Smoke or Signals?
American Popular Culture and the Challenge to Hegemonic Images of American Indians in Native American Film

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American popular culture has historically been an arena where hegemonic structures and ideas could be challenged and where the status quo could be questioned, often through humor and satire. Continuing this tradition in one of the most refreshing recent contributions to American popular culture, Smoke Signals, Sherman Alexie challenges hegemonic and stereotypical images of American Indians through portraying a complex, humanizing, and contemporary image of American Indians. In doing so, he addresses, in an interview with Cineaste, what he avows is the “greatest challenge” to contemporary American Indians—the issue of sovereignty (West and West 1998). Sovereignty generally refers to autonomy and control over one’s destiny. As such, it involves representation and the power to create and determine how groups, and individuals within those groups, are represented. Since popular culture is, by definition, “popular” and widely consumed, it is a powerful agent in shaping these representative images. However, the power of any one image of popular culture is weakened in part because of the sheer magnitude of competing popular elements. Images are further diluted because they are often casually consumed as entertainment and because the contents of popular culture are so broad, varied, and transitional. This essay emanates from my genuine appreciation for the efforts of Alexie and my curiosity about the effects of popular culture and the po-
tential of *Smoke Signals* to counter hegemonic representations of Indians. To explore this potential, I asked a series of questions of my students in an introduction to sociology class and conducted an exploratory experiment with a colleague's children. In the following, I discuss both the power of popular culture to shape perceptions, through inciting novel ideas in a film like *Smoke Signals*, and the transient effects of any one film. As such, I point to the importance of this use and appropriation of popular culture and also to the limitations of popular culture that necessitate actions on the part of people who shape culture in general, directed toward elaborating and institutionalizing the projects initiated by artists acting within the medium of popular culture.

I asked the students in two sociology classes to list the stereotypes that they or others hold concerning American Indians. The lists included a dichotomous range of all-too-familiar American Indian stereotypes. The students listed the negative stereotypes: "savage," "uneducated," "poor," "drunken," "angry," "aggressive," "stupid," "inferior," and "lazy," among others. The more positive stereotypes included "proud," "noble," "spiritual," "deeply religious," "wise," "nature-loving," "tradition," and others. None of the stereotypes gave any indication of perceptions of Indians as "ordinary" Americans, although a few students argued in the commentary that, despite these stereotypes, many Indians are "ordinary" Americans. Clearly, Indians are understood by this predominantly white and non-Indian student population as something "other" than themselves—except, of course, those Indians whom they know personally.

These stereotypes are reinforced by the images created by popular films spanning classic westerns and contemporary films of the American West. The images range from the warrior and the shamanic representation to the ignorant drunken depiction. The warrior image includes the all-too-common savage warrior, usually shown in stereotypical Plains form, and the heroic and noble warrior/hunter, depicted as stoic, in touch with nature, and peace loving but willing to fight when necessary. The shaman profile represents a deeply religious and mysterious character. These images are most often contextualized in some historic past with the major theme in the lives of the Indians being the confrontation with encroaching peoples of European descent. The warrior/hunter, the religious leader, and the confrontations with whites were undoubtedly important aspects of much of the experience of American Indians historically, and even the savage warrior image probably resonates to some degree with actual experience within tribes as they perceived their enemies—whether Indian or white. The image of drunkenness, too, has its parallels in historical and contemporary Indian experience as Indians, as well as a plethora of other Americans, struggle with alcohol problems. However, all of these images are reductive. The portrayals, or perhaps the lack of alternative
portrayals, reduce the meta-image of American Indians in popular culture to a finite and constrained set of experiences and potentials.

Alexie challenges, partially through humor and satire, these stereotypes and images as he presents the lives of the main characters in Smoke Signals situated within a contemporary context. The traditional warrior or shaman is not found in the film, but the image of drunkenness plays a prominent role because alcohol abuse is part of the subject matter and integral to the story line. Alexie's protagonists are two young, fatherless Coeur d'Alene men from the reservation, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Victor is a tough, confident but sullen jock, and Thomas is a "storytelling geek" (Alexie, quoted in West and West 1998, 29). While they are not close friends in the beginning of the story, the two are inseparably linked by circumstance beyond their tribal affiliation or the fact that they are American youth. Victor's father, Arnold, saved the infant Thomas from a Fourth of July house fire that killed Thomas's parents. Several years after the fire, Arnold's wife, Arlene, awoke from an alcohol-induced slumber to find young Victor smashing his father's beer supply against the tailgate of his pick-up truck. On that day, she determined to stop the alcohol consumption and demanded that Arnold do the same. However, the alcohol-tormented Arnold disappeared from the reservation both in response to the ultimatum of prohibition from his wife and as an escape from the haunting of his role in starting the fateful Fourth of July fire. Thomas's attempts to cultivate a friendship are consistently rebuffed by the cool Victor until circumstance once again intervenes. Several years after Arnold's disappearance, Victor and Arlene receive news of the death of Arnold and a request that one of them travel to New Mexico to recover his remains. Without enough money to make the trip, Victor is forced to accept financial help from Thomas under the condition that he take Thomas with him. Thus, with a short ride in a car driving in reverse and two bus tickets, they initiate the road trip that provides the context for the pursuit of friendship, identity, and meaning around which the story of Smoke Signals revolves.

