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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0mv5g3np>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 24(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2000-06-01

DOI

10.17953

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“Fine Ponies”: Cars in American Indian Film and Literature

JULIE THARP

The path-breaking documentary video, *The Spirit of Crazy Horse*, opens with a scene of Milo Yellow Hair walking on the prairie and singing.¹ After offering tobacco, he narrates in a flat, matter-of-fact voice, “My people have not adapted well to the white man’s world.” As he speaks, the camera pans to an upturned car marooned in the middle of a field. Despite waving grass and other natural integration, the car remains alien to this setting. Turned on its head and abandoned, the car is useful now only as a den for enterprising animals. The car’s original function has been thwarted. Even its value as scrap metal is disregarded. Yet it does offer a metaphor for how acculturation and adaptation have always been key issues in Indian-white conflicts in the United States. The car is a valuable site of analysis because it has such vastly different significance for each culture.² Its difficult fit within Indian cultures provides one entry point for understanding those differences and for better understanding the work of contemporary American Indian writers and filmmakers. Automobiles serve, in much Native literature and film, as expressions of characters’ differences from and relationships to the larger culture.

The automobile has assumed near mythic proportions in mainstream American life. The federal government has actively supported the car industry in a variety of ways ranging from a subsidized highway system to deductible interest on car loans. Indeed, so much of US culture has developed as a result of and in response to the automobile that it would be difficult to determine the extent of its effects. These car-induced cultural developments include suburban living and the loss of small, tightly knit neighborhoods; interstate trucking that expands markets and delivers goods from all over the country;

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drive-through services at banks, restaurants, liquor stores, dry cleaners, chapels, funeral parlors, movie theaters, and video rental stores; chains of motor inns; the development of tourism; and, on the more negative side, the limitless air pollution and diminishment of fossil fuels. Few critically consider the car's ill effects. For the average American, the car is inseparable from individual freedom, an icon of social, sexual, and geographical mobility. Mainstream society weds personal aspirations to car ownership. Put simply, you are what you drive. In his classic 1975 text on the automobile in American society, *The Car Culture*, James J. Flink argues that "automobility" is the single most significant change in American life during the twentieth century. "The main things that automobility symbolized were material prosperity through a higher standard of living, individual mobility, and an improvement in the quality of life through a fusing of rural and urban advantages." Unfortunately the automobile has also had the effect of "undermining community and family, and it invited anonymity and anomie."³

In the United States any car is a class-based statement. The newer the car the greater the image of success. The car industry has, since the 1920s, intended to fob "used" cars off on the poorer half of American society, rather than make new cars more widely affordable.⁴ This maintained the industry's profit margins and solved the problem of used car proliferation.

Since Flink's work in the 1970s, studies on the impact of cars on American culture have generally offered variations on his themes. In popular culture studies, several critics have looked at the car in relation to modernity, in particular to rapidly shifting landscapes and American mobility. The road film has gained attention as an expression of American desire for freedom, even escape.⁵ More focused analysis on the car as an expression of identity, particularly non-white identity, has yet to be developed. The only exception is some work on the topic of low-riding. Michael Cutler Stone describes it in his essay "Bajito y Sauvecito: Low Riding and the 'Class' of Class": "These are lovingly customized vehicles—with heavy-duty hydraulic suspension systems ('juice'), costly lacquer paint jobs, stylized murals, etched glass logos, plush interiors, and a proliferation of luxury 'extras.'" Stone argues that the low rider is an expression of Chicano identity, which "renegotiates the received indices of social status, seeking recognition for the cultural production of low riding as a textured expression of American ethnicity."⁶

Judging from the treatment of cars in a broad selection of American Indian film and literature, the automobile, as an expression of culture, differs radically from either of these models. The car is emblematic of the poor fit between American Indian and mainstream cultures. It physically assumes the lumps, bruises, and poor treatment of many Indian peoples. It is, however, exploited for its humorous, ironic, and at times tragic potential, in the manner that Coyote's foibles are exploited for both comic relief and cultural commentary. Writers and filmmakers firmly grounded in Native traditions are applying those ways to the dilemmas of modernity.

A primary factor in the creation of an Indian car is economic. Many Indians are among the poorest of the poor. Pine Ridge Reservation boasts the two poorest counties in the United States. Cars trickle down to reservations

late and in poor condition, if at all. Furthermore, reservations usually do not require car registrations, license plates, or even driver's licenses, thereby allowing any variety of improvised transportation imaginable. Keith Secola's now classic song "Indian Cars" ("NDN Karz") describes a dented car with steaming radiator, expired license, one working headlight, and an "Indian Power" bumper sticker that "holds [his] car together."⁷ In the autobiographical essays of Jim Northrup, he frequently makes humorous reference to the state of, use of, and relationship to the reservation car. He recalls that, as the oldest child in his family, he frequently got to go on long trips with his parents. After believing for years that he was the favorite child, he learned that, in fact, he was brought along to run for help when the car broke down.⁸

Most of the literary and film representations of reservation cars emphasize their decrepit condition. Speaking of the car in *Smoke Signals* that only runs in reverse, Sherman Alexie said, it's "an Indian metaphor because our cars are always screwed up. There was a man who one summer drove his pickup all over the reservation in reverse because none of the forward gears worked."⁹ In the Canadian film *Medicine River* (based on the novel by Thomas King, who also wrote the screenplay), Harlen Big Bear drives a late 1960s red Pontiac convertible with chronic carburetor trouble.¹⁰ Whenever he stops the car to get out, the car engine sputters for several minutes before coughing itself to sleep.

