

## **Abstract**

Miles, John. Not Corn Pollen or Eagle Feathers: Native American Stereotypes and Identity in Sherman Alexie's Fiction." (Under the direction of Dr. Thomas Lisk)

Ward Churchill, Michael Dorris and others have criticized filmmakers and writers alike for their construction of a Native American identity that is, according to Dorris, "lodged safely in the past." Dorris's "Indians in Aspice" and "The Indian on the Shelf" and Churchill's *Fantasies of the Master Race* identify the notion of the "suspended or static Indian." Coupled with these critical writings, the practice of the use of stock footage in the Westerns of the 1920s and 30s work to create a Native American that is nothing more than a replaying of stereotypes.

Sherman Alexie's fiction is aware of the stereotypes that writers and filmmakers, as well as readers, hold regarding Native Americans. In his fiction he works to subvert the stereotypes that others have held and created. His three collections of short stories *The Toughest Indian in the World*, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Ten Little Indians* provide examples of his repeated work to undermine the use of Native American stereotypes in film and literature.

NOT CORN POLLEN OR EAGLE FEATHERS: NATIVE AMERICAN  
STEREOTYPES AND IDENTITY IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S FICTION

by  
JOHN DOUGLAS MILES

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
North Carolina State University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURES

Raleigh

2004

APPROVED BY:

---

---

Chair of Advisory Committee

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my wife, my daughter, and my family. Without their love and support this project would not have been possible. And also, to Grandpa Ellis whose death before my completion of this degree was one of the saddest moments in my life.

## **Biography**

John D. Miles was born in Gastonia, North Carolina, April 7, 1975. After living in various places throughout the Southeastern United States, he settled in Cherryville, North Carolina. He attended Cherryville High School and received a BA in English with Secondary Education Certification from The University of North Carolina at Wilmington. In May of 2004 he received his MA in Literature from North Carolina State University.

John lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with his wife Brenda, his daughter Abigail Skye and his dogs, Jake and Sadie. In the fall of 2004, John will begin his PhD at the University of New Mexico.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr. Lee Schweninger from UNC-Wilmington for helping me discover Native American Literature and work through my stereotypes of an entire culture. Also, Dr. Deborah Wyrick for letting me further pursue my interests and begin my understanding of the “Suspended Indian.” And finally my sincerest thanks to Dr. Tom Lisk for his help and support throughout this project.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Introduction.....	2
The Suspended Indian.....	3
<i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven</i> .....	13
<i>The Toughest Indian in the World</i> .....	38
<i>Ten Little Indians</i> .....	56
Works Cited.....	73

## Preface

The summer before my junior year in college I visited Turtle Island Preserve in Deep Gap, North Carolina. I spent two months living in a teepee and practicing other such “Indian”<sup>1</sup> activities. The culmination of the week was a sweat lodge in which I sat until I almost passed out in search of visions. For months after my leave in the woods I searched for more opportunities to be “Indian.” I even went as far as doing solos in the woods to really have visions—to truly be Indian.

After these months of searching for the Indian in me I went back to school and enrolled in a Native American Literature class. I was quick to point out my knowledge of Indians—their dismissal of linear time, their Mother Earth spirituality, and all other things I had picked up along the way from movies and literature. The class shed new light on my constructed Indianness and I spent the rest of the semester peeling back layers of my notions of what that meant. In the texts for that class, I began to understand the construction of race as it relates to Indian identity. We read N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, Susan Powers, Leslie Marmon Silko, and others, working through the stereotypes that most of us in the class had accepted as truth regarding Indian identity.

One author we did not read in the class whom I have become interested in on my own was Sherman Alexie. My interest in Alexie began with seeing his movie, *Smoke Signals*. The movie’s portrayal of Indians as contemporary people—not loincloth-clad Indians—opened my eyes further to the treatment of Indians in literature, even in the literature by Indians. Not until I read Alexie was I exposed to a Native author who was

---

<sup>1</sup> For my purposes here the words “Indian,” “Native American,” and “American Indian” will be used interchangeably.

not concerned with the prevalent internal dilemma of Indians inability to assimilate into American society and their inevitable trek back to tradition. Instead Alexie offers fiction that works to shape a contemporary identity for his Indian character.

## **Introduction**

For many years television, film and literature have presented Indians in a manner that lends itself to criticism. From the early days of American film, Indians have been portrayed in a static or suspended state. In the 1920s and 30s in American film, The Western was the dominate genre. This genre featured the consummate battle between good and evil—the cowboy versus the Indian. In the late 1920s MGM went on location to the Wind River Reservation near Langer, Wyoming, to film *War Paint* (1926). The ranger footage of Indians riding across the River was used again in McCoy's *End of the Trail* (Columbia 1932) and it became, "one of the most oft used 'stock footage' and can be seen in dozens of Westerns including *The Singing Vagabond* (Gene Autry, Republic 1935), *Overland Express* (Buck Jones, Columbia, 1938), *Roll Wagons Roll* (Tex Ritter, Monogram, 1939), . . . and *The Law Rides Again* (Trail Blazers, Monogram, 1943)" ("The Indians"). Using this the same footage over a long period of time accomplished two things: one, it saved the film industry money; and two, it constructed a view of Indians for filmgoers. Consciously or subconsciously, viewers were given the same picture of Indians over and over, therefore constructing the Indian in a suspended state—the same Indian throughout time. This representation subverted the individuality of the Indians by placing them in a constructed set.

Michael Dorris, Gerald Vizenor, Ward Churchill, Louis Owens and others have written about the concept of "the suspended Indian" in literature and film and its effects

on Indian culture. In the first chapter, I provide an overview of some of these authors' interpretations of the stereotypical representation of Indians in film and literature.

In subsequent chapters, I analyze the works of Sherman Alexie that are in direct opposition to the "suspended Indian." In order to deconstruct the false representations, Alexie creates characters who are individualized as Spokane Indians—some who live on the reservations and others who live in Seattle. By creating individuals that have some of the characteristics of one tribe, Alexie creates characters who defy stereotypical representation.

### **The Suspended Indian**

Gerald Vizenor is a mixed-blood Anishinaabe Indian. His writing career has spanned over 30 years and he has lent himself to poetry, fiction, criticism, and retelling of traditional tales. He is most often noted for his use of the traditional trickster character in his experimental, postmodern fiction. Gerald Vizenor's criticism of the stereotypes of Indians is often cited for its obtuseness. He has created a critical language and plays with it in his discussion of stereotypes. Below, I seek to work through Vizenor's abstract language to begin to decipher the notion of the "suspended Indian."

To begin, Vizenor defines his "postindian" in an interview "Discursive Narratives:"

The *indian* is the absence, natives the presence, and an absence because the name is a discoverable, and historical simulation of distinct native cultures. Columbus warred, scored, rocked, talked, and coveted the other, and so we come around five centuries later to say, You made a mistake, and how ironic your discovery.

Surely, five centuries as a discoverable is enough of victimry. Casino politics is the game now, and the romantic, tragic poses of the *indian* are not as convincing as they were a decade ago. Yes, the pose of the natural ecologist endures, but most natives are wiser to the simulations. The point is that we are long past the colonial invention of the word *indian*. We come after the invention, and we are the postindians. That says more about who we are not, which is significant in identity politics, and nothing about who we are or might become as postindians.

(84)

Vizenor is working against the binary opposition, Indian and white. He tries to undermine the determination of “Indian” as a defining word for all natives. He is intensely at odds with definitions that point to a collective identity as opposed to individual tribal names.

The word “Indian” presents a picture is presented in the mind of the listener—a constructed view of what an Indian should be. Gerald Vizenor’s writings at once recognize the pictures that come to mind and identify where they come from. He also notes that

The representations of the past are more than mere human mimesis in the prenarrative dimensions of tribal lives, and more than the aesthetic remains of reason in the literature of dominance. The posers of course, must concentrate on the sources of incoherence that trace causation in transitive histories. Simulations of the tribal real and the colonial arrogance that precedes a tribal referent are the most common representations in histories. The simulations of manifest manners

are new burdens in the absence of the real and the imposture of presence.

(“Shadow Survivance” 63-64)

Vizenor sees the representations of Indians in art as mere simulations that have taken over the real. Vizenor’s representative Indian is the tool for oppression working against the contemporary Native. Accounts of Indians in film and literature have constructed a view of Indians that Vizenor says

has come to mean Indianness, the conditions that indicate the once-despised tribes and, at the same time, the extreme notions of an exotic outsider; these conditions are advocated as real cultures in the world. The simulations of the outsider as the other subserve racial and cultural dominance. Race is an invention, not a noticeable genetic presence, and cultural traits are brute concoctions of the social sciences. (“Introduction” 1)

These “concoctions” are evidenced in films and literature by non-native authors. Readers and writers of texts are bombarded with views of Indians that again place them in the category of the “other.” Vizenor, in his discussions with A. Robert Lee, defines the representations of Indians in film and literature as “postindian simulations.” These simulations “show the natives dressed to the traditional nines, wise and noble, always daring and inspired about nature, the weather, and their communities” (“Discursive Narratives” 86).

Vizenor’s postindian simulations are “the other of manifest manners, the absence of real tribes, the inventions in the literature of dominance” (“Double Others” 55).

Invented representations allow writers to prey on the stereotypes of Natives to create an idea of what an Indian is. According to Lee,

[Vizenor's] gaze. . .has lowered even more upon each Euro-American projection of "the Indian." One focus would be the literary romance figures, good and bad 'Indians,' [. . .] These, in all their beckoning charm or fascination, remained imagined "Indians," a kind of vast textual silhouette or storytelling puppetry. (Lee 3-4)

Vizenor's writings, both fiction and non-fiction, work against many notions of the constructed Indian. His trickster narratives unmask the presentations through sarcastic humor and wit to identify and destroy the ". . .mix of romanticized victimry and belief in Indians as fixed (historically or otherwise)" (Lee 4).

Gerald Vizenor outlines the definitive view of the Indian as a static simulation of the real. In his view the representations of the Natives in film and literature have broken down the relationship between the word "Indian" and the real Indian. This sign-signifier breakdown allows simulations to take hold and become more than representations—they come to be Natives. The images relayed in fiction and literature construct a specific Indian that is in no way representative of any of the tribal identities in America today. Indians are forced to occupy a space constructed through false representation.

Lewis Owens is of Choctaw, Cherokee and Irish American heritage. He is noted critic and writer on Indian writing. In his "Introduction to Indian Novels," outlines the troubles and concerns connected with Native writers.

In their fiction American Indian novelists confront, inevitably and absorbingly, this question of identity. This issue of contextual identity is one virtually every contemporary Native American—mixed blood or full blood is aware of. (Owens 5)

This “contextual identity” that Owens speaks of is the stereotypical representation of Indians in literature. The context is one in which the American Indian novelist must work against the suspended Indian—the concocted view of Indians rooted in stereotypical representation. Just the word “Indian” is troublesome because “perhaps no other utterance in American language is so ‘enveloped in an obscuring mist,’ so “entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents” (Owens 7). Owens is aware, as Vizenor is, that the representation of Indians is overwhelmingly stereotypical and that it is the charge of “Native American writing” to “attempt to recover identity and authenticity” (Owens 11).

Michael Dorris, a mixed-blood Indian, is a critic who has suffered mixed reactions from the Indian literature establishment. His biting criticisms of literature and film representations of Indians have been welcomed, but his book *The Broken Chord*, recounting his and his wife Louise Erdrich’s adoption of a child with fetal alcohol syndrome, suffered harsh criticism from some in the Indian literary community because of its perceived perpetuation of the firewater myth—that somehow alcoholism is an Indian problem.

Dorris’ essay “Indians in Aspic” examines the notion of the suspended Indian in the movie *Dances with Wolves*. Dorris claims that the only Indian that serves society today is the 19<sup>th</sup> century guide Indian—“lodged safely in the past, wrapped neatly in the blankets of history” (Dorris 1). Indians “in business suits, men and women with laptop computers and perfect English” (Dorris 1) are not portrayed in art because, like many characters in literature, Indians occupy two separate time spans at the same time. Indians are on the one hand alive and well and living in various places throughout America and

abroad, participating in the contemporary world; on the other hand they become their representations, in movies such as *Last of the Dogmen*, *Pocahontas*, and *Dances with Wolves*. It is not popular to represent Indians as they exist today because that is not what people want to see. Though they are portrayed one stock way in literature, they are also trying to survive in a time that doesn't prefer to accept their contemporary reality.

