Shape-shifting: fluctuating patterns of Indian identity in Sherman Alexie's fiction

James Patrick Webb
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16261

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Shape-shifting: fluctuating patterns of Indian identity

in Sherman Alexie’s fiction

by

James Patrick Webb

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Neil Nakadate, Major Professor
    Steve Pett
    Lynn Paxson

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2004
This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

James Patrick Webb

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>RESERVATION WRITINGS: SURVIVAL = ANGER X IMAGINATION</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>DISPLACEMENT: THE LOCATION OF IDENTITY</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>URBAN INDIANS: THE EXPANDING TRIBAL CIRCLE</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>CONCLUSION: THINKING OUT LOUD</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Neil—For the countless hours of reading and instruction you invested to make me a better writer, and for your insightful comments that have elevated my level of thinking.

To Steve—For inspiring me both in and out of the classroom. You are the kind of teacher I aspire to be.

To Lynn—For motivating me to continue (re)thinking about my topic when I thought I was ready to set it aside.

To Lisa—For putting up with the long hours, the restless nights, and the un-mowed lawn. You have your husband back!
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Poet, novelist, screenwriter, comedian, songwriter and film-maker, Native American writer Sherman Alexie’s bold entrance into mainstream American writing has captured the attention of critics and casual observers alike. As an enrolled Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian, Alexie uses his insider status to speak to what it means to be Indian – Alexie discounts the term Native American as “a guilty white liberal term” – in America today. As his experiences have changed, however, so has his definition of what it means to be Indian.

Alexie was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, to a Coeur d'Alene Indian father and Spokane Indian mother. Born with hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, Alexie underwent brain surgery at the age of six months and was not expected to survive. In fact, his father had a Catholic priest administer last rites. According to his press-bio, when he did beat the odds, doctors predicted he would be severely retarded. While he dodged this affliction, Alexie did suffer such severe side effects as seizures and uncontrollable bed-wetting throughout his childhood. Despite these physical challenges, Alexie learned to read by age three, and claims to have read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* by age five. Between his unusual physical challenges and his academic interest in reading, Alexie was an easy target among his peers. “Because he was delicate and because he was ‘weird,’ the young Alexie was bullied” (Blewster).

Alexie’s childhood was marked by countless treatments and therapies, and being one of six children living on a reservation, it was also one filled with poverty and tragedy. Both his parents were practicing alcoholics, and in eighth grade his older sister and her husband were killed in a mobile-home fire, an event that has served as a recurring motif in Alexie’s writing. “Grief never ends, it just changes. Maybe it gets smaller. That’s why I write” (cited
in Lenfestey). But this grief was part of what motivated him to find a way off the reservation, and he and his parents decided the best way was to get educated outside of the reservation. Alexie attended the white high school in Reardon, a town notoriously unfriendly to Indians, where he excelled both in the classroom and on the basketball court. And while Alexie struggled to fit in on the reservation, he found a comfortable niche in his new environment. “All those qualities that made me unpopular on the reservation made me popular at Reardan. It got to the point where I don’t think they saw me as Indian” (Cited in Marx).

His efforts earned him a scholarship to Gonzaga University; but ironically, after going 18 years on the reservation without touching a drop of alcohol, his first year away at college he became a binge drinker. After briefly dropping out of college, he transferred to Washington State University, where he enrolled in his first creative writing class. Under the guidance of Professor Alex Kuo, Alexie discovered Native American writers and poets who connected with him as no others had. Alexie credits Adrian C. Louis’s poem “Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile” with changing the direction of his life. “O Uncle Adrian! I’m in the reservation of my mind.’ I started crying. That was my whole life. Forget Steinbeck and Keats. I just kept saying that line over and over again. I sat down and started writing poems. And they came. It was scary” (Cited in Marx). Alexie turned out poetry at a frantic pace, and at Kuo’s urging, also began work with prose.

Working under the Washington State Arts Commission Poetry Fellowship in 1991 and the National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship in 1992, Alexie had two manuscripts accepted for publication while still enrolled as a student at Washington State. Alexie has gone on to publish 16 books in twelve years, a prolific pace, along with two feature films. His first two books, *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992) and *I Would Steal
Horses (1992), are collections of poetry with a few short prose pieces mixed in. He next published two similar books, Old Shirts and New Skins (1993) and First Indian on the Moon (1993) but also produced his first collection of short stories, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993). The latter earned him national recognition when he received the prestigious PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction as well as the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Writers Award. Encouraged by his publisher to work on a full-length novel, he went on to publish Reservation Blues (1995) and Indian Killer (1996). The former earned Alexie the Granta Best of Young American Novelists award, the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award, and the Murray Morgan Prize, and the latter earned him People’s Best of Pages award and New York Times Notable Book recognition. But frustrated by the challenges of maintaining an idea through such a long work, Alexie returned to his roots by publishing the poetry collection The Summer of Black Widows (1996). Always looking to explore new avenues, Alexie adapted some earlier short stories into the feature film Smoke Signals (1998). Shown at the Sundance Film Festival, the movie earned the Audience Award and the Filmmaker’s Trophy, and went on to later earn the Christopher award. Alexie then turned from Hollywood to write the short story collection The Toughest Indian in the World (2000), which earned the Malamud Short Story Award, and his latest work, Ten Little Indians (2003). In 2003 Washington State granted him the Regent’s Distinguished Alumnus Award.

Since Alexie spent his first 18 years on the reservation, it is not surprising that his early writing is dominated by it. His first three books of poetry, along with his short story collection The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, focus exclusively on Indians living on the reservation. Alexie portrays these Indians as being caught, to varying degrees,
in the stereotypical trappings of reservation life, particularly stark poverty (HUD houses, commodity food), alcoholism, abusive relationships, and hopelessness. *Reservation Blues* extends these themes of despondency and abuse while recasting characters from earlier stories. In these works, most of the Indians are content to give in to their despair, using their heritage of abuse as almost an excuse for not bettering themselves. Even worse, those who try to look beyond the reservation are either harnessed with unrealistic expectations or rejected for leaving behind their heritage. The focus of these stories is survival — Indians are trapped on the reservation and are looking constantly to the past, and while Alexie portrays these attitudes negatively, even ironically, he offers no clues about how to change them.

In *The Toughest Indian in the World*, and even to some extent in *Indian Killer*, a shift occurs, and most of these stories deal with urban Indians. Nearly all of these urban Indians, however, are discontented. Their problems, though different than those of the reservation Indians, are no less destructive. Like the reservation Indians, these urban Indians are haunted by their heritage, but because they feel separated from this heritage, their problems are complicated by feelings of displacement. In an attempt to reconnect, they, like the reservation Indians, look backwards to the past. They think if they can just engage this cultural heritage by connecting — often sexually — with Reservation Indians, they will be more content. Alexie’s characters at this point in his career have developed beyond his early characters because they are exploring solutions, albeit with limited success.

In *Ten Little Indians* there is yet another shift. Every story deals with urban Indians, and most are also well educated and adjusted to life. Unlike the previous stories, these present the identities of most characters as being independent from their being Indian. For the first time, Alexie’s grappling with identity leads his to beyond the boundaries of the
reservation and the harmful stereotypes associated with it. Another shift is that, while many of the characters initially look backward for solutions, they ultimately realize the limitations of this approach and look forward instead.

Alexie’s shifting themes have spawned a broad reading audience by expanding the range of the experiences represented, but they have also sparked controversy in both mainstream America and Native American cultures. For example, reviews of his second novel, Indian Killer, were dramatically variegated. The Kansas City Star raved, “Not since Richard Wright’s Native Son has a novel by a minority writer so devastatingly indicted an entire society and laid bare with merciless candor the racial hatred at the center of it” (Beasley). Time magazine’s reviewer was less impressed, complaining Alexie was “septic with his own unappeasable anger” (Skow). Alexie is mostly unfazed by such criticism, however. “Septic in my own unappeasable anger. I put that on a T-shirt and I play basketball in it” (Inskeep). In general, white culture has been increasingly supportive of his efforts, as his impressive sales numbers indicate. Even Hollywood appreciates his talent and vision. In the article “Death in Hollywood” Alexie writes, “I’ve been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to work on screenplays I’m quite positive will never be made into movies, so that’s obviously a very sure and strange sign of appreciation.”

Alexie’s status as a minority writer has led many to view him as broadly representative of authentic Indian culture, a point not missed by fellow Indian writers. Because in many ways he strays from traditional themes and boundaries in his writing, Alexie’s reception among indigenous writers has been more passionately demarcated. As writer Scott Malcolmson writes, “He has become such a popular Indian writer, yet he doesn’t play the traditional Indian roles – the spiritually superior role, or the nobly damned plains
warrior. He is so true to himself, especially when he’s changing his mind, that he offends a lot of people” (cited in Blewster).

The most scathing criticism has come from fellow Spokane writer Gloria Bird. Building on Owens’ argument, she posits that *Reservation Blues* “contribute[s] to a portrait of an exaggerated version of reservation life, one that perpetuates many of the stereotypes of native people and presents problems for native and non-native readers alike” (47). She goes on to claim that he sells out his heritage by “preying upon a variety of native cultures along the way” (48). She contends that Alexie borrows aspects of various tribes to create a Pan-Indian that “returns an image of a generic ‘Indian’ back to the original producers of the image” (49). Bird is most offended by Alexie’s portrayal of alcoholism, which she claims he glorifies through characters such as Lester FallsApart (51).

This is where opinions split – is Alexie entitled to use these images for his own devices or does he have a responsibility to protect Indians from any images that might somehow serve to perpetuate white stereotypes? Critic Stephen F. Evans also addresses the specific issue of alcohol in his article “Open Containers: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians.” He claims Bird fails to recognize “Alexie’s essentially moral aims in writing poetry and fiction that is heavily infused with irony and satire, including his ethical reversal or extension of stereotypes in order to establish new valences of imaginative literary realism” (Evans). Alexie himself, in contrast to his nonchalant approach to criticism from Time magazine, went out of his way to personally respond to Bird’s article in an online posting:

[My] mom is the drug and alcohol treatment counselor on the rez, so I’m quite aware of what’s going on out there. There are two major cocaine and crack
dealers on the rez now. They're Crips gang members. In every government housing village, crack vials are on the lawns. Fewer and fewer kids are going to college.

Domestic violence incidents are rising. Property crime, almost unheard of during years on the rez, has risen dramatically. My fiction doesn't even come close to how bad it can be, and how good it can be, on my reservation. ("Re: Alexie Article")

Clearly concerned with the state of the reservation, Alexie is willing to expose the horrible truths if this will lead to a less destructive lifestyle. He is more interested in revealing his vision for Indians than in assuaging the fragile insecurities of tribal councils, and this hopeful vision for the future can only be accomplished if behavioral and attitudinal changes occur.