Perhaps the pinnacle, however, of screwed-up cars is Protector in the novel and film *Powwow Highway*.¹¹ David Seals provides a biography of the reservation car in the novel *Powwow Highway*, actually supporting and detailing what Flink argues about automobile manufacturers' used car policies. Protector, as he is dubbed by Philbert Bono, starts life as an "extravagant cream-colored Buick," a 1964 LeSabre. Owned first by a banker whose children and dog manage to stain the seats, carpet, and dashboard, it moves next to "Red Siskiewicz, a lonely bachelor from Butte."¹² He rolls the car, killing himself and his date. After the car is stripped of its parts in a wrecking yard, another couple purchases it and re-equips the entire car with odd parts. When the wiring catches fire and nearly incinerates them, they send it back to Fidel DeBaca's Wrecking Yard where a family of skunks takes up residence inside. Manny Bono, stopping by on a very cold day, asks Fidel for one of his "fine ponies":

Manny did not want to look around. It was too goddamn cold. He looked out the window to see a shit-brown old Buick sticking out among the demolished pickups and Chryslers. It seemed to call to him. It was as if an eagle had shown him the light of this beautiful thing.¹³

The car, by some miracle, starts and Manny drives it for nine years until trading it to his cousin for some marijuana and an old saddle. "And that is how that Buick, like so many American dreams resurrected back unto reality, came to the Cheyenne reservation."¹⁴ No longer worthy of the American dream of success, the car has been discarded as worthless by white Americans. It only

comes to the Cheyenne when it is deemed garbage and, ironically, runs for nine more years, indirectly commenting on contemporary throwaway culture. Seals essentially outlines a socioeconomic hierarchy in this progression of owners, from the upper-middle-class white man to the middle-class white man, to the working-class white couple, to the Hispanic wrecking yard owner, to the older Cheyenne man, and finally to the young Cheyenne.

Off the reservation this car cannot possibly signify the "material prosperity through a higher standard of living" that Flink describes, but on the reservation it becomes "an integral part of the tribe. Perhaps not as timeless as the four sacred arrows bequeathed to the Maxkeometaneo by the ancestral hero Sweet Medicine, it was nevertheless essential to the daily image of the Cheyenne." Certainly Seals is employing irony here as he does throughout the novel, but he goes on to explain just why the car becomes so integral: "That Buick was the talisman of the whiteman, the medicine to explain modern spirits that ailed and healed the redman of his technological woes, the sacred bundle to protect the superstitious Morning Star People from the whiteman's evils."¹⁵

The car has a spiritual significance belied by its appearance. As talisman, the car contains magic that no one understands coupled with a power in which everyone has faith. In fact the car does protect Indian people, carrying Philbert and Buddy on an epic journey through cold and snow, rescuing friends from violence at Pine Ridge, springing Bonnie from jail, and carrying our protagonists away from the evil, white city. Finally, it provides cover for their permanent escape from the law when it plunges over the side of the mountain and explodes. The law enforcement officials assume that there are no survivors. Of course, all the passengers have survived and presumably will make it safely back to the reservation, the place of safe harbor. In the film version, their tribal chief is following behind them and picks them up for the return trip. In the novel they take shelter on a nearby reservation. Either way, they are folded back into the protective arms of Indian Country. Interestingly, while Flink sees the automobile as providing "individual mobility" and "undermining family and community," Seals provides a story in which the car brings people together. Protector provides communal mobility and reunites mother and children, brother and sister, friend and friend. In short, in the hands of David Seals the car is envisioned anew: it has the potential to protect people from precisely the evils it brings. In addition, the car does not provide the "anonymity" of which Flink disapproves. Each of the cars featured in these texts is absolutely unique and easily identified.

In Sherman Alexie's early work, *The Business of Fancy-Dancing*, and in the film *Smoke Signals*, the presence or lack of a vehicle is a constant source of both humor and pathos, carrying with it no apparent spiritual significance. Even Crazy Horse, a recurrent character in the book, has to hitchhike. The "Reservation Cab Driver" owns the 1965 Malibu with no windshield and charges "a beer a mile."¹⁶ Alexie shows both bitterness and admiration for the driver who has managed to survive through the use of this car, living in it when the Department of Housing and Urban Development evicts him, and raising the rates to include beer, cigarettes, and commodities as he loses his

benefits. He is always paid in trade goods during powwows and somehow manages to survive.