Dorris proposes that in most films Natives are not represented as they are today; rather they are constructed as the teepee dweller of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the spiritual guide to the white man looking for guidance. His core criticism of *Dances with Wolves* is that

Mr. Costner follows in a long tradition of literary and cinematic heroes who have discovered Indians. Robinson Crusoe did it off the coast of Brazil, Natty Bumppo did in New York State and everyone from Debra Paget ("Broken Arrow," 1950) and Natalie Wood ("The Searchers" 1956) to Dustin Hoffman ("Little Big Man" 1970) and Richard Harris ("A Man Called Horse," 1970) has done in Hollywood . . . American Indian society, whatever its virtues and fascinations as an arena for Euro-American consciousness-raising, is definitely past tense. ("Indians in Aspic")

Identifying this common thread of the treatment of American Indians in film further solidifies Dorris' argument regarding the suspended state that they occupy in literature as well as film.

Another of Dorris' essays that unmasks the stereotypes of Indians is "Crazy Horse Malt Liquor" in which he writes, "For five hundred years flesh and blood Indians have been assigned the role of a popular culture metaphor" ("Crazy Horse Malt Liquor" 108). This metaphor is so prevalent in society that

Everywhere you look such respects are paid: the street names in woodsy, affluent subdivisions, mumbo jumbo in ersatz male-bonding weekends and Boy Scout jamborees, geometric fashion statements, weepy anti-littering public service announcements. (“Crazy Horse Malt Liquor” 107)

Popular culture’s treatment of certain images of Indians has done nothing for Indians’ identity. Taking Indians from the present to the past shows how “such honoring relegates Indians to the long ago and thus makes them magically disappear from public consciousness and conscience” (“Crazy Horse Malt Liquor” 108). Dorris points out the suspended notion of the Indian identity—in popular culture the only good Indian is not a real flesh and blood Indian but a mere representation.

Dorris further explains the suspended Indian in his essay “Indians on the Shelf.” Dorris describes a foreign visitor to his house who admits that “He had never met ‘real’ Indians before,” so he “was interested and curious about every detail” (“Indians on the Shelf” 123). Dorris takes the metaphor from the title further to show the way in which Indians are, at least in the minds of many non-Indians, more a metaphor than a reality. Dorris searches the past for the beginnings of the life on the shelf:

Part of the problem may well stem from the long-standing tendency of European or Euro-American thinkers to regard Indians as fundamentally and profoundly different, almost not human, motivated more often by mysticism than by ambition, charged more by unfathomable visions than by intelligence or introspection. (“Indians on the Shelf” 127)

According to Dorris, “Indians” cannot be understood as long as they are nothing more than a caricature of stereotypes and assumptions.

Indian motifs have inspired hippies, Ralph Lauren designs, and the Boy Scouts of America. But flesh and blood Native Americans have rarely participated in or benefited from such commercial exploitations, though their recognition factor, as they say on Madison Avenue, outranks, on a world scale, that of Santa Claus, Mickey Mouse, or Coca-Cola. (“Indians on the Shelf” 124)

Dorris asserts that Indians are only useful when they occupy the 19<sup>th</sup> century teepee or “magnets for our sympathy” (“Dances with Indians” 264). The real 20<sup>th</sup> century natives are useless,

unless they talk “Indian”. . . , ooze nostalgia for bygone days, and come bedecked with metallic or beaded jewelry, many native people who hold positions of respect and authority within their own communities are disappointments to non-Indians whose standards of ethnic validity are based on misperceptions of Pocahontas, Squanto, or Tonto. (“Indians on the Shelf” 124-5)

Ward Churchill, the well-known Indian writer and activist, is no stranger to criticizing Indian representation in film and literature. His critiques outline a systematic pattern of colonization of American Indians that began with the first settlers of America. In “Fantasies of the Master Race,” Churchill writes,

The cinematic depiction of indigenous peoples in America is objectively racist at all levels. This observation encompasses not only the more than two thousand Hollywood movies featuring or at least touching upon such subject matters over the years, but the even greater number of titles made for television. In this, film is linked closely to literature of both the fictional and ostensibly nonfictional varieties, upon which most scripts are based. It is thus fair and accurate to

observe that all modes of projecting images and attendant conceptualizations of native people to the “mainstream” public fit the same mold. Moreover, it is readily observable that within the confines of this mold are included only the narrowest and most negative range of graphic/thematic possibilities. (167)

Churchill is conveying, as Dorris, Vizenor and Owens previously have, the negative images of Indians that American film and literature have portrayed in film. In his essay Churchill provides an exhaustive compilation of films that have left American Indians little more than mythic identity. He notes that fiction writers and filmmakers are not out to capture the reality of the indigenous people; “Rather, it seems that the current goal of literature concerning Indians is to create them, if not out of whole cloth then from only the bare minimum of facts needed . . .” (“Literature and the Colonization of American Indians” 15).

Churchill’s biting criticism of American Literature and Film shows writers’ and filmmakers’ accomplishments to be little more than creating an Indian that fits one role within film and literature. He refers to the “space/time compression” that Hollywood has imposed upon Indians (“Fantasies of the Master Race: The Cinematic Colonization of American Indians” 172), which produces the suspended Indian that Dorris speaks of. Churchill demonstrates how American literature and film have created an Indian identity for their own use, and have confined (read colonized) Indians to a particular space and time and therefore construct an image of the Indian that is little more than (to borrow a phrase from Dorris) an “Indian on the shelf.” According to Churchill, “The representation—indeed *misrepresentation* is a more accurate word—of Indigenous people

began with the advent of English colonization of the Western Hemisphere” (“Literature and the Colonization of American Indians”).

The “suspended Indian” concept manifest in film and literature leaves the Indian writer a choice: either participate in the projection of the stereotypes or use the stereotypes as tools to circumvent the expected Indian character. In his fiction Sherman Alexie has chosen the latter.

In an interview with John Purdy, Sherman Alexie admits to being in the business of turning stereotypes of Indians inside out, especially while writing the screenplay to *Smoke Signals*, based on his story “This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona.” He says,

We told the story but at the same time it is also very subversive, to take on “Indian Cinema” and the images in the movies: about the Warriors, about storytelling, there’s all sorts of little jokes along the way about the ways Indians get viewed in the movies, and in culture, as we’re telling the road movie stories. I’m hoping it will kill, make it impossible for anybody to make this type of movie again [stereotypical Indian portrayals]. (“Crossroads”)

Alexie spells out here his definite goal in writing *Smoke Signals*, but all his fiction begins in some way with this subversion and continues with the shaping of a new Indian identity—something he says rivals many “people pretending to be ‘traditional,’ all these academic professors lying in university towns, who rarely spend any time on a reservation,” which he “thinks . . . is dangerous and detrimental” (“Crossroads”).

Asserting these ideas in the short stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *The Toughest Indian in the World*, and *Ten Little Indians*, Alexie has created a

lens through which to examine his fiction as a tool to view the stereotypes wrongly imposed on Indians and also to shape an identity in opposition to the “traditional” Indian stereotypes.

***The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven***

My first impression of Alexie came from his volume *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, from which I have taught the story “This is what it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” for the past three years. This story, along with the movie *Smoke Signals* based on its plot, exposes the stereotypes that have been associated with Indians since the histories of John Smith and, according to Alexie, the fiction of early Indian writers. In an interview with John Purdy, Sherman Alexie states his claim on what his literature is supposed to accomplish:

I want to take Indian away from that [the “traditional”], and away from the people who own it now.

A lot of younger writers are starting to write like me—writing like I do, in a way, not copying me, but writing about what happens to them, not about what they wish was happening. They aren’t writing wish fulfillment books, they’re writing books about reality. How they live, and who they are, and what they think about. Not about who they wish they were. The kind of Indian they wish they were. They are writing about the kind of Indian they are. (“Crossroads” 8)

Alexie says, this writing about the “Indian they are” is in reaction to the place Native American Literature has been stuck. His criticism of the Native American author himself is new criticism—a criticism of the treatment of American Indians by other Indian

authors. He even indicts N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize-winning *House Made of Dawn*.

To attack *House* is at the core of Alexie's argument because it is the quintessential text in American Indian Literature, noted for its role as the beginning of what many term the Native American Renaissance. *House Made of Dawn* recounts the story of Abel, an Indian returning from war to find he is unable to live in the white world. Through ceremony he is able to achieve some understanding of how he is supposed to live: he must go back to the traditions of his people. This back-to-tradition story set the paradigm that many Indian authors have followed.

Alexie, intent on reinventing the paradigm, presents characters who are modern representations of Indians. Their struggles are different from Abel's, and the solutions they find to understand their identity are different too. Alexie is aware of this dilemma of the contemporary Indian, even going so far as to claim to be "as influenced by 'Three's Company' as I am by powwows. I think I'm actually the first practitioner of 'The Brady Bunch' school of Native American literature" (NPR Interview). The characters in Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* are Indians who do not fit the traditional mold of Indian characters—neither the static representation of the white films and literature nor the back-to-tradition mold outlined in many of the works by Indian authors. Alexie works against formerly-held stereotypes to mold a new, uniquely Spokane identity.

Alexie's story "A Drug Called Tradition" calls into question the very notion of what it means to be an Indian. The frame is the story of three young Indian men, Victor,

Thomas and Junior, who ditch a party to take a new drug: tradition. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the storyteller, sets the scene for us:

Three Indian boys are drinking Diet Pepsi and talking out by Benjamin Lake. They are wearing only loincloths and braids. Although it is the twentieth century and planes are passing overhead, the Indian boys have decided to be real Indians tonight. (“A Drug Called Tradition” 20)

This picture painted by Thomas represents at least two things. One, it recounts a scene that could very well be on any wall in any home that has representations of Indians in art; and two, it is the juxtaposition of life of the past with life in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Indian, a life balancing the two worlds—traditional and contemporary. The Diet Pepsi beside the loincloths is the physical manifestation of the internal struggle that Indians face. The boys’ journey from the party to the riverbank and the visions that occur there are a metaphor for the struggle of the contemporary Indian.

The party they attend is at Thomas’ house because Thomas has just made a lot of money from the power company. Alexie sets the frame of the story with this party because, “When Indians make lots of money from corporations that way, we can all hear our ancestors laughing in the trees. But we never can tell whether they’re laughing at the Indians or the white” (13). Here Alexie is proposing that the Indians on the reservation are out of touch with their ancestors, and as representatives of this culture the boys are forced to only get in touch with their Indian heritage through a “drug,” an escape from reality.

The characters Alexie has created are aware of the stereotypes that are commonly associated with them. They are working to make fun of and unmask the traditional

conception of the Indian character. One exchange that illustrates this mockery and unmasking is when Victor and Junior bid Thomas to join them: “‘Hey,’ I said. ‘Jump in with us. We’re going out to Benjamin Lake to do this new drug I got. It’ll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit, you know?’” (14). These Indians are making fun of the things that many people have deemed to be Indian, things such as spiritual quests and vision seeking to be Indian. The visions that occur from the drug are ironic, in that they take traditional representations of Indians and indict both the representation and the represented.

The first vision is Thomas’ vision of Victor. Thomas sees him as a horse stealer who rides “that pony across the open plain, in moonlight that makes everything a shadow” (“A Drug Called Tradition” 15). The dark night, the thinly-clad Indian boy atop the pony riding into the night—he even asks the horse his name and the horse replies: “*My name is Flight*” (16). Alexie has presented an image of an Indian that could be stock footage of the Indian used in any film. A horse thief who has intricate knowledge of the voices of horses—what’s more Indian than that?

Junior’s vision of Thomas is again a traditional portrayal of an Indian. Junior says: “You’re dancing and you ain’t wearing nothing. You’re dancing naked around a fire” (“A Drug Called Tradition” 16). Junior sees Thomas dancing the Ghost Dance to bring back his ancestors who were killed by the infected blankets that the U. S. government gave the Indians. The tribe and even the extinct buffalo join him. This dance is one that implicates the treatment of Indians in literature in film. Again Alexie has painted a picture of the Indian as “stock footage” of a dancer around a campfire—one of the most oft-used pieces of footage in the treatment of Indians.

These visions show the farce that is back-to-tradition. The narrator says:

What you have to do is keeping moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons. They ain't never going to leave you, so you don't have to worry about that. Your past ain't going to fall behind, and your future won't get too far ahead. Sometimes, though, your skeletons will talk to you, tell you to sit down and take a rest, breathe a little. Maybe they'll make you promises, tell you all the things you want to hear . . . .

But, no matter what they do, keep walking, keep moving. And don't wear a watch. Hell, Indians never need to wear a watch because your skeletons will always remind you about the time. See, it is always now. That's what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That's how it is.

*We are trapped in the now. (22)*

The visions and characters' reactions, along with the didactic narration above, demonstrates that Alexie is calling into question the ability of the contemporary Indian to get out of the trap of the suspended Indian. Thomas leaves, and Junior and Victor stay at the riverbank. Victor is troubled by the drug and as it wears off he says, "After I saw my grandmother walking across the water toward me, I threw away the rest of my new drug and hid in the backseat of Junior's car" (22). The "drug" called tradition is tricky for the Indians in this story, and Alexie offers a solution to the problem. Keep moving forward, aware of the past, but do not become the suspended Indian in search of his future through a static past.

