



**HAL**  
open science

# “We are [still] Cheyenne”: How Smoke Signals and Powwow Highway Reanimate the past

Lionel Larré, Leann Stevens-Larré

## ► To cite this version:

Lionel Larré, Leann Stevens-Larré. “We are [still] Cheyenne”: How Smoke Signals and Powwow Highway Reanimate the past. Arrows of Time, American Indian Workshop, Apr 2018, Gand, Belgium. ⟨hal-05296042⟩

**HAL Id: hal-05296042**

**<https://hal.science/hal-05296042v1>**

Submitted on 3 Oct 2025

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Arrows of Time  
AIW Ghent, 10-13 April 2018

“We are [still] Cheyenne”: How *Smoke Signals* and *Powwow Highway*  
Reanimate the past

Lionel Larré, Bordeaux Montaigne University, and LeAnn Stevens-Larré, Bordeaux INP

One striking difference between Hollywood movies showing “Indians,” even those sympathetic to Native Americans, and independent Native American movies, has to do with the historical time they represent and what that time signifies. Movies like *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), *Soldier Blue* (1970), *Little Big Man* (1970), and *Dances With Wolves* (1990) show past Indians who have since supposedly vanished, whereas Native American movies like *Powwow Highway* (1989), *Smoke Signals* (1998), or *Skins* (2002), among others, show present Indians, very much not vanished. As soon as the films’ openings, these movies defy expectations by showing contemporary settings or, as Denise Cummings writes about *Smoke Signals*, they “dislocate [their] first expected ethnic response” (60), even if *Powwow Highway* tricks us into believing, for a few seconds, that we might be about to watch a classic Western (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: *Powwow Highway*, opening

Native Americans have obviously not vanished, but the openings of both *Smoke Signals* and *Skins* indicate that perhaps the Euro-Americans wish Native Americans had vanished, since the present in which many Native Americans live seems far less romantic than their habitually romanticized past, and points to Euro-American responsibility for Native Americans' present dire condition.

Moreover, Hollywood's representation of the past violence against Indians is really intended to show a contemporary violence (the Vietnam war, for example, or the desecration of nature) whereas Native American representations of the present are replete with signs that the past is never really past.

At a superficial level, this conflation of past and present is visual. Both *Powwow Highway* and *Smoke Signals* move from present to past and back to present seamlessly. In *Smoke Signals*, this overlapping is even more intricate.

More subtly, the past is made present by characterization, especially in how Philbert Bono in *Powwow Highway* and Thomas in *Smoke Signals* are constructed. Philbert and Thomas are the storytellers who mirror what the authors of the two movies do, which is to take upon themselves what Jeremy Stoddard and Alan Marcus call "the burden of historical representation":

"a 'burden of representation' [...] exists whenever a marginalized or underrepresented group is portrayed in film, and it has a lasting impact on how people view the world and the groups that are represented, even if they know that the film's portrayal isn't accurate [...] In the case of representing history in film, this burden requires that members of these underrepresented groups be portrayed in a way that allows the viewer to understand their points of view, history, and language" (Stoddard & Marcus 2006, 27)

*Powwow Highway* and *Smoke Signals*, then, meet this "burden of historical representation" through "developing complex characters and rich personal stories that

challenge traditional historical and film narratives, which have generally focused on Eurocentric history and appealed to white audiences” (Stoddard & Marcus 2006, 27).

To understand how Philbert and Thomas meet this burden, archival theory, as LeAnn Stevens-Larré, defined it, may be useful. There are two strains of archival theory: the theory regarding archives in the sense of “history of documents over time,” and the theory regarding “the archive” in the sense of “power, memory, and identity formation.”<sup>1</sup> Without delving into too much detail here, it is significant that the impetus for codifying archival practice was a need associated with the Dutch nation’s expansion and the process of dominating other peoples. Thus, the beginnings of archival theory intimately correspond with the exercise of power and, as a consequence, the erasure of competing narratives.