In addition to offering shelter and subsistence, cars can offer mobility and escape for Alexie's characters:

The Professor tells me he dreams, dreams of a bus station at the beginning of everything else, where another Indian tries to board the last Greyhound without paying fare, the same Indian hitchhiking in the rain no matter where you drive, and you stop, let him into your life, call him cousin, and take him anywhere he wants to go, passing through gates of some reservation buying illegal fireworks, cigarettes, a raffle ticket for a '57 Chevy, and you promise yourself you can win that car, drive away, hide in a rest stop miles from anywhere red or white, or anything somewhere in between.¹⁷

Cars often signify dissatisfaction with the character's present circumstance. If one were happy to remain on the rez, a car might be optional. Cars are also a significant source of danger for Alexie's characters, as seen in "Ceremonies":

Seymour and I steal the Bartender's car and drive
down the Crazy Horse Highway
until an ice cream truck cuts us off and I'm halfway into the
twenty-third wreck of my life, Seymour yelling drive goddamn it drive
we come to a stop in the middle
of a wheat field,
Seymour upside-down in the back seat while I study the exact
sculpture of my face smashed into the glass of the windshield....¹⁸

The narrator's father lost a tooth "in the forty-sixth wreck of his life."¹⁹ In other words, car accidents are commonplace. One cause for this may be a recklessness that ensues when one puts little value on life. Adrian C. Louis writes in *Skins: A Novel* of the frequent car accidents on the highway running between Pine Ridge Reservation and the nearest source of liquor.²⁰ That stretch of road is the location for the highest number of fatalities in the tribe each year. The high rate of alcoholism on some reservations, the distance of liquor suppliers, and the poor condition of most reservation automobiles and roads combine to make the car a major source of danger.

In *Smoke Signals*, Alexie takes a more lighthearted approach, creating the riotously laughing duo, Thelma and Lucy, driving backward at highway speeds all over the reservation.²¹ They are on a perpetual road trip, providing, as Alexie says, a "'circular sense of time.'" He sees the car as a "'visual metaphor'" for his philosophy that "'Sometimes to go forward you have to drive in reverse.'" ²² Another humorous vehicle is Lester Falls Apart's van, which sits in the spot where it broke down years before. Lester uses the vehicle as his scouting location for his job as tribal weatherman. He sits atop the van and watches the sky, mostly reporting on cloud shapes.

The other crucial vehicle in *Smoke Signals* is, of course, the pickup truck that Victor inherits from his father. Victor's legacy is also his only tangible connection to Arnold, aside from the ashes he carries home, and several of Victor's clearest memories of childhood focus on the truck. This vehicle, while certainly much newer than the others considered thus far, only starts one in four tries, providing not a small portion of the film's suspense. Without it the protagonists' road trip is confined to the Greyhound bus. The journey homeward in the pickup truck allows Thomas and Victor to separate themselves from the white racists of the bus trip. However it is here, ironically, that they have their first serious falling out. On the bus they must join ranks, but in the truck they must confront the essential stumbling blocks in their relationship and their individual differences. They seem irreconcilable until the accident forces Victor to reach outside himself and, in a vision, accept the helping hand of his father. The bad memories of the truck somehow dissipate, and it becomes a space where the two young men can make peace. In this film we do have a brush with the dangers of alcohol and the road, but Alexie chooses to reverse the stereotype, making the culprit a white male alcoholic and Victor the non-drinker who runs for help.

In the film version of *Medicine River* Thomas King uses the Indian car primarily for humorous effect, what Alexie calls an "Indian trapdoor," or inside joke.²³ Harlen Bigbear is the trickster in the tale, manipulating Will into dating Louise, returning to the reservation, playing basketball, and photographing the elders, among other coercions. Harlen uses the car to reunite Will with the community, bringing him to meet the elders and carrying him to and from basketball games. The red Pontiac convertible is appropriate for a trickster character as it was originally a large, flashy car (the muscle car of the 1960s and 1970s), but has fallen on hard times. The car is over twenty years old, the shine is gone from its paint job, and the engine runs badly. Harlen has hung a dream catcher from the rear view mirror. The car goes almost everywhere on the reservation, both on and off roads. These very traits, however, almost constitute the car as another character in the film. While lacking the sentience that Philbert projects onto Protector, the convertible has a strong presence. Like the "extravagant, cream-colored Buick," it too has seen better days, but the very incongruence of these large, aging luxury cars on the reservation help to provide some of the humor and pathos of the situation.

