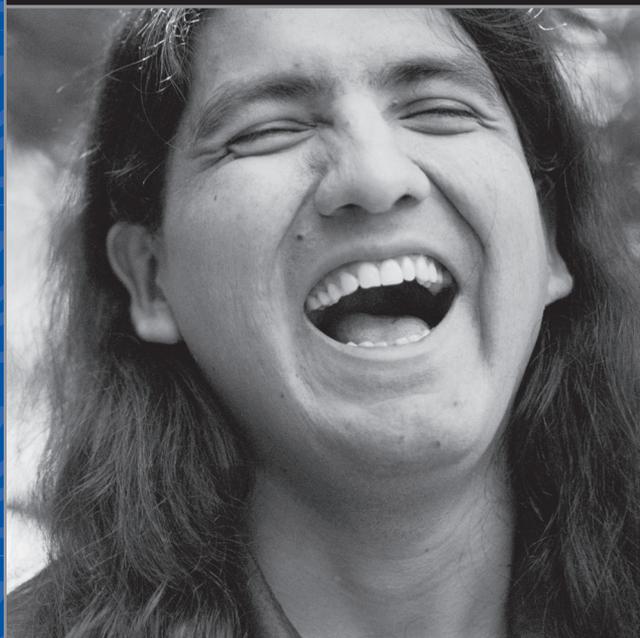


# Sherman Alexie in the Classroom

“This is not a silent movie.  
Our voices will save our lives.”

The NCTE High School Literature Series



Heather E. Bruce  
Anna E. Baldwin  
Christabel Umphrey

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## 2 *Smoke Signals*: Visual Literacy and Multimodal Texts



Sherman Alexie admits he has always loved movies. When he was ten years old, his family spent \$1,000 on a VCR, significantly more than their monthly income. Alexie explains, “I love movies more than I love books, and believe me I love books more than I love every human being, except the dozen or so people in my life who love movies and books as much as I do” (*Smoke Signals: A Screenplay* vii). His passion is evident in his numerous stories and poems filled with references to TV and film. He knows what a powerful influence they have; what he has seen has shaped how he views the world. As a result, it is unsurprising that Alexie works in the medium himself. His first feature film, *Smoke Signals*, is based on his story “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

*Smoke Signals* is the result of a collaborative effort between Alexie and Chris Eyre, a Cheyenne and Arapaho, who directed the film. The film Eyre and Alexie created, like all of Alexie’s poetry and stories, expands our ideas of what Indians look like and reminds us that Indians are not a people that existed only in some distant Wild West version of the past. All the major elements of the film make it a strong piece to use to introduce students to postcolonial issues. In numerous interviews and essays, Alexie has made it clear that he is interested in truthfully portraying the

community and lifestyle (and all its social, political, economic, and cultural aspects) that he was familiar with growing up on the Spokane Reservation. Much of this way of life was in response and resistance to the lingering colonial influence on Indian people.

Alexie thinks that many Americans have gained most of their understanding of Native Americans from what they have seen in the movies. Too often American film has dished out “endless looping reels of Anglo cowboys defeating Indian villains replayed at drive-ins and on TV” (Gillan 99). The result is that “[a]s these heroes subdue dark Indians hour after hour, they convey the message of Indian inferiority, which gains strength and legitimacy with time, repetition, and syndication” (99). Alexie knows American cinema has work to do when it comes to producing films that more accurately portray American Indians, which is one of his motivations for writing screenplays. For example, Alexie admits that he loved John Ford’s *The Searchers*:

I rooted for John Wayne . . . even though I knew he was going to kill his niece because she had been “soiled” by the Indians. Hell, I rooted for John Wayne because I understood why he wanted to kill his niece. I hated those Indians just as much as John Wayne did. I mean, jeez, they had kidnapped Natalie Wood . . . who certainly didn’t deserve to be nuzzled, nibbled, or nipped by some Indian warrior, especially an Indian warrior who only spoke in monosyllables and whose every movement was accompanied by ominous music. (“I Hated Tonto” par. 11–13).