\* \* \*

The short story, “Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix Play ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at Woodstock,” recounts incidents in which the narrator and his father were brought together through music and conversation. It is also a story of the construction of the memory and identity of a father by his son. Alexie establishes that the narrator must identify with his father not through the Spokane tradition, but rather through memories of his father’s ties to popular culture.

The first piece of memory that the narrator uses to construct his father’s identity is a picture in his father’s scrapbook that made the cover of *Time*:

In the photograph, my father is dressed in bell-bottoms and flowered shirt, his hair in braids, with red peace symbols splashed across his face like war paint. In his hands my father holds a rifle above his head, captured in that moment just before he proceeded to beat the shit out of the National Guard private lying prone on the ground . . . .

The photographer won a Pulitzer Prize, and editors across the country had a lot of fun creating captions and headlines. I’ve read many of them collected in my father’s scrapbook, and my favorite was run in the *Seattle Times*. The caption under the photograph read DEMONSTRATOR GOES TO WAR FOR PEACE.

The editors capitalized on my father’s Native American identity with other headlines like ONE WARRIOR AGAINST WAR and PEACEFUL GATHERING TURNS INTO NATIVE UPRISING.

Alexie does two things by associating the attachment that the narrator has to his father with this picture. First, he establishes the father as a member of American culture—not Indian culture. Second, he provides another opportunity to point out the misconceptions

of Indians. The captions and the reality built by the photograph are not the actual reality—his father went to jail for attempted murder.

The narrator also must construct the memory of his father through conversations he recalls, most of which occur with or around music, whether it be Hank Williams’ “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” or Jimi Hendrix’s rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner.” The first of these conversations about the story of the meeting of his parents that ends with this exchange:

“You sound like a bad movie.”

“Yeah, well, that’s how it is. You kids today don’t know shit about romance. Don’t know shit about music either. Especially you Indian kids. You all have been spoiled by those drums. Been hearing them beat so long, you think that’s all you need. Hell, son, even an Indian needs a piano or guitar or saxophone now and again.” (“Because My Father. . . 30)

Again, the narrator recounts a story that ties his father to popular culture. The traditional drumbeat attached to Indian culture is augmented by the piano, guitar or saxophone. The father’s ties to popular culture are stronger than his ties to Indian tradition.

Another conversation that the narrator and his father have again brings up the question of identity.

“You know,” I said, “sometimes you sound like you ain’t even real.”

“What’s real? I ain’t interested in what’s real. I’m interested in how things should be.” (33)

This conversation is a point at which Alexie’s narrator problematizes “the real and the representative” that Vizenor is so concerned with. The narrator does not grasp that his

father is not fulfilling the expectation of an Indian character. On the other hand, the father offers his son a contemporary Indian who is comfortable not aligning himself with the back-to-tradition Indian movement.

\* \* \*

In “Crazy Horse Dreams” Alexie again demonstrates the incapability of his Indian characters to tie themselves to the past. Both of the characters in the story are trapped in the idea of what an Indian is and are unable to capture a connection to their tribal past.

Victor, a storyteller dressed in Levi’s and a “red-and-black flannel shirt, the kind some writer called an Indian shirt” (“Crazy Horse Dreams” 41), is not the traditional Indian character, because he lacks many of the defining characteristics. His love interest opens the story with a description of Victor that separates him from his tribal counterparts when she notes, “They don’t pay you any mind because your hair is too short” (“Crazy Horse Dreams” 37).

Victor’s love interest is also a contemporary Indian. Her introduction is very similar to Victor’s. As she is described through Victor’s eyes,

She’s wearing a fifty-dollar ribbon shirt manufactured by a company in Spokane. He’d read about the Indian grandmother who designs them, each an original, before she sells them for a standard operating fee. He remembered the redhead bank teller who cashed his check and asked him if he thought her shirt was Authentic. Authentic. (38)

The authentic nature of the shirt is a commentary on the selling of Indian traditional garb.

The white bank teller feels like she has some connection to the traditions of Indians by

wearing an “authentic” shirt. Although they are wearing the same shirt, Victor is not mad at his love interest.

On the surface she and Victor share a normal relationship between two contemporary Indians. Witness this exchange from one of their initial meetings:

“You must be a rich man,” she said. “Not much of a warrior though. You keep letting me sneak up on you.”

“You don’t surprise me,” he said. “The Plains Indians had women who rode their horses eighteen hours a day. They could shoot seven arrows consecutively, have them all in the air at the same time. They were the best light cavalry in the history of the world.”

“Just my luck,” she said. “An educated Indian.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Reservation University.”

They both laughed at the old joke. Every Indian is an alumnus. (39)

This exchange is clearly Alexie’s attempt to connect the two Indian characters through contemporary wit rather than through a traditional tale. But Alexie does not keep the relationship so contemporary, and the attempt at love fails in one thing—Victor is not Crazy Horse. Victor cannot accept that he is not the Indian warrior coming to the Indian princess, nor can she. She needs Crazy Horse and he needs to be Crazy Horse.

The beginning of the end appears in her thoughts on Victor:

Then she was afraid of the man naked beside her, under her, afraid of that man who was simple in clothes and cowboy boots, a feather in a bottle.

“You’re nothing important,” he said. “You’re just another goddamn Indian like me.”

“Wrong,” she said, twisting from his grip and sitting up, her arms crossed over her chest. “I’m the best kind of Indian and I’m in bed with my father.”

He laughed. She was silent. She thought she could be saved. She thought she could watch him fancydance, watch his calf muscles grow more and more perfect with each step. She thought he was Crazy Horse. (41)

Victor cannot be the warrior savior she is looking for because he is not Crazy Horse. Crazy Horse is a metaphor for the unattainable authenticity that both she and Victor are seeking. Victor is lost in the end

Standing in the dark, next to a tipi with blue smoke escaping from the fire inside, he watched the Winnebago [her Winnebago]. For hours, Victor watched the lights go on and off, on and off. He wished he was Crazy Horse. (42)

Alexie’s portrayal of the failed love between the unnamed female character and Victor underscores the problem of identity many contemporary Indians face. In one realm they are thrust into a back-to-tradition search for the authentic Indian who fits the shirt of the bank teller—the suspended Indian. What Alexie does not offer in this story is a reconciliation of the traditional Spokane identity with contemporary reality. Victor and the woman are lost in the contemporary world because of their Crazy Horse dreams—and according to the literature and film representations described in the writings of Michael Dorris, Gerald Vizenor and others, there is no other dream for them to have.

\* \* \*

In “Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie” Alexie says “Some people say I always write about drunks” (11). Unlike many contemporary Indian authors,

Sherman Alexie is defining a contemporary identity for Indians. He is aware that some of his work will not reach white audiences because

It's not corn pollen, eagle feathers, Mother Earth. It's everyday life.

Remembering taking our bikes and setting up ramps to jump over the sewer pit.

That kind of stuff. ("Crossroads" 10)

Alexie, by writing about the everyday life of contemporary Indians, more specifically contemporary Spokane Indians, leaves out the traditional representations of Indians (read "corn pollen, eagle feathers, Mother Earth" among others). He understands that white audiences may not accept the contemporary Indian instead of the usual representations.

Furthermore, Alexie has expressed his ties to the traditions of Indians:

That's a way of doing it. I mean, you always get tired of the question, y'know, of "How does your work apply to the oral tradition?" It doesn't. I type it! (Laughter.) And I'm really, really quiet when I'm doing it. The only time when I'm essentially really a storyteller is when I'm up in front of a crowd.

("Crossroads" 6)

Although one can see Alexie's sarcastic wit, it is obvious that he has qualms about the automatic assumptions that people bring to the table when discussing Indian literature. He is conceiving a new identity for Indians and cultivating new ground for Indian fiction.

The contemporary concepts, basketball and alcohol, dominate the story, "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation doesn't Flash Red Anymore." Throughout the story the conversation is between the two main characters, but they also come to represent the seemingly hopeless existence that is the contemporary reservation life. Although Alexie smirks at his ties to his native past, Victor and Adrian in "The Only

Traffic Signal . . .” are storytellers. They recount the story of many of the tribal basketball players who have never made it off the reservation because of alcoholism.

Victor says,

There’s a definite history of reservation heroes who never finish high school, who never finish basketball seasons. Hell, there’s been one or two guys who played just a few minutes of one game, just enough to show what they could have been. And there’s the famous case of Silas Sirius, who made one move and scored one basket in his entire basketball career. People still talk about it. (“The Only Traffic Signal. . .” 47)

Alexie has made Victor rely on tribal history to tell the story of the latest basketball prodigy, Julius. They want Julius to make it, but there is little hope that he will escape the throes of alcohol and transcend the world he is a part of. The only place Julius will survive is in the stories. The story of Julius turns into the story of Silas, and the story of all the tribal basketball players—the hopeless story of failure and drinking.

The storyteller Victor notes that this hopelessness is real:

It’s hard to be optimistic on the reservation. When a glass sits on a table here, people don’t wonder if it’s half filled or half empty. They just hope it’s good beer. Still, Indians have a way of surviving. But it’s almost like Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It’s the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn’t take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins. (“The Only Traffic Signal. . .” 49)

Amidst the hopeless story of the reservation, Alexie brings to light other social ills that Indians face. He gives them no hope in searching for the future, though “. . . just like

everybody else, Indians need heroes to help them learn how to survive. But what happens when our heroes don't even know how to pay their bills?" ("The Only Traffic Signal . . ." 49). The narrator illustrates that these Indians do not have contemporary heroes to rely on, therefore giving them nowhere to look for heroes in the contemporary world.

In the end, Julius falls to the alcoholism and the storytellers are left on the porch, searching for a new hero. Their conversation is sad

"Hey, look," Adrian said. "Ain't that the Lucy girl?"

I saw that it was, a little brown girl with scarred knees, wearing her daddy's shirt.

"Yeah, that's her," I said.

"I heard she's so good that she plays for the sixth grade boys' team."

"Really? She's only in the third grade herself, isn't she?"

"Yeah, yeah, she's a little warrior."

Adrian and I watched those Indian children walk down the road, walking toward another basketball game.

"God, I hope she makes it all the way," I said.

"Yeah, yeah," Adrian said, stared into the bottom of his cup, and then threw it across the yard ("The Only Traffic Signal . . ." 53).

The storytellers are locked in the place in which they began the story, hoping to find a hero, searching for the modern warrior to show them how to live. Alexie's storytelling seeks to make the writer the modern warrior, to show contemporary Indians that there is in fact hope in the seemingly hopeless world.

\* \* \*

According to Gerald Vizenor, the tools for fighting against the colonial control of native fiction are trickery and irony. These attitudes, which have always been in place in native stories, point out the absurdity of Indian stereotypes (“Discursive Narratives” 84).<sup>2</sup> In “Amusement” Alexie’s short-short story, he uses irony and trickery to undermine the drunk Indian stereotype.

Many Indian critics, including Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Gerald Vizenor, were very critical of Michael Dorris’s novel *The Broken Chord* because of its treatment of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome as an Indian disease.<sup>3</sup> They point out that Dorris uses his adopted child’s story to do little more than perpetuate “the firewater myth” of Indians, and the concept that somehow Indians are predisposed to alcohol abuse. Alexie, however, uses a drunk Indian in his story “Amusement” as a tool of irony to point out the farcical use of Indian stereotypes.

At the story’s opening, the narrator and Sadie are attending a carnival when they spot Dirty Joe passed out on the carnival midway. They decide to put him on the roller coaster, and what ensues is a criticism of the state of the treatment of alcoholism by white and Indian. First of all, Sadie and the narrator recognize who is watching

“Oh Jesus, Jesus,” Sadie screamed, laughed. She leaned on my shoulder and laughed until tears fell. I look around and saw a crowd had gathered and joined in on the laughter. Twenty or thirty white faces, open mouths grown large

---

<sup>2</sup> It is a little troubling to use the word “Indian” when writing of Vizenor because of his vehement protest against the word as a colonial tool. Here I find it necessary to use the word that Alexie favors in order to keep my writing about Alexie uniform. In this section of the paper, for peace of mind in regard to Vizenor one could easily, insert either the term “native” or “postindian.”

<sup>3</sup> For more on this concept see Cook-Lynn’s *Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner . . .* and Vizenor’s “Discursive Narratives.”

and deafening, wide eyes turned toward Sadie and me. They were jury and judge for the twentieth-century fancydance of these court jesters who would pour Thunderbird wine into the Holy Grail. (“Amusements” 56)

The white people are not concerned with helping the drunk Indian. They are pointing and laughing at the man in need of help. Their children are running by, making “Indian” noises with their mouths. What is more important than the white people watching the events unfold is that the Indian narrator and Sadie do not reach out to help their fellow native. They turn and run, and the narrator ends up in the funhouse. He sees in the mirror a cartoonish panorama of himself, more specifically a three-foot distorted reflection.

