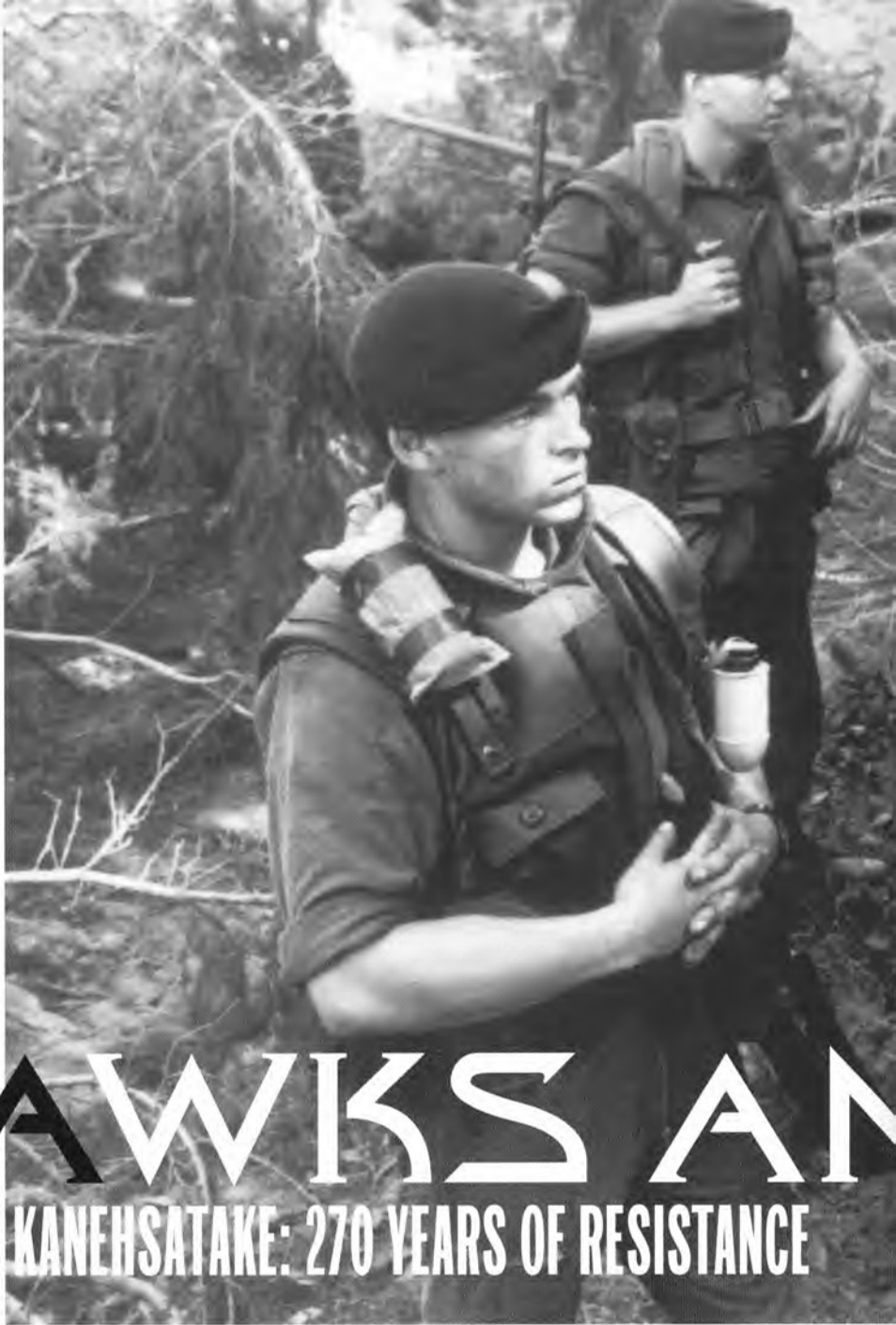


OBOMSAWIN

The media's overall point of view was grounded in the institutional authority of government and law enforcement

By Sandy Greer

MOHAWKS AND ALANIS OBOMSAWIN'S *KANEHSATAKE: 270 YEARS OF RESISTANCE*



A critique of *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* begs important and timely questions: about “voice”—that is, who speaks for whom; about the legitimacy of “point of view”; about the recognition that there are no absolute truths possible in the media; about threats to freedom of expression; and about the role and responsibility of a journalist and media critic such as

myself. *Kanehsatake*, a feature-length documentary by Abenaki First Nations filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin on the Oka crisis, must be addressed in the larger landscape of these media issues, to explain its strengths and flaws.