The film has many dimensions, and the characters of Victor and Thomas and the images of American Indians they promote in the film cannot be reduced to one interpretation. One of the contributions of Alexie's artistry in Smoke Signals is his ability to portray complex characters who happen to be American Indians. In their personae and their struggles, Alexie simultaneously develops characters with both specific Indian qualities and more common American aspects. In doing so, he promotes a more complete human image of contemporary American Indians to a popular American audience. This significant contribution is achieved through a rather simple formula: the major protagonists portray contemporary American Indians in a specific world that is at once American and Indian.
First and most obviously, the film is exclusively focused on Indian characters embedded in an Indian cultural context. The protagonists in *Smoke Signals* are associated with the specific cultural elements of the contemporary Coeur d'Alene. For example, the film features the Coeur d'Alene reservation with its landscape, people, dress, hairstyles, and form of the English language, and incorporates elements of traditional music, food (fry bread), and family. The audience comes to know a little about the contemporary American Indian world the characters live in, as interpreted by Alexie, because that world is depicted.

The humanizing efforts of the film and its appeal to a mainstream American audience do not end with the illustration of contemporary American Indian life. Along with being an informative, tragic, and humorous story, *Smoke Signals* appeals to a mainstream audience because it addresses familiar human conditions. In conjunction with the Coeur d'Alene Indian cultural specifics lie a general American character and common personal dilemmas that parallel the experience of the larger American audience. Victor and Thomas in many ways reflect some very recognizable stereotypes in American culture, the jock and the geek, with which most Americans can relate. The protagonists encounter dilemmas of life including the discovery of one's identity, the battle with alcohol or other addictions, the struggles of poverty, the experience of abandonment or neglect from one's father/parents, the development of lasting friendships, and even the exploration of a road trip. These experiences, whatever the cultural trappings, resonate with the experience of people within and outside the Indian community. Through the vehicle of this film and its Indian characters, the audience can engage their parallel personal dilemmas. Herein lies the second part of Alexie's formula for image creation: he brings to life a "familiar" character with which the popular audience can identify. If the audience can identify with the characters and their dilemmas, the film potentially has a broad appeal, as *Smoke Signals* does, and thus can communicate with a large popular audience. This Alexie was determined to do. The simultaneous portrayal of experience unique to American Indians, with its specific cultural context, and experiences recognizable to a more widespread popular audience is one of the major strengths of the humanizing efforts of the film.

Whatever the attraction, one of the potential effects of the film on a mainstream audience involves its confrontation with the images the audience previously held of American Indians. A novel image is set forth as the characters become very human and very American without shedding their distinction as members of a particular cultural group—remaining very Indian. The audience comes to know the characters in cultural trappings that might, at first glance, make them alien to the mainstream audience. The audience's relationship to the characters is transformed to one of familiarity as they become real and complex.
through the unfolding representation. If this occurs, then the process of bringing to life the full humanity of each character potentially has the power to render a fuller and more complex image of Indians in the eyes, or minds, of the audience that may be under the influence of the aforementioned more reductive images. Thus, *Smoke Signals* and popular culture in general remain an effective avenue for confrontation and transformation in American culture.

The novelty of these American Indian images created in the film struck a chord with the children—ranging from age eight to fourteen—whom I talked with concerning *Smoke Signals*. I asked the children what they thought about American Indians and had them draw a picture of an "Indian" before we watched *Smoke Signals* together. Before the film, one of the children explained, "This is weird, but, when you first said Indians, I kinda thought of savages, in a way, because, back in the old times, they didn't live like we did, they lived in huts and had fires and all that other stuff, like moccasins." Another child added, "They were warlike, because they came out of there and most of them in the past didn't have guns, so they killed people with their bare hands. Um, they lived off the land, you know, they kind of harvested food and didn't have processed flour and things like that." These quotes reveal the static, historical, and primitive images common in Indian stereotypes. The children's pictures reflected the same static quality. While one of the children, the oldest, drew a picture of a man in contemporary mainstream clothing, the others clothed their drawings in buckskins or colorful long dresses and beads. When asked specifically about contemporary Indians, one child said, "They probably look like regular people but they probably have more, like, beliefs, kind of, because they grew up that way and their ancestors or whatever, they had more of a background."

