walrus tusks fashioned into weapons. They are successful in murdering Amaqjuaq, but in a climactic twist, Atanarjuat emerges from the tent to the surprise of the murdering party, and sprints across the icy plains for many miles fully nude, eventually evading Oki and his gang. Seasons pass, and Atanarjuat, who had found refuge with a solitary family for some time, resigns himself to the fact that he must return to the village to save his people from Oki and evil itself. Atanarjuat does return and, instead of exacting eye-for-an-eye vengeance onto Oki, he shows some mercy and allows

him to live – with the caveat that he, his supporters, and Puja are to never return to the village. They are exiled, and with them the shaman’s curse.

Oki is merely a physical device used to portray the true antagonist of the film: the less tangible evil scourge that comes from outside the tight-knit Inuit community and, by possessing its inhabitants, challenges its traditional ways and threatens its very existence. The parallel between the dark magic that threatens Atanarjuat’s village, and the often-violent historical and contemporary imposition of Western culture onto Indigenous populations is plain to see. Without hesitation, Oki commits explicit acts of rape and murder in order to advance his own self-interest. Imperialist regimes the world over have enacted these exact methods on a massive scale, targeting entire Indigenous populations and decimating their cultures through violence, forced assimilation, forced relocation, or some combination thereof. Without any other recourse, many communities have been forced to “run” like Atanarjuat to whatever ends of the earth have been left over for them, in order to preserve a semblance of their traditions or, as in Atanarjuat’s case, to survive.

In the years that have followed *Atanarjuat*’s release, the success of the film has enabled its production company, Isuma Productions, to uplift the local Indigenous community of Igloolik in a quantifiable way, by injecting more than \$2 million into the local economy and creating over 200 jobs (Senguin, 2005). Moreover, with its many records and firsts, and a box-office tally of nearly \$6 million (compared to its “hard-won \$1.96m” budget [Chun 2002]), the film has provided prospective Indigenous filmmakers with a powerful precedent. To Indigenous audiences, by displaying multi-dimensional characters capable of intimacy, betrayal, remorse, forgiveness, and healing, there is a breakaway from the typical binary “stoic” or “savage” (as detailed in *Real Injun* – see Diamond & Hayes, 2009) categorizations of Indigenous peoples in film. Although the movie takes place in a land and time that seems distant, the personalities and layered moralities of the characters give Indigenous viewers realistic archetypes to identify with.

*Atanarjuat* at once shows us Indigenous peoples at their most human, dealing with the types of interpersonal dramas that persist in our modern world, while refusing to leave behind their time-honored traditions and instead fully immersing the viewer in a world heretofore unseen. It does not dwell on the differences, but instead lets the cultural backdrop breathe in a way that makes it feel neither forced nor focal. While I went into the film expecting a story that I might like but would probably feel very “far away” from, I found myself at times barely noticing that I was seeing things that I had never seen before on film; the spacious inside of an igloo, the skinning of a walrus, the language. I was positively engrossed in the arc of the story, and I was wrapped up in the lives of the *people*. This observation points to what I feel to be one of the larger messages to be found in the way this story was told: No matter how separate our circumstances seem to be, the ways that we respond to and experience them are not so different. Understanding that, there is no apparent justification in subjecting someone to treatment that you would not wish to endure yourself on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, or culture. *Atanarjuat* can show viewers that the human experience of an Inuit man or woman is equally valid to that of anyone else, anywhere else, and that the treatment of Indigenous persons around the world ought to be modified accordingly.

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