As indicated above, notable shifts in Alexie's vision are characterized by an outward progression of settings that begins with the reservation and moves further and further into urban areas. In his fiction, a direct correlation exists between proximity to the reservation and the direction of characters' focus: the reservation stories reflect the trap of looking back to a tragic but romanticized history and emphasize survival; the transitional stories portray recently-urbanized Indians looking back to the equally tragic and romanticized reservation life and trying to come to terms with a level of success incongruent with reservation life; the urban stories focus on the mixed realities of the present and even, in some cases, the hopeful future. Ultimately, the shifting shape of Alexie's characters parallel the changing environments into which they are placed. But while the shapes change, the heart remains the same: they all wrestle with what it means to be Indian.

I will be exploring this shifting paradigm of Indian-ness by tracing the changes that appear in Alexie's fiction. While Alexie considers himself to be primarily a poet, his short fiction has garnered the most critical attention. His two novels will be cited as well, but while
Reservation Blues fits neatly into this scheme by using some of Alexie’s recurring characters and themes, his detective novel Indian Killer is largely anomalous and will not receive much attention here. The shift will be traced through three distinct groupings. The first, the reservation writings, consists of The Business of Fancydancing, Old Shirts and New Skins, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, and Reservation Blues. The second grouping, Displacement, includes Indian Killer, Toughest Indian in the World, and Smoke Signals. The final grouping, urban Indians, consists solely of Ten Little Indians.
CHAPTER 2. RESERVATION WRITINGS:

SURVIVAL = ANGER X IMAGINATION (LR 150)

Alexie’s early writing reflects his reservation experiences. The Business of Fancydancing, Old Shirts and New Skins, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, and Reservation Blues reflect Indian life as a pattern of passivity and self-destructive behavior. Almost without exception, the stories and poems from this period are set on the reservation and feature characters striving for survival above all else. Alexie’s characters are trapped on the reservation, and instead of looking toward the future, they concentrate on their history of oppression and abuse. Ironically, Alexie regards the so-called glorious past of the Indians as an artificial construct of Hollywood that Indians themselves have, unfortunately, embraced. Alexie’s reservation Indians passively receive their compensatory government handouts rather than taking control of their own destinies.

In his first book, The Business of Fancydancing, Alexie emphasizes the victimization of Native Americans. “Every highway in the world crosses some reservation, cuts it in half” (13), he writes in “Traveling,” the first story. This early sentence establishes a pattern of abuse because, if every highway crosses a reservation, there are clearly numerous reservations. It also speaks to universality (“in the world”) and continued oppression—they are already confined to reservations, yet their space is further split and divided by highways, a symbol for Western progress and domination. The image is further reinforced by the details of the story: hungry Indians with no food (only a cooler “full of wishes”), harassment from a state trooper, and an empty tank of gas. The most disturbing aspect of the story, however, is
the haunting line Alexie ends with to reflect the Indian response to this oppression: “I turned back to the van, put my shoulder to the cold metal and waited for something to change” (15).

This attitude of passive resignation is characteristic of Alexie’s stories during this early period. Even as his characters recognize that things are amiss, they fail to take positive action to formulate change. When the trooper pulls the van over, the Indians joke that “being Indian has been illegal in Washington since 1972” (14). And when the Trooper harasses them, quizzing them on American trivia, the Indians quickly figure out what he wants to hear and feed it to him:

“Who holds the major league record for most homeruns in a single season?” the Trooper asked my father.

“Roger Maris.”

“No, it’s Babe Ruth. You must be drunk” . . .

“Who invented Velcro?”

“You did.”

The Trooper bumped chests with my father, spit in his face as he yelled.

“Now you understand, Indian.” (14)

The Indians in the van passively accept their fate, their abuse, and agree to play along in the name of survival.

In “Traveling,” Alexie also demonstrates how getting stuck in survival mode cancels out dreams, or at least renders them unrealistic. In it, a young Victor Joseph, exhausted from a short-handed basketball game, reaches for a sandwich but discovers only two slices of bread. “You can have a wish sandwich . . . . All the time you’re eating you’re wishing there was something in your sandwich . . . . It was hunger made me move then, not a dream” (13).
The only thing Victor knows to wish for is the fulfillment of his basic needs of sustenance.

On the reservation, imagination is expended merely on survival.

During a PBS "Presidential Dialogue" panel discussion at about this time, Alexie argued that Native Americans are the most oppressed people in the country:

A poor Native American faces more hurdles than a poor anybody. . . . I concluded that the American Indians had gotten the worst of both worlds, that they had not been given enough empowerment or responsibility or tools to make the most of their own lives, and the sort of paternalistic relationship the U.S. Government had kept them in was pathetic and inadequate. So they literally got the worst of both worlds. They weren't given enough help, and they certainly didn't have enough responsibility and power in my view to build the future. ("Remarks in the 'Presidential Dialogue'")

The tone of these comments is typical of these early writings - Alexie is angry current conditions, and he blames the U.S. Government them. "Alexie blames white culture over and over in no uncertain terms" (Coulombe). The government provides essential needs; this fosters Indian dependency and simultaneously blocks access to the power to provide for themselves.

An excellent example of this appears in the poem "Evolution." In it, Buffalo Bill (Buffalo Bill is a loaded name because of his history of exploiting Native Indians in his Wild West show and because of the Western Hero status he enjoys in American culture.) opens a pawn shop across the border from the liquor store. Buffalo Bill is getting rich through a double exploitation: he is cheating Indians out of pieces of their heritage by paying pennies on the dollar for valuable cultural heirlooms, and he is pandering to and further enabling their alcohol abuse by situating his shop across from the liquor store. In a final ironic twist, when
the last Indian has pawned all he has left, his heart, Buffalo Bill “takes that for twenty bucks/
closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old/ calls his venture THE MUSEUM
OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES/ charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter”
(48). After taking their culture away from them, he charges them to regain access to it, but
now their cultural history is labeled and categorized by a white man. “Evolution” emphasizes
a pattern of continual Indian defeat. “The border crossing from reservation to liquor store and
back becomes a powerful metaphor of recurring Indian defeat by white civilization and the
white-conditioned habit of Indian self-defeat” (Evans).

As critic Stephen F. Evans notes, there is a hint of complicity from the Indians
themselves – they willingly pawn their culture to purchase alcohol, which has had a
notoriously devastating affect on reservation life. As of January of 2003, Indians were more
than three times more likely to die of cirrhosis of the liver than white people, four times more
likely to die in an alcohol related accident and three times more likely to be murdered or
commit suicide (Campbell). The question of who is most to blame for these horrific
conditions is an important one for Alexie. His second book, Old Shirts and New Skins,
though primarily a poetry collection and thus outside my primary focus here, nevertheless
contains a few poems that warrant mention. Alexie tackles this issue of complicity and blame
in his poem entitled “Poem” by replacing “Trail of Tears” with “Trail of Beers.” “Poem”
refers directly to arguably the most notorious examples of government hostility toward
Native Americans: “You can always find me mumbling here [the Breakaway Bar]/ about
how I wounded my knee, pie-eyed/ and falling on a trail of beers” (77). The reference to
Wounded Knee is an obvious one, and does much to reveal Alexie’s dissatisfaction with
focusing on the past. His critique continues as he takes aim at the reservation’s reputation for settling for government handouts:

Commodities can keep me pacified/ now, on this two-lane trail of tears. / Cashing governments checks like a premier/ I’m an alcoholic Jekyll and Hyde/ in tattered coat, of a trail of beers/ giving my last twenty to the cashier/ for another case, trying to decide/ if I’m crawling along a trail of tears/ of drowning myself on a trail of beers.

(77)

Here and elsewhere Alexie argues that government provisions do little but foster dependence and enable laziness and complacency. By evoking famous tragic events, ones which have stood as rallying points and unifying events in Native American culture, Alexie acknowledges that abuses have occurred, but suggests that the present tragedy of the reservation is more accurately categorized as a self-inflicted one, or at least one Indians have gone along with. As Alexie once explained it, “It’s a two-way street. The system sets you up to fail, and then, somehow, you choose it” (Marx).

Alexie further expands the problematic relationship between reservations and the U.S. government in nearly all of the 22 stories in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. In “A Drug Called Tradition,” Thomas throws a party with money he receives for allowing power lines to cross his land. “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 whites” (13). Three important ideas emerge here. First, while handsomely compensated for the power lines, Thomas exchanged land and safety for money, a pattern that has been mimicked repeatedly in the form of uranium mines and toxic waste disposal and elsewhere. Second, Thomas spends this “ton of money” on “the second-largest
party in reservation history” rather than using that money to advance his future. In the midst of his poverty, he throws a party for the entire reservation, buying enough beer to satisfy everyone. Third, his measuring stick for success or failure is the past; rather than determining for himself if the scarring of the land and the introduction of yet another carcinogenic agent to the reservation is worth the money made, Thomas passively completes the deal and wonders if it is a move his ancestors would have made or approved of. This backward focus is apparent when, in the midst of a drug-induced high, Victor, Thomas and Junior imagine themselves as ancient warriors performing feats of bravery against the U.S. Cavalry. During one of his visions, Thomas defines the precarious nature of Indian existence as a dance with skeletons: “These skeletons are made of memories, dreams, and voices. And they trap you in the in-between, between touching and becoming. What you have to do is keep moving . . . See, it is always now. That’s what Indian time is. The past and the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That’s how it is. We are trapped in the now (21-22). Alexie describes Indians as being unable to reconnect with the past, but also unable to achieve a hopeful future. With nothing left but the present, it is easy to see why reservation Indians focus solely on survival.

It is significant that the past here is depicted as a skeleton; clearly, in Alexie’s mind, looking to the past is not the solution. As Jennifer Gillan puts it, “Alexie struggles against the tendency to romanticize the past that he sees in much Native American writing” (96). Romanticizing the past does little but create confusion and foster dissatisfaction with the present because of the stark disparity between the two. Victor demonstrates this well in “A Drug Called Tradition” when he desires to be an ancient warrior even as he doubts the existence of this imagined heritage. “Victor is situated at a boundary between cultural rejection and cultural connection, torn between skepticism toward the heritage of traditional
spirituality and the desire to retain that heritage” (DeNuccio 89). Alexie’s own struggles with this romanticized past emerge in an interview he gave to Publisher’s Weekly: “I write what I know, and I don’t try to mythologize myself, which is what some seem to want, and which some Indian women and men writers are doing, this Earth Mother and Shaman Man thing, trying to create these ‘authentic, traditional’ Indians. We don’t live our lives that way. . . . I have a very specific commitment to Indian people, and I’m very tribal in that sense. I want us to survive as Indians” (Marx).