After this discussion we watched *Smoke Signals* together and I asked them a series of questions about the film and how its images were similar to or different from their previous understandings of Indians. While they were too inexperienced and uninformed to grasp much of the complexity of the film, they were surprised by its portrayal of Indians. Their historical, static, and stereotyped images of American Indians were confounded by the images portrayed by Alexie. The children's comments reflect the humanizing depictions presented by Alexie in the film. One of the children remarked, "I sort of think of Native Americans as like tepees and stuff like that, but I don't think of them as modern-day people. I think of them as, like INDIANS, but I think of them now as regular people." Another child added, "They showed Indians like how they know feelings; in other movies they just talk about the history of it, and how, they didn't show how they had feelings." Along with the humanizing aspects, the children were dismayed at the amount of drunkenness depicted in the film and thought it portrayed Indians in
a bad light. One child remarked, "They didn't really show that much sober Indians except those two guys, because the mom was drunk, the dad, and all those people were all drunk."

While *Smoke Signals* was probably not widely watched by children, these examples demonstrate the immediate and powerful transformative effects of the images in the film. It can provide a direct challenge to the static historical images through developing a complex human portrayal of contemporary Indians. However, the salient perception among the youth that the film acts negatively by depicting drunkenness indicates the tenuous nature of popular culture to transform hegemonic images. This perception was not limited to the young children I talked with. The impressions remembered from *Smoke Signals* by college students in my sociology classes sustain this tenuous impact. When asked to list the films they most remember seeing depicting American Indians, less than 20 percent mentioned *Smoke Signals*. The fact that nearly every student remembered seeing *Dances with Wolves* and *The Last of the Mohicans* indicates that those films were more popularly seen. Of those that mentioned *Smoke Signals*, only a few commented on the positive portrayal of Indians. The bulk of the students who remembered the film remembered that it depicted contemporary Indians, but they also characterized the film as portraying Indians in a negative light—with a focus on drunkenness. In class discussion, the students were asked if popular films, including *Smoke Signals*, reflect common stereotypes. The majority of students said that the films did in fact reinforce them. Only a few indicated that *Smoke Signals* challenged these stereotypes or the images of Indians presented in other popular films.

Given the children's and students' negative associations with the film despite the well-developed alternative images created by Alexie, what are we to make of the impact of *Smoke Signals*? Why did this audience identify drunkenness as the dominant portrayal of Indians in *Smoke Signals* when the film included such a powerful anti-alcohol message? Neither of the two main characters ever touched a drop of alcohol, Victor's mother had not taken a drink since the day her husband left, and even Arnold quit drinking later in his life. One way to make sense of this contradiction is to recall the enduring power of hegemonic representations. This power indicates one primary reason that the works of artists like Alexie, who use the mediums of popular culture, cannot stand alone in their efforts to educate the public and transform dominant images. Popular culture, while an effective, immediate, and widely consumed agent, has, at times, only a fleeting effect, lasting only the time that passes between its consumption and the consumption of the next unrelated element. Popular culture is consumed as entertainment, not as a learning tool. That does not mean it has no potential lasting power in the images it portrays. But the popular culture items exist in a
larger political context. Unless that context and its representations are addressed by people acting outside of popular culture, the novel images offered by artists such as Alexie could be fleeting.

The ideas and images designed by Alexie are certainly not reinforced by hegemonic culture. Reductive and stereotypical images are much more prevalent and institutionalized, and the hegemonic cultural context is not conducive to the creation, dissemination, or reinforcement of counterimages like those developed in *Smoke Signals*. Aside from the numerous depictions of American Indians in popular films besides *Smoke Signals*, one need only look at the controversy surrounding the mascot at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as an example of these reductive images. Many see the mascot as a harmless Illinois tradition. That argument is problematic in and of itself, but, if the mascot is seen in a larger context of maintaining stereotypical images of Indians, its continued use is clearly exposed as an oppressive agent. The same holds for the use of American Indian names and symbols at forty-five other colleges and universities (Lapchick 1996; Miller 1999) and extends to activities like the "tomahawk chop" performed by spectators at Atlanta Braves baseball games.