Through the unwillingness of the whites to help Dirty Joe Alexie shows their inability to see past the firewater myth as an amusement. More importantly, though, Alexie implicates the Indians themselves. They become nothing more than caricatures of themselves as they run away from their problems. By not offering an obvious lesson, Alexie is noting the complexity of the problem, but he is also commenting on the lack of support Indians provide each other, whether tribe-to-tribe or within their own tribe (such as the characters in this story).

\* \* \*

With the release of *Smoke Signals*, Alexie changed the face of the treatment of Indians. The text of the movie is based mostly on the story, “This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona.” The story recounted in “This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” is an epic journey for Victor and Thomas to obtain the remains of Victor’s dead

father. Through this tale Alexie accomplishes a criticism of the stereotypical portrayal of Indian life. In the text, Alexie subverts the stereotypes of Indians again with the tools of trickery and irony.

Through his role as storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire is the vehicle for the subversion of the stereotypes. At the outset of the story no one on the reservation pays Thomas any attention. As Victor describes him he is “that crazy Indian storyteller with ratty old braids and broken teeth” (“This is What it Means . . .” 66). The storyteller is a traditional role in film and literature for Indian characters, but the usual storyteller is not ridiculed as Thomas is.<sup>4</sup> Thomas is aware of the importance of his stories when he says,

We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories. My father, he died on Okinawa in World War II, died fighting for this country, which had tried to kill him for years. My mother, she died giving birth to me, died while I was still inside her. She pushed me out into the world with her last breath. I have no brothers or sisters. I have only my stories which came to me before I even had words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps.

They are all I have. It's all I can do. (“This is What it Means...” 72-73)

Thomas is not the traditional warrior, savage, exotic Indian character, but rather a kid who is picked on and beaten up for his incessant storytelling, and his adult life is filled with the same absence of friends and ridicule. Thomas relies on his stories for his very existence, but no one seems to listen to him. His role as storyteller has been lost on his

---

<sup>4</sup> The objectification of Indian women and men's bodies is discussed in *Selling the Indian: Commercializing & Appropriating American Indian Cultures*, edited by Carter Jones Meyer and Diana Royer.

reservation but it is the tool of subversion and didacticism in the story. The people have accepted Thomas as an oddity, rather than someone who can teach them, but the death of Victor's father begins a time when at least Victor notices the stories and their purpose for him as a person; furthermore, Alexie uses Thomas to show the reader some ridiculous notions of Indian representation.

The first example occurs when Victor, whose father has died, encounters Thomas Builds-the-Fire at the tribal store. Their conversation is an opportunity for Alexie to poke fun at the myth that Indians somehow have a greater connection to the Earth and can listen to the wind to tell the future.<sup>5</sup>

“Victor, I’m sorry about your father,” Thomas said.

“How did you know about it?” Victor asked.

“I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight.

Also, your mother was just in here crying.” (“This is What it Means . . .” 61-62) Thomas, the reservation storyteller, is the embodiment of the trickster character.<sup>6</sup> He is at once the portrait of the suspended Indian and the tool for making fun of it. Having no direct connection to the wind and birds for knowledge, he is the agent for the joke, the instrument of sarcasm.

Another example of Thomas as the subverting, trickster storyteller is built into a flashback to the summer when Victor and Thomas shared a bicycle. The Indians are celebrating the Fourth of July and Victor asks Thomas to tell him a story.

Thomas closed his eyes and told this story: “There were these two Indian

boys who wanted to be warriors. But it was too late to be warriors in the old way.

---

<sup>5</sup> One should not pass up the opportunity to point out the title of a song from the movie *Pocahontas* “Paint with all the Colors of the Wind.”

<sup>6</sup> See Vizenor’s *Discursive Narratives* and *Manifest Manners* for more on the trickster character.

All the horses were gone. So the two Indian boys stole a car and drove to the city. They parked the stolen car in front of the police station and then hitchhiked back home to the reservation. When they got back, all their friends cheered and their parents' eyes shone with pride. *You were very brave*, everybody said to the two Indian boys. *Very brave.*" ("This is What it Means . . ." 63)

Thomas' story becomes didactic. In the beginning Alexie points out the inability of the boys to be warriors. The young boys cannot fill the role supplied by literature and film for Indians, or maybe more important to Alexie, they cannot go back to the ways of the past. Their inability to do so suggests that Alexie is aware of the pitfalls of a back-to-tradition push for Indians. The farcical car-stealing is funny and sad at once. The lack of a role for the boys to fulfill turns them to a pointless crime, and their friends and family applaud them when they return home. This amusing story is a sad commentary on the state of Indian reservation life.

\* \* \*

Towards the middle of the collection, Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* takes a stylistic and thematic turn. Alexie's stories become a bit shorter, and in many of them he openly confronts the concept of the suspended Indian. His characters are aware of the difference between the imagined Indian and the real Indian, and the difference is the fodder for their jokes and conversations.

Victor is a character who pops up more than one time throughout the collection, and in the story "All I Wanted To Do Was Dance" he is again trudging through life on

the Spokane Reservation. As he searches for himself through love and alcohol he comes across a stranger to drink with:

“What tribe are you, cousin?” Victor asked him.

“Cherokee.”

“Really? Shit, I’ve never met a real Cherokee.”

“Neither have I.”

And they laughed. (“All I Wanted To Do . . . 91)

These two men joke about the reality of the deterioration of the Cherokee tribe, but Victor’s humor is a cover for the distance he has put between himself and the tradition of his ancestors. Although he does not search for a ceremony to cleanse himself he is running from the new tradition Alexie has given his Indian characters, alcohol. Victor’s entire existence is devoted to not drinking. Rather than fall into the firewater myth, however, Alexie shows that a stereotypical back-to-tradition journey (such as Abel’s in *House Made of Dawn*) will not cleanse his characters from the drink. In a scene earlier in the story,

Victor was fancydancing. Eight, maybe nine years old and he was fancydancing in the same outfit his father wore as a child. The feathers were genetic; the fringe was passed down like the curve of his face.

Drums.

He looked into the crowd for approval, saw his mother and father. He waved and they waved back. Smiles and Indian teeth. They were both drunk. Everything familiar and welcome. Everything beautiful.

Drums. (“All I Wanted To Do . . .” 87)

At this point in Victor's memory, there is a chance for Alexie to offer some redemption for his characters by having the traditional dance attach them to their past. But Alexie is not sold on the ability of the past to cure the present. His characters do not search for their identities in tradition.

After Victor's fancydancing, a group gathers.

"Did you see Junior dancing?" his mother asked everyone in camp. She was loud, drunk, staggered.

They all nodded heads in agreement; this other kind of dancing was nothing new. His father passed out beneath the picnic table, and after a while his mother crawled under, wrapped her arms around her husband, and passed out with him. ("All I Wanted To Do . . ." 88)

The two "dancing" scenes play against each other by showing that the traditional fancydancing does not redeem his characters. There is no answer in tradition. Victor is forced to search for his identity; unfortunately, he is unable to find any answers outside of his struggle with the bottle.

It is obvious Victor's hollow existence is a result of his inability to create a contemporary identity for himself. At the end of the story he is still in search of his destination. After having given his bottle to the Indian stranger,

. . . he was walking down this road and tomorrow maybe he would be walking down another road and maybe tomorrow he would be dancing.

Victor might be dancing.

Yes, Victor would be dancing. ("All I wanted to do..." 92)

Alexie leaves undetermined which dancing Victor will be doing—the fancydancing of his youth or the staggering dance of his mother.

\* \* \*

The stories, “Imagining the Reservation” and “Jesus Christ’s Half Brother is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation,” question the portrayal of Indians in popular culture and the implications of such representations on Indian identity. First of all, in “Jesus Christ’s Half Brother. . . ,” the narrator and his adopted son James visit the World’s Fair in Spokane. While there they see that

All the countries have exhibitions like art from Japan and pottery from Mexico and mean-looking people talking about Germany. In one little corner there’s a statue of an Indian who’s supposed to be some chief or another. I press a little button and the statue talks and moves its arms over and over in the same motion. The statue tells the crowd we have to take care of the earth because it is our mother. (129)

Here Alexie blatantly takes on the suspended Indian. The statue’s repetitive motions and message about the Earth are one example of the stereotypical treatment of Indians.

Alexie uses this portrayal to further problematize the representation of Indians. He gives notice to the stereotypical representation of other cultures to support his idea that the way the representation of Indians is as absurd as saying all Germans are mean.

In “Imagining the Reservation,” Alexie questions where the contemporary Indian can look for identity. He gives an equation to solve the problem of survival:

Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation. (150)

Alexie's narrator is in conflict with survival in the contemporary world. He poses the question, "What do you believe in? Does every Indian depend on Hollywood for a twentieth-century vision?" ("Imagining the Reservation" 151). The narrator and the other Indian characters in the text are left without answers because

There are so many possibilities in the reservation 7-11, so many methods of survival. Imagine every Skin on the reservation is the new lead guitarist for the Rolling Stones, on the cover of a rock-and-roll magazine. Imagine forgiveness is sold 2 for 1. Imagine every Indian is a video game with braids. Do you believe laughter can save us? ("Imagining the Reservation" 152)

It is unavoidable that Indians will be misrepresented in popular culture, but the identity of the contemporary Indian must be tied to contemporary society because for good or ill that is the world Indians live in.

\* \* \*

In "Indian Education," Alexie recounts the education that an Indian boy receives regarding himself in school and society. The narrator traces the pieces of his identity that he picked up through contact with whites as well as through his life on the reservation. In the section titled "First Grade" the narrator recounts the story of his initiation into the universal childhood ritual of tormenting each other, when an Indian spin. He recalls

I was always falling down; my Indian name was Junior Falls Down.

Sometimes it was Bloody Nose or Steal-His-Lunch. Once, it was Cries-Like-a-White-Boy, even though none of us had seen a white boy cry. ("Indian Education" 172).

Alexie is again playing with the idea of “Indian naming.” Recalling the childhood initiation also shows that he is pointing out the obvious understanding the youth have in the satirical ritualistic naming of their classmates. Even though they had never seen a white boy, the children even bring in the name “Cries-Like-a-White-Boy”, thus participating in a stereotypical representation.

In the “Ninth Grade” section of the story, the narrator has left the reservation school to play basketball at the white high school. After a game he is at a dance when he passes out. He recalls,

As my white friends revived me and prepared to take me to the emergency room where doctors would later diagnose my diabetes, the Chicano teacher ran up to us.

“Hey,” he said. “What’s that boy been drinking? I know all about these Indian kids. They start drinking real young.” (“Indian Education 178)

The teacher has a conception of the entire Indian population, especially their drinking behavior. He is the purveyor of the firewater myth in contemporary society. The Chicano teacher’s comment makes Alexie’s narrator aware that “sharing dark skin doesn’t necessarily make two men brothers” (“Indian Education” 178).

In the “Eleventh Grade” section Alexie comments again on the practice of naming. This time it is the naming of teams. His 16-year-old narrator says

The farm town high school I play for is nicknamed the “Indians,” and I’m probably the only actual Indian ever to play for a team with such a mascot.

This morning I pick up the sports page and read the headline: Indians Lose Again.

Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me very much.

(“Indian Education” 179)

The irony of the Indian playing for the Indians is a spoof on sports team naming, as is the punning headline. The narrator, aware of the irony, is educated yet again.

In the “Twelfth Grade” section, Alexie notes a distinction between his senior portrait and the senior portraits of the reservation students. He tries to remain stoic for the photographer and his reservation counterparts smile, “as they look back toward tradition” (“Indian Education” 180). This distinction is important not only because it represents the two schools of contemporary Native American Literature (the backward glancing and the forward looking) but, more importantly, the stereotypical representation of Indians. The character realizes that when he is among whites, he must look stoic and when among Indians, he can laugh.

\* \* \*

“Witnesses, Secret and Not” is one of the last stories in the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Taking into account the conceptions of Indians held by many readers, Alexie illustrates that he has in fact gone beyond the stereotypical representation of Indians. He defines a cultural identity for his narrator, not by reaching backwards, but by showing his conception of himself in the contemporary world. The narrator looks for his identity in his memories of his father and in himself, not in the stereotypical representation of Indians:

In 1979 I was just learning how to be thirteen. I didn't know that I'd have to keep thinking about it until I was twenty-five. I thought that once I figured out thirteen, then it was history, junk for the archeologists to find years later. I

thought it would keep working that way, figuring out each year as it came, then discarding it when the new one came along. But what it meant to be a boy, a man, too. Most of all, I had to find out what it meant to be Indian, and there ain't no self-help manuals for that last one. (211)

Alexie shows two things in this opening paragraph. First, he sets his Indian narrator up as a regular kid. A 13-year-old boy dealing with his conception of himself at a pivotal age in life harkens back to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Alexie also brings into question the conceptualization of Indian identity. The narrator confesses that there is no manual to show him the way to figure out what it means to be Indian.

