“The Native’s Point of View” as Seen through the Native’s (and Non-Native’s) Points of View

SAM PACK

This chapter describes a reception study that I conducted with both Navajo and Anglo viewers using two sets of films about Navajos in order to compare and contrast their reactions to “insider” and “outsider” perspectives of the same subject matter. The first set addresses the forced relocation of Navajo families from their ancestral homeland as presented by a Native filmmaker and non-Native filmmakers. I screened the films to both groups to determine if either was able to distinguish cultural authorship. The second set of films—one a documentary and the other a television drama—chronicles the journey of Navajos who were adopted by white families as infants and then reunite with their biological families as adults. Unlike the very structured nature of the first study, this one replicated a more natural viewing environment. Interestingly, any historical and cultural inaccuracies depicted in these visual reproductions did not detract from the viewers’ enjoyment of the films.

Until relatively recently, studies of audience reception among Indigenous peoples have been all but ignored within anthropology. Debra Spitulnik bemoaned the fact that there was no “anthropology of mass media,” as anthropologists had largely managed to neglect the centrality of mass media in twentieth-century life. This absence was ironic in light of the often-quoted Malinowskian dictum that the goal of ethnography is “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world.” Anthropologists in industrial countries paid scant systematic attention to the production, distribution, and consumption of mass media in their own societies and even less attention to mass media in nonindustrial societies.

The glaring lack of reception studies within anthropology reflects the unacknowledged assumption that all viewers process information in a similarly unproblematic manner. Studies have demonstrated, however, that there is an intrinsic link between culture and communication and...
that each culture socializes its members in its own viewing habits and interpretive strategies. Simply stated, the media do not affect all equally or in the same fashion.

The literature regarding the effects of imported mass media in non-industrial societies oscillates between two diametrically opposed poles. The first, influenced by Marxism, conceives of the media as an extremely powerful force in the reproduction and distribution of a dominant ideology that both reflects and reinforces asymmetrical power relations delimited by race, class, and gender. The other, influenced by cultural studies, views mass culture—in spite of such inequitable power relations—as allowing for active agency on the part of audiences. Of course, mass media are capable of both of these extremes in that they can produce resignation and resistance.

By virtue of relying on self-fulfilling research designs, too many reception studies obscure the agency of their human “subjects.” With their preconceived agendas in place, all they have to do is fill in the blanks. Indeed, anthropologists and other researchers have historically employed what I call a “ventriloquist approach” in their studies of Indigenous peoples. By essentially speaking on their behalf, they have rendered their Native subjects as little more than exotic puppets. Within anthropology in recent years, there has been interest in reversing the academic perspective by using Native epistemologies to critique our own assumptions. Dan Rose, in particular, urges a more radical democratization of knowledge that simultaneously de-privileges our academic inquiry while helping to recover ideas and practices from historically marginalized points of view.

Thus, the following study seeks to address and perhaps remedy some of the deficiencies of its predecessors in three specific ways. First, it takes as its point of departure the need to examine the cultural dimension of communicative processes. This is especially important since the dynamics of image interpretation are magnified when the producer of the image and the consumer of the image come from different cultures. Second, this chapter explores the multiple formations and contestations of identity through the experiences of a Navajo family with which I have been closely associated for two decades. Such familiarity is crucial precisely because so much family behavior is private and hidden from public view. Finally, bolstered by the application of an insider/outsider perspective, this study mitigates the objectification of ethnographic subjects by actively soliciting their reactions to two sets of films: In the Heart of Big
Mountain (1988)/Broken Rainbow (1985) and The Return of Navajo Boy (2000)/The Lost Child (2000). It is formulated on the premise of not only recognizing but also privileging the voices of Native people in their own mass-mediated representations.

There is also an added significance in focusing on the voices of Navajos in particular because of their participation in a landmark study known as the Navajo Film Project. During the summer of 1966, Sol Worth and John Adair visited Pine Springs, Arizona, to conduct an anthropological experiment by handing film cameras to seven Navajo adults to determine whether the kinds of films they chose to make would reveal something about the ways in which they perceived the world. Interestingly, the underlying assumption was that Navajos had little knowledge of Hollywood film language and an analysis of the films they elected to make and the ways they framed their images would reveal something of the cultural lens through which they perceived the world.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from the Navajo Film Project was the specific ways in which Worth and Adair found the films to be distinctly “Navajo” as opposed to “amateur” or even just “different.” Since it has been demonstrated that Navajos produce images distinctively, perhaps it should follow that they receive images distinctively as well. In other words, my reception study examines whether there are uniquely “Navajo” viewing habits and interpretive strategies as they specifically apply to watching films.

In the Heart of Big Mountain and Broken Rainbow tackle similar subject matter from different points of view. While a Native American filmmaker completed the first, non-Natives produced and directed the second. In 1976 Robert Aibel conducted a reception study similar to Worth and Adair’s among Anglo university students to see whether they could distinguish between a Navajo-made film (by Johnny Nelson) and an Anglo-made film (by John Adair) about the same topic (Navajo silversmithing). Although he found that informants could correctly determine cultural authorship, Aibel acknowledges that it would have been “particularly valuable and revealing” to conduct the study with a Navajo audience, especially in light of the comment by a Navajo woman during a screening of the Navajo Film Project films that she “cannot understand English”—despite the fact that all of the films were silent.