But who decides what an “authentic, traditional” Indian is? This question is hotly debated in tribal circles—are these definitions authentically representative, or stereotyped products of a romanticized Hollywood imagination? In the poetry of Old Shirts and New Skins, Alexie represents this dichotomy with the idea of Indians being extras in some eternal Western movie. Alexie notes that the majority of Americans picture Plains Indians and, of course, John Wayne when they imagine Native American history. The ending of the prose poem “Vision (2)” effectively illustrates the problems with this stereotype:

By the time the 20th century reached this far west, the war was over. Crazy Horse was gone and the Ghost Dancers were only ghosts. Christopher Columbus was 500 years and 3,000 miles away, fresh from a starring role in the Great American Movie.

I’ve seen that film at the reservation drive-in. If you look closely, you can see an Indian leaning against the back wall. You won’t find his name among the end credits; you can’t hear his voice or his song.

Extras, we’re all extras. (27)
Many reservation Indians think they are looking to a glorious past, but Alexie argues that they are actually only imagining themselves in an artificial role that never really existed, or at the very least, one that the majority of Indians never participated in.

The short prose piece “Eugene Boyd Don’t Drink Here No More” in *The Business of Fancydancing* further reinforces this idea. In “Eugene Boyd” a stranger comes to a bar looking for an old friend and, upon learning of his death, breaks into tears. Because this is inconsistent with their self-inflicted code of Indian conduct, the reaction is telling. “All us stoic Indians rehearsing for parts as extras in some eternal black and white western. Shit, used to be only whites expected Skins to have monosyllabic faces, but now, we even expect it of each other” (75). Ironically, while Alexie has been accused of exploiting Indians through the affirmation of stereotypes, many of his early stories, while incorporating these attributes, are simultaneously critiquing not only the stereotyped attributes themselves (which he might very well argue actually are at least moderately valid), but also the system that created these stereotypes.

Spearheading the outcry against Alexie’s stereotypes is poet and critic Gloria Bird, who, by nature of her status as a fellow Spokane Indian, has emerged as an important critical voice. Bird accuses Alexie of “preying” on his culture and exaggerating the problems on the reservation without providing a context for the problems, which results in a “spoof of contemporary reservation life” (51). Because of Alexie’s culturally broad, far-reaching audience, Bird is concerned that “this is the only exposure to native literature to which mainstream readers are exposed” (48). This is problematic, Bird argues, because “Stereotyping native peoples does not supply a native readership with soluble ways of undermining stereotypes, but becomes a part of the problem, and returns an image of a
generic ‘Indian’ back to the original producers of that image” (49). Furthermore, this
mainstream audience, she contends, will mistake Alexie’s writing as “complete
representation,” when actually he “omits the core of native community, and exists solely in
the marginal realm” (49).

Alexie’s on-line posting response to these allegations, quoted in the introduction,
make clear his true intentions. The despair Alexie portrays is well founded, and his use of
stereotypes is ironic. As Evans notes, “his construction of a satiric mirror . . . reflects the
painful reality of [their] lives” (Evans). Within the context of satire, Alexie’s extensions of
Indian stereotypes serve to model weaknesses and incite change. Critic Gordon E. Slethaug
argues that Alexie’s stereotypes are designed to help Americans “grasp the fact that their
stereotypes about Indians are not only historically false but that they condemn Indians to lurk
forever in the dark behind the bluffs of frontier America instead of coming into the light of
an urbanized, contemporary United States” (130). In his early writing, Alexie is not clear on
what the image of an American Indian should be changed to; rather, his focus seems to be
marking what the image should be changed from.

In The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, the story “Amusements” is
representative of Alexie’s treatment of this slippery problem. In it, Victor and Sadie run
across Dirty Joe, passed out at the carnival. Deciding to have some fun with him, they load
him onto a roller coaster and pay the attendant $20 to let him keep running all day. What
starts as a joke, however, quickly turns into something more profound:

She leaned on my shoulder and laughed until tears fell. I looked around and saw a
crowd had gathered and joined in on the laughter. Twenty or thirty white faces, open
mouths grown large 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. (56)

Alexie uses two stereotypes here, the drunken Indian and the Indian as entertainer. By blending them as an Indian who entertains with his drunkenness, he creates an absurd image that draws attention to itself as a device. To further the effect, he has Victor serve as the exploiter, turning the traditional model of western exploitation on its head. The scene sparks a sort of epiphany for Victor and Sadie: "'Oh, shit,' she said, realizing what we had done, 'let's go'" (56) (my emphasis). Once they see the spectacle they made of another Indian, and they note that the laughter is directed as much toward them as to Dirty Joe, they recognize they will forever be trapped within this self-affirmed stereotype. As they try to escape the police, they run through the fun house where Victor sees himself in one of the distorting mirrors: "Crazy mirrors, I thought, the kind that distort your features . . . The kind that make a white man remember he's the master of ceremonies, barking about . . . the Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty" (58). Through the mirror, he sees himself as the whites see him, and the image he receives is a sobering one.

Victor learns another lesson in "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." This story, made famous by the film adaptation Smoke Signals, traces the journey of Victor and Thomas to claim the ashes and assets of Victor's father, who had abandoned his family years ago. This story is notable for its emphasis on tribal ties, the coming together of tribe members in the face of tragedy. Interestingly, this is the only story that expands beyond the boundaries of the reservation, and it is the only story in which Alexie acknowledges the possibility of a tie of humanity, one that transcends mere tribal connections. On the plane to Phoenix, the boys meet a "tiny white woman" who was "first alternate on the 1980 Olympic team" (66).
When Cathy complains the government “screwed the 1989 Olympic team by boycotting,” Thomas notes, “Sounds like you all got a lot in common with Indians” (67). This conversation foreshadows the shift that will occur in Alexie’s later fiction when he establishes themes based on shared human experiences rather than just the unique Indian one.

The key moment in the story, however, is when Thomas explains to Victor his memory of Victor’s father. When Thomas’s adolescent dream told him to stand by the Falls in Spokane and wait for a vision, he instead happened upon Victor’s father who told him “all you’re going to get here is mugged” (69). Thomas says he realized the vision was Victor’s father, and the dream was saying “Take care of each other” (69). Thomas’s attempt at a traditional dream quest resulted in breakfast at Denny’s and a message to help others, and this seems to embody Alexie’s message as well: while the Indian cultural heritage is rich and inspiring, what the reservation most needs is a pragmatic message to take care of one another.

Alexie argues that one of the most detrimental barriers to achieving this hopeful vision is the reservation tendency to cut down its most promising “heroes” for a variety of reasons. This tendency is alluded to briefly in “This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” when Thomas “flies” off the roof of the tribal school, breaking his “wing” in two places. The boys chanted “He broke his wing” as if it were a tribal song, as if celebrating his failure. Then, “all the Indian boys chanted as they ran off, flapping their wings, wishing they could fly, too. They hated Thomas for his courage, his brief moment as a bird. Everybody has dreams about flying. Thomas flew” (70). The hatred they feel is telling; because they have experienced disappointment, they denounce someone who has the luck or initiative to
achieve a level of success. Paradoxically, they also admire him for possessing the courage they lack, and they are jealous of his initiative.

It is not always resentment or jealousy that interferes, however, as Alexie demonstrates in “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore.” In fact, the problem here is nearly its opposite: elevating anyone showing promise to hero-status and subsequently smothering him/her in unrealistic expectations. The story opens with Victor and Adrian sitting on a porch drinking Pepsis and watching the traffic light that had stopped working. When a young basketball hero, Julius Windmaker, walks by, Victor shares some of Windmaker’s legendary exploits, noting that even his mistakes were not acknowledged by the reservation observers: “Julius could throw a crazy pass, surprise us all, and send it out of bounds. But nobody called it a turnover because we all knew that one of his teammates should’ve been there to catch the pass. We loved him” (45). Adrian teases Julius, making clear his admiration for him, even though the boy is just a child, but Victor holds off, conscious of his own experiences with the overpowering responsibility of living—and the burden of losing—hero status. Going into the state championship game, the whole team felt invulnerable, like nothing could touch them. In their make-shift changing room, however, the medical injury booklets they encounter, with their close-up pictures of death, makes them suddenly aware of their own mortality. They lost the game and Victor missed every shot he took. As Victor recalls, “when [that feeling of immortality] disappears, for whatever reason, that ballplayer is never the same person, on or off the court” (46).

When Julius begins showing signs of “going bad” by getting arrested for smashing a truck window, Victor reflects on the hopelessness of the reservation and the need for heroes:
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. . . . And, 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? (49)

Consistent with the pattern developed throughout Alexie’s early writings, life is not ultimately a matter of being optimistic or pessimistic on the reservation; life never gets past the point of seeking survival. This passage also alludes to alcohol, the primary stumbling block on the reservation. Alexie further develops the alcohol theme by showing how it dismantles Julius. On the day of a big game just a year after the opening scene, Victor and Adrian see Julius “drunk as a skunk” by two in the afternoon, and they hear he’s been drinking Sterno, which will “kill his brain quicker than shit” (51). At the game, Julius plays horribly, leaving everyone depressed. “Times like that, on a reservation, a basketball game felt like a funeral and wake all rolled up together” (51). Another hero has fallen, representing another collective failure for the reservation. The closing scene is an ominous one as it mirrors the opening scene, except this time Victor and Adrian first kick out a passed out Julius from their living room — “Hey, you bum, get your ass off Victor’s floor” — and this time the hero they call to in the street is a young third-grader girl who has shown promise on the basketball court. One hero has fallen, and the next one will not even get to live her childhood without bearing the burden of hope for an entire reservation.

Victor is again allowed to experience the burden of heroism in Alexie’s first novel, Reservation Blues, where Alexie extends many of the themes from his earlier works. The book also features characters and excerpts from his earlier stories. Inspired by the music of
legendary Blues musician Robert Johnson and the Columbia Pictures film *Crossroads*, the book follows the formation and development of a reservation band Coyote Springs. Alexie begins by establishing the depraved conditions existing on the reservation. When Robert Johnson first arrives and is picked up by Thomas, he comments on the beauty of the reservation. Thomas comments that he has not seen everything yet, then thinks about “all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development . . . The pipes froze every winter, and windows warped in the hot summer heat” (7). On the surface, the reservation is beautiful, just as on the surface, Native Americans get a great deal by receiving HUD houses from the government. But under the surface, the houses are cheaply made, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) cut off the money half way through the building of Thomas’ house. The unveiling continues a few pages later when Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin bully Thomas, putting him in a headlock. Thomas claims he is used to the violence, and that it is typical of those “who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for U.S.D.A. commodity food instead. They savagely, repeatedly, opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored” (14).

As with the HUD houses, the handouts allow for survival but little else. Men must swallow their pride and accept conditions humans should not have to endure, which results in bitterness and misplaced violence. “Indian men like Victor roared from place to place, set fires, broke windows, and picked on the weaker members of the Tribe” (14). Alexie thus establishes early that members of the tribe, because of the despondent state of conditions, are
apt to turn on one another. This will come into play later in the book as band members turn on one another.