The concept of a metaphorical archive comes much later, with Michel Foucault in the 1960s and Jacques Derrida in the 1990s. The narrative that arises from the archive is one that addresses the space where no whole story exists. It is a space filled with an incomplete array of the disassembled pieces of historical record – which Foucault calls “a collection of *stagnating language*” – reassembled by those who have the power and status to enter and construct within that space. Since archives do not admit marginalized voices, the historical record dealing with American Indians was incomplete at best and empty at worst.

---

<sup>1</sup> Archivist and scholar Terry Cook makes the distinction between “the archive” and “archives.” The former focuses on issues of power, memory, and identity centered upon the initial inscription of a document. The latter concentrates on the subsequent history of documents over time, including the many interventions by archivists (and others) that transform (and change) that original archive into archives (497). He states that “The ‘archive’ (singular) usually engaged by such scholars is as a metaphorical symbol, as representation of identity, or as the recorded memory production of some person or group or culture” (498). Therefore, when one theorizes about archives, one is dealing with both the physical archive (archives, plural), those that exist in computers or on shelves in the form of tangible and infinitely reproducible sets of data, and the metaphorical archive, any entity which is sanctioned by the powers-that-be to preserve cultural/community memory in the guise of “records.”

Philbert and Thomas take upon themselves the burden of historical representation: they both constantly refer to history. When his CB interlocutor complains that “nobody cares about history these days,” Philbert responds “I do” (*Powwow Highway* 27’34). They take it upon themselves to complete the lack left by the Hollywood narratives constructed from the disassembled fragments found in the archive which were made sacred by its institutionalization, in the sense that Michel Foucault intended: “history, in its traditional form, undertook to ‘memorize’ the monuments of the past, transform them into *documents*, and lend speech to those traces which, in themselves, are often not verbal, or which say in silence something other than what they actually say; in our time, history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*” (7). Thus, Philbert and Thomas may be called “archival characters,” in the sense that they “elucidate the themes of memory, narrative and the construction of both individual and community identity in the face of History” (Stevens-Larré, 6).

To become a warrior, or what Hollywood would consider an embodiment of the Cheyenne past, Philbert picks and chooses disassembled fragments and, putting them together, proposes an alternative to the narrative of the powered. This process starts in a junkyard. At the beginning of the scene, the car salesman on TV embodies what Euro-Americans value in American culture: cars, owning a car, and, as far as Indians are concerned, a feather headdress, a war-whoop and cliché vocabulary (“how,” “warpath,” etc) (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: the American Dream and Philbert's "fine pony," *Powwow Highway*

The car salesman is performing the typical narrative of American and native identity. As a member of the marginalized, Philbert does not have authorized access to the archive so he could tell such a story. He only has access to the debris rejected by the powered. In a way, then, the junkyard is the anti-archive of America, composed by everything the powered have deemed profane. Philbert gazes over these fragments discarded by the American dream, and he uses them to tell another story. He gives new meaning to these fragments: the old cars are "fine ponies." Philbert trades like in the old days, as he says later to Buddy: "I made a trade, as in the days when men possessed nothing" (15'43). If the archive is sacred for the powered, it is appropriate to consider this anti-archive profane, which is signified by Philbert tossing the dashboard Virgin Mary.

To make the opposition clearer between this alternative narrative proposed by Philbert and the official, sacred, institutionalized narrative advanced by the powered, this scene is immediately followed by one in which the mere mention of "public record" and "statistics," the archival constructions of the powered, are expected by the representative of the federal government to be considered gospel.

Once the car is devoid of the sacredness that the powered had invested in it, Philbert can endow it with a personal and communal (*We are Cheyenne*) sacred quality, as he does with the tokens he finds on his way to become a warrior. He invests meaning in the debris left around him. The value of his tokens is not obvious to anyone but himself. The coin in his boot, the piece of melting ice, and the car handle are profane to the powered but sacred to him. He says as much to Skye: "to be a warrior, you must have a medicine bundle... sacred things that protect you from all harm, four tokens that come to you in a special way" (1h13). In a way, just like the car salesman and Hollywood, Philbert practices cultural appropriation,

to his and his community's advantage: the tokens make him a warrior, he regards a bar of Hershey's chocolate as sacred, and he helps Bonnie escape, inspired by a scene caught on the gas station TV.