Alexie rooted for Wayne because he did not recognize those Indians. “I wasn’t those Indians; I wasn’t running around in a loin-cloth. I wasn’t vicious. I wasn’t some sociopath with war paint” (qtd. in Mabrey par. 15). Unfortunately, much of the rest of

America does recognize these film portrayals, and others like them, as “real” Indians.

Film is a powerful medium with intense and long-lasting influence. Rennard Strickland recounts a story about the set of another of John Ford’s Westerns: “The cameras stop. The Navajo actors dismount and take off their Sioux war bonnets. One of the film crew says to the Indians, ‘That was wonderful, you did it just right.’ An Indian actor replies, ‘Yeah, we did it just like we saw it in the movies’” (par. 1). We need new stories when even Indians are learning how to be Indian by watching movies. We agree with filmmaker Oliver Stone, who says “the stories we like to believe or know about ourselves, are part of the ammunition we take with us into the everyday battles of how we define ourselves and how we act toward other people” (qtd. in Carnes 306). It is increasingly important to think critically about the kind of stories we view on film. *Smoke Signals*, the first movie written, directed, and even nearly entirely acted by Native Americans, provides important (re)vision in reversing this trend by including a diversity of Indian personalities (Mabrey). *Smoke Signals* is full of culturally specific details and there are no non-Native characters central to the story. Watching the film and discussing what they see happening on screen gives students an opportunity to increase their familiarity with American Indian issues.

Although *Smoke Signals* is worth viewing just for the storytelling and film production, we want students to view the film critically as well. We spend a few days building a critical framework that students can work from before we actually watch the film. Gore Vidal writes, “In the end, he who screens the history makes the history” (81). Because we want students to think about the validity of this statement, we move quickly from reader-

response work (which provides important opportunities for students to examine their personal knowledge and experience base) to working with a postcolonial lens so they can investigate how an individual or group's daily life and ideology are shaped by what they see and hear from those in positions of power. More specifically, this approach helps guide students to examine how colonization has affected Indian identity (both within Indian communities and outside them) by thinking about the lasting consequences of outsiders with significant ability to influence everything from a community's economics to the stories the people grow up hearing about themselves.

### **Previewing**

Because Alexie has talked and written at length about wanting his work to move audiences away from narrow and stereotypical views of Native people, a view that Native people had very little influence in shaping, one way to frame the film so students think about these issues as they view it is to read Alexie's poem "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys" from *First Indian on the Moon* and discuss Indian stereotypes by looking at some of the ways Indians are portrayed in society.

Before we read the poem, we want students to begin thinking about the ideas and history that Alexie references. We take a word or phrase from each stanza of the poem to use as a writing prompt, read the stanza number and phrase, and ask students to write the corresponding number on their paper and two or three sentences that come to mind when they hear each word or phrase. These are the prompt words we have used for each stanza in this exercise:

1. Columbus
2. cowboys and Indians
3. “how the West was won”
4. cowboy shows
5. heroes
6. “Win their hearts and minds  
and you win the war.”
7. old westerns
8. translated from the American
9. American dream
10. God
11. John Wayne
12. home movies
13. life change
14. “We’re all extras”

This is an informal exercise meant to be completed quickly. Its purpose is to gather initial ideas, experiences, and impressions. What personal connections do students have to these ideas? What do they know about the history that is connected to the words and phrases? After time to reflect and write, each student reads aloud some of what he or she has written, moving through the whole list at once (so two students might read from number one, followed by two from number two, and so on) until everyone in the class has shared something and we have covered all the stanzas. Then we read Alexie’s poem “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys” and look for differences and similarities in the connotations of the words between those of the class and Alexie’s. Sometimes, rather than taking on the poem as a whole, we read the poem stanza by stanza, sharing our associations, then reading Alexie’s corresponding stanza and discussing similarities and differences in each section.