Alexie also uses *Reservation Blues* to extend his earlier theme of the unrealistic expectations laid on those showing promise in life. “When any Indian shows the slightest hint of talent in any direction, the rest of the tribe starts expecting Jesus. Sometimes they’ll stop a reservation hero in the middle of the street, look into his eyes, and ask to change a can of sardines into a river of salmon” (97). These unrealistic expectations become the focus of the book once the band Coyote Springs gains local, and later national, attention. This is also a defining time for Alexie’s career, and he seems to be exploring his own delicate balance between maintaining his tribal ties and marketing himself as an ethnic entity in a white-controlled market. Writer Joel McNally writes that “Indians sometimes resent [Alexie] for selling stories of despair on the reservation to the outside world.” But Alexie feels their criticism in unfounded: “I would say no sober Indian has ever objected to the way I have written about life on the reservation. I write about alcoholics because I am a recovering alcoholic. If I extend my family out as far as I possibly can to include a hundred or more people—all but maybe two of them are alcoholics” (McNally). The movie *Smoke Signals* garnered Alexie the most national attention, and also the most Indian criticism. Still, Alexie claims, “The people who hate me [on the reservation] now are the people who hated me when I was seven” (Cited in Campbell). Alexie’s family still lives on the reservation, and his monthly visits are part of his effort to keep those ties alive. His efforts, however, have met with varied success.

As with Alexie’s career, one of the easiest ways to track the reservation’s attitude toward the band is to trace the changes in coverage in the local newspapers. While initially
supportive, it does not take long for various tribal leaders, displeased with the band, to influence the papers into negative reviews. Many tribesmen viewed the band as thinking too highly of itself: “‘They think they’re hot [manure],’ White Hawk was rumored to have said. ‘They play a few shows and they think they’re [gosh darn] stars. [Forget] them’” (84). This same paper, The Wellpinit Rawhide Press, later prints a letter from David WalksAlong, the Tribal Council Chairman, which expresses similar sentiments: “I’m beginning to seriously wonder about Coyote Springs’s ability to represent the Spokane Tribe. First of all, they are drunks. . . . We don’t even have to talk about the problems caused by the white women. . . . Do we really want people to think that the Spokanes are a crazy storyteller, a couple of irresponsible drunks, a pair of Flathead Indians, and two white women? I don’t think so” (176). The Indians are very image conscious, and they fear Coyote Springs represents an image incongruent with the Hollywood image they want for themselves. This very point is made by Big Mom to Michael White Hawk when she says, “Indian men have started to believe their own publicity and run around acting like the Indians in movies. . . . You’re the first to tell an Indian he’s not being Indian enough. How do you know what that means?” (208). This again raises the question of who is responsible for creating the present negative image of American Indians, and reinforces the idea that Indians work against themselves to preserve it.

Because Coyote Springs’ dreams lead them off the reservation, and because they are viewed as representing the entire tribe, they must either fully succeed or face rejection. These sentiments are not lost on the band. As Thomas says when they are about to leave for New York City, “We have to come back as heroes. They won’t let us back on this reservation if we ain’t heroes. Unless we’re rock stars. We already left once, and all the Spokanes hate us
for it. . . . What if we screw up and every Indian everywhere hates us?” (214). The pressure overwhelms the band as they come to view themselves as representing not only their tribe, but every tribe. But there is also pressure from the record label, and in particular Sheridan and Wright, the two talent scouts responsible for sending them to New York in the first place. If Coyote Springs does not produce, the company loses money and Sheridan and Wright likely lose their jobs.

Alexie makes the moment even more poignant by demonstrating how the band will be marketed more for its stereotypically authentic Indian “look” than for its “sound.” Sheridan and Wright’s letter to the record company describes the band in terms of being “exotic[ally] animalistic,” and “ethnically handsome” (190). They go on to say, “Overall, this band looks and sounds Indian. . . . We can really dress this group up, give them some war paint, feathers, etc., and really up the Indian angle” (190). The white record label expects them to be successful by playing to stereotypes. Clearly, white culture controls the stereotypes, and Indians, specifically here the band, only further subjugate themselves by trying to conform to them. Ironically, it is the white groupies Betty and Veronica who receive the music contract because it is they who “really understand what it means to be Indian” (269).

When the inevitable happens and Coyote Springs fails in its quest for fame, the results are disastrous. Victor goes on a dangerous drinking binge, Checkers is raped by Sheridan, and the band spends the whole night on the street looking for one another. After Wright rescues Checkers from Sheridan and the rest of the band finally shows up in the hotel lobby, Wright recognizes his inherited guilt: “He saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and
bullets. He looked at his own white hands and saw the blood stains there” (244). Wright’s vision is fully realized when Junior climbs on top of the reservation water tower and commits suicide. Alexie’s message is clear: when an entire tribe is focused solely on survival, success is merely that, beating the odds and surviving. If the best one can hope for is merely survival, then failure is particularly bleak; failure equates to the absence of survival, or death.

At this point Alexie attempts to create resolution by having Thomas, Chess and Checkers escape the reservation. They are only moving to Spokane, but as Thomas notes, “Anywhere off the reservation is a long ways from the reservation” (304). Throughout the novel, Alexie has equated the reservation with death, both literal and figurative. By escaping the reservation, they are escaping the recurring fate of the tribe that began back with its forced conception by the U.S. Cavalry. He delivers this message through his recurring motif of the slaughtered horses who represent the victimized Spokane Indians. From the first chapter on, Alexie refers to an incident that occurred “one hundred and thirty-four years before Robert Johnson walked on the Spokane Reservation” when cavalry officers shot and killed hundreds of Indian horses. (Alexie makes multiple references to this same historical incident in each of his previous three books.) As Big Mom describes it, “The colt fell to the grass of the clearing, to the sidewalk outside a reservation tavern, to the cold, hard coroner’s table in a Veteran’s Hospital” (10). Each time a character in the book makes a poor choice, Alexie records the refrain, “The Indian Horses screamed.” Alexie clearly connects the horses to his characters through his description of Sheridan and Wright and their boss, Armstrong, as cavalry officers and by using the gunshot of Junior’s suicide and the “little explosion” of Victor’s beer cans opening sounding like “a smaller, shorter version of the explosion that Junior’s rifle made, to echo the gunshots that killed the horses. Victor and Junior are just two
more horses falling, albeit indirectly, at the hands of the new Cavalry. The final scene has Thomas, Checkers and Chess driving off in their van, and thus escaping the slaughter of the reservation, with the horses’ spirits “leading toward the city” (306). The horses are still screaming, but now they are screaming a new song: “a song of mourning that would become celebration: we have survived, we have survived” (306).

They have survived, but what kind of future do they have? Their pockets are empty, their friends are scattered or dead, their families are dead, their tribes are bitter towards them, and Spokane is indifferent at best to their arrival. Alexie’s dramatic resolution in fact resolves very little. “They were alive; they’d keep living,” he writes in the final paragraph, and this is climactic because survival is all one may hope for in Alexie’s early writings. Even with their dreams dashed and no prospects for the future, Alexie considers them a success because they escaped the reservation. Additionally, consistent with the established paradigm of survival, these three hopeful characters measure success only by comparing their experiences to those of the past (as represented by the horses). Because they did not die, as their ancestors did (and some of their recent friends and family), they have achieved something noteworthy. But what comes next? Alexie does not know because this is the extent of his vision at this point. Significantly, though, Alexie demonstrates this “success” by leading his characters away from the reservation. This movement represents Alexie’s first shift away from the reservation and towards imagining a future that transcends mere survival.
CHAPTER 3. DISPLACEMENT:
THE LOCATION OF IDENTITY

Thomas Builds the Fire’s pilgrimage to the city at the conclusion of Reservation Blues effectively marks the end of the reservation as a setting for Alexie’s stories, but the reservation continues to serve as an influence on his characters’ lives. Indian Killer, The Toughest Indian in the World, and Smoke Signals all share the theme of displacement, in large part because the characters in these works, all urban Indians, are somehow connected to white culture. Sensing they do not fit into white culture, however, these characters feel compelled to reconnect with their Indian heritage. Like their reservation counterparts, the urban Indians in these works adopt someone else’s idea of their Indian heritage, accepting many white Hollywood stereotypes as valid and measuring present-day realities by looking to a romanticized historic past. Further complicating matters, Alexie’s urban Indians in this section perceive reservation Indians as representing an authentic Native American experience; thus, many go to great lengths to connect themselves to reservation Indians, often through violence or sex. They are so concerned with proving their authenticity and maintaining a romanticized image of themselves that they miss out on the potential for happiness and fulfillment.

Indian Killer is Alexie’s first exploration of Indian life outside of the reservation. In fact, the novel represents several new things for Alexie. Having already moved from poetry to short fiction, and from short fiction to long, Alexie was eager to explore new genres; Indian Killer is Alexie’s experiment with the detective genre, which has traditionally been controlled by Indian writers and by whites writing as Indians. Alexie was shifting the shape
of his characters again, drifting deeper into the urban experience more familiar with non-native cultures. The more Alexie’s themes expanded toward this broader cultural readership, however, the more he incurred the wrath of Native Indian critics. Many were initially excited by his commercial success, but they soon saw this success as evidence of his pandering to familiar white stereotypes. Perhaps in response to these accusations, Alexie’s tone in *Indian Killer* is bitterly angry, and his treatment of whites is harshly critical and accusatory. Critics were quick to note this shift in attitude. *Time* magazine’s John Skow accused Alexie of being “septic with his own unappeasable anger,” a sentiment echoed by numerous mainstream critics. The Indian reception was not warm, either, with many offended at his exploitation of yet another negative Indian stereotype, the crazy homeless Indian. Many also argued, as Stuart Christie does, that “John’s mania, moreover, simply revisits the by-now tired theme of alienated mixed-bloods forced to wander forever between tribal and white cultures” (17).