The reception study I conducted does precisely what Aibel’s did not, as it was undertaken with both Anglos and Navajos. I originally completed
a study using *In the Heart of Big Mountain* and *Broken Rainbow* in an introductory anthropology class I taught at Temple University during the summer of 1998 with eight Anglo college students. Two years later, I repeated the study with five Navajo informants, all members of the Benally family, as part of my dissertation research.

Methodologically, presenting the films to these two constituencies presented a unique challenge because the cultural baggage that each group brought to the viewing was very different. Since most of my students knew little to nothing about Navajo culture before taking my class, it was imperative for me to provide some contextualization for what they were about to watch. As such, I assigned relevant readings and dedicated two class periods to lectures briefly describing the history of the Navajos as well as the issues and ethics of (self)-representation. My Navajo informants did not require such background information for obvious reasons. All five individuals were already familiar with the relocation controversy to varying degrees.

The viewing contexts for the college students and my informants also varied tremendously. All of the students watched the films together in a classroom as part of an assignment. Although I emphasized that they would not be graded for their responses to the films, their participation was undoubtedly motivated by academic concerns. Several of the students, for example, scribbled notes during the screenings. My informants, on the other hand, took these films a lot less seriously. With the exception of Grandma Annie, who required an English translator, the other four family members watched the films individually and at their leisure. They often paused the films to get up and do something else. Several ate during the screenings. None wrote down any notes.

For both groups, I introduced the films by stating that each addressed the same topic—Navajo relocation—from different perspectives. I cued each film to start at a point where the title and the credits would not be visible. I distributed questionnaires immediately after each screening and instructed the viewers to fill them out. Both groups were allowed a brief intermission before the next screening.

The questionnaire was divided into four components. For each film, respondents were asked to provide a summary, describe what they had learned from the film, numerically evaluate ten separate filmic qualities, and devise their own title for the film. After both screenings, they were also asked to explain which was better made, which they liked more, and
which film was made by whom. The college students wrote down their answers, and my Navajo informants responded verbally to the questions.

Before discussing the results of the reception study, it is important to emphasize that neither group can be essentialized as constituting a homogeneous entity. Both groups exhibited significant differences and contradictions among members. That said, there were also common cultural threads. Although I may generalize findings from each group for the sake of brevity, readers should keep this intragroup diversity in mind.

The first set of films explores the topic of Navajo forced relocation. A highly polished film narrated by actor and activist Martin Sheen, *Broken Rainbow* won the Academy Award for best documentary in 1985. The film details the relocation of Navajo families from their homes in Big Mountain, Arizona, compassionately portraying the devastating impact of coal mining on the forcibly removed Navajo and implicating the federal government’s role in creating the Navajo-Hopi land dispute that precipitated the relocation. Navajo-Hopi borders were nebulously defined during the pre-reservation era. Strife between the two tribes resulted in a federal partitioning of the commonly claimed land in 1977. As a result of this ruling, over 10,000 Navajos had to be relocated to government housing in cities off the reservation. Many traditional Navajos whose families had lived on Big Mountain for generations refused to leave. Those who were forcibly removed have had great difficulty adjusting to a radically different way of life. The film makes an impassioned plea that the relocation process be overturned in order to prevent the impending ecological destruction of a sacred land due to coal mining as well as the cultural destruction of a proud people.

Like *Broken Rainbow*, *In the Heart of Big Mountain* also addresses the forced relocation of Navajos as a result of the Navajo-Hopi land dispute. The major difference is that the latter is made by a Native American filmmaker. Sandra Osawa provides thorough background information for those unfamiliar with the history of the land dispute. The strength of this film lies in Osawa’s emphasis on the emotional and human aspects of the issues. She shows how the land dispute has adversely affected the lives of various Navajos from Big Mountain who have become afflicted by alcoholism, mental problems, physical illness, and even death because of their separation from their homeland.

The film is divided into two sections, the first of which focuses on a Navajo matriarch, Katherine Smith, who was born and raised and con-
continues to live on Big Mountain. The second half describes Katherine’s daughter, Nancy, who was relocated to a HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) house near Tuba City, Arizona. Through these two individuals, Osawa juxtaposes the traditional and modern worlds. For example, although Katherine washes her face from a bin and cooks fry bread on an open fire, her daughter enjoys the amenities of running water and electricity. The dichotomy is overly simplistic, but it serves its purpose.

The dominant description of Big Mountain among the Anglo college students was that this film depicted yet another instance of the government mistreating Native Americans. In their questionnaires, most students recycled familiar clichés along the lines of “Oh, these poor Indians.” A sampling of the responses:

Colleen: The film was about the problems brought on by the forced relocation threat imposed by the government: namely, increased death rate, alcoholism, mental problems. The government has created boundaries and split up the land between two groups of people. However, in doing so, they have divided land that is sacred. Because there are no statues or huge churches built on the land does not mean that this is not a place of prayer.

Colleen’s comments clearly reflect that she has learned something about cultural relativism. A self-proclaimed devout Catholic, Colleen recognizes that the Navajos’ religious beliefs are just as valid as her own.

Karen: I feel this film was made primarily to generate sympathy. It worked. I felt really bad for these people. What right do the whites have to come in and drive those people from their homes? I greatly admire Katherine and the others who stayed where they belonged regardless of what the government said.

Karen’s remarks are interesting because, in the space of only a few sentences, she proceeds from feeling sympathy at the Indians’ “plight” to proclaiming admiration for their strength of character.