First, let's reflect on the point made by independent producer Sylvia Sweeney (*In the Key of Oscar*), that television viewers lack confidence in journalism. Sweeney spoke from the audience, at the Festival of Festivals' Symposium '93 panel in Toronto, “Hot Docs: Real Life Dramas, When Does Truth Become

Fiction.” She said, “We've got to start qualifying *who* we are. We have to qualify *how* we do what we do as broadcasters and independent producers.”

In regard to who I am, I am a non-Native woman who has written for both the Native and mainstream media for 12 years, primarily to inform and educate readers about Native cultures and concerns. This quest has provided me with another mirror through which to look at western cultural institutions, including the commercial media industry. I have stayed in indigenous communities in the



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northern territories and most provinces, and attended many elders' gatherings, conferences and ceremonies. More specific to *Kanehsatake*, I have listened to accounts of the 1990 Mohawk crisis directly from Mohawks in all factions, as well as Mohawk journalist Dan David's personal testimony at the 1991 Native American Journalists' Conference (NAJA) in Denver. I have read four books on the subject, re-examined *The Globe and Mail* news accounts for most of the 78-day resistance, and reviewed tv news reports from the period.

As Obomsawin herself declared at a Toronto press conference, "There are many stories to Kanehsatake, or Oka, or Kahnawake during the crisis—thousands of stories." Questioning the CBC's refusal to broadcast her film unless its employees re-edit it, she asked, "Why does it only have to be CBC that can tell the story? Why can't we tell our story of what we experienced there?" Similar criticisms of the commercial tv networks were voiced by other Symposium '93 panelists and audience members.

However, what bothered me at this

panel discussion was the assumption, voiced too often, that somehow news journalism is closer to "reality" and "the truth" than point of view documentaries. Panelist and director John N. Smith (*The Boys of St. Vincent*) challenged this assumption. "The world of journalism is no different from the world of documentary filmmaking or dramatic filmmaking," he said. "There are people who do things in a very narrow, safe, cautious way. There are people who express opinions that inflame."

I suggest, moreover, that if more

media storytellers could acknowledge that each and every one of us constructs reality, and if the major broadcasters and other gatekeepers would own up to their own systemic bias about whose voices they consider legitimate, then perhaps broadcasters and critics would not get their knickers in so many knots about point of view documentary films.

Indeed, point of view documentaries can contribute particular insights and a type of integrity lacking in news stories created from less well-informed, and equally biased, perspectives. Obomsawin's *Kanehsatake*, in this regard, has a vitally significant point of view on the "Mohawk crisis" which the mainstream media, with rare exception, distorted and misrepresented.

Obomsawin expressed her own mandate up front, at the Toronto press conference. "I just knew it had to be documented by a Native person," she said. She first heard about the "shootout" at the Mohawk community of Kanehsatake on the radio immediately following the arrival of armed Sûreté du Québec (SQ) to end a four-month roadblock on a dirt road by Mohawks (who were trying to stop expansion of a golf course through their burial grounds). She added, "I document people on location. I look, in my films, for a place that they (Native people) can be together. I will never do propaganda on the infighting or the hate one has towards the other, because that is the most horrifying thing that people give each other. I hope that this film will provide hope and some understanding for a possible new beginning."

In answer to a question whether Obomsawin believed that media reports were exaggerated to reduce legitimacy of what was happening at Oka, the filmmaker continued, "The public and media played on infighting and ruining people's individual lives, which seems to happen in this country, and I'm very allergic to it. The government plays on this separation between clans and groups of people, and that makes us very weak." Indeed, my review of the mainstream media's coverage of the crisis demonstrated to me that its point of view communicated the message that the Mohawk standoff was *not* justified, and that government and police/army forces *were* justified in their actions.