Alexie’s anger is evident in *Indian Killer*, but the direction of his anger is less clear. As Alexie shared in an interview with *The Guardian*, “Everyone failed to see the ambiguity [in *Indian Killer*]. It’s sold by far the least of all my books. Indians didn’t like it” (Campbell). But while he grants the anger is present, Alexie contends some anger can be a positive force: “Anger without hope, anger without love, or anger without compassion are all-consuming. That’s not my kind of anger. Mine is very specific and directed” (McFarland). While most read the book as a simple, bloody diatribe against white colonialism, Alexie intended it as a balanced, even nuanced glimpse at the boiling anger beneath the veneer of civilization. His list of targets is lengthy; they include negative Indian stereotypes (especially alcoholism), colonialism, white writers who publish “Indian” books (especially detective fiction), mixed families, racism, and exclusionary white culture.
One could even argue Alexie wrote the book in response to various Tribal leaders’ criticism (Bird’s, in particular) that his writing casts Indians as too complicit in ill-treatment by whites. Alexie’s early works directed frustration at Indians who idly sit by and allow the cycle of abuse to continue; in *Indian Killer*, Alexie’s frustration with passivity remains, but it is underscored by a violent resentment toward white culture. The character Marie Polatkin serves as an excellent mouthpiece for these developing ideas as she speaks at a rally simultaneously to highlight the destructive behaviors of Indians while placing blame for these problems on “white people”:

If the real Pocahontas came back, you think she’d be happy about being a Cartoon character? If Crazy Horse, or Geronimo, or Sitting Bull came back, they’d see what you white people have done to Indians, and they would start a war. They’d see the homeless Indians staggering around downtown. They see the fetal-alcohol-syndrome babies. They see the sorry-ass reservations. They’d learn about Indian suicide and infant-mortality rates. . . . and they would start killing themselves some white people. (314)

While these comments tacitly criticize present-day Indians for not responding appropriately to white abuses (based on what their ancestors would have done), Alexie clearly blames white people for exploiting Indians. Alexie’s anger becomes progressively palpable throughout the story as Indian traditions are co-opted and stolen by professors, radio hosts, white liberals, and, of course, detective fiction writers. Stuart Christie writes that Alexie’s colonialist themes in *Indian Killer* suggest American Indian identity is “in essence violated, in principle, through mere contact with Anglo-European cultures” (3). American Indian identities, particularly for urban Indians, is threatened merely by the presence of white
culture, which simultaneously dilutes Native American cultures and redefines them, through media representations.

Alexie portrays whites as scapegoats and suggests violence as an appropriate Indian response to their abuse, an unusual twist for a self-proclaimed pacifist. But Alexie casts his white characters in such a negative light, one can hardly blame the Indians for the violence that erupts. Nearly all the whites in the novel are themselves strongly stereotyped as either liberals claiming to help the Indians while actually stealing and impersonating them (Jack Wilson most directly embodies these attributes), or as violent racists: “I hate Indians. They smell. They’re fucking drunks and welfare cheats. They ain’t got no jobs. They’re lazy as shit” (240). Invectives such as these appear from bar patrons, radio hosts, and various citizens on the street. Even John Smith’s parents are stereotyped as well-meaning liberals whose attempts to expose John to his Native culture serve only to further alienate him from both cultures. Critic Kelley Blewster notes, “the whites are either bigoted, narrow-minded, and violent – in thought if not in deed – or somewhat pathetic,” an observation to which Alexie responded, “The book is not called ‘White People Who Are Good to Indians.’ It’s about the ways in which Indians are culturally, psychologically, physically, and emotionally killed. Still” (Blewster).

In fact, Alexie contends the book was written for readers to somehow experience for themselves these feelings of displacement; specifically, he wanted his white readers, the group he estimates constitutes the greatest percentage of his readers, to experience seeing themselves negatively portrayed and stereotyped in literature:

That’s why I wrote Indian Killer, and people don’t get it. God, I mean all they talked about was, “Oh, this is so filled with stereotypes.” But the reaction I was looking for
was for people to feel uncomfortable. And so because they felt uncomfortable they
dismissed the book, rather than accepting the fact that making them uncomfortable
was the point of the book . . . I wanted to reverse the tension. And I wanted white
readers to feel just as uncomfortable with it as I’ve felt my whole life with books
written by white people about Indians. (Blewster)

*Indian Killer* successfully produces discomfort in his white readers, as evidenced by the
number of white critics offended by Alexie’s vitriolic tone. But most white critics responded
defensively rather than reflecting on their own culpability.

Because of its polemic attributes, it is difficult to place this book next to Alexie’s others. There are, however, a few connecting points. First, it serves well as a transitional piece into his first major shift because the Indian characters still look backward to measure the present. In Marie Polatkin’s comments cited above, she references three Indian heroes as evidence of how Indians should be responding to the present crisis. As Thomas did in the story “A Drug Called Tradition” from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Marie looks back to the past rather than determining for herself the best course of action. She decides to lead the protest rally because it represents to her a warrior-like response to the situation.

Her cousin Reggie Polatkin is equally guilty, referencing a number of fallen Indian heroes while attacking and torturing a white backpacker. Reggie claims to be Ira Hayes, a hero from Iwo Jima who later froze to death in a snowbank; Black Kettle, a victim of a massacre on the Washita River in Oklahoma; and a nameless, unarmed man killed in the Sand Creek massacre in Colorado. Reggie literally adopts the personae of past warriors, using them as an excuse for violently beating his white victim senseless and blinding him by
digging his thumbs into the man’s eyes, “searching for whatever existed behind them” (259).

While many of these urban Indians are beyond just the survival stage or existence, leading economically successful lives, they still struggle to imagine a life outside of its tragic historical context.

_Indian Killer_ represents Alexie’s shifting paradigm through its movement from reservation to city. While the characters are not physically on the reservation, the city has become a sort of extension of the reservation. Stephen F. Evans describes this correlation, saying, “[Alexie’s] vision of contemporary reservation reality both expands and dilates in _Indian Killer_. That is, from a broad view the entire United States is conceived as a reservation contained and managed by whites, while under Alexie’s satiric lens Seattle, the ‘urban rez,’ becomes a microcosm of that larger phenomenon.” Alexie broadens the scope of his fiction, but reveals few real differences from reservation life. The only noticeable difference comes from the lack of community in urban life. While reservation Indians are grouped together and share common experiences, the proximity of urban Indians is much more erratic, leading to a greater sense of displacement. The ironically named character John Smith embodies this well, being raised by white parents and feeling like an outcast in white culture and Native American culture alike. In fact, in _Indian Killer_ all the major characters “are struggling with their senses of identity” (Marx).

As with his earlier works, Alexie’s writing during this transitional period is again characterized by themes of identity struggles, but with a new emphasis on what Indian identity is not. Following the disappointing reception of _Indian Killer_, Alexie returned to his roots with the poetry collection _The Summer of Black Widows_. But after having produced eight major works in just four years, Alexie took a full two-year break from publishing.
When he finally returned to the public eye in 1998, it was not with a book, but with the movie *Smoke Signals*, his adaptation of "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." Appropriately, Alexie selected the only story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* with a setting outside the reservation. Additionally, Alexie expanded the original themes to reflect a more culturally inclusive picture of grieving, one moving beyond just the Native American experience by emphasizing the complexity of familial relationships (fathers, in particular), though he does go out of his way to realistically portray Indians. The movie was a commercial and critical success, lauded for its "universal" themes, a term Alexie bristles at: "When a white reviewer says *Smoke Signals* is universal, what he’s saying is that white people can get this and that white people are the judges of all that is universal, when white Americans constitute a tiny, miniscule percentage of the world’s population. That statement is making the assumption that white stories are universal, that white culture is the template by which all others are measured" (Blewster).

Though frustrated with the phrasing of its praise as universal, Alexie was pleased with the success of *Smoke Signals*, and proud of its status as the first movie written, directed, and produced by Native Americans, with actual Indians in all the starring roles. The movie’s closing scene, with Victor tossing the ashes of his father into the Spokane river, uses a voice-over to ask the question: “Can we forgive our fathers? And if so, what’s left?” But while the movie implied a sense of resolution, his next book reveals Alexie still struggling to discover it for himself. Backing away from the formula of success that worked so well for Victor and Thomas in *Smoke Signals*, Alexie searches in *The Toughest Indian in the World* for a way to find fulfillment in the city.
All but one of the nine stories in *The Toughest Indian in the World* are set in the city, and many stories feature what Lynn Cline phrased “the collision between lives on and off the reservation.” Alexie comments on his conscious shift away from the reservation, saying, “I’ve been reading recent Indian literature, and little of it is about urban Indians, despite the fact that most of us Indian writers are urban Indian now. I also wanted to get away from the model of the dysfunctional Indian” (Cline). Alexie does get away from the tired Indian model of his early novels, but his characters still struggle to come to terms with who they are and how they should live. While many of his new characters grew up on the reservation, they are well-established professionals now. Problems arise when they realize the gap between themselves and their white peers is narrowing (they are driving Saabs, working in otherwise-white office buildings, marrying white spouses), that they are becoming assimilated into white culture.

For many of these characters, the assimilation process is expedited through mixed marriages, but in the six stories featuring mixed marriages, the Indian character is always unfulfilled, longing to somehow reconnect to his/her ethnic roots. As with *Indian Killer*, the characters of these stories struggle with the role their ethnicity should play in their personal identity. As urban Indians, they understand that white culture defines them by their ethnicity, but because the urban existence so starkly contrasts with reservation life, which is the basis for most white stereotypes, they feel conflicted between the life people expect them to have and the one they actually live. The first story, “Assimilation,” sets the tone for this issue through the character Mary Lynn. A Coeur d’Alene Indian woman married to a white man, Mary Lynn has reached a crisis in her marriage and searches for the first Indian man she can
find and propositions him for sex “only because he was Indian” (1). She is confused and
guilt-ridden by her affair, and she struggles to understand the motivation for her actions:

There were many people who would blame Mary Lynn’s unhappiness, her
dissatisfaction, on her ethnicity. God, she thought, how simple and earnest was that
particular bit of psychotherapy! Yes, she was most certainly a Coeur d’Alene—she’d
grown up on the rez, had been very happy during her time there . . .—but that wasn’t
the only way to define her. She wished that she could be called Coeur d’Alene as a
description, rather than as an excuse, reasons, prescription, placebo, prediction, or
diminutive . . . Her most important complication: she was a woman in a turbulent
marriage that was threatening to go bad, or had gone bad and might get worse. (2-3)

Mary Lynn resents being defined by her ethnic heritage and claims her problems are not
necessarily related to her ethnicity. She openly admits, however, that she cheats on her
husband because he is white, that she sleeps with the Lummi man because he is Indian. Her
biggest problem may in fact be her marriage, but her marriage is a problem because it is a
mixed marriage.

Mary Lynn and her husband Jeremiah make numerous jokes about race throughout
the story, but the narrator notes that while they regularly discuss it as a concept, it is also a
“constant presence” that creeps through and disrupts their lives (14). Jeremiah describes race
as a white invention, a “Frankenstein monster” that has grown beyond control. He even
acknowledges that while he’d once been willfully blind, he now recognizes the monster in
“the faces of whites and Indians and in their eyes” (14). In fact, Jeremiah seems to better
understand the complications of race than Mary Lynn. For example, while waiting for a table
at an Asian restaurant, Mary Lynn comments that often there are Chinese workers at a
Japanese restaurant because “white people can’t tell the difference” (10). The exchange that follows reveals much about the fragility of their relationship:

“I can [tell the difference].”

“Hey, Geronimo, you’ve been hanging around Indians too long to be white.”

“Fucking an Indian doesn’t make me an Indian.” (10)

Jeremiah understands what Mary Lynn has yet to learn, that one cannot lose or regain ethnicity through mere contact. Jeremiah’s comment is particularly powerful because Mary Lynn just minutes before had sex with a complete stranger in her attempt reestablish her own sense of Indian identity.