The majority of the students referenced Big Mountain when summarizing Broken Rainbow. The general consensus was that the second film approached the topic of relocation in more historical detail.

Mary: Like the other film, it was about the government trying to take away Big Mountain from the Navajo in order to exploit its resources. Only this
time, the film gave time to the Hopi to show how they are affected by this as well. Not as much time spent on their bond with the land, but more on the whole litigation process.

But what this film gained in comprehensiveness, according to students, it sacrificed in a personal connection to affected individuals.

In terms of the film’s educational value, the students’ responses varied most in this category. Some, like Dave, found Big Mountain to be a valuable learning tool:

I really learned a lot from the film because I can understand that the Big Mountain is an important place for the Navajo. I am angry that the government forced the people to move out. I would support Navajo people to have their rights to stay . . . I would like the Navajo to maintain their standards. I really want them to be left alone.

Others, like Mary, were not as impressed:

I didn’t learn a whole heck of a lot. I know from papers I wrote earlier in college that the Navajo religion is based on the land and that each element of the land has its own “spirit,” and I knew from the readings that land inheritance was a “female thing.” Also, it didn’t surprise me that mental illness and suicide was on the rise among the Navajo. It makes sense given what they’re going through. The deaths did surprise me, although it can be argued whether that’s really based on the relocation or if it’s purely medical.

A similar juxtaposition applied to Broken Rainbow, which was well articulated by Scott:

Basically what I learned was a pretty solid history of the Indians in that region. But most of the info about whites taking advantage and manipulating I was already aware of.

As part of their evaluation process of the films, all of the respondents were asked to give a numerical score from 1 to 10 (lowest to highest) for a series of different filmic qualities, including artistic, smooth, intelligible, complete, interesting, funny, educational, good, unusual, and likeable.
On the whole, the students ranked *Broken Rainbow* higher in terms of intelligibility, completeness, and educational value, while *Big Mountain* received a slight nod for being more interesting and unusual. Both films were rated as being evenly artistic and smooth, and none of the students found either of the films to be particularly funny. The students disagreed about which film they liked more or was better made—which I will discuss in further detail later.

For the final component, students were presented the opportunity to demonstrate their creativity by proposing their own title for each film. For *Big Mountain*, titles tended to focus more on the deleterious impact of relocation upon the Navajo: “The Effects of Forced Relocation on the Navajo” (Mark), “The Heartache of Relocation” (Karen), and “Big Mountain and How the People Can’t Live without It” (Gena). On the contrary, suggested film titles for *Broken Rainbow* concentrated more on the underhanded tactics of the government: “Manipulation and Destruction of the Hopi and Navajo” (Scott), “The Navajo, the Hopi, and the Government: Whose Land Is It?” (Mary), and “The Government’s Destruction of Indian Lifestyles” (Dorian).

Unlike the college students, my Navajo informants spoke in broad generalizations and rarely provided specific examples from the films. For instance, this is the way Isabelle, a middle-aged mother of ten, summarized *Big Mountain*:

It was about the Navajo people being relocated out of Big Mountain and how it’s working on them psychologically. And all the problems they’re having up there with their family dying and all that.

Her college-educated daughter, Regina, employed similarly sweeping strokes when describing *Broken Rainbow*:

This film gave a brief history of the origins of Navajo relocation. Then it also included the Hopis. This one was more spread out to a whole group of Navajos living on Big Mountain.

Such lack of detail may be indicative of their not paying very close attention to the films. But I have noticed that many of the Navajos whom I have come to know have difficulty giving precise answers to vague and
open-ended questions like “What did you think about it?” or “What was it about?” Instead, general questions invariably elicit general responses.

Of course, the main reason they did not pay very close attention to the educational value of the two films was because they were already familiar with the subject matter. Although bothered by the travesty of justice perpetrated against the Navajos of Big Mountain, none expressed any surprise, as they have come to expect this type of unethical behavior from the government. Sixteen-year-old Chucky first heard about the issue in his high school class:

I knew about Big Mountain from taking “Navajo Government” this semester. He [the teacher] didn’t tell me about the relocation, though. I got a white guy. He don’t know nothing. He just goes by the book. The part I was surprised about was where people died because of it and how it affected their minds and stuff. I felt sorry for the people but, then again, it was expected. Because the government, man, they’re always going to do you like that. Sooner or later, they’re going to kick us off our land. Watch.

An underlying apathy also characterized their reactions of Broken Rainbow:

Isabelle: I never really paid attention to the relocation because it didn’t affect me. It used to be a big thing about ten years ago, but now people kind of just forgot about it. Even when all this was going on, nobody really cared or they would have been out there supporting those relocatees. I don’t think the outside people really got involved.

All five members of the Benally family maintained an emotional distance from the issue of relocation since neither they themselves nor anyone they knew was directly involved. But Delbert, an unemployed silversmith, acknowledged that the situation would have been different if he had been personally affected.

Being way over here, I heard it all on the radio and newspaper. I couldn’t really do anything about it. What if they come over to where I live? “Hey, man, this whole doggone valley ain’t yours.” That’s when you get a little bit more about how these people feel. And it could happen this way, too.
They can easily say, “Forget about these social services anymore. No more hospitals. Run your own show.”

The Benallys’ unsympathetic remarks are consistent with the “every man for himself” ethos that I have found to be common among contemporary Navajos.