This bias in the mainstream news reporting process is enough reason to point out the critical need for Native perspectives to be heard. *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* provides one perspective, and does heighten public aware-

ness about how Native people in North America view their position today and why a growing number of them feel compelled to stop—with physical force as a last resort when necessary—further incursions by the "dominant culture" upon their lands and cultural systems. This, I suggest, is the main theme of this powerful, provocative film.

Other themes highlighted in *Kanehsatake* include: human and civil rights violations; racism once covert, now increasingly overt; and threats to the freedom of the press through the use of the Canadian armed forces. Clear evidence is provided throughout Obomsawin's film, including *The Globe and Mail's* Geoffrey York's on-camera statement (interviewed following his departure from behind the Mohawk barricades): "I think the thing that's the most unbelievable is that in a country like Canada, we're allowing the army to tell us what can be published in our newspapers and what can be put on our nightly news." *Kanehsatake* shows many other scenes that document how journalists' supplies were cut off and almost all phone lines cut, while the army tried to seize journalists' tapes.

Enough has been written about how all parties—governments (federal and provincial), Mohawks, the SQ, and army—manipulated the media and vice versa. It can be argued, however, that the army was the most successful information manager, producing its own slick video of the events.

Not just the army and the SQ, but also the Mohawk Warriors at times did not cooperate with journalists. As Dan David stated at the NAJA conference, "No one behind the barricades wanted the media to get a look at all the defenses, or to see how pitifully small the community really was, how few people, how very few arms." (David stayed in his home community of Kanehsatake throughout the crisis, not on assignment, but, instead, as a food volunteer.)

Meanwhile, *The Globe and Mail's* Hugh Windsor bestowed legitimacy on the army video, in writing for example, "Intelligence officers estimated in the video that there are at least 200 armed Warriors behind the barriers." Many media reports perpetuated this assumption, yet a later *Globe and Mail* report revealed that army searches were turning up more disposable diapers than weapons. But the damage had already been done in news reports, which repeatedly quoted officials who criminalized all the Native people behind the barricades.

Dan David clarified that several people behind the barricades were not Mohawk Warriors or even Mohawks, but other First Nations supporters. The journalists, he added, who bothered to get the Mohawk story from behind the barricades got a truer story: "not the one foisted upon them by Mohawks pro or anti-Warrior, but the one told to them by good-old-everyday-average-trying-to-keep-your-ass-in-one-piece Mohawks."

This perspective is the power of Obomsawin's film, which focuses on the impact of the SQ and army actions, the voices of the Mohawk people directly affected in Kanehsatake and Kahnawake, as well as the non-Native Quebecers, and supporters who travelled to a nearby peace camp. Her film also provides a broader picture by showing that not all Oka or Chateaugay residents were against the Mohawks.

Furthermore, *Kanehsatake* reveals the army's many faces, sometimes a willingness to negotiate reasonably with the Mohawk leaders behind the barricades, and other times engaged in psychological warfare and denials of their own wrongdoings. Obomsawin said that she did try to speak to the army privates (who would not answer her), and she also sought permission to interview an officer in charge, Major Alain Tremblay. "First they said, perhaps. Then they said, no. I asked them to give it to me in writing, and they refused." She continued, "Watching these soldiers, sometimes they looked so young. I felt they could be my sons. It was incredible to have seen them in that kind of space, the control and the confrontation. Some of them I think they were afraid themselves. It made me feel very sad."

I asked Obomsawin about how she coped with harassment. Didn't it influence her feelings towards the police and military? "It happened all the time and every day. I kept reminding myself that I was there to document what was happening to the Mohawks. I didn't give myself any time to have those kinds of feelings. On the contrary, I spent a lot of time talking to policemen. I was very patient. Even if I was insulted, I never turned any insult back, because I was there to do a certain job." Yet, even behind the barricades, she said, "I felt very much on my own."