Despite the challenges and failure in their marriage, Alexie ends the story on a guardedly positive note. Driving away from the restaurant following a heated argument, they encounter a traffic jam caused by a woman jumping off a bridge. Jeremiah runs out of the car to see if he can help and, after seeing he is too late, has a Joyce-an epiphany. “Jeremiah ran across the bridge until he could see Mary Lynn. She and he loved each other across the distance” (20). Alexie acknowledges that a distance still exists between the two (their cultural differences will always be present), but their love is able to bridge the gap, offering the hope of happiness and fulfillment. The ending could also be read, however, as two discontented people settling for a safe, comfortable life, making the conclusion yet another form of failure.

Alexie repeats this pattern of urban Indians searching for identity through self-conscious contact with other Indians in “The Toughest Indian in the World” and “Class.” In both of these stories, an Indian man is married to a white woman and, like Mary Lynn, feels compelled to initiate contact with a reservation Indian to reconnect with his cultural heritage.
In the former it is through sexual contact with a tough, scarred Indian fighter that the unnamed narrator, a Spokane newspaper man, reaches back to the past. As the narrator reflects on his childhood and all the times he and his father picked up hitchhikers, he comments, “We all know that nostalgia is dangerous, but I remember those days with a clear conscience” (23) (my emphasis). Now the narrator always picks up hitchhikers himself, which helps him feel like he is retaining a piece of his heritage. This particular hitchhiker, however, is an Indian fighter who reminds the narrator of his romanticized vision of an ancient warrior: “You would’ve been a warrior in the old days, enit? You would’ve been a killer. You would have stolen everybody’s goddamn horses” (30). As a result, the narrator tries to live up to these stereotypes himself: “I threw in ‘enit,’ a reservation colloquialism, because I wanted the fighter to know that I had grown up on the rez, in the woods, with every Indian in the world . . . [and] invert[ed] the last two words in order to sound as aboriginal as possible” (26). He is playing a role, and the farce continues when he allows himself to be taken sexually by the fighter: “I wanted him to save me” (32). In the end, the narrator is largely disappointed, both by the fighter himself—the narrator notes “He was surprisingly small” (31)—and with the results: “At that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of one thousand salmon” (34). The narrator thinks if he can just maintain contact with “authentic” Indians, he can maintain his own authenticity. He ultimately discovers, however, that his idea of Indian-warrior authenticity is as flawed as his techniques for achieving it.

In “Class,” it is through fighting a reservation Indian named Junior that an urban Indian seeks connection with his tribal heritage. A conversation in “Class” between narrator Edgar Eagle Runner (though he now goes by Edgar Joseph) and Sissy, the reservation
bartender, gives voice to Alexie's emerging theme that life outside the reservation is more hopeful than reservation life because the primary goal becomes success rather than just survival:

“I wanted to be with my people,” I said.

“Your people?” asked Sissy. “Your people? We’re not your people.”

“We’re Indians.”

“Yeah, we’re Indians. You, me, Junior. But we live in this world and you live in your world.”

“I don’t like my world.”

“You pathetic bastard,” she said, her eyes swelling with tears that had nothing to do with laughter. “You sorry, sorry piece of shit. Do you know how much I want to live in your world? Do you know how much Junior wants to live in your world? . . . We have to worry about having enough to eat. What do you have to worry about? That you’re lonely? That you have a mortgage? That your wife doesn’t love you? Fuck you, fuck you. I have to worry about having enough to eat.” (56)

Alexie’s early writing attacked reservation Indians for always looking to and romanticizing the historic past; now he has shifted his criticism to urban Indians for looking to and romanticizing reservation life. The names of the Indians in the bar—Junior and Sissy—evoke two of Alexie’s earlier characters, Junior Polatkin and Big Mom. The story suggests Alexie has resolved his own struggle with his success in life by embracing his success rather than metaphorically beating himself up over it.

This pattern of searching for contentment is demonstrated repeatedly through Alexie’s stories, as in each case the protagonist learns his/her attempted solution of
reconnecting with the reservation is ill-fated. Significantly, however, Alexie does not offer any sense of lasting fulfillment in these stories. In each, the protagonist is resigned to the fact that this present life is as good as it gets, and certainly better than the alternative of the reservation. But two of his last three stories, “Saint Junior” and “One Good Man,” break from this pattern by portraying Indian men who are content living their lives.

In “Saint Junior,” Roman Gabriel Fury gains entrance into Saint Jerome the Second University after scoring in the 99th percentile on the standardized CAT exam (Roman refers to it as the Colonial Aptitude Test.). From an early age, Roman had dreamed of leaving the reservation, “not because he needed to escape . . . but because he’d always known that his true and real mission lay somewhere outside the boundaries of the reservation” (159). Roman understands that education is the key to his getting away, so unlike so many of Alexie’s early characters, he takes proactive steps to insure this can become a reality. Once he arrives on campus, he avoids the temptations of alcohol and womanizing, instead seeking out the only Indian girl on campus who had earned her way in. Marrying an indigenous partner seems to be part of Alexie’s solution for urban Indians—this is the first couple in the book where both are Indian, and it is also the first successful relationship. The narrator comments that “Indians are disappearing by halves” (162) and Roman makes a conscious decision to marry an Indian woman: “You’re the best Indian I’m ever going to find. Marry me” (182). Because they are both Native American, even though his wife Grace comes from a different tribe and is even part white, neither has to feel their “Indian-ness” disappearing into the homogenizing white culture.

The most important feature of Roman’s success, however, is his ability to ignore traditional Indian stereotypes and create for his own Indian code. As Grace notes, “He was a
man who'd created a new tradition for himself” (175). A professional basketball player, Roman went through a phase where he tried to be the warrior, to prove himself to the world. But he gives up his basketball to be a husband and a worker, which results in a contented, fulfilling life. He does not ask what his ancestors would have done, he does not use his ethnicity as an excuse for not making it into the NBA, and he does not seek to prove to himself or anyone else that he is Indian; rather, his emphasis is on making his wife happy and making the most of their life together.

This traditional emphasis on family permeates the final story in “One Good Man.” The narrator, unnamed throughout, shares numerous attributes possessed by Roman from “Saint Junior”: he is educated, he marries an Indian woman, and he works as a professional in Spokane. Unlike Roman, however, the narrator’s life in “One Good Man” has not all fallen into place. His wife has divorced him and remarried a white man, taking his son with him. Furthermore, his father is dying from kidney and liver failure, forcing the narrator to take a leave of absence to care for him in his last months back on the reservation. Significantly, even in the face of these trials, the narrator makes wise choices, nurturing his relationship with his father and discovering what it truly means to be Indian.

The question “What is an Indian?” serves as a refrain for the story and, as Evans notes, also best represents “the overarching theme of the volume.” Like Roman, the narrator seeks to define a new tradition for himself rather than trying to fit someone else’s definition. Alexie’s new definition is illustrated beautifully in a scene where Cromwell, one of the narrator’s professors, challenges the class with the same question of “What is an Indian?” After the narrator gets kicked out of class for making a sarcastic response, he returns with his
father, and the exchange that follows does much to illuminate Alexie’s definition of the new tradition:

“Are you an Indian,” my father asked.

“I was at Alcatraz during the occupation. . . I was in charge of communications. What about you?”

“I took my wife and kids to the Pacific Ocean, just off Neah Bay. Most beautiful place in the world. . . .”

“What about Wounded Knee?” Cromwell asked my father. “I was at Wounded knee. Where were you?”

“I was teaching my son here how to ride his bike. Took forever. And when he finally did it, man, I cried like a baby, I was so proud.”

“What kind of Indian are you? You weren’t part of the revolution.”

“I’m a man who keeps my promises.” (228-229)

The narrator’s father has not participated in the traditional ways of fighting white culture, but he has participated in a revolution of his own. By fostering his family and encouraging education for his son, he is working outside of stereotypes rather than constantly just reacting to them. In fact, the narrator’s greatest source of pride is his family. Alexie draws the narrator’s family differently from those of his earlier stories, and the positive results are notable: “Our biggest success: we were all alive. Our biggest claim to fame: we were all sober” (219). The love and responsibility of the narrator’s father has affected multiple generations; the love the narrator received is passed down through his choice to love his son and spend time with him despite the divorce and the new white stepfather. The narrator is
humbled by this decision, but it allows him to continue influencing his son. His choice also earns the respect of his wife’s white husband:

... The stepfather stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. Then he hugged me (Tightly! Chest to chest! Belly to belly!) and I hugged him back.

“Thank you for being kind to me,” he said. “I know it could be otherwise.”

I didn’t know what to say.

The stepfather held me at arm’s length. His eyes were blue.

“You’re a good man,” he said to me.

Like his father, the narrator is breaking stereotypes. The potential of one good man to enact change is powerful and, reflective of Alexie’s self-proclaimed pacifism, more effective than any violent, revolutionary movement.

The final way the narrator serves as Alexie’s ideal Indian model is in his attitude toward the reservation: he respects the reservation and cherishes his experiences there, but he also recognizes its limitations. The narrator comments that when he left the reservation he always planned on coming back, but realized he was more content apart from it:

I had never wanted to contribute to the brain drain, to be yet another of the best and brightest Indians to abandon his or her tribe to the Indian leaders who couldn’t spell the word sovereignty. Yet despite my idealistic notions, I have never again lived with my tribe... Don’t get me wrong. I loved the reservation as a child and I suppose I love it now as an adult... but it’s certainly a different sort of love. As an adult, I am fully conscious of the reservation’s weaknesses, its inherent limitations (geographical, social, economic, and spiritual)... (221)
This speaks strongly to Alexie’s own experiences. More importantly, however, the story “One Good Man” represents Alexie’s embrace of yet another shift. While *Indian Killer* and *The Toughest Indian in the World* demonstrate new shapes from his reservation writings, they still offer more questions than solutions to the problem of Indian identity. “One Good Man,” appropriately the last story in *Toughest Indian*, offers a definitive response to negative stereotyping: avoid the typical reservation traps (particularly alcohol), develop a nurturing family, pursue an advanced education, and make the most of life. This story marks the new direction for Alexie’s writing that is evident in his latest work, *Ten Little Indians*. It is not a movement towards assimilation; on the contrary, Alexie meticulously demonstrates the value of family heritage and personal rituals. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the important role tradition should play in taking control of the future.
CHAPTER 4. URBAN INDIANS:
THE EXPANDING TRIBAL CIRCLE

Alexie’s early stories of reservation life reflected themes to which most non-indigenous readers could not relate. His later works centered on urban Indians, whose lives white readers could better relate to. In Ten Little Indians, Alexie further expands his themes to be accessible to a still broader audience: “I’m trying to free myself from tribal ideas of basing my politics or my art on what is good for only one group of people” (Weinberg). In part, his themes have shifted because he believes conditions have improved over the last ten years. But his change is also due to a heightened awareness of global events and the scale of suffering shared by many. In a recent interview, Alexie was asked about his statement in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven that “Indians can reside in the city but never live there.” Alexie just laughed, saying, “You believe things at the time you write them. I believed that then!” (Campbell). He went on to explain the cause of his ideological shift:

I was much more fundamental then. What changed me was September 11th. I am now desperately trying to let go of the idea of being right, the idea of making decisions based on imaginary tribes. . . . We are making [world-impacting] decisions not based on any moral or ethical choice, but simply on the basis of power and money and ancient traditions that are full of shit, so I am increasingly suspicious of the word ‘tradition,’ whether in political or literary terms (Campbell).