Many students will miss important references. Among others, they’ll run into Randolph Scott, the 1940s film cowboy-hero; Tom Mix, whose over 300 films were nearly all silent but did much to define the Western genre; “These Boots Are Made for Walking,” a song students might recognize but will likely associ-

ate with Jewel or Jessica Simpson rather than Nancy Sinatra; the term *manifest destiny* and the idea that it was God's will that the United States should stretch from sea to sea; and John Wayne, possibly the most well-known onscreen, Indian-fighting cowboy. So be prepared to offer a few sentences about these references or give students the job of looking into the topics beforehand so they are poised to read with the necessary background information.

Once we work our way through the poem comparing our own historical connections with Alexie's associations, we then read it once aloud in its entirety while students underline parts that connect in some way to things they have written about. Next, we listen to Willie Nelson's song "My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys." As students listen to the song, we ask them to think about ways in which Willie Nelson's impression of cowboys and life and culture in the West differ from Alexie's. We challenge students to write reflectively about where their own ideas fit:

What do Alexie and Nelson indicate about their experiences and the stories they heard about the West as children? Did you see any similarities? differences? Which version is more familiar to you? Why do you think this is? Did you ever watch shows about cowboys and Indians when you were younger? Was it a game you played? Were you "Pursuin' the life of my high-ridin' heroes," like Nelson, or did Alexie's line "all us little Skins fought on the same side against the cowboys in our minds" resonate more with you?

Even though the cowboy and Indian films of the era Alexie and Nelson write about are significantly before the time of today's students, many are still familiar with the genre and grew up surrounded by the same imagery.

Both versions resonate with our students, many of whom live on an Indian reservation in Montana. Austin remembered “playing cowboys and Indians” and said, “I was always an Indian, I think . . . because I am an Indian. As I got older, I got confused. . . . I didn’t know you could be both cowboy and Indian.” In Montana some of the best cowboys are Indians, which shows there can be overlap in the two dramatically different ideologies. For Danna, Alexie’s words made sense because she was from the reservation and was familiar with the ideology his poem expressed, but Nelson’s song seemed familiar too because she grew up on horses, living a lifestyle that resembled the one he wrote about. She knew she had played cowboys and Indians when she was younger but confessed, “I don’t remember who won.” For many of our students, neither Nelson nor Alexie seem to get it just right. Or they both do. Helping students examine the contrasting viewpoints complicates their understanding of American history. After the class has had time to write and has discussed the stories about American history they heard when they were younger, we push them to think about ways colonialism has influenced Alexie’s ideas and their own: Were there any moments when Alexie’s poem made you rethink what you’d learned about the history of the West? In what specific ways does the poem resist the accepted story of “how the West was won”? Were there any topics raised in Alexie’s poem that you didn’t know much about? How is Alexie’s discussion about America different from what you’ve heard in movies or read in books? Who has influenced what you know about this country and its history? What stake do they have in what version of the story you know? Why does your understanding of the past matter?

Once they begin looking critically at various interpretations of history, some students are quick to find inconsistencies. For

Danna, Alexie’s version is “the way it is. Indians had their territory, identity, dreams ripped away from them,” but then at the same time, “Cowboys never seemed to be in the wrong.” Raising students’ awareness of the many competing narratives as well as having them think about who is telling the stories and how that influences the telling help prepare them to understand what Alexie and Eyre were working against as they created *Smoke Signals*. Many students have the background to understand this, though they may not be aware of it without prompting.

After reading both Alexie’s antiheroic and Nelson’s heroic visions of cowboys, Melinda shared one of her experiences:

When I was little I remember watching some old westerns with my family. They would laugh at times in the movie that weren’t really supposed to be funny. I would laugh with them even though I didn’t understand why they were laughing. I came to realize sometime later why they were laughing. The Indians weren’t really Indians and the cowboys didn’t have to reload their guns or even have to aim to bring down three Indians at a time.