Kanehsatake provides a window for numerous individual stories otherwise ignored or neutralized in mainstream media accounts. Even in their telling, the storytellers unveil the trauma that lingers, such as Michel Trudeau and his

small son, Yannick, who were mistaken for Indians and terrorized by police, or Gaston Tardiff's embarrassed look at relating how the SQ forced him and several women he was escorting through Oka to strip side-by-side in the street.

The film also includes various Mohawk accounts of brutality, the most poignant concerning the Mohawk Warrior named "Spud Wrench" whom the viewer sees totally battered and bloodied after a visit by army personnel late one night. On the next day, *The Globe and Mail* mentioned the attack on "Spud Wrench." It was reported as a sub-theme within a larger story. On the same day, a second story carried a sub-heading: "Soldiers win respect, praise in public-relations battle." Also on the same day, a *Globe and Mail* editorial column entitled "The use of violence advances no cause" quotes a speech by former Justice Minister Kim Campbell on the threat of violence by the Mohawk Warriors. I suppose that's called "balanced" reporting.

Yet, what becomes obvious in analyzing any media source is that each and every one has a point of view, albeit more systemic and insidious. Regardless of the occasional guest columns that outlined reasons why the Mohawk standoff happened and some sincere attempts by staff reporters to paint the complex cultural Mohawk landscape, the media's overall point of view was grounded in the institutional authority of government and law enforcement. Editorial columns throughout the Mohawk crisis represented these institutions as un-problematic, and in turn de-legitimized any challenge to their failings.

Similarly, the original land claim issue of Kanehsatake went through a quick metamorphosis, which Dan David outlines: "The media changed the story and began to focus on the 'criminal and terrorist' Warrior Society, and began to push the government line, that basically this wasn't about land and cultural survival and the enraged reaction to a brutal



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raid. No, it was about bingo, bullets, and guns."

It is no wonder Obomsawin refuses to fall in line with mainstream media which feeds on fragmented information that focuses on human conflict and divisiveness. Instead, in *Kanehsatake* she chooses to show those moments when people came together for the sake of their children's future. Her film shows the resolute determination, patience, and abilities of persuasion among the women and the older men, Warriors, and spiritual healers to try and contain the volatile passions of the younger men. Yet, paradoxically this representation of a homogeneous and harmonious group is also the film's main shortcoming.

While I respect Obomsawin's reasons for focusing on the elements of unity, part of my responsibility as a journalist is to raise the question that I know many viewers will raise. Obomsawin does so only in one scene: "A number of houses in the area are vandalized by various peo-

ple. In one case, two Warriors are suspected. Needless to say, the community feels this is very bad." As a viewer, I sensed a need for fuller accountability.

I concluded that only a Native who was behind the barricades could speak to this difficult question. Tehakarorens, a Mohawk Warrior who lives with his wife, Kahentiiosta (who appears in the film's opening moments), and their children in Kahnawake, agreed to an interview.

"There were a lot of incidents," he recalled. "We're human. Not everyone can handle pressure the same in a crisis. Some of them didn't know how to deal with it. We've got a cross-section of society, like everybody else. We're a microcosm of any other population of people that have problems. So, if you want to accent that—I thought the same too. It can't be all on our side, the way she (Obomsawin) projected it in the film." (It must be added, some Warriors also made redress for wrongs by others, in one case returning stolen

goods taken by others, and in another case escorting out of their territory two reporters caught vandalizing.)

Tehakarorens identified the blind spot in mainstream society. "They don't see the need, the way we see the need, of what we believe in. This is what this film is trying to express—that there is a deep-rooted history in what we are trying to do—not because we'd like to do it, but because we don't have any choice. We can't pick and choose our culture. We only have one culture. We have an influence from another culture that is destroying us. We had people from all over the country doing ceremonies for us, for peace, not for war. They all knew the reasons why we did what we did."

Indeed, *Kanehsatake* communicates clearly the convictions and resolute determination of Native peoples to resist ongoing neglect and violations of their rights •

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