The narrator understands the complexity of the Indian identity at a very young age. When his father walked into a police station for questioning,

Wearing old jeans and a red T-shirt, he looked very obvious next to the police uniforms and three-piece suits. He looked as Indian as you can get. I could spend my whole life on the reservation and never once would I see a friend of mine and think how Indian he looked. But as soon as I get off the reservation, among all the white people, every Indian gets exaggerated. (“Witnesses, Secret or Not” 219)

Contemplating his cultural identity, this young narrator defines the principle of “Indian as other.” Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens, Michael Dorris and others have contemplated the reasons behind this concept. What Alexie has done is show that not only does white culture see Indians as the others, but that Indians themselves have defined themselves in contrast to the whites in the world off the reservation. In the narrator’s father, however, Alexie does not create a character who is unable to survive in the contemporary world

because of his Indianness. His narrator and his father are not tragically Indian nor do they embody any preconceived Indian characteristics. They are both contemporary Indians with contemporary problems; heck, they both even suffer from diabetes—not small pox.

The *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* contains stories that posit Spokane Indians on the reservation against the stereotypical representation of Indians. Alexie's characters overcome and subvert these stereotypes to begin to shape an Indian identity.

### ***The Toughest Indian in the World***

This volume takes the sarcastic and witty subversion of stereotyping to the next level. Some of Alexie's characters leave the reservation and search for their identity while others stay on the reservation and contemplate it there. The identity question is at hand in most of the stories in the volume. Alexie creates stories that question popular culture stereotypes, but he also takes on anthropology, assimilation, class and the back-to-tradition story. More importantly, in all but a couple of stories, Alexie contemplates the suspended Indian and works against it to shape a more complex and realistic Indian identity.

In "Discursive Narratives" Gerald Vizenor says that "most of the characters in [his own] stories outwit, reverse and overturn the wiles of dominance and they contradict the simulations of natives" (79). Mary Lynn, the Indian narrator of Alexie's "Assimilation" is not the standard Pocahontas character. She is at once in conflict with

the identity she has created with her white husband and the abandonment of her Indian race. Her white husband, even though he is married to an Indian, is bothered by her race.

Mary Lynn and her husband,

Clad in leather jackets and black jeans standing inches apart but never quite touching, both handsome to the point of distracting, smoking crappy cigarettes that appeared to be real cigarettes . . . (“Assimilation” 8)

Here there are no poetic scenes of trees talking or listening to wind. Mary Lynn is at once Indian and modern, a character constructed on a 20<sup>th</sup> century model, not a 19<sup>th</sup> century one.

Race is important to the characters in this story; in which Alexie positions Mary Lynn in a world where she is uncomfortable with her Indianness in opposition to whiteness. “‘We should have another kid,’ she’d said to Jeremiah, ‘so we’ll know if this is a white family or an Indian family’” (“Assimilation” 13). Here Mary Lynn is unable to construct a race for her family based on how her children look. By having an affair with a fat, scarred Indian man, Mary Lynn hopes to reattach herself with her familial line. Her disillusionment with her own race is evidenced in her reactions to racial simulations. She is not the stereotypical representation of an Indian, leaving her lost.

Mary Lynn’s struggles are coupled with the struggles of her husband. He is the voice of racial identifier.

As a rational scientist, he’d known that race was primarily a social construction, illusory, but as the husband of an Indian woman and the father of Indian children, he’d since learned that race, whatever its construction, was real. Now, there were plenty of white people who wanted to eliminate the idea of race,

to cast it aside as an unwanted invention, but it was far too late for that.

(“Assimilation” 14)

By creating Jeremiah as a white person struggling with racial identity, Alexie is able to problematize the construction of race. Through Jeremiah Alexie exposes race as “the Frankenstein monster” that cannot be faced or reversed (“Assimilation” 14).

Alexie is also confronting “The seams [that] are sewn over and over by social scientists and other inventors of the American Indian. And the invention is a conservative, national allegory of cultural difference and distinction” (“Discursive Narratives” 79). It is obvious that Alexie is aware of the versions of Indians that Vizenor speaks of, and in “Assimilation” creates a character who is struggling with her racial identity as a Native because of her assimilation into mainstream culture.

\* \* \*

“I’d been growing the braids since I’d graduated from law school. My hair impressed jurors but irritated judges. Perfect” (“Class” 38). With his Indian braids Edgar, in the short story “Class,” has constructed an identity for himself, at least in the eyes of those who witness him in the courtroom. His braids represent for him the Indian identity that he has lost in the process of raising his socioeconomic status. Edgar’s story turns into a subversion of the back-to-tradition story that many writers and filmmakers have combined to make the Indian paradigm.

Edgar and his mother have constructed their identity much the same way as non-Native writers have constructed the suspended Indian. His identity may have been lost years before because Edgar and his mother are not connected to their heritage as Spokane Indians. His “. . . mother told white people she was Spanish, not Mexican, not Hispanic,

not Chicana, and certainly not Spokane Indian with a little bit of Aztec thrown in for spice, even though she was all of these things” (“Class” 40). By not divulging her true ethnic identity, Edgar’s mother is constructing an identity that plays on ethnic stereotypes of skin color yet allows her not to be construed as an Indian. This is a working backwards, a deconstruction, of the construction of the Indian.

Edgar even serves as a subverted version of the construction:

As for me, I’d told any number of white women that I was part Aztec and I’d told a few that I was completely Aztec. That gave me some mystery, some ethnic weight, a history of glorious color and mass executions. Strangely enough, there were aphrodisiacal benefits to claiming to be descended from ritual cannibals. In any event, pretending to be an Aztec warrior was a lot more impressive than revealing I was just some bright kid who’d fought his way off the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington State and was now a corporate lawyer in Seattle who pretended to have a lot more money than he did. (“Class” 40)

An Indian pretending to be an Aztec because he wants to create mystery and seduce women is obviously a deconstruction of the way that many whites have portrayed Indians in film and literature. It is also an Indian using white culture’s stereotypes and weapons against them—much what Alexie is doing, because Indians have become the mystery, the “other” as Vizenor has said, and here an Indian constructs a mysterious background to play on cultural stereotypes.

The cultural stereotypes are further displayed when Edgar, on the phone with an escort service, refers to himself as “traditional” (“Class” 43). In the context of the conversation Edgar is referring to his traditional sexual practices by having the escort

service call him Mr. Traditional and Geronimo. He has ordered an Indian prostitute (“you know, like Tonto” but a woman) because he had never had intercourse with an Indian woman. When the prostitute arrives she wears “a conservative tan suit and a string of fake pearls. Dreamcatcher earrings, turquoise rings, a stainless-steel eagle pinned to her lapel” (“Class” 44-45). The woman is not Indian but a white woman who says, “you can mostly pretend I’m Indian” (“Class” 45). The woman is symbolic of Edgar’s inability to identify with his Indian heritage. Like her, he looks the part, but he must pretend that she is Indian in order to fulfill his fantasy. He fulfills the fantasy of the white world by pretending to be Indian, with his braids, calling on stereotypes of Indians held by popular culture to create an air of mystery and mysticism. What Alexie also accomplishes through Edgar is an understanding of the impossibility of getting “back to tradition.” Alexie has notably been against the formulaic approach to Indian Literature. As already noted, his writing is “not corn pollen, eagle feathers, Mother Earth, Father Sky. It’s everyday life” (“Crossroads”). Edgar is trapped in this everyday life and he is not able to reach back towards a past that allows him to understand his present.

Aware of the stereotypes of his people Edgar goes to a bar to reclaim his heritage, but Alexie does not fall back on the firewater myth of an Indian. Edgar’s visit to the bar begins with the internal monologue:

I don’t drink alcohol, never have, mostly because I don’t want to maintain and confirm any of my ethnic stereotypes, let alone the most prevalent one, but also because my long-lost father . . . is still missing somewhere in the bottom of a tequila bottle. I had always wondered if he was a drunk because he was Indian or because he was white or because he was both. (“Class” 47)

Taking on the stereotype of the drunk Indian, Alexie is able to subvert the usual representation of Indians, a notion that plays itself out in the character of Junior: “in his white T-shirt, blue-jean jacket, tight jeans, and cowboy boots, he looked like Chief Broom from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*” (“Class” 49). Edgar and Junior fight (well, Junior punches Edgar and cuts one of his braids off), and Edgar goes back to his white wife and children. Metaphorically the two choices of the Indian are at battle here—the drunk and the sell-out. To complete the cycle all we need is a fancy dancer from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In all seriousness, through Edgar Alexie constructs an identity for at least one contemporary Indian and allows the reader to understand the difficulty of the choice. Edgar realizes this when he says, “For most of my life, I’d dreamed about the world where I currently resided” (“Class” 55). Alexie does not place Edgar at a crossroads between past and present where, as Dorris points out, he must take on a stereotypical role; he is a contemporary man, not lodged in the past.

\* \* \*

The notion of an Native American sidekick has been around almost since American literature’s beginnings. Even Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter* brings Roger Chillingworth into town with an Indian dressed in full attire. Tonto and many others have taken the silent sidekick role. Alexie in “South by Southwest” plays with the concept of the Indian sidekick just enough to turn the stereotype on its head.

The white bandit Seymour robs The International House of Pancakes, looking for someone to go with him on his nonviolent killing spree and fall in love with him: “From the floor, a fat Indian man raised his hand. He wore black sweatpants and a white T-shirt embossed with a photograph of Geronimo” (“South By Southwest” 59). The fat Indian,

aptly named Salmon Boy by Seymour, is not the typical Indian sidekick. He does not offer spiritual guidance, nor is he able to read the “bad signs” along the way:

They stopped when they saw a dead coyote nailed to a fence post.

That’s a bad sign, ain’t it? asked Seymour.

Yes, it is, said Salmon Boy.

What does it mean? asked the white man.

I have no idea, said the Indian. (“South By Southwest” 60)

It is obvious that Alexie is aware of the role that many Indians have played in movies and literature as the silent sidekick who only pipes up with mystic wisdom and spiritual advice. Salmon Boy is a parody of the sidekick motif so overused in film and literature—an invented identity to deconstruct the invented Indian.

In comparison to Salmon Boy is the white, romantic Seymour. Seymour “wanted to be romantic. He wanted to be the Man Who Saved the Indian” (“South By Southwest” 74). As Dorris says in his essay “Indians in Aspic,” in stories containing both Indians and white people the white man typically becomes the savior of the Indians, or learns some life lesson from the savage Indian: “Indians may be poor, they may at first seem strange or forbidden or primitive, but by golly once you get to know them they have a thing or two to teach us about The Meaning of Life” (“Indians in Aspic”). In the end Salmon Boy is not the mystic and Seymour is not the white savior. The two men walk off in the sunset together holding hands—not riding off into the sunset on two horses—“into all the south and southwest that remained in the world” (“South By Southwest” 75).

\* \* \*

As with many of Alexie's characters, Low Man from "Indian Country" gives insight into white stereotypes of Indians, but more importantly he acts as an avenue through which Alexie can point out stereotypes and problems with contemporary Indians. Initially his name recalls the saying "low man on the totem pole," automatically inviting the reader to suppose that Low Man will serve as a parody, a way to circumvent and point out the invented stereotypes of Indians. Low Man "was a Coeur d'Alene Indian, even though his mother was white . . . and had visited his home reservation only six times in his life" ("Indian Country" 121). He identifies himself as an Indian despite the fact that he has not associated himself with his tribe. He is a mystery writer who is not an alcoholic, but rather uses soda pop as his "substitute addiction" ("Indian Country" 124). Low Man recognizes the problem of alcohol in Indians, but he does not resort to "fire water" representations. He wonders, "what would happen when every drunk Indian quit drinking—and he truly believed it would someday happen—when Indians quit giving white people something to worry about besides which wine went with fish and which wine went with Indians" ("Indian Country" 143-44). Alexie's treatment of alcohol undermines the traditional treatment of Indians as alcoholics, but also brings into question where the nature of the stereotype lies. Low Man, a mixed-blood Spokane, recognizes the parts that whites and Indians play in the stereotype of the drunk Indian.

Although Low Man does not participate as a member of his tribe, he is aware of the perception that whites have of his people, especially the Coeur d'Alene Reservation, which he believed

to be a monotonous place—a wet kind of monotony that white tourists saw as spiritual and magic. Tourists snapped off dozens of photographs and tried to capture it . . . .

The tourists didn't know, and never would have guessed, that the reservation's monotony might last for months, sometimes years . . . (“Indian Country” 122).