In King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water* cars play a curious role. King seems to be setting things right with the US government through the use of their automotive technology. He uses cars on behalf of Indians, on behalf of nature even. The reference in the title of the novel is, of course, to the famous treaty line "as long as the grass is green and water runs."²⁴ The four old Indians, intent on fixing up the world, relieve several people of their automobiles and transport them somehow to the manmade lake, which was created by damming the river. In other words, the Civil Corps of Engineers has stopped the water from running, thereby nullifying treaties and radically interfering with nature. The four old Indians conveniently appropriate a red Pinto from Babo, a blue Nissan from Alberta, and a white Karmann-Ghia from Doctor Hovaugh. Other cars disappear in the course of the novel, but these three show up at the dam.

Red, white, and blue, the cars represent the United States. The cars are of American, Japanese, and German manufacture, the three primary sources of cars in the United States. All three are very small cars as well, fit only for one or two passengers and so supporting Flink's concern that cars will only provide *individual* mobility, cutting us off from one another.

King completely subverts the car's function by having them sail down the lake toward the dam:

Clifford Sifton and Lewis Pick watched the Nissan, the Pinto and the Karmann-Ghia float into the dam just as the earthquake began. Almost imperceptibly, the waters swelled and the cars were thrown into the dam, hard, insistent. And before either man realized what was happening, a tremor rolled in out of the west, tipping the lake on its end.²⁵

King's sense of humor emerges again in the choice of car makes when he writes them in the above order, "the Nissan, the Pinto, and the Karmann-Ghia." Mirrors of Columbus' ships, they seem to be setting back the damage done to Native Americans by a pace or two. Bashing against the dam wall, the cars finally break through and tumble "over the edge of the world" as it was predicted Columbus would do when he set sail. The cars begin to even the score and King momentarily fantasizes that Columbus did in fact sail over the edge, while "Below, in the valley, the water rolled on as it had for eternity."²⁶ The river is nearly restored to its original course and strength, the land below the dam is again irrigated, and plans for the lake's white resort and recreation area are ruined. King uses "progress" in the form of the automobile to foil the "progress" of the dam, just as Seals uses the white man's car to foil the white men. In both cases it is Indian action that tips the balance.

The two women writers considered in this article, Susan Power and Louise Erdrich, evince a less optimistic view of the automobile, perhaps indicating some gendered understanding. In both writers' novels cars are condemned for many of the typically American problems related to them. They are vehicles for people's anger, drunk driving, suicide attempts, risky travel, and social status. Susan Power's novel *The Grass Dancer* traces some of the most difficult problems of her two young protagonists, Charlene Thunder and Harley Wind Soldier, to the dangers of automobiles. In the opening prologue Henry Burger is shown drowning his pain over losing his girlfriend to a Sioux. When he leaves the bar, he imagines Sioux ghosts coming after him. Upon seeing two round eyes coming directly toward him and imagining them to be ghosts "sent to scare him out of his white skin," he decides to "slam [them] back to hell...." He charged his four-wheel-drive pickup into their strange light, blinding them forever.²⁷ Because Henry chooses to use his pickup as a tool for rage and revenge, Harley loses his father and brother. His subsequent guilt over their loss and his mother's withdrawal from the world leave Harley with a "black, empty hole" in his chest.²⁸ The grass dancer, Pumpkin, may be able to help him, but she too dies in a car accident on her way to the next powwow when the car in which she's riding "shimmie[s] out of control" and flies out over the edge of the road and down to the Badlands floor.²⁹ In this

example, the car is being used communally, uniting both the dancers in the car and the passengers with many others along the powwow trail. Unfortunately, it is also their means of destruction.

Charlene Thunder's subsequent problems include her own feelings of guilt over Pumpkin's death. She is convinced that her grandmother, Anna Thunder, has killed Pumpkin to avenge Pumpkin's victory over Charlene at the powwow and her success with Harley, Charlene's object of affection. It is only at the end of the novel, as Charlene is escaping her grandmother's control in a bus bound for Chicago and her long lost mother and father that Charlene has a vision of Pumpkin dancing along outside the bus window. Birds fly out of her mouth and into Charlene's and the words emerge: "*It wasn't your fault.... These things happen. There was nothing you could do.*"³⁰ Charlene finds the courage to forgive herself.

In both accidents, cars are depicted as powerful vehicles for the hatred and jealousy of disappointed, embittered characters. The excessive power of the cars is too easily misused or poorly controlled; it spills over to kill the innocent, sometimes unintentionally.

One recurring theme in Erdrich's fiction is related to this issue of jealousy and possession. The Chippewa philosophy of giving away rather than acquiring goods lies at the heart of several of her renderings.³¹ Given that the car is a major acquisition in American culture with all kinds of materialistic significance, it makes a good site for this kind of consideration. Erdrich does not overtly introduce Windigo allusions in *Love Medicine*, but they do appear in a more recent novel, *The Antelope Wife*.³² Windigo is a central character in many traditional Chippewa stories. The Windigo is often depicted as a ravenous giant who eats both four-leggeds and two-leggeds indiscriminately. While Windigo tales sometimes provide explanations for natural occurrences (like the source of mosquitoes for instance), they usually provide some moral commentary on the evils of greed. Greed, envy, jealousy, and desire for possession of any kind, whether of people or of material goods, can only lead to suffering that quickly reels out of control, harming everyone, even the envious ones who set the monster in motion.