Since images like the ones Melinda writes about are still the most familiar portrayals of Indians much of society has to draw on, *Smoke Signals* is a valuable resource for expanding students’ ideas about Native Americans.

After we look at the poem and song lyrics, a second brief previewing activity we do is to help students think through stereotypes about Indians that exist in American cultural lore. We tell students before this activity to bring in a picture or image of an Indian. We want them to spend some time paying attention to where images of Indians appear and how they are portrayed. Students may gather images from books, magazines, online, adver-

tisements, video and audio clips, products they buy or clothing they own, or whatever else they wish. Students who live in an Indian community may bring in actual photographs of friends or family members, though we do not suggest this at first. If you work with American Indian students and no one chooses this option on their own, why no one does so sparks interesting discussion. Images of “real” Indians provide remarkable contrast with the Indian art prints, American Spirit cigarette or Red Man chew ads, or Atlanta Braves baseball hats students otherwise collect.<sup>1</sup>

When students bring in their images, we arrange the artifacts on the wall and on a table at the front of the room. In the center of that wall, we have already posted two large manila envelopes, one labeled “stereotypes” and the other “realities.” Beside them is a large poster paper with two columns also labeled “stereotypes” and “realities.” Once everything is assembled for all to view, we hand out index cards and give students five to ten minutes to look over the images and to think about what else they know or have heard about Indians and to write as many of these ideas as they can think of as one-sentence statements on their cards. Giving a basic example for each side helps students get started (e.g., “All Indians get free money from the government.” / “Members of some tribes get various benefits from their own tribe’s businesses and programs or rights linked to their treaty agreements with the federal government.”). We usually choose to keep responses anonymous so students feel freer to generate ideas they are unsure about and raise assumptions they might feel uncomfortable discussing. There are very good arguments for holding students accountable for what they write (and ensuring that they all contribute), but at this early stage in the work we opt to take off a little pressure to make dealing with difficult issues a bit easier. We

want students to get their ideas and assumptions out in the open because we cannot address misconceptions we aren't aware of. As students write down their ideas, they drop each into whichever envelope they think it belongs. After everyone is finished, the teacher takes one envelope, reads the statements, and asks the class if each is accurately placed as a stereotype or a reality. This allows us to move past duplicate statements and to skip, for now, irrelevant, offensive, or nonproductive statements such as those that are overtly racist without drawing undue attention to them. This is a useful precaution for pacing how much ignorance and controversy to take on at one time.

When the class comes to consensus on each statement, we tape the card under the appropriate column. If no consensus is reached, we post the idea to the side of the chart. We tell students that where we place ideas is not permanent, but throughout the unit we can continue to move the statements around as we learn more.

What students write will vary widely and will be influenced by everything from their age and academic background to their geographical location to the ethnic makeup of the class doing the exercise. Even doing this activity on an Indian reservation with classes of both white and Native students yields mixed results. Some classes are already aware of the many stereotypes of Native American people and can eloquently explain the realities. Other classes can become tense quickly because it's clear they know the "right" answer or what they are expected to say about stereotypes, but it's also clear that their personal experiences or family opinions make them want to speak to the stereotype. In other situations, some students genuinely have no experience with Indian culture (sometimes, surprisingly, even if they've lived on the res-

ervation for years) but do have questions they've been afraid to ask. Regardless of the class makeup, the exercise is a good tool for giving you a basic idea of students' knowledge base.