For Alexie, the terrorist attack on the World Trade center on September 11, 2001 was an epiphany, a shocking reminder that Indians are not the only group with a painful history of abuse. In fact, Alexie found himself relating both to the victims of September 11th and to the
terrorists—as much as he despises violence he understands how hatred can become all consuming.

The link between Indians and the rest of the world began for him with the recognition that emotions like love and hate, fear and joy are shared by all people regardless of race. Alexie suggests that his growing acceptance of this shared humanity is actually the final step in a process of Indian self-actualization:

I think there are three stages of Indian-ness: The first stage is where you feel inferior because you’re Indian, and most people never leave it. The next stage is feeling superior because you’re Indian and a small percentage of people get into that and most never leave it. At the end, they get to realizing that Indians are just as fucked up as everybody else. No better; no worse. I try to be in that stage. (Cited in Coulombe)

This shift away from the Indian experience to the human experience is evident in *Ten Little Indians*. Each of its nine stories centers on an urbanized Indian character, and similar to Alexie’s early stories, each struggles with the concept of cultural identity. The themes expand, however, as the characters come to realize their experiences are not unique to Indians, and that they possess an identity outside of their ethnic heritage. Furthermore, because some of these characters have found niches in society that openly accept them as human beings (as opposed to only Indians), they sometimes struggle with an identity outside the context of racism. If they are not the oppressed “other,” what are they? Alexie describes this phenomenon in a recent discourse about *Ten Little Indians*:

There’s a character in the book, you know, the only time he thinks of himself as being Indian is when somebody else reminds him of it, you know... Was it James Baldwin who described it? He sadly wonders if racism is the entire basis for his
identity because he doesn’t know what he’d do without it and how to self-define without it. And I think my characters in this book often struggle with that same dilemma. (Montagne)

Many of Alexie’s characters find it easier to blame problems and personality conflicts on racism rather than accept that they might share responsibility for the situation. Race, then, becomes a built-in scapegoat, a way to rationalize conflicts by continually projecting blame outward.

This struggle is evident in “Lawyer’s League” when Richard, the half black/half Indian narrator, becomes conscious of his ethnicity only when, on the basketball court, a heated argument ends with the hint of an ethnic slur. Richard’s violent response of breaking Bill’s nose is an overreaction to the situation (although Bill was making insensitive stereotyping remarks), and Richard’s rambling page-long stream-of-consciousness rationalization reveals he is struggling with the race issue. As a successful executive liason officer for Governor Locke with numerous rich white friends, Richard lives an elite life, causing his complaints of racism to ring hollow. Even after admitting he broke Bill’s nose, Richard tries to generate sympathy for himself: “Listen, I hurt myself when I punched Big Bill. His face is fine, but I can barely make a fist, and I can’t straighten my fingers anymore... Look at my hand. See how much it pains me? Can you see how much it hurts to use it? Do you understand I have a limited range of motion?” (68). Richard better fits Alexie’s early Indian model by struggling to get past one isolated incident and allowing a white man to tempt him into a self-destructive decision—Bill sued him and has probably forgotten the incident, but Richard burned some bridges and generated a harmful level of self-pity. Alexie reveals here that a violent response to negative stereotypes only reinforces those stereotypes,
further restricting the Indians. Casting Richard as half black demonstrates Alexie’s conscious effort to link the experiences of Indians with other minority groups. African Americans are another stereotyped cultural group, and the fact that the racist remarks came within the context of basketball is particularly appropriate because of the complex cultural relationship these cultures share with basketball.

Alexie offers a more positive model for dealing with stereotypes through Corliss in “The Search Engline.” While Richard made a poor decision by responding violently to stereotyping, Corliss creatively takes advantage of stereotypes even as she fights against them. By writing and calling teachers from the local white high schools, she gained access to advice and materials that helped her prepare for her SATs, which she aced. Alexie writes, “She’d been a resourceful thief, a narcissistic Robin Hood who stole a rich education from white people and kept it” (5). Corliss understands that “In the twenty-first century, any Indian with a decent vocabulary wielded enormous social power, but only if she was a stoic who rarely spoke” (11). In a recent interview Alexie comments that his characters are now aware of Indian stereotypes and willing to employ these stereotypes to advance themselves: “Well, it can be part of your job description. Corliss . . . talks about, you know, using her Indian identity that, you know, if white people are going to assume she’s spiritual and serene and magical simply because she’s Indian, then she saw no reason to contradict them” (Inskeep). And yet, Corliss fights stereotypes every day from both white culture and Indian culture, including her own family: “You’re pretty and smart, why are you wasting your time with poems?” (15).

But to Corliss, poems are not a waste of time, and she is amazed that she could relate so well to white poets. Speaking of Gerard Manly Hopkins, Corliss wonders, “How could she
tell her family she sometimes felt like a white Jesuit priest? . . . Who would ever understand how a nineteen-year-old Indian woman looked in the mirror and sometimes saw an old white man in a white collar and black robe” (15). As much as Corliss loves her family and her tribe, the wonderful ways they supported her financially and emotionally, she is also frustrated by the limitations of the reservation: “Over the last two centuries, Indians had learned how to stand in lines for food, love, hope, sex, and dreams, but they didn’t know how to step away . . . Indians made themselves easy targets for bureaucratic skull crushing, didn’t they? Indians took numbers and lined up for skull-crushing. They’d rather die standing together in long lines than wandering alone in the wilderness” (10). She sums up her frustration when she says, “She loved her fathers and uncles . . . but she hated their individual fears and collective lack of ambition” (13). Corliss takes it upon herself to control her own destiny through education.

Alexie contends that for many reservation Indians, as with many minority groups, failure has become such an ingrained stereotype that those simply trying to succeed are looked at as trying to be white. Alexie addresses this issue in another recent interview where he responds to his tribe’s resentment against him and his success: “A lot of people are so dysfunctional, to the point they believe that any Indian striving for success becomes white, that failure is an American Indian attribute. They’ve internalized the colonialism so much, they’ve internalized the stereotype so much, that they think any effort toward success is white” (Blewster). Corliss vehemently opposes this notion, believing the hatred toward whites is as destructive as the abuse they sometimes suffer. Corliss would rather focus on the shared humanity of whites and Indians:
Because she was Indian, she'd been taught to fear and hate white people. . . . It was easy to hate white vanity and white rage and white ignorance, but what about white compassion and white genius and white poetry? Maybe it wasn't about whiteness or redness or any other color. . . . She also wanted to believe in human goodness and moral grace. (14)

This is the first time Alexie has suggested that cultural problems transcend race, and that human compassion and goodness are attributes found worldwide, beyond just his tribe. It is much easier to blame an outside force than to take responsibility for one's own action, but it is through looking for the connections, the links between humanity, that healing occurs.

Harlan Atwater, the Spokane poet Corliss relentlessly pursues in the story, is a “lost dove,” a full-blood Indian adopted and raised by white parents. Feeling displaced, he faked being a reservation Indian to feel what it was like to “grow up like an Indian is supposed to grow up” (41). He spent his whole life focusing on the gaps, the differences between his life and the stereotypical Indian life. After his epiphany at the bar, however, he realized he was not a reservation Indian, and he had a wonderful life with his white parents: “I know they’re white and I’m Indian, and that’s supposed to be such a sad-sack story, but, well, they did, they really saved my life” (50). Corliss learns from Harlan that ethnicity is just one component of life, and when one chooses to make ethnicity the focal point of life, the result is a limited existence.

In “Flight Patterns,” William also discovers he is part of a larger tribe. Both William and his wife Marie were Spokanes, but that was not the extent of who they were. As William notes, “Sure, he was an enrolled member of the Spokane Indian tribe, but he was also a fully recognized member of the notebook-computer tribe and the security-checkpoint tribe and the...
rental-car tribe and the hotel-shuttle-bus tribe and the cell-phone-roaming-charge tribe” (109). Because he is a traveling businessman, William spends as much time traveling as he spends at home, and while his skin tone is different than that of his co-workers, his experiences are not much different. He is linked to these other workers at a level of humanity that transcends race.

This point is developed through William’s taxi ride with Fekadu, the Ethiopian taxi driver. Ironically, each of them confuses the other for the wrong ethnic background, William seeing an African American and Fekadu seeing a Jew, or maybe a Mexican with long hair. “We’re all trapped in other people’s ideas” (117), William notes. That they cannot even differentiate one another’s nationality speaks to the relative unimportance of ethnicity; they were both brown men, and that was enough. They were unified in their experiences with pain, just as they both reflected on how they were unified even with white people in their fear after September 11th. As Alexie told The Writer, he now desires to make “allies out of poor white folk and brown people. If we could do that, we could change the world.” Alexie is targeting his themes at a diverse group of people now, and in the absence of an ethnic focus, and as Harlan discovered earlier, family emerges as the most important factor in life. Fekadu is in America under political asylum and both sides of the warring factions in Ethiopia want him dead; he is a man with no true country. But the real tragedy is Fekadu’s estrangement from his family, a situation that causes daily pain. William realizes that in his effort to fit into any and all of the “tribes” listed above, he is sacrificing the one that matters most.

Alexie’s shift to emphasize family over ethnicity appears again in “Can I Get a Witness,” a story written in response to the terrorist attacks in 2001; “Do Not Go Gentle,” where an entire children’s ICU ward is unified in the shared tragedies of their children’s
illnesses; and "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above," where Estelle’s son reflects on his heritage as an Indian (which he ranks as third on the list of self-defining terms, behind "bitterly funny" and "horny bastard") and as a son, with the latter being what he values as the truer inheritance. Each story revolves around an urban Indian, but each of these characters learns to recognize his/her place with a broader social paradigm. They also come to recognize that everyday personal tragedies are more “real” and thus hurt more than distant tragedies on the TV screen. For example, even after the nameless woman is pulled out as one of the few survivors in a terrorist attack in “Can I Get a Witness,” her focus is on her failed marriage and the distance she feels from her children. The man who saves her carries her through the crowded, bloodied streets realizing his own failures and sins: “None of these people, not one of them, had loved any of the others well enough. Failures, he thought, we’re all failures. . . And wasn’t he the greatest sinner? Wasn’t he more dangerous to the people who loved him than any terrorist could ever be? Wasn’t he the man who failed the woman who’d loved him most? Didn’t he explode her life and burn her to the ground? . . . Forgive me, God, oh, forgive me, he thought as he carried this other exploded woman” (95). Hate only generates more hate, but when people love one another, when they care for their families and those who love them most, the world is filled with beautiful potential.