Hegemonic images are also perpetuated in our teaching about American Indians in the education system. While some high-quality courses incorporate an exploration and understanding of contemporary American Indian life, all too often the curriculum focuses on the same historical past as the film industry. While the representation of that past in the education system is perhaps of higher quality than the representations often seen in films, the continual representation of American Indians as a past, albeit diverse, population reinforces, if my students are any indication, stereotypical and static images. Many of the valuable cultural practices American Indians continue, as well as many of the problems they face today, have roots in history, and educators should seek to further the understanding of those historical circumstances and cultures. However, for Alexie's images to enter and be sustained in mainstream hegemonic culture, the knowledge of the past must be balanced with a dynamic understanding of the complexity of contemporary American Indian lives. The static images of past American Indians as something other than, rather than part of, the concept of American continue to contribute to the obstruction of images like those Alexie portrays.

Another dimension to this balance and the reformation of hegemonic images of American Indians concerns who tells the story. While scholars with knowledge and actual experience among Indian communities are a valuable component, members of Indian communities and tribes can and should partner in the education process. This collaboration is being developed and fostered in numerous places. For example, at the University of Idaho, an American Indian Studies minor has been
formed with the cooperation of and in partnership with local tribes and tribal members. Programs like this have the potential to help reshape hegemonic images of Indians in the realm of education and provide cultural support for the project that Alexie and many others have initiated through the medium of film.

Ownership in the American capitalist economic system is also a major factor in promoting hegemonic culture in general and the images of American Indians in particular. American Indians, like other minority populations, have limited membership in the elite circles of capital ownership. Aside from contributing to sustained high poverty rates, one consequence of this lack of ownership of capital is that those who have no ownership, and this includes American Indians, have no control over the primary purveyors of hegemonic imagery—the corporations that create/sell the mass media. They thus have little control over the forms of the images constructed and sold that portray them in media ranging from national news coverage to popular films and print media.

The lack of power in the economic realm also reduces the political power of any group in the United States since money and politics are intimately entwined. All non-upper-class Americans suffer to some degree from the exclusion from political processes due to the heavy political influence of the “power elite” and corporate America, but the exclusion has, and has had over the years, unique implications for American Indians, including the issue of tribal casinos. Tribal casinos are a relatively recent avenue of entry into the capitalist economy for Indian tribes. The complex negotiations with federal and state governments over the right to operate casinos on the reservations and the degree of regulation they are subject to is an ongoing challenge of sovereignty. At issue with the casinos is the entry into the system of capitalist ownership with the associated access to political power and corporate control through investments of revenue—not to mention the ability to address conditions of poverty and unemployment on reservations. Increased access of Indian individuals and tribes to political power and corporate control could potentially significantly contribute to reshaping hegemonic images of American Indians.

The images of American Indians presented via popular culture through Smoke Signals have the potential to have a powerful impact on the American public perception of American Indians through challenging and reshaping hegemonic representations. However, as I have discussed, popular culture is fleeting, Smoke Signals is a minute portion of that popular culture, and the hegemonic culture at large is not conducive to reinforcing Alexie’s portrayals of contemporary American Indians. Many people, both Indian and non-Indian, enjoyed the movie for a variety of reasons. But it is not enough to simply enjoy this movie—for whatever reason. Whether the movie evokes emotive responses
concerning personal struggles, a cathartic white liberal guilt, or a sentimentalist or genuine compassion and/or admiration for contemporary American Indians among a white audience, there is a larger issue at stake. The stake is representation, and it is an issue of sovereignty. Those of us who enjoyed the movie, talk about the movie, and recognize part of ourselves in the movie have a responsibility to move outside our indulgence in popular culture as entertainment and recognize the importance of popular culture to challenge hegemony—the "subversive" component to popular culture. If the emotional evocations lead to concrete actions and sustained attempts to promote understanding, whether it be at home with children or in a larger social and political sphere, then that is a first step. However, those of us operating in the daily construction and maintenance of American culture also need to be consciously inspired and motivated by the artistic message and pursue the subversive project after the emotion wears off. If we fail, if we only indulge ourselves in popular culture emanating from the Coeur d’Alene reservation and then move to the next popular culture stimuli, Smoke Signals, along with the images it creates, will suffer the fate of so many other transient aspects of American popular culture. And Alexie’s "signals" will dissipate.

WORKS CITED