The editing technique mentioned earlier consisting in blending past and present only mirrors what characters do. As "archival characters" Philbert and Thomas reanimate the past in the present. They ensure that both individual and community identities are in history. At the beginning of *Smoke Signals*, the voice of Thomas places the story that is about to unfold in the larger context of tribal history, US history and even world history. In both movies, historical references are numerous, even if they are lies, as when Geronimo is said to be the toughest basketball player in the world. As Thomas makes clear to Suzy Song, it does not really matter if the stories are part-lies, part-truth. It does not really matter because, after all, the stories told by the powered from the true fragments found in the archive are also part-lies. What matters, then, is to tell the stories, especially if one does not belong to the powered but to the marginalized.

Thomas and Philbert, both storytellers, meet the burden of representation by mobilizing what Toni Morrison calls "discredited knowledge" (Morrison & McKay 428). Victor, who has internalized the knowledge institutionalized by Hollywood – "don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" (*Smoke Signals* 35'26) – systematically debunks Thomas's stories: "Thomas, you're so full of shit". When he says that, he discredits Thomas's knowledge in the same way the powered would discredit it. Sometimes, Victor actually admits his lack of the knowledge that Thomas holds, even though unwittingly: "you know, Thomas, I don't know what you're talking about half the time, why is that?" (*Smoke Signals* 35'). Victor, who is seen watching a Western movie, validates Euro-American clichés about Indians and his own negative narrative of his father. A superficial interpretation would be

that Victor knows the truth and that Thomas indeed is “full of shit.” However, because we know that Victor’s knowledge about how to be an Indian is cliché, we value Thomas’s positive memories of Joseph, even if they are true only in a full-of-lies kind of way.

Victor and Buddy find Thomas and Philbert’s discredited knowledge “embarrassing” but this knowledge does make the world larger for them, notably because they know that the present encompasses the past and possibly the future, as suggested by Thomas’s grandmother: “Tell me what happened, Thomas. Tell me what’s going to happen” (*Smoke Signals* 1h20’56).

If Toni Morrison is right, if we have discredited a knowledge that may enlarge the world, it matters that Philbert and Thomas keep enlarging the world with their stories and their worldview. Thus, they may open other people’s minds, as they do gradually open the minds of Buddy and Victor. Buddy sings to the rising sun along with Philbert in freezing water, and Thomas manages to bring Victor to see his father differently, and forgive him: “he didn’t mean to, Thomas” (1h19’), Victor finally says about Joseph.

With their knowledge coming from the past, Philbert, Thomas, and the movies enlarge the present and give it new meaning, proposing alternatives to powerful narratives which have frozen Native Americans in the past. These two ways of narrating the past and present are still opposing each other in movies today. *Hostiles* (Scott Cooper, 2017) still makes the Indians vanish, physically or culturally; whereas *The Rider* (Chloé Zhao, 2017) shows some contemporary Lakota characters’ passion for horses and rodeo, thus subverting once again the narrative that held that all cowboys were white males fighting Indians.

In the documentary *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World* (2017), John Trudell says of Native Americans’ role in history: “They tried to erase it, but it didn’t get erased. If they had erased it, we wouldn’t be able to pick up the pieces.” This is how Native American

movies represent time: they pick up the pieces of the past discarded by the powerful, and they make sure that their stories are not erased.

#### Bibliography

- Foucault, Michel. « Le *Mallarmé* de Jean-Pierre Richard », *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, vol. 198, n° 5, septembre-octobre 1964, p. 996-1004.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*. 1972. Trans. Rupert Swyer. New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.
- Morrison, Toni & Nellie McKay. "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature* 24.4 (Winter 1983), 413-429.
- Stevens-Larré, LeAnn. "Incorporating Multiple Histories: The Possibility of Narrative Rupture of the Archive in *V.* and *Beloved*." Ph-D. dissertation. University of Oklahoma, 2010.