As a means of evaluation, assigning a numerical designation to various traits seemed to be an entirely foreign concept to my Navajo informants. Unlike the college students, they were not accustomed to isolating specific traits and then ranking them on a relative scale. Grandma Annie, the Benally family matriarch, had an especially difficult time understanding the ranking system no matter how many times and different ways that her son, Delbert, and I tried to explain it to her. Ultimately, I believe she humored me by rattling off an arbitrary series of numbers.

The arbitrary nature of the evaluation is most evident in how inconsistently they ranked the different traits. Delbert, Isabelle, and Chucky all felt that Broken Rainbow was the more intelligible, complete, and interesting film, yet they gave higher scores in all three categories to Big Mountain. Another interesting tendency was how several of the Navajos supplied two different numerical scores: one for the general public and the other for themselves. So, for example, Chucky gave Big Mountain a 7 for being unusual, but quickly noted that it rated only as a 3 from his own point of view. Similarly, Isabelle and Regina both thought the films would be much more educational for non-Navajos.

As with those the college students proposed, the Navajo informants’ responses were predictably uninspired given their generally lackadaisical approach in the viewing context. Unlike the case with the Anglo students, there was no discernible difference between the titles for either film. In fact, Delbert and Chucky gave practically the same title for both films. Perhaps this is because the films are ultimately about the same thing in their eyes: how the federal government has once again victimized the Navajos. It is a story they know all too well.

As with those the college students proposed, the titles basically fell into two camps. The first addressed the sadness and heartache of the Navajos: “Brokenhearted Diné” (Grandma Annie), “Emotional Crisis at Big Mountain” (Isabelle), and “The Psychological Effects of Navajo Relocation” (Regina). The second group focused on anger aimed at the federal government and Anglos as a whole: “Screwed Again by Uncle Sam”
(Chucky), “Stealing Indian Lands” (Regina), and “The Corrupt White Man” (Delbert). Significantly, the two camps were almost equally divided according to gender lines, with the female viewers responding more emotionally and male viewers responding more angrily.

When asked which film is better made, each group of viewers provided responses that reflected their own cultural biases. Although the college students unanimously agreed that Broken Rainbow was the much slicker production, such evidence of its higher budget did not necessarily translate into superior overall quality. Scott elaborated on the pluses and minuses of each film:

For entertainment value, [Broken Rainbow] was made a lot better and gave more of a historical background. But the film was done in the “voice of God” method with the narrator speaking for the people. While [Big Mountain] was not very artistically pleasing, it did seem to be more believable. So as far as an ethnography, [Big Mountain] seemed to have less flaws.

Similarly, Dorian hailed Broken Rainbow’s “informational nature and multiple perspectives,” but ultimately decreed that Big Mountain was “more anthropological” because of its focus on individuals rather than groups.

The Navajos unanimously nominated Broken Rainbow as the superior film in terms of production quality. Compared with Big Mountain, this film was longer, more detailed, and more informative. Taken together, my informants easily gathered that the documentary was the more expensive film to make. Broken Rainbow, observed Grandma Annie, “looked like it cost a lot more money.” For Annie, there was a direct correlation between cultural value and its monetary counterpart.

Surprisingly, several of the students who decided that Broken Rainbow was the better-made film nevertheless liked Big Mountain more. Karen, for example, sided with the Oscar-winning documentary as the superior production because it was “more informative and educational,” whereas Big Mountain was “only about one woman and her life.” Yet when it came time for her to cast her vote for the film she found more appealing, Karen preferred the smaller production precisely because of its human touch:

I enjoyed [Big Mountain] better because it was on a more personal level. I know the view of one person does not represent all Navajo, but I...
sympathized with her. [Broken Rainbow] was too full of facts and statistics. It doesn’t matter to me that their sheep are a gift from the Holy People—I could care less. I was interested in how relocation affected their everyday lives and [Big Mountain] showed that well.

Dorian, on the other hand, had the opposite impression:

While I feel [Big Mountain] was better made, the second provided me with more information that was obviously lacking in the first. I needed things to be placed in a historical timeline and the second film provided adequate info mixed with varying opinions and imagery. [Big Mountain] acted as a more focused version of [Broken Rainbow].

As these divergent comments illustrate, there is no accounting for personal taste.

Perhaps because of their greater familiarity with forced relocation, the Navajos were far more critical of both films’ content. In contrast to the college students, my informants were not as susceptible to the emotional underpinnings of either film that portrayed the relocated Navajos as helpless victims. Through the reservation grapevine, Isabelle had heard that the Big Mountain residents were offered a significant economic incentive to move:

Those guys received funds to build brand-new houses and they also got moving expenses. There’s a lot of other people that had their arms wide open to the money. You know how Navajos are. Ninety-nine percent of the time, they’re thinking about the money.

While the goal of both films was to elicit sympathy for the displaced Navajos, several of the informants viewed the financial settlement resulting from the relocation as a blessing in disguise for those involved. Perhaps because neither film showed this perspective, the Navajos did not express a strong preference for either. They seemed to agree with Chucky’s one-word response when I asked him which film he liked better: “None.”

Finally, the all-important question: Is there anything uniquely “Native” about Osawa’s version? Other than smaller production costs, is Big Mountain really that different from Broken Rainbow? Would a casual observer or even a fellow Native be able to tell the difference? Thus, for the
final phase of this reception study on *Big Mountain* and *Broken Rainbow*, respondents from both groups were asked to determine which film they thought was made by a Native filmmaker and which was made by a non-Native filmmaker.