Lipsha offers one line of thought on the issue when he fantasizes about the bingo van in *The Bingo Palace*: "I see that I wouldn't want to live as long as I have coming, unless I own *the van*.... Now I know that what I feel is a symptom of the national decline." Lipsha comments on how materialism is leading not just to Chippewa problems but to problems for the entire United States. He goes on to say, "You'll scoff at me, scorn me, say what right does that waste Lipsha Morrissey, who makes his living guarding beer, have to comment outside of his own tribal boundary? But I am able to investigate the larger picture, thanks to my mother's directions and thanks to Lulu, from whom I soon learn to be one-minded in my pursuit of a material object."³³ Lipsha provides us with his views of life not only outside the reservation, but also inside the tribal boundary. He has to learn to pursue the material object. He is not socialized as a child to do this. Neither is his well-off employer, Lyman Lamartine, who admits in *Love Medicine* that he has never had to work for anything; money just seems to fall into his lap.

Lipsha's lust for the bingo van is obvious in his description of it:

It has every option you can believe—blue plush on the steering wheel, diamond side windows, and complete carpeting interior. The seats are easy chairs, with little built-in headphones, and it is wired all through the walls.... The paint is cream, except for the design picked out in blue, which is a Sioux Drum border. In the back there is a small refrigerator and a padded platform for sleeping.³⁴

Lipsha pursues the material object by applying his talents in the bingo palace, playing daily until he actually wins the van. Unfortunately, owning the van changes him. He further embodies the "national decline":

Looking down on others, even if it's only from the seat of a van that a person never really earned, does something to the human mentality. It's hard to say. I change. Just one late evening of riding the reservation roads, passing cars and pickups with a swish of my tires, I start smiling at the homemade hot rods, at the clunkers below, at the old-lady sedans nosing carefully up and down the gravel hills.³⁵

Possession of this fine piece of machinery turns sweet, humble Lipsha arrogant and condescending toward others on the reservation. In adjusting to the twentieth century he loses his Chippewa value system. Windigo comes for Lipsha in the shape of several large men from Montana who total the van, smashing the windshield, denting the sides, ripping out the carpet and stereo. Eventually he's able to repair the van, but it has created hard feelings, especially among others who "stalked that bingo van." Lipsha ponders the ill will he perceives around him when he wins the van: "some are plain envious and ready to believe the first bad thing a sour tongue can pin on me."³⁶ The van may offer comforts, but they come at a high price.

Toward the end of the novel, the lesson is again offered when Gerry steals a car with Lipsha in tow. After squealing out of the parking lot, they discover a baby strapped into the back seat of the car, the baby's father clinging to the outside of the speeding vehicle before falling to the pavement. Later, caught in a blizzard, the car fishtails out of control and into a field where all three run the risk of freezing to death. Ownership offers complications, some comic, some fatal.

In discussing *Love Medicine* Marvin Magalaner points out the recurrence of cars in heightened or climactic scenes.³⁷ In all of them there exists a sense of tragedy, from June's decision to leave the warmth of the pickup and freeze to death, to Gordy's hitting a deer and mistaking it for June, to Lynn's taking refuge in a car to escape the violent King. The story of Lyman and his brother Henry, Jr., however, most clearly develops the theme of altruism and even allows for the possibility of a positive role for the car.

Lyman and Henry stumble into the ownership of a red Oldsmobile convertible when they visit Winnipeg one day. They both happen to carry with them large amounts of money, one his insurance payoff and the other his last

two paychecks. The brothers share the car initially. As Philbert does with Protector, Lyman invests the car with a life of its own. "There it was parked, large as life. Really as if it was alive. I thought of the word *repose*, because the car wasn't simply stopped, parked, or whatever. That car reposed, calm and gleaming."³⁸ Lyman and Henry, Jr. take the car on long journeys, all over Montana and up to Alaska, sharing the freedom of the open road together. When Henry returns from Vietnam seriously traumatized, Lyman damages the car to give Henry something therapeutic to do. "By the time I was done with the car it looked worse than any typical Indian car that has been driven all its life on reservation roads."³⁹ The car, in other words, shared between the two young men and purchased not out of greed but of camaraderie, has the potential to help its owners. Cars need not lose the Windigo; they can be used positively.

