

Telling Native stories on TV

***Rutherford Falls* gambles on humor to sort out White blindness. *Reservation Dogs* ignores the White gaze altogether.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue



Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs, Lane Factor, Paulina Alexis, and D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai in *Reservation Dogs*. (Shane Brown / FX)

Somewhere around the third episode of the electrifying original FX series *Reservation Dogs* (created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi) I felt my allegiances shift from curious to fully committed.

The show starts with a group of Native teenagers living in a poverty-stricken village on a reservation in Oklahoma who fashion themselves as gangsters in the mode of Quentin Tarantino (the title plays on his hyper-violent 1992 movie *Reservoir Dogs*), resorting to not-so-petty crime to raise money to escape to California. The joke is that their cool glamour and toughened personas are undercut by the reality of their circumstances. The big showdown with the other tough kids in town—which looms in their minds as a violent battle—is a paltry schoolyard fight. Their biggest heist is a truckload of spicy potato chips.

The show pokes gentle fun at the teenagers' attempts to aestheticize violence. But real violence—domestic and emotional, spiritual and generational—hems in their lives. They are bound together by grief over a dead friend, living around exploding marriages, abandoned by various adults, acutely aware of their second-class status as Native citizens in a settler colonial state. The Tarantino-style posturing is a self-defense mechanism to make sense of or try to escape the real devastation around them.

It sounds bleak to write this out, but the tone of the show is in turns hilarious, tender, and thoughtful. The show eases off the Tarantino track and develops into a series of beautiful vignettes, following each of the main characters—Bear, Cheese, Willie Jack, and Elora—as they interact with adults in their community: the wiser-than-he-seems tribal police officer, the pot-smoking uncle nursing regret and guilt, a deadbeat dad who fails to meet even the lowest bar of expectation, the Deer Lady who seeks her own style of feminist vengeance, and even a spirit warrior who shows up in dreams to give semi-motivational speeches.

When I got to these character vignettes, I was all in. The show unfolds the way it feels to be a young adult: at turns confused and self-confident, impatient and bewildered, wounded and hopeful. (Though a word of warning if you watch this with a teenager of your own: it also shares with Quentin Tarantino an almost poetic overuse of expletives.) These teens feel both suffocated by Native culture and desperate to be more fully initiated into it. They are skeptical of the adults in their lives and want models of adulthood and spiritual wisdom. The show knows there are no easy answers to the questions they are asking, but it treats them with such respect, curiosity, and care, we cannot help but feel the same.

Reservation Dogs came out a few months after *Rutherford Falls* (created by Sierra Teller Ornelas, Ed Helms, and Michael Schur). They are the first two television shows

to be produced by a majority-Native creative team. *Rutherford Falls* centers around the friendship of Nathan Rutherford (Helms), who has committed his life to preserving the memory of the town's namesake and his family's colonial patriarch, and Reagan Wells (Jana Schmieding), who runs the meager cultural center inside the fictional Minishonka Nation's casino.

Longtime readers of this column will know that I am a big Michael Schur fan. (*The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *The Good Place* are perennial favorites.) *Rutherford Falls* operates in this contemporary sitcom mode—fast paced, joke saturated, punctuated by knowing pauses and beats. Like *The Good Place*, it moves self-consciously into moral territory, staging funny debates about hot-button topics like whether White people can meaningfully engage and represent non-White culture or White assumptions about Native spirituality that end up limiting Native sovereignty and economic power.

But the show can't quite decide how hard it wants to hit when it comes to White-Native relations. Nathan is convinced that the original Rutherford was "one of the good White people" and that his town represents a rare instance of White-Native harmony stretching back to colonial invasion. Nathan eventually learns that Native residents don't tell the same stories about his ancestors that he does, but the show backs away from any real reckoning about these discrepancies. It almost feels like the show's creators couldn't decide if it was too cliché to tackle the obvious truth that any relationship that ends with expropriated Native lands can't be a good one.

The effect, however, is to make a White person's experiences and feelings far too central in the first Native TV show. This might be the problem of operating in the TV sitcom genre, a White-majority cultural space if ever there was one. But it might also be part of the show's overall strategy.

Nathan's obsession with his ancestors means he is often self-centered and blind to Reagan's feelings and experiences. We are supposed to cringe when he demands that she pay attention to his "erased" history while she fights for even a sliver of recognition for her people's past. Despite their genuine friendship, Reagan can't tell Nathan everything she feels and thinks. This power imbalance—that Reagan always has to be aware of Nathan's perspectives in a way he never has to be about hers—is more important than debates about the degree of badness in the original settlement.

Watching both of these shows I was reminded of the different strategies that non-White artists take when working in cultural spaces dominated by White people. Some simply decenter White experience, insisting that there are realities outside the White story. *Rutherford Falls* embraces this work with its pedagogical heart on its sleeve, gambling that humor can help us work through White blindness and guilt.

Reservation Dogs's strategy is considerably more radical: it ignores the White gaze altogether, even though it is profoundly aware of the culture that shapes and limits the lives of its main characters. Because of this, these stories are more opaque to non-Native viewers, less able to teach us—except, perhaps, to teach us the art of paying attention to lives and experiences we cannot easily assimilate. In a culture dominated by White experience, this might be the hardest lesson and a beautiful gift.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Telling Native stories."