The majority of the college students based their judgments on aesthetic quality rather than content. Several students (Scott, Dorian, Gena) attributed the personal nature of *Big Mountain* as being a Native quality. Others (Dave, Karen, Colleen) cited the strong anti-white stance of *Broken Rainbow* as being characteristic of a Native American filmmaker because he or she would be understandably upset at the harsh treatment of his or her people by whites. In other words, there was no clear consensus as all of the students felt strongly that their perception was the correct one.

My Navajo informants, however, experienced much less uncertainty in determining cultural authorship. For them, the simple fact that *Broken Rainbow* looked like it was so much more expensive to put together necessarily meant that it had to have been made by Anglos. By comparison, an Indian could never gather enough funding to travel to all those different places, much less hire a famous actor to serve as a narrator. Furthermore, “all those politicians and businessmen wouldn’t have talked to no Indian” (Isabelle) and “only a white man would do that much homework” (Chucky).

Sufficiently impressed by the “Native” filmmaker’s privileged status, none of the students noticed or cared that Osawa is Makah and not Navajo. Operating under the apparent assumption that all Indians are essentially the same, my students did not attribute any importance to the tribal dissimilarity even after I specifically brought this fact to their attention. As an Indian, Osawa seems to be granted the preordained right to speak for all other Indians.

In contrast, the fact that Osawa is not Navajo made a significant difference to my informants. Delbert, for instance, attributed the glaring omissions in *Big Mountain* to his conclusion that the filmmaker, although perhaps an Indian, did not know enough about Navajo culture to make a thorough and convincing film:

> They should have put a little bit more about what the Hopis thought about it and what the U.S. government really had to do with it. The United States government is not something you mess around with. I think at the time Peter MacDonald was chairman and I feel like he sold the people out.
They didn’t say anything about what the council’s reaction was. It should have been more about getting the whole tribe involved and asking them what they thought about it. That film right there was just about one person. What they should have done was they should have got another family that had a mother and father and see what the father thought about it. And the kids, they come back and just feel sorry. They should come out and speak. It seemed like this family just kind of folded.

Regina also speculated that the individual behind Big Mountain was not from the reservation:

I think he was an urban Navajo. He probably based the film on just a few relocates that he may have interviewed, but not a lot.

After I informed her that the filmmaker was actually a Makah and a woman, Regina thought for a moment to choose her words: “Then I don’t think she should have made this film.” What this statement suggests is that Osawa, as a non-Navajo, does not have the right to make a film about Navajos.

Quite the opposite of the structured nature of the first reception study, the second study involving The Return of Navajo Boy and The Lost Child was based entirely on observations of a natural viewing environment. Instead of watching my Navajo informants individually watch a videotape, taking notes during the screening, and then asking a series of prepared questions afterward, I decided just to “go with the flow” and see what happened. No tape recorder, no list of questions, no notepad—not even a pen. For The Return of Navajo Boy, I simply inserted the tape into the living-room VCR during a time when the trailer was full of people and, within minutes, a crowd of curious onlookers began to assemble in front of the television. I did not limit viewing to my five Navajo informants but opened access to whoever was interested in watching the documentary. Various people came and went and came back again.

The Lost Child was screened during even more informal circumstances. One evening, when a large group of people came over to play cards, Isabelle suggested that I “play the tape,” ostensibly as supplemental entertainment. So while a couple of dozen people were crammed together around a makeshift gambling area, the made-for-TV movie played in the background (or foreground, depending on one’s perspective). Every
now and again—between shrieks of laughter, cheering, and cursing over
the card game—various members of the Indigenous delegation would
sneak a peek at the television to follow along with the plot. Granted, such
divided attention seems far from ideal for a purported reception study, but
this is the way the Benally clan typically watches TV as a group.

Analogous to *In the Heart of Big Mountain* and *Broken Rainbow*, *The
Return of Navajo Boy* and *The Lost Child* also tackle a similar subject
matter: the abduction of Navajo infants by outsiders and their subsequent
reunion with their biological family as adults. But this is where the com-
parisons end. While the former is a heart-wrenching documentary, the
latter is a cheesy television drama.11

*The Return of Navajo Boy* chronicles a serendipitous chain of events
that began with the appearance of a 1950s film reel and eventually led to
the reunion of a long-lost brother to his Navajo family after four decades.
The Cly family has a long and storied history in pictures. For nearly a
century, family members appeared as unidentified Indians in countless
photographs and films shot against the backdrop of Monument Valley.
But it was the sudden appearance of a 1950s silent film reel called *Navajo
Boy* that would affect the Clys the most. Bill Kennedy, the son of the man
who shot the original footage, wanted to return the film to the people in
it. The Cly family matriarch, Elsie Mae Begay, delighted in seeing herself
as a young girl, but she also sadly recognized her infant brother, John
Wayne Cly, who was adopted by white missionaries and never heard from
again. Amazingly, John Wayne read about the return of *Navajo Boy* in a
newspaper article and learned that the Clys were the family he had never

*The Lost Child* also follows an individual’s path to self-discovery, but
this Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation ultimately gets lost in trying to
do too much. Although based on the autobiography *Looking for Lost Bird:
A Jewish Woman Discovers Her Navajo Roots*, by Yvette Melanson and
Claire Safran (1999), the film’s fish-out-of-water narrative still feels like a
stretch. The movie is about a Jewish woman living in Pennsylvania who
discovers that she was stolen at birth only to learn in middle age that she
is actually a full-blooded Navajo. Like most screen adaptations, there are
numerous discrepancies between the book and the film.12