Having Low Man share these feelings about the reservation, Alexie undermines the Romantic misconception of the Indian country—the reservation. Whites identified the reservations as places of “temporary tourism”<sup>7</sup> for spiritual benefit. Although Low Man is not an Indian who lives on the reservation, he is aware of the reality and of the perception white tourists have of the place. The reservation is not a spiritual place to Low Man, it is a place of quick violence and reconciliation, and then a return to monotony. It is not the place that whites are searching for, nor is it the place for whites to find spiritual guidance. Furthermore, a place full of teepees and war paint is not the Indian Country that Alexie creates. Low Man is no warrior, no savior and no spiritual guide; he is a mixed-blood author stirring up trouble and undermining misconceptions of Indians.

\* \* \*

For centuries, stereotypical representation of Indians has preyed upon commonly held notions of Indianness. For instance, Indian naming has been the source of many a joke about Indian culture. Also, portraying Indians as destined to rely on the traditions of the past and as a people who have one identity—tribal or otherwise—has been a popular

---

<sup>7</sup> This term is from the poem “For White Poets Who Would Be Indian” by Wendy Rose—a work devoted to the premise that whites use Native Americans for their own purposes and leave them to move on to better things.

way to portray Indians. “Saint Junior” is a story that Alexie uses to unravel stereotypes of Indians in the areas of naming, tradition, and identity.

Indian naming has been a source of mockery and delusion for many years. Jokes, cartoons, films and literature perpetuate the notion that each Indian has an “Indian” name, a mystically-produced symbol that identifies the inner being of the person who bears the moniker. Roman Gabriel Fury is the main character in Alexie’s “Saint Junior.” He was “named after an obscure professional football quarterback named Roman Gabriel—a man with his own kind of fury and the rumor of Indian blood—who’d toiled for the Los Angeles Rams in the early seventies” (“Saint Junior” 159).<sup>8</sup> Alexie’s character was named after a football player, not an elder tribesman or an animal. Alexie has created a world in which the stereotypical Indian’s traditional naming is turned to show the contemporary Indian’s reliance upon popular culture.

Furthermore, Alexie understands the expectation a name gives someone who hears it. Like Vizenor’s discussion of the word “Indian” and the notions that it evokes, a name produces an image for the person who hears it. In the following exchange, Alexie expresses the reliance he feels Americans, especially white Americans, have on the stereotypes:

“Hey,” said the kid with the blue eyes and blond hair. “You must be my roomie. I’m Alex Weber.”

“Roman.”

“I thought you were Indian.”

“I am Indian. Roman is my name.” (“Saint Junior” 179)

---

<sup>8</sup> Roman Gabriel also played college football at North Carolina State University.

This passage shows the distinction between the expectation of a name and the reality of the person. This concept of names meeting cultural expectation is especially true with Indian representation. Roman accepts his identity as a contemporary Indian apart from the “spectacular moniker” he has been given (“Saint Junior” 179).

Another concept related to naming that Alexie contemplates in the story is the concept of identity. Roman Gabriel Fury identifies himself as a Indian, but he is careful to define what that identity means to him. He incorporates the traditions of the past and present to invent a tribal identity. Roman Gabriel Fury

had always been a religious man, had participated in all of the specific Spokane Indian ceremonies, most involving salmon, and in many of the general American Indian ceremonies like powwows and basketball tournaments. (“Saint Junior” 183)

Alexie has fashioned a character who is able to get beyond the traditions of his tribe to invent for himself an identity, “a new tradition . . . a manhood ceremony” (“Saint Junior” 175). Fury’s identity incorporates the old and the new, and he understands that he has to find his own place in the world. Alexie does not limit him to the reservation or to a role shaped by the stereotypical notions of what it means to be an Indian.

Paired with Fury is his wife Grace Atwater. She is the spiritual support for Roman throughout the story, and even though her own connections to the Spokane Indians is fractured, she supplies him with connections to the past. The poet, writer and longtime mate is the voice of tradition in his life, and she participates in a very important scenes that develop the modern tribal identity. The first scene is a political discussion between Roman and Grace regarding the Presidential race.

Neither a Republican nor a Democrat, Roman had always voted for the candidate who looked like he or she could hit a twenty-foot jump shot with three seconds left on the clock and the home team down by one. Therefore, he was very excited that Bill Bradley, former Princeton All-American and New York Knick, was running for President of the United States.

“Finally, a worthy candidate,” Roman had said during Bradley’s first press conference.

“Come on,” Grace had said. “You can’t vote for a guy with a jump shot that ugly. And besides, you grew up in a matriarchy. You should vote for a woman.” (“Saint Junior” 155)

Here Grace reminds Fury of his traditional past and although Alexie uses this reminder in a comedic way, the roots of Fury’s traditional past are brought to light.

The matriarchy is a concept that is most often left out of any discussion of Indians. Michael Dorris discusses this concept in his essay “Indians on the Shelf:”

For five hundred years Indian people have been measured and have competed against a fantasy over which they have had no control. They are compared with beings who never really were, yet the stereotype is taken for historical truth. Last week the local mail carrier knocked at my door and announced that he was taking his Boy Scout troop into the woods where they intended to live “like the Iroquois” for two days. Did I have any advice?

I suggested that they bring along their mummies . . . . This was not what the postman wanted to hear, for it ran counter to his assumption of a macho Indian

culture where men were dominant and women were retiring and ineffectual  
“squaws.” (“Indians on the Shelf” 125)

Placing this excerpt from Dorris beside Alexie’s story suggests that Alexie is aware of the stereotypical portrayals of Indians and is most certainly in dialogue with those stereotypes. Grace is not objectified or relegated to the role of sex object. She is a spiritual guide for Roman and a keeper of tradition. The matriarchal component of some Indian societies is just one of the many Indian traditions that is left out of most film and literature. Grace and Roman are two Indians who are not tied to stereotypes that have been presented in the past; they have safely broken free from any constructed view of Indian identity through their contemporary ceremonies, such as basketball games.<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

The story “Dear John Wayne” takes a turn that the other fiction in *The Toughest Indian in the World* does not. The story opens in the year 2052 with Spencer Cox, a cultural anthropologist, visiting Etta Joseph, the last of the Spokane Indians, “Well, actually, [she’s] not . . . . But it sounds more Romantic, enit?” (“Dear John Wayne” 191). Spencer is there to discuss the tribal identity of the Spokane, but Etta is convinced that he has come to talk about her affair with John Wayne. And, although the story is set in 2052, in Spencer Cox Alexie creates a character who relays the stereotypical view that cultural historians have held of Indians.

From the beginning of the story Cox is rolling out the stereotypes from his years of study. Spencer gives life to the builder of the stereotypes of Indians, specifically in academia. He is an authority on Indians, the “author of seventeen books, texts, focusing

---

<sup>9</sup> In many of Alexie’s stories, including this one, basketball is central to the identity of the characters. It takes on a metaphorical meaning beyond the game—it becomes a cultural identity marker for Alexie. It has become cultural and tribal because of the number of Indians Alexie describes playing it.

on mid- to late-twentieth-century Indian culture, most specifically the Interior Salish tribes of Washington State” (“Dear John Wayne” 190). His remarks are textbook stereotypes, the first of which is “Irony, a hallmark of the contemporary indigenous American” (“Dear John Wayne” 190). Cox has relied on his textbook understanding of Indians to shape his knowledge of Indians. Alexie shapes Spencer Cox’s keen insight to point out the inevitable pitfalls of stereotypes. Cox is quick to point out to Etta his knowledge of the rules of conversation among Indians: “Formality. Yes, quite another hallmark of the indigenous. Ceremony and all. I understand. I’m honored to be included” (“Dear John Wayne” 190). He is armed with the “fact,” or what Vizenor calls the “simulations of the tribal real” (“Shadow Survivance” 63), the seemingly fact-driven concoctions of the Indian that have been present in most of the literature about Indians.

Etta is aware of the holes in Spencer’s knowledge and is quick to point out how inadequate his book knowledge is. Once Etta finishes her John Wayne story, she again calls into question Spencer’s ideas regarding Indians:

Q: Is that everything?

A: It’s all I can remember. Quite an example of the oral tradition, enit?

Q: Lovely. But I wonder how much of it is true and how much of it is lies?

A: Well, now, an Indian has to keep her secrets, or she’s just not Indian. But an Indian a lot smarter than me once said this: If it’s fiction, then it better be true.

Q: How oxymoronic.

A: Yeah, kind of like saying Native American. There's an oxymoron for you. ("Dear John Wayne" 206)

In this exchange, Etta is using Spencer's previous words against him. Turning the conceptualized idea of the oral tradition and the politically correct moniker "Native American" into jokes and subjecting Spencer's own idiocy to ridicule is Alexie's goal. And through Etta he is able to achieve this goal.

From the outset of the interview, Spencer is blinded by the knowledge that he is reading through her file and books, transcripts of old oral tradition, but he is not interested in listening to her. The books and knowledge that Spencer is armed with are in direct conflict with Etta. Her story regarding John Wayne is an example of the oral tradition, but Spencer still looks to his books, prompting Etta to ask, "What is it with you white people and your books?" ("Dear John Wayne" 191).

Etta's persistence in avoiding discussing Spencer's ideas only prompts him to delve deeper into his anthropological knowledge. One exchange between Spencer (Q) and Etta (A) illustrates his blindness:

Q: Okay, wait, I understand. We were participating in a tribal dialogue, weren't we? That sort of confrontational banter which solidifies familial and tribal ties, weren't we? Oh, how fascinating, and I failed to recognize it.

A: What are you talking about?

Q: Well, confrontational banter has always been a cultural mainstay of indigenous cultures. . . . And here I was being insulted by you, and I didn't recognize it as an integral and quite lovely component of the oral tradition. Of course you had to insult me. It's your tradition.

A: Oh, stop it, just stop it. Don't give me that oral tradition garbage. It's so primitive. It makes it sound like Indians sit around naked and grunt stories to each other.

Alexie here asserts a position on anthropological representations of Indians. Etta resists answering Spencer's questions because she believes his knowledge to be lies trapped in books, and Spencer resists listening to Etta because she does not fit into the box he has prepared to her—she is not the “Suspended Indian.”

Finally, Spencer listens to Etta's tale about losing her virginity to John Wayne. It happened in a movie where Etta “was playing a Navajo extra” (“Dear John Wayne” 195). By creating a character who is Spokane playing a Navajo, Alexie is criticizing the portrayal of Indians in film. Having a Indian from one tribe play a character from another tribe is using “stock footage.” The extras in the John Wayne film represented in the story are much the same as the actual extras and footage of Indians in the real John Wayne films. Alexie is playing with the concept of “stock footage” or blending of tribal representation that Dorris speaks of as the conglomeration of all tribes into one tribe (he speaks mainly of making all Indians Plains Indians—much like the Spokane-for-Navajo substitution in the story).

Etta and Spencer are struggling against each other in much the same way that the contemporary Indian struggles with the stereotypes presented in the “literature of dominance” of which both Churchill and Vizenor speak. Spencer is representative of the literature and anthropological studies that have perpetuated the stereotypes of Native peoples. Vizenor points out that the notions of the American Indian are “sewn over and over by social scientists and other inventors of the American Indian” (“Discursive

Narratives” 79). Through Etta Alexie counteracts these stereotypes by pointing out their absurdity.

\* \* \*

In the final story in *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Alexie is fully aware of the problems he has pointed out in his other stories in the volume and sets out to begin answering the question “What is an Indian?” a question Alexie poses repeatedly in “One Good Man.” Throughout the story (and most of the collections) he problematizes the expected view of what an Indian is supposed to be and provides a narrator who has constructed his identity through experience, not through textbook representation.

The first time the question is asked is when the main character visits his son and ex-wife living in Seattle with a white man. He is not concerned about the nontraditional arrangement, his visiting his ex-wife and son in the house she lives in with another man, because “the nontraditional arrangement, this extended family, was strange when measured by white standards, but was very traditional by Indian standards. *What is an Indian?* Is it a child who can stroll unannounced through the front doors of seventeen different houses?” (“One Good Man” 217). Alexie answers the question here with a characteristic of the familial relationship—at least through the eyes of the Spokane Indian narrator. This answer illustrates a uniquely Spokane character’s separate from the usual representation of Indians.

Another time the question is answered is in the discussion of his deceased mother. He says,

I missed my mother like crazy. During all of my childhood bedtimes she'd read me books (Whitman! Dickinson!) I could not understand and would not understand until many years later.

*What is an Indian?* Is it a boy who can sing the body electric or a woman who could not stop for death? ("One Good Man" 218)

The narrator here points out the influence that Western writers may have on a contemporary Indian. To quote Whitman's and Dickinson's poetry as influences on Indian tradition changes the back-to-tradition movement. This narrator is not searching for a long ago Mother Earth spirituality. Instead he is seeking to define himself as an Indian through his experiences: Whitman, Dickinson, and all-night Scrabble games.