After all the statements have been placed, each student chooses one from either the stereotype or the reality side to examine further for homework. The next time we meet, students report to the class what they learned and share at least two sources used to gather information. The range of ideas and information students report is generally wide. They might find facts that disprove statements or explanations for origins of some stereotypes, but it is also likely they will find information that supports stereotypes. Not all Indians gamble or earn huge incomes from reservation casinos, but there are some large casinos and a small percentage of tribal people in the United States do have sizable incomes from gaming. Not all Indians drink, but alcoholism is a significant problem on many reservations. As students share what they find, discussion should be carefully moderated to help students sort through what they have discovered and to prevent perpetuation of misconceptions.<sup>2</sup>

## Viewing

To introduce *Smoke Signals* and keep students thinking about the issues we discussed in our previewing activities, we share two quotes from interviews with Alexie:

I just try to write about everyday Indians, the kind of Indian I am who is just as influenced by the Brady Bunch as I am by my tribal traditions, who spends as much time going to the movies as I do going to ceremonies. (Mabrey par. 8)

What's revolutionary or groundbreaking about the film is that the characters in it are Indians and they're fully realized hu-

man beings. They're not just the sidekick, or the buddy, they're the protagonists. Simply having Indians as the protagonists in a contemporary film and placing them within this familiar literary and cinematic structure is groundbreaking. (West and West par. 9)

Before watching the film, each student chooses a specific aspect of filmmaking to focus on while keeping in mind the question: How does this film play into or break down mainstream America stereotypes of Indians?

The different components of filmmaking students pay attention to are cinematic style, character development, music and sound, use of humor, and historical references.

### ***Cinematic Style***

Bringing a story to life in film requires more than strong text. What viewers see makes a huge impact on the viewing experience and ultimately on their opinion of the story. Directors and cinematographers put a lot of work into deciding what will fill the frame. Students evaluate how effectively they have done their jobs. Pay attention to:

- Camera movement: What is the camera angle (above action, below, straight on)? What is the distance of the camera from the action (far shot, medium shot, close-up, extreme close-up)?
- Framing/composition: What is included in each shot? What is left out? How is the main focus of the shot framed?
- Lighting: What is the source? Is it artificial or natural? What is the level of intensity? What direction is it coming from?
- Editing/montage (length of shots, rhythm, relationship of one shot to the next).
- Transitions (dissolve, fade-in/out, splicing) between scenes and

between the flashbacks (from past and present); splicing between two events happening simultaneously.

Alexie criticizes stereotypical Indian images in the movies like the brief flash of one of the main characters in *Powwow Highway* dressed in a full Indian warrior outfit with a tomahawk as he jumps into a fight, or one of the actors in *Thunderheart* turning into a deer (West and West par. 11–12). Though he found these movies more realistic than most in their portrayals of Indian people, he wanted to avoid this type of imagery and these sorts of transitions in *Smoke Signals*. Has he? He also says he is “rarely interested in traditional narrative” and has always been “fascinated with dreams and stories and flashing forward and flashing backward and playing with conventions of time” (West and West par. 26–27). He wants to include those elements, too. Is he successful?

As students view the film, we direct them to jot down three to four single shots or brief scenes that they like, to describe what is memorable about each (What’s the frame? What is cut out? What’s the camera angle? What is the lighting like?), and to tell why they think the shot or scene is effective. What impact does it have on the viewer’s emotional reaction to the situation or the characters?

### ***Character Development***

Just as in written text, filmmakers pay attention to character development so the people in their stories seem real, distinctive, and memorable. According to Mabrey, Alexie wants “to shatter Hollywood’s stereotypes of Indians as Tonto and the noble savage. ‘That’s so tiring. Who wants to be wise, you know? You get carpal tunnel syndrome from carrying the burden of your race,’

Alexie says. ‘I’d like to have villains. I’d like to have goofballs.’ Alexie says he tried to do this with his film *Smoke Signals*. ‘One of the heroes was this geeky, androgynous, verbose, irritating Indian guy’” (qtd. in Mabrey par. 19–23).

We ask students to pay attention to the characters in this movie: “Are these the Indians described on the stereotypes list? If not, what strengths are portrayed by the characters on screen? What characteristics show up?” Students choose one of the main characters (Victor, Arnold, Thomas, or Suzy) and record details about at least three elements of characterization. They look for details of character traits and how they are conveyed. Possibilities to consider:

- Decisions and actions throughout the film
- Appearance: wardrobe/costume, hair, makeup
- Speech: content of dialogue, unique speech patterns, distinct phrases or words
- Personality quirks (like Thomas closing his eyes to tell stories)

After following a chosen character through the film, students decide if the character develops during the course of the film, whether the character’s behavior seems motivated and consistent. They decide whether the character is realistic or caricatured and provide examples to back up their conclusions.