After learning of her roots, Rebecca (played by very Italian-looking
actress Mercedes Ruehl) uproots her family to move to the reservation.
While she retraces her ancestry and adapts to her new family, her Anglo
husband and two daughters experience bitterness and prejudice from the locals. In fact, after continual teasing, her older daughter is assaulted at school by a male student. At this point, the film suddenly switches gears altogether by turning Rebecca into a crusader. (Needless to say, none of this occurred in the book.) While the first half is an almost interesting portrait of birthrights and cultural clashes, the rest of the movie is reduced to a predictable fix-the-system melodrama.

Perhaps it is unfair to compare these two films, as one is a documentary and the other a Hallmark special. We are talking about apples and oranges—or, more appropriately, fry bread and Wonder bread. Although *The Lost Child* was inspired by a true story, the producers have taken obvious creative liberties and fictionalized certain parts in order to package the film for mass consumption. But herein lies the problem. By virtue of being telecast on broadcast television, *Lost Child* reached a much larger viewership than *Navajo Boy*, a documentary distributed by PBS. As a result, the inaccurate or “wrong” version is more likely to shape the general public’s attitudes about Navajos in particular and Native Americans in general.13

In spite of the chaotic circumstances surrounding the screening of *The Return of Navajo Boy*, the documentary was compelling enough to captivate the attention of nearly everybody who originally sat down to watch it out of curiosity. Such a high retention rate is exceedingly rare for most television programs or videos, as it is customary for certain viewers to watch only for a few minutes before losing interest. At the documentary’s heartrending climax, when Elsie Mae is finally reunited with her younger brother after forty years, there was complete silence in the room. Intermittent sniffling and eye rubbing soon followed. As I looked around, I noticed that even the men were choking back tears.

The key to the documentary’s appeal among the assembled viewers was its authenticity. Members of the Benally family could identify with and literally relate to the film’s “characters.” (The Cly’s are clan relatives of the Benallys.) Everyone recognized familiar locations such as the new museum at Window Rock and Richardson’s Pawn Shop. (In fact, a brief shot of a photograph of an elderly couple at the pawnshop shows my research assistant’s girlfriend’s grandparents.) Isabelle and Regina saw people in the documentary whom they knew. Grandma Annie remarked that one of the older ladies shown speaking at the museum bore a striking resemblance to her. Tom and Todd elbowed each other during scenes of
“rez kids” playing outside as these idyllic images surely reminded them of their own not-so-distant childhood.

Isabelle referred to the Monument Valley Navajos depicted in the documentary as “hard-core traditionals” because of their remote living conditions. In one particular scene involving footage of the original Navajo boy happily riding around a desolate canyon on a horse, Jerry (who is about the same age now as that boy was then) asked his mom if “that’s how it was back then” and whether she ever experienced those types of moments herself. Ironically, the documentary includes a scene of a young Navajo girl clad in a basketball jersey looking at old postcards of her relatives and inquiring of her grandmother, “Did you always put your head in a bun?” and “What did you do for fun?”

Grandma Annie particularly enjoyed this film because a large portion of the dialogue was spoken in the Navajo language. But she was also able to follow along with the parts in English with only minimal translation. (Later, she stated that this was “the first movie I ever understood.”) At the conclusion of the documentary, Grandma Annie’s comment was simple but fitting: Nizhoni, the Navajo word for “beautiful.”

However, Navajo Boy did not garner unanimous praise. Isabelle objected to the powwow music at the beginning of the documentary because powwows, a ceremony of the Plains Indians, are not culturally indigenous to Navajos. Nate voiced disagreement with scenes of a Yeibechei song and dance not so much because it is a sacred ritual but more because the ceremony is performed only during the winter months and not intended to be shown at any other time. (This viewing took place during the summer.) Regina, who had already seen the documentary at a screening sponsored by Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, expressed mixed feelings. Although she found the reunion deeply touching, she resented the fact that John Wayne Cly was abducted from his family in the first place: “It was the white man who took him away and the white man who brought him back.” Meanwhile, the members of the Cly family spent four decades with their lives shattered.

The Lost Child elicited very different reactions. Although the movie depicts a similar scenario—a Navajo baby adopted by Anglos returns to her Navajo roots as an adult—members of the assembled card-playing gathering immediately dismissed it as inauthentic. Scattered throughout the screening were frequent protests of “Those aren’t Navajos!” Trisha ridiculed the actor who played Yazzie, the Navajo father, for the way he tied
his hair as well as his loosely fitting concha belt. The most vocal scorn, however, was reserved for the characters’ persistent mispronunciation of common Navajo words. They would repeatedly say “Dee-NAV” instead of “Din-EH”—the name Navajos traditionally call themselves. The actors even pronounced the more mainstream tribal moniker as “NAH-vah-ho” when no self-respecting “NAH-veh-ho” would verbalize it that way. Similarly, the characters kept referring to the Navajo girl’s puberty ceremony as a “keynaldah” when it is supposed to be enunciated “ki-na-al-DAH.”