Coupled with Alexie's creation of a contemporary identity for the narrator are the challenges of what others define as Indian. Dr. Lawrence Crowell, one of the narrator's college professors, was "according to his vita, a Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian-Indian" ("One Good Man" 224). Crowell is representative of a kind of condescension prevalent in the academic arena. The narrator and his family "felt only contempt for a man like Dr. Lawrence Crowell, not because he was a white man who wanted to be Indian . . . but because he thought he was entitled to tell other Indians what it mean to be Indian" ("One Good Man" 227). Crowell, like Spencer Cox from "Dear John Wayne," is an Indian of convenience, or as the narrator's father puts it:

"I don't know," said my father. "Now, you may have some Indian blood. I can see a little of that aboriginal bone structure in your face, but you ain't Indian. Maybe even get a little of the ha-ha when one of the women is feeling

sorry for you. But you ain't Indian. No. You might be a Native American but you sure as hell ain't Indian." ("One Good Man" 228)

For at least the second time in this volume of stories Alexie has made the distinction between Indian and Indian. He aligns academics and whites as people who use the term "Native Americans" and Indians as those who use the term "Indian." Furthermore, he has given the term "Native American" connotations of a made-up system of beliefs, much the same as Dorris' "suspended Indian."

*The Toughest Indian in the World* delves into the stereotypes of Indians and, beginning with the title of the collection, subverts and undermines all of the usual representations. Alexie moves beyond identifying stereotypes to point out their flaws and starts to shape a contemporary Indian identity, beginning with the identities of individual Indians.

### ***Ten Little Indians***

Sherman Alexie's short stories have developed over the span of the ten years between *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Ten Little Indians*. The characters in the first collection are mostly concentrated on the Spokane Indian Reservation and the latter are all Spokane Indians living in Seattle. The setting is not nearly all that Alexie changed when he takes on Indian stereotypes in this collection. Alexie shows the absurdity of stereotyping Indians. Renee Montagne, an NPR interviewer, points out that many of Alexie's characters "are not above employing stereotypes to pull one over, if you will, on the white world" ("Sherman Alexie" 2). Furthermore, as in his earlier texts, he contemplates the contemporary Indian identity by

sending his characters on journeys. These journeys do not take his characters to the past for their answers, but rather into the future—turning away from the stereotypical back-to-tradition tale that is so prevalent in Indian Literature.

*Ten Little Indians* still reflects on the suspended Indian, but its scope is much wider than the previous collections. Written in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedies, the book contemplates a wider reaching set of ideas. Alexie goes beyond the reservation, and even the Spokane Indian life, to tap into the human condition, searching for answers in a fragmented world that goes beyond the Indian identity. Although many of his stories still contain the darkly funny wit of the previous two, *Ten Little Indians* shows the full realization of his skills as a writer.

\* \* \*

In “The Search Engine”<sup>10</sup> Alexie sends Corliss, a college student, in search of Harlan Atwater, the only Spokane Indian poet that she has ever read. Her search is prompted in part by her recognition of Indian stereotypes and her need to connect to an Indian who is as aware of that as she is. Through Corliss’ character, Alexie attacks stereotypes. She takes the stereotypes that non-Indians hold to and makes fun of them or uses them to her advantage. She is looking for what Harlan Atwater has to say about being Indian.

The story begins while Corliss is attending college. It is clear from the beginning that she is aware of the way white people stereotype Indians. She says she didn’t want a white roommate because, “White people, no matter how smart, were too romantic about Indians. White people looked at the Grand Conyon, Niagara Falls, the full moon,

---

<sup>10</sup> I would be remiss if I did not at least call attention to the pun that is the title of this story. The story is the journey (read search) of the main character, Corliss, (read engine—yes, like “honest injun”).

newborn babies, and Indians with the same goofy sentimentalism” (“The Search Engine” 11). Corliss stereotypes white people because she understands, as Michael Dorris does, that many people place Indians in a space in the past, a caricature of the reality. By creating a character who is aware of the way others view Indians, Alexie shows how some Indians are able to destabilize these stereotypes. Corliss’ knowledge of these stereotypes is Alexie’s knowledge when he refers to his writing lacking loincloths and feathers. Through Corliss he can demonstrate the idiocy that is the suspended Indian.

Beyond her awareness, Corliss uses the romantic Indian stereotypes to her advantage. Later the narrator explains,

Being a smart Indian, Corliss had always taken advantage of this romanticism . . . . If white folks assumed she was serene and spiritual and wise simply because she was an Indian, and thought she was special based on those mistaken assumptions, then Corliss saw no reason to contradict them . . . Corliss figured she could certainly benefit from positive ethnic stereotypes and not feel any guilt about it . . . . She knew there would come a day when white folks finally understood that Indians are every bit as relentlessly boring, selfish, and smelly as they are, and that would be a wonderful day for human rights but a terrible day for Corliss. (“The Search Engine” 11)

Corliss provides a profound look at the misconception that white America has regarding Indian stereotypes. Her commentary (read Alexie’s) is obvious a tongue-in-cheek jab at the incongruous conceptions that many carry about Indians. This way of deconstructing stereotypes through laughter is in fact a notion Alexie uses to tie together his two main characters in this text.

Corliss' quest takes her in search of Harlan Atwater. She begins this journey when she reads his poetry. The scene when she checks his book out of the library brings to light other ways that Corliss and the narrator view stereotypes. The librarian "was a small woman wearing khaki pants and large glasses. Corliss wanted to shout at her: Honey, get yourself some contacts and a pair of leather chaps! Fight your stereotypes!" ("The Search Engine" 7). Checking out the book provides the impetus for her journey. But already she is conscious of the stereotypes held about her and others. The librarian plays the role of the librarian and Corliss plays the role of the Indian. She reads Arlan's poetry initially and understands that "Harlan Atwater was making fun of being Indian, of the essential sadness of being Indian, and so maybe he was saying Indians aren't sad at all. Maybe Indians are just big-footed hitchhikers eager to tell a joke!" ("The Search Engine" 7). By acknowledging the Indian stereotypes Atwater is the logical choice for Corliss to seek her Indianness.

The irony of this search though, lies in the character of Harlan Atwater. Instead of being an elder shamanic Indian who provides Corliss with a place to find what it means to be Indian, Atwater is very similar to Corliss in his use of stereotypes. Early on, Corliss finds an interview with Atwater. Through a few exchanges in the interview, Atwater does the same thing with stereotypes that Corliss does—uses them to his advantage. He says,

There's been so much junk written about Indians, you know? So much romanticism and stereotyping. I'm just trying to be authentic, you know? If you look at my poems, if you really study them, I think you're going to find that I am

writing the most authentic Indian poems that have ever been written. I'm trying to help people understand Indians. (22)

Here Atwater expresses his understanding of the stereotypes. Through Atwater, Alexie is commenting on the treatment of Indians by authors and historians. The romantic ideal of the Indian leaves them in a peculiar situation. Either they must embrace the stereotypes and write, and live, as 20<sup>th</sup> century cigar store Indians, or they have to somehow create a work that defies the stereotypes. But what becomes problematic about Atwater is that he is in fact not as authentic as he has proposed.

Atwater wrote poems about the Spokane Indian reservation, but when Corliss and Atwater finally meet in the used bookstore, he tells her, "Indian is easy to fake. People have been faking it for five hundred years. I was just better at it than most" (40). He did not write poems to try to capture the authentic Indian experience, because he knew that was not what others wanted. He wrote what was supposed to be Indian, poems that spoke to the searchers of Indian stereotypes. He even says, "No matter what I write, a bunch of other Indians will hate it because it isn't Indian enough, and a bunch of white people will like it because it's Indian . . . . I don't even know what Indian is supposed to be" (41). So Atwater becomes what Alexie has criticized other Indian writers for being: an Indian who does not live a traditional tribal lifestyle, but writes about tradition to placate audiences. The trouble with that equation is, where do contemporary Indians look for their identity? And what may be more troubling than that question is the answer, or lack thereof, that Alexie offers.

When Corliss left to go find Harlan Atwater she had convinced herself that her trip to find him was a 20<sup>th</sup> century vision quest. She even comments that

Long ago, as part of the passage into adulthood, young Indians used to wander into the wilderness in search of a vision, in search of meaning and definition. Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? Ancient questions answered by ancient ceremonies. Maybe Corliss couldn't climb a mountain and starve herself unto self-revealing hallucinations. Maybe she'd never find her spirit animal, her ethereal guide through the material world. Maybe she was only a confused indigenous woman negotiating her way through a colonial maze. (27)

Alexie knows that there is no way that Corliss, a contemporary Indian, can reach back towards the past—towards the traditional practices of her tribe—to find the answers to those ancient questions. She, on the other hand, believes Atwater may have answers, but awkwardly enough he is as confused about what being Indian means as she is. So, Alexie shows that Corliss, as representative of 20<sup>th</sup> century Indians, cannot search in the past, and she is hard pressed to find literary representations or writers who can help her find answers to questions about her individual and group identity.

\* \* \*

As already noted, Alexie has openly admitted that he is employing his characters to use stereotypes to put one over on the white world. In the postmodern, fragmented story “The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above,” Alexie uses the narrator and Estelle to show two ways of using Indian identity in contemporary society.

Estelle, a single mother, “was Spokane Indian and looked the part: cheekbones stretching from there to here, big black hair hanging halfway down her back, a big brown face with spelunkable eyes, a big bosom, wide hips, and a flat ass” (133). She is the stereotypical female Indian character, but as the narrator points out on a few occasions

during the story, they (he and his mother) are just two more Indians. What Estelle does, though, is to reinvent herself once they leave the reservation, changing her last name from Miller to Walks Above to sound more poetic (136). This reinvention allows her to be what her white friends are looking for and to become “more Indian in their presence” (135). She becomes the stereotypical shaman for them: “They asked her for advice about their love lives, spiritual directions, political positions, and fashion styles. Her white friends wanted to be my mother, so they started to dress and talk like her” (136). She seems to understand the reasons why these white liberals, as she calls them, look to her—because that is what she is supposed to be, based on the representation of Indians. This practice of deliberately meeting white expectations may seem unsettling but it is all too often seen on reservations and downtown Indian shops.<sup>11</sup> What Alexie does, though, is offer a different approach to how a contemporary Indian can reach an identity separate from stereotypical representation.

The narrator of the story, Estelle’s son, is not one to use his Indian heritage to his advantage. His commentary on what Estelle does with her white friends and his approach to the use of his Indian identity provides an alternative to Estelle’s stereotype-riding. Aware of the way whites view Indians, he even asks,

What is it about Indians that turns otherwise intelligent, interesting, and capable people into blithering idiots? I don’t think every white person I meet has the spiritual talents and service commitment of a Jesuit priest, but white folks often think we Indians are shamantic geniuses. Most Indians are only poor folks

---

<sup>11</sup> See *Selling the Indian: Commercializing & Appropriating American Indian Cultures*, edited by Carter Jones Meyer and Diana Royer, for a collection essays on this very topic.

worried about paying the light bill, and they usually pray to win the damn lottery.

(139)

He contemplates the absurdity of his mother's actions. He does not identify with her using the way whites perceive her to reinvent herself. He is also a bit at odds with his tribal/ethnic identity as it relates to whites, because he is not the stereotypical Indian and even comments:

To this day, I rarely look in the mirror and think, I'm an Indian. I don't necessarily know what an Indian is supposed to be. After all, I don't speak my tribal language, and I'm allergic to the earth. If it grows, it makes me sneeze. In Salish, "Spokane" means "Children of the Sun," but I'm slightly allergic to the sun. If I spend too much time outside, I get a nasty rash. I doubt Crazy Horse needed talcum powder to get through a hot summer day. Can you imagine Sacajawea sniffing her way across the Continental Divide? I'm hardly the poster child for aboriginal pride. I don't even think about my heritage until some white person reminds me of it. (134)

The narrator here provides the reader with an understanding of the confusing place of many contemporary Indians. Their tribal identities are lacking because of a disconnection from the past practices, but there is no way, in Alexie's fiction and maybe in reality, for them to recover that connection. So, they are again left with the dilemma that seems to separate the narrator from his mother. Do they, like Estelle, reinvent themselves to fit into the mold that has been set by Indian representation? Or, do they, like the narrator, live as he says

. . . proud to be an Indian. But I don't want to wear a T-shirt with my tribal enrollment number printed on the front and a photograph of Sitting Bull ironed on the back. On the long list of things that I am, I'd put Indian at number three, behind "bitterly funny" at number two and "horny bastard" at number one for the last twenty-seven years running" (135).

The latter seems to be where the ability to get past the stereotypical representations, at least on a personal level, allows the Indian to exist outside the suspended state so long required of them. This transcendence of stereotypes in individual identity is where Alexie seems to place the greater emphasis for happiness in the contemporary Indian.