The only thing the two argue about is ownership. One is always giving it to the other. Henry gives it to Lyman when he leaves for Vietnam. Lyman gives it to Henry when he returns. Henry again gives it to Lyman on the riverbank before he dies. Finally Lyman has the last word in pushing the car into the river after the drowned Henry. "Now Henry owns the whole car."⁴⁰ Their insistence on giving each other the car maintains the traditional Chippewa obligation of giving, not acquiring. But pushing the car in after Henry may also serve another function. Traditionally Chippewa who drown are said to wander forever between two worlds, never to be at peace. Lyman has simply ensured that Henry will wander in style, not on foot. Finally, in joining the car—the present—with the river—the past—Lyman effectively merges the two symbolic systems and submerges the technology of the present within the traditions of the past.

In *Tales of Burning Love*, Erdrich meditates on the nature of possession and romantic love. Again cars play key roles in a couple of scenes. The whole *modus operandi* of the novel is the snowstorm in which Jack Mauser's four former wives sit stranded in a red Ford Explorer. It is there that they tell their tales of burning love in order to stay warm. Ironically, it is unlikely that the women would even be in this situation if it were not for the arrogance inspired by cars. Dot feels confident that her Explorer can maneuver through the worst storm nature can deliver. Of course it cannot. Living in North Dakota, a state where the freeways have gates that can be closed during blizzards, she should know better. The choice of vehicle is a nice touch for several reasons. For one, the women are *exploring* the nature of their relationships with Jack. For another, the sports utility vehicle (SUV) is promoted with an air of indomitability, of a power over nature that it clearly lacks. Furthermore, the car is not a Cherokee, the other best-selling SUV of 1996, the year this novel was published. Finally, it's a good choice because it can comfortably hold all four wives and still stash Gerry Nanapush in the back end, ensuring the women's safety. The Ford Explorer also indicates a new level of affluence among the characters of this family, bringing them closer to the American dream of automobility.

Another principal vehicle in this novel is Candice's car, which is revealed to be the one Gerry Nanapush stole in *Bingo Palace* from Jack Mauser, who first

took it from Candice when he took their baby. Erdrich adds another layer of jealousy and possession in making the stolen car already stolen, and the baby twice stolen. Jack can only set things right by searching the highways in a snowplow and finally stumbling through the dark fields in search of the car. Led by a ghostly June, he finally "hit the same waist-high wall he'd climbed on first leaving the truck. He staggered, hit the thing again, groped with his numb mitts, slugged at the smooth crust, screamed for a door handle. He found a catch, pulled, and was through and into a dark unsnowed and frigid interior of utter blackness."⁴¹ Finding Lipsha's inert body—and later discovering that Lipsha holds the baby, Jačk, Jr.—Jack drags him to the snowplow and heaves him inside.

One other noteworthy vehicle, which features briefly in both *Bingo Palace* and *Tales of Burning Love*, is June's blue Firebird. Gerry, Lipsha, and Jack all see the dead June driving the car at some point or another. In several cases, as in the snowstorm scene, she acts as a guide for the other characters. Both the Explorer and the stolen car could have easily become tombs of "utter blackness." The characters' lives are clearly in danger. But it seems that they need to come to that edge in order to confront their need to own others, to swallow them up in loving them. Dot, for instance, learns that she is happy with a husband she sees only once in a great while and would not necessarily love Gerry if she owned him.

This theme of love as ownership is developed further in one of the most troubling passages of Erdrich's novel *The Antelope Wife*.⁴² When Rozin Whiteheart Beads tells her husband Richard that she is leaving him, he becomes consumed with jealousy. But because her lover is a dying man, Richard finds that he cannot express that intense jealousy except through self-destruction. After sealing off his garage, he starts his yellow pickup and eases back into the seat. He returns to the house, however, to retrieve his forgotten glass of whiskey and in doing so changes his mind. He decides to live after all, but he does not turn off the pickup. Unbeknownst to him, his daughter has sneaked out to the pickup and hidden in the jump seat under a blanket so as to surprise her daddy somewhere down the road. They both fall asleep, but only one wakes up. In this scene, Erdrich again gives us an extremely negative view of the role that automobiles play in our society. As in Power's novel, the vehicle has too much potential for misuse and thereby harms the innocent. Richard's aborted suicide also arises out of jealousy and revenge, feelings that release the Windigo that appears periodically throughout this novel. Richard's possessive feelings coupled with the too powerful automobile result in a blind power that consumes the little girl, Deanna. In true Windigo fashion, the released anger ricochets back to hurt Richard as well as Callie, Rozin, and the rest of the extended family.

For Erdrich, the car both undermines and unites community and family, sometimes simultaneously, depending upon characters' motivations. When they act out of the impulse of connecting, of bringing community and family together, cars can serve a positive function. When they act out of selfish or possessive motives, the car's potential for harm is unleashed.

