

Seven Native American Films for High School Teachers

List by [Dr. Amanda Morris](#). Published on the *Teaching Tolerance* website on November 30, 2015

Discoveries in a recent report from the [White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education](#) include serious problems for Native students, such as bullying, hostility when reporting culturally insensitive situations, Native imagery that harms students' identities, and anxiety over misrepresentation in classroom lessons. One of the initiative's recommendations is to "promote cultural awareness," specifically to "promote the accurate instruction of Native American history and culture."

A dynamic way to incorporate accurate instruction and promote cultural awareness of contemporary Native American experiences is through film. Incorporating a film into the classroom also acts as a multimodal entrée into a deeper conversation about representations of Native peoples in today's social media, advertising, news and entertainment.

I recommend for high school teachers* the following films that feature Native directors, actors, writers and storylines or histories:

[Smoke Signals](#) (1998, PG-13, 89 minutes) Based on a Sherman Alexie (Coeur d'Alene/Spokane) short story and directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho), this now-classic Native American road film remains relevant as a film that introduces non-Native students to one story of contemporary indigenous experience with humor and poignancy. Post-film discussions might focus on family, humor, contemporary Native reservation culture, alcoholism and stereotypes.

[Four Sheets to the Wind](#) (2007, R, 81 minutes) A coming-of-age story in the wake of a father's suicide, written and directed by Sterlin Harjo (Seminole/Cree), this quietly thoughtful film challenges non-Native expectations of contemporary Native peoples. Post-film discussions might focus on contemporary Native experiences, leaving home, suicide and loss, family dynamics, alcoholism, and the active presence of Native peoples in American culture.

[The Cherokee Word for Water](#) (2013, PG, 92 minutes) This fictionalized retelling of the work that led Wilma Mankiller to become the first woman chief of the Cherokee Nation challenges mainstream American stereotypes of Native women as sexualized and subjugated objects. This is the story of a smart, savvy, hard-working and compassionate Cherokee woman who helped bring her nation together in tangible and intangible ways. Post-film discussions might focus on indigenous feminism, contemporary representations of Native American women, tribal politics and water rights.

[The Lesser Blessed](#) (2012, R, 86 minutes) Originally a novel written by Tłıchǫ writer Richard Van Camp, this intense film tells the story of a First Nations teen named Larry trying to find his place in the world. (Note: Serious content that includes drugs, alcohol and violence.) The story is real and raw—and would likely lead to vibrant, honest and productive discussions about bullying, sexual abuse in families, grappling with the past, teenage experiences and the concept of redemption.

[Our Spirits Don't Speak English: Indian Boarding School](#) (2008, G, 80 minutes) Most students have never heard of Indian Boarding Schools, and this documentary is an eye-opening starting point for discussions of diverse educational experiences in the United States. Students will have the opportunity to consider and compare their own experiences with those of the Native American students who often suffered the stripping of their culture, clothing, hair and language as they were forcefully assimilated into American culture via the education system. Post-film discussions might touch on racism, social justice, educational systems and Native American historical experiences.

[Imprint](#) (2007, PG-13, 84 minutes) Billed as a “supernatural thriller,” this film complicates notions of Native American women. The lead character is a Native American woman lawyer who returns to her home reservation after prosecuting a Lakota teen in a controversial murder trial, only to encounter and confront the ghosts of her past. Post-film discussions might focus on representations of indigenous women in films and in broader American culture, family dynamics, mother-daughter relationships and the complications that arise between Native cultures and the Euro-American colonialist agenda.

[Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian](#) (2009, NR, 85 minutes) This documentary dismantles everything students think they know about Native Americans in Hollywood films. Eye-opening post-film discussions might focus on racism, white privilege, misrepresentations of Native peoples in film, and the responsibility we all share to make sure students understand that the Hollywood “Indian” is not an accurate representation of living, real Native peoples and cultures.

*Because of the language and story content in some of these films, I recommend that teachers watch the films in advance to determine acceptability and appropriateness for their schools and students. Representing reality in film often means allowing the characters to speak and act in a realistic ways.

About the Author of this list.

Dr. Amanda Morris is a writer, scholar and traveler who has lived in Pennsylvania and Alabama and is working on visiting all 50 states (she’s currently achieved 41). She teaches writing and rhetoric at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, loves teaching students creative nonfiction and Indigenous Rhetorics, and spent three years as the University Writing Center director. Her academic writing can be found in *Rhetoric Review*, *Epiphany*, *WSQ*, *Journal of American Culture*, *South Atlantic Review* and *The Literary Encyclopedia*.