The assemblage also took issue with the movie’s “corny” New Age dialogue, from Rebecca’s sappy testimonial, “I don’t know why I walk the path I walk, I only know I have to” to Aunt Mary’s melancholy proclamation that Rebecca’s biological mother’s “spirit returned to the Great Creator.” None of the Navajos in the room talk in these aphorisms or know of any other Navajos who speak in such a manner. When Rebecca’s daughter begins attending the reservation school, her classmates tease the blonde-haired girl by calling her “cornhead.” The gathering suddenly erupted in laughter, as they had never before heard such an insult. For the rest of the evening as well as for the next several days, the members who were present at this screening would teasingly call one another “cornhead” (or “corny” for short).

Although The Lost Child thus played to a steady soundtrack of mocking laughter, none of the onlookers appeared angry or offended by the inaccurate representation of their culture. Rather, it seems as if they have all become immune to these mass-mediated stereotypical portrayals. The Hallmark special is just more of the same standard fare. Whether Indians are depicted as cold-blooded murderers in the old westerns or as noble victims in newer films such as Dances with Wolves (1990), none of these misrepresentations are taken personally. Whenever I ask members of the Benally family why they react to these films in such a detached manner, they give me the same answer: “It’s so stupid.” In other words, they seem to be saying, why get hot and bothered over something so trivial that you have no control over anyway? Parenthetically, such dismissive apathy also applies to their attitudes about the Native American sports mascot controversy.

It likewise makes no difference if Native Americans are the ones controlling media representations of Native Americans. My Navajo informants were as equally oblivious to Smoke Signals (1998) and Skins (2002) as they were to Black Robe (1992) and Thunderheart (1992). Although
Skinwalkers (2002), for example, is a film about Navajo medicine men directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho) and starring Indian actors and actresses in all of the primary roles, none of these individuals are Navajos—and their tribal ignorance is clear from the onset.

The recruited Navajo spectators disagreed with the basic premise of the film: since medicine men are the only ones with the power to repel the witchcraft caused by skinwalkers, they have no reason to fear them as the movie shows. Their criticisms of the film ranged from the anecdotal (for example, Jim Chee’s “non-Navajo” wood-chopping technique) to the more factual (for example, again, the mispronunciation of Navajo words). Yet none of these discrepancies seemed to prevent them from enjoying the movie. The Navajo viewers did not nitpick about these details, much less act offended by the inaccuracies. In fact, they seemed surprised and even somewhat grateful that their culture was even portrayed on film at all. It is important to remember that Navajos have not experienced too many cinematic moments of seeing a familiar landscape or hearing their language (albeit not enunciated correctly). As the saying goes, beggars can’t be choosers.

This does not mean that the Navajo viewers in my study did not challenge the rights of both Anglos and non-Navajos to undertake such films. In varying degrees, they displayed an awareness of the wider historical contexts that problematize the filmmakers’ narrower points of view. But, as my reception studies have confirmed, the viewers’ criteria for production evaluation are not the same as those for enjoyment. The reported reactions of viewers suggest a window into what criteria are most salient for their enjoyment, engagement, and evaluation, as well as what factors contribute to the point of view that they express.

In conclusion, reception is never a matter of passive acceptance but always a process of creative adaptation and unintended consequences. Meanings constantly shift and are subject to multiple interpretations. It is in this process of negotiation that different, alternative, and even oppositional readings are possible. John Fiske has argued that media texts contain an “excess” of meaning within them. Like a jigsaw puzzle with too many pieces, media contain the raw materials for multiple interpretations. Although many of the components of a television program, according to Fiske, will fit together into one relatively consistent interpretation that is likely to be the dominant interpretation, lots of bits and pieces around the edges of the program do not quite fit, and the dominant in-
interpretation cannot completely contain them. Thus, media texts are structured in such a way that they facilitate, and perhaps even encourage, viewers to “read against the grain.”

Since their inception, every form of mass media has become an easy and convenient target on which to blame society’s ills. As is always the case, cultural change results from numerous factors instead of a single one. Rather than causing the breakdown of Native traditions, I found that media consumption provides an expanded frame of reference by introducing Navajos to peoples, places, and things they would likely never see or know otherwise. Indeed, mass media present viewers with the imaginative resources to envision virtually infinite possible lives.

But different audiences receive media messages in different ways. The majority of Anglo viewers are usually able to contextualize—or compartmentalize—what they are viewing based on their past experiences. So while they may be enthralled with images of the luxurious lifestyles depicted in Desperate Housewives, for example, they also know that suburban life is rarely so extravagant. The key difference, however, for the Navajo viewers in my study is that they lack such a competing frame of reference. Most members of the Benally family have limited firsthand knowledge about life outside the reservation. The media serve as their primary, if not only, means of learning about the outside world. Viewers are drawn to the screen for more than just the entertainment value—it presents them with a rare opportunity to compare their own lives with the televised images of foreigners. Analyzing the differences gives them new perspectives not only about other cultures but, more important, about their own way of life.

My findings might therefore be interpreted as a glimpse of film as a mode of cultural exchange in a period of rapid social change. Viewing these images transformed not only their perception of the outside world but the ways in which they perceive themselves and their positioning vis-à-vis the dominant society. Watching their cinematic counterparts provided these real-life Navajos with a clearer understanding of how they are seen through the eyes of the mainstream population, thereby expanding their frame of reference for what it means to be “Navajo.”