Erdrich's attention seems focused on the essentially conflicting philosophies of traditional Chippewa culture and car culture. Indeed, Milo Yellow Hair's "My people have not adapted well" seems to echo throughout the novels. Again, it is intoned as a matter of fact, as observation, not sermon. The novels simply look on in wonder at the various adaptations that are attempted, usually with startling results.

Finally, Annie Hansen extends her unique approach to the problem of the Indian car in her short story "The Burial Mound." This story features three grown brothers who reminisce about the great grandmother who raised them, Grandma One Rock. The story opens three days after the brothers have "stepped out of Jimmy's overturned '62 Impala, in the middle of the squash patch, like it was natural, something regular. This wasn't the first time they'd flipped a car. But it was the first time they had awakened in a squash patch in an overturned '62 Impala with no tire tracks anywhere across the big, wide field and the memory of a spirit dance around the fires burning in his soul."⁴³ The flipped Impala is treated rather nonchalantly in the story as it is pulled out of the squash patch and re-equipped with fan belt and radiator. There is no attempt to solve the apparent mystery of its location. As in most of these tales, the cars in Hansen's story are old: a 1962 Impala, a 1947 Nash, a 1952 Chevy pickup.

Grandma One Rock's 1947 Nash carries the deepest significance for Jimmy, from whose point of the view the story is told. In trying to come to terms with his identity as an Indian and all the trouble it has caused him, he has come back to their old cabin to meditate on Grandma One Rock's wisdom. Among other episodes he remembers her driving the Nash twice before Jimmy grew old enough to take over driving. She used the car first to prepare a "station wagon full of sweet grass" by driving back and forth over it, "squeezing the mucous right out." The other time she drove the Nash was when a raffle drawing was held at the Big Moose Drive-in. Since she "never missed a drawing," she took the boys "all the way to the Big Moose in first gear."⁴⁴ It pays off as Chuckie wins a new bike, which he proceeds to ride all the way home in the light of the Nash's high beams. In both cases Grandma uses the car for specific, culturally significant incidents. Hansen makes it clear that this car is something of an anomaly though. Its usefulness is not obvious to Grandma One Rock.

When the brothers sit in the sweat lodge they built, it comes to them that they need to "care for the bones of [their] ancestors," in this case Grandma One Rock's car. "That there in the weather like the skull of a dead elder uncle. The other cars don't bother me none. But that one, ever since Lila shot the tires off, it's been trying to tell us something."⁴⁵ It strikes Jimmy that they must bury the car and create a burial mound for it. "Jimmy watched the final, slow motion arch and leap and fall of Grandma One Rock's '47 Nash as it rose and then settled into the cool earthen grave."⁴⁶ On top of the mound, the brothers plant a stick of twisted grapevine, twelve strips of cloth tied to it, and call out "those twelve ancient prayers." After offering tobacco and passing a pipe, Chuckie says, "This stick is to remember this day, to remember our Grandma One Rock who drove this Nash, to remember that we are brothers and to

remember that we belong to this place.’”⁴⁷ These “symbols,” as they are called, help the characters reaffirm their identity and move forward in their lives. The Nash becomes a modern tool consigned to a burial mound perhaps for use in the afterlife. Primarily, however, the ceremony serves the living in this story, helping them to solemnize their relationships with one another, with their grandmother and with the past. Not quite like any of the other stories represented here, this one offers a vision of wise integration of the automobile. Grandma One Rock does not allow the car to change her life, only to enhance, in a very limited way, what she already does. The brothers’ deep reverence for her and her wisdom is extended to the car. Burying it reestablishes a balance in their lives. It, like them, is not junk.

Each author discussed here treats the automobile in unique ways, but it clearly holds a prominent place in their imaginations. The problems of cultural adaptation, poverty, philosophical differences, and power spun out of control are all threads leading from these depictions of the reservation car. The vehicles that are used wisely and cooperatively, or that are invested with personality, with a spirit, are those that have been positively integrated, as opposed to the cars used as a means of extending individual power and status. The latter only create harm. These scenes emphasize not only the car’s subversive capacity, but also its lethal potential to both the people and the culture. They offer some of the best examples of Indian humor and some of the most painful examples of loss.

Cultural differences are likely to remain thorny social problems for some time to come. Clarifying the vastly different approaches to so central a symbol of American life as the car, however, is an important step toward better understanding not only how a “people have not adapted well to the white man’s world” but also how various contemporary cultures are adapting themselves to modern technology. Literary and film treatments of the Indian car help reveal Americans’ worst failings and best intentions, all with a sense of humor. The Indian car may eventually turn out to be the ultimate trickster.

NOTES

1. James Locker (director), *Spirit of Crazy Horse* (Parallax Production, 1990).
2. While American Indian tribes are many and are vastly different in and of themselves, I am taking some liberty within this essay in referring to a broader phenomenon that crosses tribal boundaries. The Indian or Reservation car is presently understood as a running joke throughout Indian Country. Each writer treated within this essay has his/her own vision of the significance of cars, which may or may not correspond to any one tribal understanding but which certainly operates within this Pan-Indian awareness.
3. James J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1975), 161.
4. Flink found in 1927, the point at which the car industry reached market saturation, that only half of American families could afford to own a car. It was only when car owners replaced their older models with new ones that the less affluent could afford to join the fray.