### ***Music and Sound***

Taken for granted by many viewers, a film’s audio track (including both music and the background sounds) plays a huge role in creating the emotional and psychological impact of a film. Aware of how important the music would be to the movie, Alexie even wrote the lyrics to some of the songs and had specific ideas about which genre of music (rock vs. traditional) to include and when.

Some of the musical pieces have English words, western-style intervals and rhythms, as well as traditional Indian singing and drumming. Sounds of cars, wind, and fire might go undetected if they aren't pointed out to students.

We ask students to pay attention to these audio components of the film, to notice whether they are unique, and to describe the impact of the film's sound. Specifically, we ask students to pinpoint three to four specific times when the sound really seems to move the influence, direction, or tone of the story in either a positive or a negative way. Students may focus on song lyrics, music, background noises, voice-over dialogue, etc. For each sound moment chosen, they write a few sentences in which they discuss how the sound track supports or distracts from the story. Students consider whether the sound is surprising or anticipated and whether it reinforces stereotypes or offers something new.

### *Use of Humor*

Alexie tries to break down stereotypes through humor: "I think humor is the most effective political tool out there, because people will listen to anything if they're laughing. . . . Humor is really just about questioning the status quo, that's all it is" (West and West par. 66). Students consider whether he pulls it off in *Smoke Signals*. We ask them to decide whether Alexie's humor allows him to guide audiences into considering important but tough issues by examining the following:

- As you watch, list in a two-column chart both examples of humor and examples of difficult issues from the Indian community that Alexie addresses in the film.
- After the movie ends, look at the lists you've compiled and write a paragraph in which you discuss how well you think Alexie has

balanced these two goals. Does he manage to be both humorous and address important, serious Native issues at the same time? Explain.

### ***Historical References***

Alexie is interested in expanding the version of mainstream western history to include Native American experiences and points of view. His writing and this film provide great materials to help students understand postcolonial ideas as they read and research. All his work is sprinkled with references to important tribal leaders from the past as well as major conflicts and battles. We want students to focus on those included in the film by completing the following activities:

- Keep a running list of references to significant people and events in Indian history. If you aren't sure, write it down and you can check after the film is over.
- Choose two of these references and explain how they are related to what is happening in the film. Why do you think Alexie thinks it is important to include references to the past if the film is taking place in modern times?

After viewing is completed and students have had time (in class or as homework) to write up the details they gathered and conclusions they've drawn while watching, we return once again to our initial question: How does this film play into or break down mainstream America stereotypes of Indians? We give everyone a few minutes to write to that prompt, reminding them to pull details from their viewing to support their ideas, and then we use that work to begin class discussion.

## Wrapping Up: Reexamining Indian Roles in the Story of America

To pull our concluding discussion back to the film, students rewatch Chapter 11 and part of 12. (The entire clip from the beginning until the bus pulls into Phoenix is about 5:45 minutes.) We direct students' attention to two issues (possibly dividing the class in half and assigning one to each section):

### ■ “Real Indians”

What advice does Victor give Thomas? What does he tell him a real Indian is like? Victor slips into a mini-monologue in which he tells Thomas that his current look isn't cutting it. His advice ranges from “you got to be mean if you want any respect” to “an Indian man ain't nothin' without his hair.” Make a list of everything Victor tells Thomas about being an Indian. Why is it important to be a “real” Indian? What does this seem to imply (or directly state) about the consequences of not fulfilling the stereotype?