Notes

1. Surprisingly, at least the idea for reception studies of “Native” audiences is not new. Half a century ago, Anthony R. Michaels wrote: “The time may be
approaching when social anthropologists may have to devote some attention to
the cinema-going habits of certain native populations, if all aspects of culture are
to be considered in fieldwork.” Cited in Research Films in Biology, Anthropology,

2. Debra Spitulnik, “Anthropology and Mass Media,” Annual Review of
Anthropology 22 (1993): 293. In the intervening years since Spitulnik’s lamenta-
tion, anthropology has decisively thrown its hat into the field of media studies,
as evidenced by the recent publication of Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod,
and Brian Larkin, eds., Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain (Berkeley:
University of California Press, 2002.) The volume is a collection of essays ad-
dressing current research in the emergent subfield. The editors of Media Worlds
underscore the importance of an ethnographic analysis of media in their intro-
duction: “We now recognize the sociocultural significance of film, television,
video, and radio as part of everyday lives in nearly every part of the world, and
we bring distinctive theoretical concerns and methodologies to our studies of these
phenomena” (1).

3. Bronislaw Malinowski, Argonauts of the Western Pacific (New York: E. P.
Dutton, 1922), 25.

4. Harriet D. Lyons, “Television in Contemporary Urban Life: Benin City,


6. Robert Aibel, “Communication, Cognitive Maps and Interpretive Strate-
gies: Filmmakers and Anthropologists Interpret Films Made by Navajo and
Anglos” (master’s thesis, Annenberg School for Communications, University of

7. Sol Worth and John Adair, Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in
Film Communication and Anthropology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
1972), 130.

8. Located in the heart of Philadelphia, Temple University boasts an ex-
tremely racially diverse student body. However, this class was taught at the Am-
bler campus, which is predominantly white.

9. All names have been changed to protect the informants’ identities.

10. Readings included a chapter from Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea
Leighton’s The Navaho (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951); Jay
Ruby’s “Speaking for, Speaking about, Speaking with, or Speaking alongside—
An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma,” Visual Anthropology Review
American Anthropologist 95 (1993): 671–86; and Richard Chalfen’s “Navajo
Filmmaking Revisited: Problematic Interactions,” in Native North American In-
teraction Patterns, ed. Regina Darnell and Michael K. Foster (Quebec: Canadian

11. For teaching purposes, these two films constitute ideal companion
pieces. They share many similar scenes, including the adoptees not feeling fully accepted by their adoptive families, references to feeling like “something is missing,” finding their biological family through extraordinary circumstances, fears that they will not be accepted by their new family, an emotional reunion, and the lost birds “feeling whole” for the first time.

12. As Jeff Zucker, president of NBC Entertainment, has recently conceded: “All made-for-TV movies based on fact have some fiction in them” (Howard Rosenberg, “History Rewritten to Make Us Feel Good,” Los Angeles Times, June 30, 2003, E1, E4).

13. This is humorously displayed in a scene in Navajo Boy when Anglo teenagers from Missouri visit a souvenir shop on the reservation and inform the Navajo shopkeeper: “We’re studying the Indians because we just got finished reading Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.” These girls think they understand Navajo/Indian culture because they read a book or watched a movie.

14. This is an example of the flip side of the common argument that visual records taken by outsiders are documents of colonization. Sometimes, as in the case of the postcards, these are the only remaining visual records to give testimony to the past. Hopi filmmaker Victor Masayesva explains his debt of gratitude to photographer Edward Curtis: “I wouldn’t know my grandfather if not for photography, because I never met him and I saw him in [a photograph of] a Snake Dance. So that’s how I’ve met him” (Fatimah Tobing Rony, The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996]). Similarly, the National Inuit Brotherhood of Canada highly recommends Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) because the organization believes the quasi-documentary “excited great pride in the strength and dignity of [the Inuits’] ancestors and they want to share this with their elders and their children” (Harald E. L. Prins, “American Indians and the Ethnocinematic Complex: From Native Participation to Production Control,” in Eyes across the Water, ed. Robert M. Boonzajer Flaes [Amsterdam: Het Sinhuis, 1989], 80–89). In a remarkable display of prescience, Edmund Carpenter predicted that Indigenes would one day learn about their own history through such “exploitative” films (Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me! [New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973]).

15. The film is adapted from the Tony Hillerman novel of the same title, which is part of a long-running series about the adventures of Navajo tribal officers Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn. For those who do not know, a skinwalker is a Navajo witch who is capable of causing great injury or even death to unsuspecting victims. According to what I have been told by my informants, skinwalkers are medicine men who have chosen to use their considerable knowledge and powers for causing evil. A person becomes a skinwalker by committing an unspeakable act such as incest or murdering a family member. Skinwalkers are believed to have supernatural powers, such as the ability to take the form of an upright wolf and travel far distances in a short period of time. They get their name from wearing the skins of wolves or coyotes.
16. Perhaps what the Navajo viewers found most unbelievable was the purported claim that Joe Leaphorn did not know the meaning of *bilagaana*, the Navajo word for “Anglo.” Every Navajo, no matter how assimilated or urban, knows this particular word—especially somebody who lives and works on the reservation.

17. Similar feelings were expressed about *Windtalkers* (2002), a feature film about the role of the Navajo Code Talkers during World War II. Although Navajo moviegoers who eagerly anticipated the movie’s release were disappointed by the many inaccuracies, they were happy just to have this story told at all. Ironically, it was the film critics who were the most incensed by the Navajos receiving the short end of the cinematic stick.