One of the more dramatic epiphanies comes from Frank Snake Church in “What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church.” Frank had a promising future as young man, having earned a full-ride basketball scholarship to the University of Washington (one of 114 scholarship offers) where he planned to major in Environmental Science. But when Frank’s mother died, he wanted to do something to honor her memory: “To honor her and keep her memory sacred, Frank knew he had to give up something valuable. He had to bury with her
one of his most important treasures. So he buried his basketball dreams” (202). When Frank takes basketball back up 22 years later, he notes he has been “suffering from a quiet sickness, a sort of emotional tumor that never grew or diminished but prevented him from living a full and messy life” (205). He acknowledges that by focusing his life on a past tragedy, he inhibited his ability to experience a fulfilling life. Ironically, he makes an equally rash and unfulfilling decision, leaving his career as a forest ranger to train full time for the next twelve months.

When Frank finally takes up a basketball again, quickly regaining his legendary form, Preacher is the first to say what Frank has been needing to hear: Frank is too old to be playing street basketball full time. “...Son, you’re in denial. Your mind in stuck somewhere back in 1980, but your eggshell body is cracking here in the twenty-first century” (226). When Frank tries to defend himself by saying it is to honor his parents, Preacher deconstructs Frank’s argument, saying, “Well, I just took myself a poll, and I asked one thousand mothers and fathers how they would feel about a forty-year-old son who quit his high-paying job to pursue a full-time career as a playground basketball player in Seattle, Washington, and all one thousand of them mothers and fathers cried in shame” (227-228). The following exchange reflects Alexie’s new position that Indians, while admittedly oppressed, are just one in a long line of oppressed people through the ages (Alexie once argued before President Clinton during a PBS presidential forum that Indians are the most oppressed people on earth.):

“Preacher, . . . 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. What makes you think your pain is so special, so different from anybody else’s pain? You look up death in the medical dictionary, and it says everybody’s going to catch it. So don’t lecture me about death.”

“Believe me, I’m playing to remember them.”

“You’re playing to remember yourself. You’re playing because of some of that nostalgia. And nostalgia is cancer. Nostalgia will fill your heart up with tumors. . . . You’re just an old fart dying of terminal nostalgia.” (228)

Preacher identifies Frank’s response for what it is, self-serving self-pity. This passage reinforces Alexie’s recurring theme of letting go of past pain and taking control of one’s life. But Preacher also calls Frank on his notion that Indian pain is somehow greater than anyone else’s. As a black man living in an economically depressed part of the city, Preacher resents the contention that Frank’s pain is worse than his own.

Alexie here again argues that a link connects all of humanity, and it usually appears in the form of pain and tragic experiences. While in early writings Alexie defined the Indian experience in terms of unique struggles and pain, he now seeks to define the individual experience in terms of how one responds to struggles and pain. But his emphasis is not limited to painful experiences. In “What You Pawn I Will Redeem,” Alexie employs some of the most painful stereotypes of various ethnicities to reveal that humans are essentially good, or at least tries to be good. In a recent interview with National Public Radio, Alexie described the idea behind “What You Pawn”:

Stereotypes wouldn’t exist if they weren’t in some large measure true. … But what I wanted to do was take these other archetypes and stereotypes— the Korean grocery
store owner, the white cop, the [white] pawn shop owner—and combine them with this portrayal of this homeless Indian man and take these stereotypes, which are so infused with negative ideas about who these people are, and create a story where all of these people in the end are pretty basically decent people. (Inskeep)

For the first time in his career, Alexie is writing to debunk the negative stereotypes of various groups of people.

The Indians in “What You Pawn” are among a long list of stereotyped people, and all of them are just trying to help others. As critic Fiona Hook writes, “Alexie turns our preconceptions on their heads.” Jackson Jackson is a homeless alcoholic Indian who has been diagnosed with asocial disorder, incorporating three stereotypes at once. But his quest to raise $999 in 24 hours to reclaim his grandmother’s stolen dance regalia from a local pawn shop leads him on a wild series of misadventures as he repeatedly raises large sums of money only to buy booze for his friends, share lottery winnings with his “family” at the Korean grocery store, buy shots for all the strangers in Big Heart’s all-Indian bar, and buy breakfast for three stranded Aleuts. But Jackson also receives help along the way in the form of money from his friend Junior, free newspapers from an agency to sell and raise money, and even twenty dollars in cash from the pawn shop owner and thirty in cash from the policeman who picked Jackson up for public intoxication. Everyone is helping everyone else, but by the end of his 24 hours, Jackson still has only five dollars to his name. Now Jackson must return to the pawn shop in hopes that the price has somehow changed:

“Is that the same five dollars from yesterday?”

“No, it’s different.”

He thought about the possibilities.
“Did you work hard for this money?”

“Yes,” I said. . . .

“Take it,” he 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.”

Do you know how many good men live in this world? Too many to count.

(194)

Jackson was more concerned with addressing the immediate needs he saw around him than getting justice for a past wrong. He did not make excuses and he did not feel sorry for himself; rather, he accepted the consequences for his actions and lived as best as he knew. Similarly, the white pawnshop owner judged Jackson as a man rather than a stereotype; and like Jackson, he found helping someone more important than material gain.

Alexie’s new stories envision a circle composed of multiple tribes rather than just Alexie’s own. Jackson Jackson’s family had a symbolic relic stolen, but they did not lose their cultural heritage when they lost the dance regalia. Similarly, Jackson did not have to reclaim the regalia to reclaim his Indian identity, but his quest to raise the money reveals how cherished his identity is. Jackson treasured his heritage enough to fight nobly for 24 hours to retain a piece of it; but perhaps he honored that heritage more richly through his ability to recognize and meet the needs of those in other tribes than if he had been single-minded in his task. Alexie seems to contend that one’s cultural heritage can paradoxically be the most important driving force in one’s life and yet be secondary to a number of other people and
problems. This is a new shape of identity for Alexie’s writing. While Jackson’s lot in life parallels many of Alexie’s early characters, particularly those from *Indian Killer*, there is a marked difference in his choice of how to respond to the problems. The problems have not gone away—Jackson is penniless, all his friends have literally disappeared, and he is still a homeless alcoholic—but there is at least a momentary sense of contentment, even joy, at the Jackson’s victory, albeit fleeting.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION: THINKING OUT LOUD

Sherman Alexie writes with sincerity; as he writes in “Can I Get a Witness,” “Nobody wants to hear these things, but I’m thinking them, and I have to say them” (TLI 90). But Alexie speaks the truth with a smile, which often allows him to get away with inflammatory remarks. This technique is aptly demonstrated through his nationally televised presidential panel discussion on race in 1998. President Clinton introduced Alexie by saying, “Sherman, before I was president, the only thing I knew about Indians was that my grandmother was part Cherokee.” When Clinton went on to ask Alexie if Indians were a part of the national dialogue on race, Alexie responded, “No, the only time white folks talk to me about Indians is when they tell me their grandmothers were part Cherokee” (“Remarks in the ‘Presidential Dialogue’”). He then explained how Indians are not included in much of the national focus on race. Alexie was nervous about embarrassing the president on national television, but during a commercial break, he claims that Clinton leaned in close and said, “Sherman, you’re fucking funny!” (cited in Campbell). Like a referee in his beloved game of basketball, Alexie calls it like he sees it.

As the years have progressed, however, Alexie has come to see the world in new, sometimes conflicting ways. Alexie has quickly progressed from poor college student to multimillionaire; from having no one care what he thinks to having the president of the United States hanging on his every word. But the world has changed as well: there is a new president, a new war, a new awareness of national vulnerability, and a growing sense of international community as new technology expands daily. The instability of Indian identity in Alexie’s writing reflects an author wrestling with his world. Ironically, it is this very
instability that remains constant through his writing. Whether it be Thomas on the reservation wondering what his ancestors would have done, or Edgar Eagle Child wondering how a reservation Indian would respond, or even Corliss wondering if a Spokane poet has a greater insight into the world than a white one, Alexie's characters continually seek to understand their position in the world. It is through this identity struggle that he opens his fiction to all readers. Alexie claims it was an epiphany for him when he realized all the white poets he had grown up reading were about everybody; not just white people (Marx). The same revelation can be applied to Alexie's fiction: his stories reflect the experiences of Indian characters, but they are ensconced in emotions experienced by everybody.

As evidenced by the continually shifting shapes of his characters, Alexie, like many in Native American cultures, is still wrestling to come to terms with his own sense of identity. In fact, characteristic of his explorative attitude toward genre, Alexie's latest project is a non-fiction family history. Tentatively titled Inventing My Grandfather, it explores the fragile father-son relationship and wrestles with how his grandfather Alphonse, an Indian man, could end up fighting and dying for the very nation that conquered his own (Weinberg). As Alexie writes in a recent article, "As a Native American, I want to have this country and its contradictions" ("What Sacagawea" 57). He wonders how the same country could produce both Geronimo and Joe McCarthy; Nathan Bedford Forrest and Toni Morrison; smallpox and the vaccine for smallpox. But most things are contradictory on some level, as is Alexie himself. His writing has revealed both his love and his hate for the reservation, the city, and even his cultural heritage. While tough to categorize, it is in his contradictions, and his authentic grappling with these contradictions, that Alexie derives much of his power.
Perhaps Alexie sums it up best in his recent article “What Sacagawea Means to Me (and Perhaps to You)” when he extrapolates his contradictory love affair with America:

As a Native American, I want to hate this country and its contradictions. I want to believe that Sacagawea hated this country and its contradictions. But this country exists in whole and in part because Sacagawea helped Lewis and Clark. In the land that came to be called Idaho, she acted as diplomat between her long-lost brother and the Lewis and Clark party. Why wouldn’t she ask her brother and her tribe to take revenge against the men who had enslaved her? Sacagawea is a contradiction. Here in Seattle, I exist, in whole and in part, because a half-white man named James Cox fell in love with a Spokane Indian woman named Etta Adams and gave birth to my mother. I am a contradiction; I am Sacagawea.” (57)

The settings and the faces of Alexie’s stories have changed and will undoubtedly continue to shift as, like Sacagawea, he leads his readers through new terrain. Unlike Sacagawea, however, Alexie does not claim to know the best path, or even the ultimate destination. What he does promise is that he will continue to explore.
WORKS CITED


“Remarks in the ‘Presidential Dialogue on Race’ on PBS.” *Weekly Compilation of*

Infotrac. Ames High School Lib. 16 Mar. 2004

Skow, John. “Lost Heritage: Rage Sours the Eloquent Novel *Indian Killer*.” Rev. of