### ■ “Cowboys Always Win”

Throughout this scene, Thomas keeps repeating that “the cowboys always win.” How does the conflict in this scene echo or make fun of some of those cowboy–Indian conflicts from other films? Is this scene a modern-day take on the cowboy–Indian conflict? Why or why not?

After we discuss these specific scenes, we think again about the focus point (what a “real Indian” is like or that “cowboys always win”) and generalize to the movie as a whole. We use these questions to generate discussion: “What does this movie really show us about real Indians?” “How do the characters we meet compare with the list Victor gives?” “How does this movie com-

pare with others with Indian characters?” “Do the Indians lose yet again here? Why or why not?”

### **Postviewing Extension**

For students to really understand *Smoke Signals* and what Alexie accomplishes, it is helpful for them to look at the ways Indians have been portrayed in other movies. We divide students into groups (about three to five works best). Each group chooses a film to watch together (or on their own schedule and discuss together) in which Indians play a significant role. We pull some possibilities from films Alexie has talked about in interviews or referenced in his creative work, including *The Searchers* (1956), *Powwow Highway* (1989), the Lone Ranger and Tonto movies (a number of titles available), *Thunderheart* (1992), *Little Big Man* (1970), any number of John Wayne films, *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), or *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). Other possibilities might include *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), *War Party* (1988), *Clearcut* (1991), *Black Robe* (1991), *Geronimo* (1993), *Cheyenne Warrior* (1994), *Skins* (2002), or even Disney’s *Pocahontas* (1995). These films have various ratings and like any materials will not all be suitable for all audiences, but all offer much to talk about in terms of Indian portrayals. Many students will also have suggestions of their own.

After choosing a film, students are given the following tasks to complete over the span of two to three class periods:

1. Watch the film, paying attention to the Indian characters portrayed.
2. Write a one-page written response and evaluation. Explain what you liked and thought was well done in the film as well as what you found unimpressive. To help organize your paper, choose

two to three of the elements the class focused on while viewing *Smoke Signals* (cinematic style, character development, music and sound, use of humor, historical references) to comment on and also include one section about which you decide if you could make an argument for the film as a postcolonial text. Bring this to class and be ready to turn it in after using it to guide your discussion with others who watched the same film.

3. After discussing your initial impression of the film with your group, everyone needs to find a different critical review of the film and write a second one-page response paper. Compare the reviewer's ideas with your own, offering at least two specific passages from the film (different from those the reviewer uses) to support your points. Again, bring this to class and be ready to turn it in after using it to guide your group's discussion.
4. Work with your group, giving each member a chance to summarize and share highlights from the review he or she read, emphasizing where you agreed and disagreed with the reviewer.
5. Prepare a group presentation that teaches the rest of the class about the film you've been discussing. Make sure you have all the following components:
  - Overview of film: title, year, director, one- to three-sentence plot summary
  - Professional reviewers' opinions, including one to two very brief quotes from the reviews you read that give the class a good idea of the overall tone of the reviews
  - Your group's opinions of the film and thoughts on its portrayal of Indians
  - Your group's decision on whether the film can be interpreted as a postcolonial text
  - Five-minute (maximum) clip from the actual film with expla-

nation of why the group chose the excerpt and what they think it illustrates

After each group has presented, we debrief by reading Alexie's poem "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel" from *The Summer of Black Widows*. We give each student a copy of the poem and ask them to read it completely through once. Then we have them read it again and decide on one sentence that summarizes the poem's message and one word that describes the poem's tone. Students share their selections and we discuss what Alexie might want readers to think about, realize, or reconsider as they read this poem.

Next, we put a copy of the poem on an overhead and ask students to find as many lines as they can that describe events from any of the movies they watched (*Smoke Signals*, the ones they just presented on, or others they have seen independently in the past) and explain any connections. We underline the lines from the poem they connect with movies. We finish with a reflective writing prompt:

Do you think stereotypes about Indians show up in film? What are they? How does Alexie's film compare with others you have viewed and discussed? Are his portrayals similar or different? How so? Where does he seem to pay homage to these other films? How does he poke fun at them? Reference any specific lines, images, or scenes. Describe any trends in ways Indians are portrayed on screen over time. What evidence of postcolonialism did you find in the films you watched?