\* \* \*

There have been numerous stories written by Indian authors that capture the back-to-tradition movement of Indians perhaps beginning with *House Made of Dawn*. This movement usually puts an Indian character off the reservation and returns him/her eventually to the traditional past because of his/her inability to fit into the contemporary world. What ensues is self-imposition of the suspended Indian idea. The idea that Indians' only way of survival is to fall backwards until they have landed in the traditions of their tribal past. Sherman Alexie has been admittedly anti-back-to-tradition by calling into question what that movement in Indian literature does for Indians.<sup>12</sup>

Two stories in *Ten Little Indians* put Indians on journeys to their past. One, "What you Pawn I'll Redeem," is the story of the homeless Jackson Jackson and his search for the money to buy his grandmother's stolen dance regalia that he notices in a

---

<sup>12</sup> See "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie."

pawnshop window. Another is, “Whatever Happened to Frank Snake Church,” in which Frank, a forty-year-old forest ranger, tries to recapture his basketball past after the death of his father. These two men are tools for satire of the traditional tale of the back-to-tradition Indian story. In each of their stories one doesn’t have to look far for parodies of the genre.

Jackson Jackson, called Jackson Squared by some, is a homeless Indian man living in Seattle. He left the reservation for college, only to flunk out within two semesters (“What You Pawn...” 169). Jackson, Rose of Sharon and Junior are “panning the handle” when Jackson spots some old powwow-dance regalia hanging in the window of a pawnshop (171). After a visit with the pawnshop proprietor to authenticate the regalia, the proprietor gives Jackson the opportunity to buy it back for \$999—one dollar less than the pawnshop paid for it. Jackson sees raising the money as a way for him to redeem his lost life—it is his quest to be a hero. His ensuing journey subverts the stereotypical journey of the Indian hero and brings to light the irony of the journey itself.

Jackson, Rose of Sharon and Junior only have five bucks between them, so the pawnbroker gets them started with a fresh twenty-dollar bill. Jackson only has twenty-four hours to raise the money so they “carried the twenty-dollar bill . . . over to the 7-Eleven and spent it to buy three bottles of imagination. [They] needed to figure out how to raise all that money in one day” (174). This drinking incident begins the journey, and Alexie leads Jackson again to the local Indian bar to drink the night away with his \$100 lottery winnings.

Jackson cannot escape the bottle for more than a couple hours and his journey seems failed from the beginning. But, as in many other back-to-tradition tales, Jackson

meets a group of Aluet Indians in search of some ceremonial singing. What he gets is a spoof on the cleansing ceremony that most heroes go through before their return:

“Do you guys know any songs?” [Jackson] asked the Aleuts.

“I know all of Hank Williams,” the elder Aleut said.

“How about Indian songs?”

“Hank Williams is Indian.”

“How about sacred songs?”

“Hank Williams is sacred.”

“I’m talking about ceremonial songs, you know, religious ones. The songs you sing back home when you’re wishing and hoping.” (191)

Here is a point where in a back-to-tradition story an Indian ceremony could cleanse Jackson of his troubles, provide him with the means to attain the regalia, and send him packing backwards towards the reservation life of his youth. But, Alexie is not giving the reader a traditional tale. He lets the Aleuts sing to Jackson for two hours, but all they end up doing is going to breakfast.

When Jackson returns to the pawnshop defeated, the pawnbroker gives him the regalia. But Jackson is angry

“Take it,” [the pawnbroker] said and held it out to me.

“I don’t have the money.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“But I wanted to win it.”

“You did win it. Now, take it before I change my mind.” (194)

Jackson is not the triumphant returner-to-tradition. He is still a drunk, homeless Indian, but now he has his grandmother's regalia back. The journey is nothing more than a farce. Alexie is not offering the same reconciliation that many other Indian authors have by giving Jackson the answers in the past.

Frank Snake Church, in "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church" follows a very similar pattern to the one Jackson Squared follows. Frank's journey is not to regain a mark of his tribal past, but to regain his ability to play basketball. The journey is less ironic than Jackson's but the outcome is similar in its disappointment.

Frank is a 40 year-old man who began playing basketball again after the death of his father. He was a great basketball player in his youth, but after the death of his mother, three days after his high school graduation, he quit playing basketball until the day his father died. Frank has worked out for a year, and on the one-year anniversary of his father's death he steps onto a court with an older man named Preacher. In many stories, an Indian serves as the wise sage who leads the main character (most of the time a white man) towards a deeper understanding of life. In his twists on this situation, Alexie sends the old Indian Frank to an older black man. Preacher and Frank share insults and a game of HORSE. One conversation allows the reader to see what Alexie is saying about capturing the past.

"Preacher," Frank said, "it's true. I'm not kidding. This is, like a mission or something. My mom and dad are dead. I'm playing to honor them. It's an Indian thing."

Preacher laughed harder and longer. "That's crap," he said. "And it's racist crap at that . . . You're playing to remember yourself. You're playing

because of some of that nostalgia. And nostalgia is a cancer . . . You're just an old fart dying of terminal nostalgia." (228)

Here Alexie, in a twisting of the traditional tale, provides a wise old man who does not lead Frank towards a recapturing of the past, but more importantly tries to show Frank the inability to recapture the past. Preacher points out the ridiculous nature of Frank's journey. Because Frank says, "It's an Indian thing," Preacher has to counter that it is crap. It is at this moment that the reader should realize that Frank's journey backwards will not succeed. Frank leaves Preacher broken and disappointed, but he still goes to the community college to try and recapture his past glory on the court.

In the end, Frank is lying on the court, amongst younger and better basketball players, with a blown knee. The point guard from the team he was playing against says, "You're going to be okay . . . . You hear me, old man? You're going to be fine" (243). This is not just the point guard telling Frank he will survive, even though he will not be able to play basketball as he did in his past glory. This is Alexie letting his audience know that Indians are going to be okay, in spite of (or maybe because of) their inability to recapture their past—to become the suspended Indian. Alexie does not offer reconciliation with the past as the answer to Frank's problems. His failure points him back in the direction that will lead him to answers, the future.

\* \* \*

Alexie admittedly wrote many of the stories in the volume *Ten Little Indians* in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedies. "Flight Patterns" uses the paranoia

surrounding the tragedies as a backdrop for a discussion of Indian stereotyping and stereotyping in general.

William, the main character, is an assimilated Indian. He jokes that he is the owner of a 21<sup>st</sup> century American mind filled with trivia regarding pop culture and country music (102-3). His morning ritual of stretching and coffee is no different from that of any other businessman preparing for his departure for a business trip. What is different about William though is that he is concerned about his appearance as an Indian—at least the stereotypical things that make him Indian. For example,

William was obsessive about his mane, tying and retying his ponytail, knotting and reknitting his braids, experimenting with this shampoo and that conditioner. He greased down his cowlicks (inherited from a cowlicked father and grandfather) with shiny pomade . . . . (104)

This obsessive behavior about his hair is the first of many indications that William is fully assimilated into the American culture, but uncomfortable about his place in that culture, especially in the atmosphere of America post September 11<sup>th</sup>. He is aware that, as much as he has psychologically assimilated, his appearance has an effect on the way people view him.

In this case he is not concerned with the misrepresentation of Indian stereotypes. He

. . . always scanned the airports and airplanes for little brown guys who reeked of fundamentalism. That meant William was equally afraid of Osama bin Laden and Jerry Falwell wearing the last vestiges of a summer tan. William himself was a little brown guy, so the other travelers were always sniffing around him, but he

smelled only of Dove soap, Mennen deodorant, and sarcasm. Still, he understood why people were afraid of him, a brown-skinned man with dark hair and eyes.

(107-8)

This conception of his identity is filled with irony. He seems to have reconciled the fact that even though he has accepted all parts of the American corporate identity—going so far as to call himself a “member of the notebook-computer tribe and the security-checkpoint tribe”—that he is still viewed as the “other” (109). This is part of the ultimate irony of the Indian existence, because Alexie shows that the Indian cannot escape stereotyping. No matter that his characters do feel comfortable in the contemporary world, they are still unsettled.

William is sarcastic about his pigeonholing because of his skin color but he sees no way out. He jokingly says that

He wanted his fellow travelers to know exactly who and what he was: *I am a Native American and therefore have ten thousand more reasons to terrorize the U.S. than any of those Taliban jerk-offs, but I have chosen instead to become a civic American citizen, so all of you white folks should be celebrating my kindness and moral decency and awesome ability to forgive!* Maybe William should have worn beaded vests when he traveled. Maybe he should have brought a hand drum and sang “Way, ya, way, ya , hey.” Maybe he should have thrown casino chips into the crowd. (112)

Here, through the narrator and William, Alexie notes the absurdity that is stereotyping and its common use in airports and beyond. William and Alexie cannot get past the dilemma that September 11<sup>th</sup> has forced on all people but especially on people of color.

The ethnic stereotypes of the Indians seem to take a back seat (besides for humor) to the overwhelming predictability of ethnic stereotyping of terrorists.

Alexie takes William, a seemingly fully-assimilated Indian, and problematizes his Indianness against the backdrop not only of the stereotypes of Indians, but of all people of color. What comes out of this treatment is an ironic understanding of the impossibility of assimilation for Indians. This irony is clear in a recollection William has during a conversation with the taxi driver:

“We’re all trapped by other people’s ideas, aren’t we?”

“I suppose that is true, sir. How has it been for you?”

“It’s all backward,” William said. “A few days after it happened, I was walking out of my gym downtown, and this big phallic pickup pulled up in front of me in the crosswalk. Yeah, this big truck with big phallic tires and big phallic flagpole and a big phallic flag flying, and the big phallic symbol inside leaned out of his window and yelled at me, ‘Go Back to your own country!’”

“Oh, that is sad and funny,” the taxi driver said.

“Yeah,” William said. “And it wasn’t so much a hate crime as it was a crime of irony, right?” (117)

Indians, as well as everyone else, are trapped in their representation. Alexie is at odds with the fact that all people hold stereotypes of those they deem “the other.”

\* \* \*

At this point, *Ten Little Indians* concludes the collections of short stories by Sherman Alexie. He is fully aware of the stereotypical representations of Indians both as characters and writers and he is constantly upsetting the boundaries readers have

regarding those stereotypes. This volume allows the reader a glimpse into the modern Indian life, not through the glass of *Dances with Wolves* but through narrators that spin tales of hurt, anger, and triumph. They seem less likely to be stereotyped as Indians and more likely to be characterized as people.

## Works Cited

- Alexie, Sherman. "A Drug Called Tradition." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 12-23.
- "All I Wanted to Do Was Dance." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 83-92.
- "Amusements." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 54-58.
- "Assimilation." *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000. 1-20.
- "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 24-36.
- "Class." *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000. 35-56.
- "Crazy Horse Dreams." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 37-42.
- "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie." *Studies in Native American Literature* 9. no. 4 (winter 1997): 1.
- "Dear John Wayne." *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000. 189-208.
- "Flight Patterns." *Ten Little Indians*. New York: Grove Press, 2003. 102-123.
- "Imagining the Reservation." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

- New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 149-153.
- "Indian Country." *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000. 121-149.
- "Indian Education." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 171-180.
- "Jesus Christ's Half-Brother Is Alive and Well on the Spokane Indian Reservation." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 110-129.
- "One Good Man." *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000. 209-238.
- "Saint Junior." *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000. 150-188.
- "South By Southwest." *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000. 57-75.
- *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994.
- "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 43-54.
- *Ten Little Indians*. New York: Grove Press, 2003.
- "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above." *Ten Little Indians*. New York: Grove Press, 2003. 124-149.
- "The Search Engine." *Ten Little Indians*. New York: Grove Press, 2003. 1-52.

- *The Toughest Indian in the World*. New York: *Atlantic Monthly*, 2000.
- "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 59-75.
- "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" *Ten Little Indians*. New York: Grove Press, 2003. 195-243.
- "What You Pawn I Will Redeem." *Ten Little Indians*. New York: Grove Press, 2003. 169-194
- "Witnesses, Secret and Not." *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Harper Collins, 1994. 211-223.
- Churchill, Ward. "Literature and the Colonization of American Indians." *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998. 1-18.
- "Fantasies of the Master Race: The Cinematic Colonization of American Indians." *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998. 167-224.
- Dorris, Michael. "Crazy Horse Malt Liquor." *Paper Trail*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 107-110.
- "Dances with Indians." *Paper Trail*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 260-264.
- "Indians in Asp." *New York Times*. 24 Feb 1991: v140, sec4.
- "Indians on the Shelf." *Paper Trail*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. 120-121.

- Lee, A. Robert. "Introduction." *Postindian Conversations*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1999.
- Owens, Lewis. *Other Destinies*. Norman: U of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- "Sherman Alexie discusses his new book *Ten Little Indians*. Interview. National Public \ Radio. 18 August 2003.
- Vizenor, Gerald and A. Robert Lee. "Discursive Narratives." *Postindian Conversations*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1999. 79-94.
- "Double Others." *Manifest Manners*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994. 45-62.
- "Fugitive Poses." *Fugitive Poses*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1998. 145-165.
- "Introduction". *Native American Literature*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- "Shadow Survivance." *Manifest Manners*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994. 63-106.