5. For modernity, see Edward Dimendberg, "The Will to Motorization: Cinema, Highways, and Modernity," *October* 73 (Summer 1995): 90–137 and Keith Sculle, *Frank Redford's Wigwam Chain: A Link in the Modernization of the American Roadside* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990). For freedom, see Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1996); Kris Lackey, *RoadFrames: The American Highway Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); and Marie T. Farr, "Freedom and Control: Automobiles in American Women's Fiction of the 70s and 80s," *Journal of Popular Culture* 29:2 (Fall 1995): 157–169.

6. Michael Cutler Stone, "Bajito y Sauvecito: Low-Riding and the 'Class' of Class," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* (January 1990): 85, 86.

7. This song was first recorded by Keith Secola and the Wild Band of Indians in 1987. Since then it has gained wide popularity. It was added to the soundtrack of the 1994 film *Dance Me Outside* and is currently available through Akina on the *Circle* compact disc. The song offers a simple, clear expression of the freedom and joy provided by the car in its ability to transport the singer along the powwow trail, especially in the lyrics of the last stanza: "We're on a circuit of an Indian dream. / You don't get old, you just get younger. / When we're flyin' down the highway, / Ridin' in our Indian car." The dilapidated condition of the car does not seem troubling; in fact, it contributes to the feeling of freedom—no responsibility for material possessions.

8. Jim Northrup, *The Rez Road Follies: Canoes, Casinos, Computers and Birch Bark Baskets* (New York: Kodansha International, 1997).

9. Dennis West and Joan M. West. "Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals: An Interview with Sherman Alexie," *Cineaste* XXIII:4 (1998): 31.

10. Stuart Margolin (director), *Medicine River* (Medicine River Pictures, Limited, 1994). The authors considered in this essay usually avoid the perhaps easy target of cars named after Indian tribes, leaders, and symbols such as Cherokee, Dakota, Cheyenne, Pontiac, Comanche, Firechief, Thunderbird, Skyhawk, Eagle, Pinto, and Mustang. Thomas King subtly delivers the Pontiac in *Medicine River* and a Pinto in *Green Grass, Running Water*. There are a disproportionately large number of red cars in the novels and films under consideration.

11. Jonathan Wacks (director), *Powwow Highway* (Handmade Films, 1989).

12. David Seals, *Powwow Highway* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), vii, viii.

13. Seals, *Powwow Highway*, ix. The 1994 film *Dance Me Outside* features a car less naturally broken in. Taken from Silas' sister's white husband, the new Saab—symbol of yuppie affluence—is aggressively converted to an Indian car by the film's central protagonists, Silas and Frank. Other references to cars in the film include the young men's dreams of becoming auto mechanics and a supposedly sacred place in the woods, the path to which is littered with car parts. This film is based on the work of Thomas Kinsella who is non-Native.

14. *Ibid.*, x.

15. *Ibid.*, 1.

16. Sherman Alexie, *The Business of Fancy-Dancing* (Brooklyn: Hang Loose Press, 1992), 76.

17. *Ibid.*, 60.

18. *Ibid.*, 72.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Adrian C. Louis, *Skins: A Novel* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995).
21. Chris Eyre (director). *Smoke Signals* (ShadowCatcher Entertainment, 1998).
22. West, "Cinematic Smoke Signals," 31.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Thomas King, *Green Grass, Running Water* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 295.
25. *Ibid.*, 453–454.
26. *Ibid.*, 455.
27. Susan Power, *The Grass Dancer* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 16.
28. *Ibid.*, 25.
29. *Ibid.*, 51.
30. *Ibid.*, 280.
31. This philosophy is common to numerous Indian nations.
32. This character appears very early in Erdrich's work. Her 1984 poem, "Windigo," has an epigraph that defines him as "a flesh-eating, wintry demon with a man buried deep inside" (Louise Erdrich, "Windigo," in *Jacklight and Other Poems* [New York: Henry Holt, 1984], 79).
33. Louise Erdrich, *The Bingo Palace* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 63.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 75.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Marvin Magalaner, "Louise Erdrich: Of Cars, Time, and the River," in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*, ed. Mickey Pearlman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 95–108.
38. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 144.
39. *Ibid.*, 149.
40. *Ibid.*, 143.
41. Louise Erdrich, *Tales of Burning Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 386.
42. Louise Erdrich, *The Antelope Wife* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).
43. Annie Hansen, "The Burial Mound," *Kenyon Review* 15:2 (Summer 1993): 33.
44. *Ibid.*, 7.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 11.
47. *Ibid.*, 12.