### **Multimodal Extensions**

Like Alexie, many of our students already are (albeit amateur) producers of these kinds of texts. It behooves us to develop activities to help our students write more technology-informed, visual

arguments such as inviting them to use features of PowerPoint to construct persuasive visual arguments (beyond the typical ho-hum repetitive delivery organized by the Microsoft PowerPoint wizard); to use iMovie or Movie Maker to edit video clips from the presentations with their own video captures into powerful persuasive visual arguments; or to use Dreamweaver software to produce Web-based articulations of what they have learned in complex, multimodal, multimedia texts. Although some of us worry that the new media are imperiling our students' attention spans, writing skills, and so forth, it is vital in the twenty-first century to celebrate technologies that borrow from the visual artist's instinct for pattern, contrast, unity, and balance and from the poet's ability to posit, to juxtapose, and to condense, as has Alexie with *Smoke Signals*. Doing so enables us and our students to learn to compose using a new and proliferating writing technology in which students are already dabbling and that allows them to write intertextual and hypertextual responses to curricular content developed in striking visual formats. By experimenting with image and sound, students can compose dramatic portrayals that speak strongly about issues of significance to them. Not to do so means to watch as they leave us behind.

## Conclusion

Working with *Smoke Signals* helps students both explore how Native people have been portrayed and think about the authenticity of stories. Alexie chose the title *Smoke Signals* for this film because it conjures stereotypical images of Indians sending smoke signals across the plains with blankets, an image regularly portrayed in the comic strip *Mother Goose and Grimm*, but it also fit the theme of fire that runs through the film. Alexie comments, "in a contemporary sense, smoke signals are about calls of distress,

calls for help. That’s really what this movie is all about” (West and West par. 37). Ultimately, this film sends a powerful signal to viewers that there is more to Indian people than past movies have shown. Movies are, as Oliver Stone has called them, “first drafts.” They are not the complete explanation for anything or the final judgment we leave on an issue, but “they raise questions and inspire students to find out more” (Carnes 306). Viewing *Smoke Signals* helps students begin that inquiry and think more deeply about the power of visual representation to influence understanding.

## Notes

1. Students can view images posted in the archives of The American Indian College Fund at [http://www.collegefund.org/news/ad\\_sari.html](http://www.collegefund.org/news/ad_sari.html). The archives house a series of “Have You Ever Seen a Real Indian?” print ads that ran from 2001 through 2006 featuring accomplished American Indian professionals and tribal college students as a way to portray a contemporary and accurate image of Native American people.

2. Devon Mihesuah’s *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities* is an excellent resource for this activity. Mihesuah is Choctaw and a history professor at Northern Arizona University. The book addresses twenty-four common misconceptions about American Indians. The text is accessible to students; more important, however, teachers with little background in Native issues will find it incredibly helpful to read this book before trying to implement this activity in the classroom.

**S**herman Alexie is the premiere Native American writer of the twenty-first century. His work—often charismatic, insistent, and opinionated—has earned accolades and awards, including the 2007 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature.

This volume in NCTE’s High School Literature Series examines ways to teach the works of Alexie, including his film *Smoke Signals*; the short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*; several of Alexie’s poems; the novels *Reservation Blues* and *Flight*; and the National Book Award winner *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Coauthors Heather E. Bruce, Anna E. Baldwin, and Christabel Umphrey contextualize Alexie’s work in the larger body of works written in English by Native American authors, but they also let Alexie’s own voice shine through.

As with all volumes in the series, student samples are included, along with a chapter that excerpts selections from pertinent literary criticism to guide teachers in their study of Alexie’s work. A companion website, <http://alexie.website.googlepages.com>, provides additional instructional materials, including an introduction to Native American literatures.

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