

Antiseptic Humor:
Using Comedy to Confront Realities and Refute Stereotypes
in the Works of Sherman Alexie

by

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Sherman Alexie, a Native American author of poems, novels, plays, and film uses humor to expose and to explore lingering cultural stereotypes affecting people of Native American ancestry. These stereotypes often conflict with their actual identity and mainstream society's ambiguous expectations of them in modern life. Analyzing various genres from his works, I propose that Alexie's works include both positive and negative stereotypes not only to teach but also to delight. With observation and wit, Alexie refutes prevailing cross-tribal stereotypes of alcoholism, spirituality, and residence of Indian reservations, and he confronts the deeper, serious social problems that are bypassed by such stereotyping. Like a doctor designing a treatment plan for a chronic care patient, Alexie approaches the stereotypical views of Native Americans by identifying symptoms and providing antiseptic humor to help heal the pain caused by prejudices suffered by Native Americans on and off the reservations.

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in the Works of Sherman Alexie

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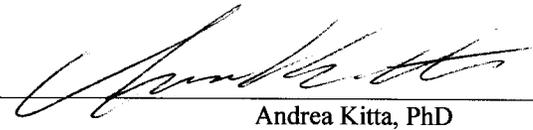
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Introduction

Often in literature, authors use stereotypes as a device to refute those they address in their works. These stereotypes are often related to issues in their communities. Though some authors address stereotypes with complete seriousness, others prefer to use humor to address them. By choosing to use humor, they can bring the reader's focus to serious issues while entertaining their audience. Sherman Alexie uses humor to highlight sometimes uncomfortable realities in Native American communities. He shows how those realities are often expressed as exaggerated stereotypes and he is successful not only in bringing awareness to these issues but in refuting the related stereotypes while using them within works of multiple genres.

Alexie grew up, surrounded by poverty and alcoholism, in Wellpinit, Washington on the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation. He rose above the circumstances that he was born into and eventually left the reservation to become a successful author and comedian. Multifaceted, he is also a songwriter, screenwriter, producer, professor, husband, and father. He has written works that have carried "the weight of five centuries of colonization, retelling the American Indian struggle to survive, painting a clear, compelling, and often painful portrait of modern Indian life" (Cline 197). Throughout his career of more than two decades, his work has been the subject of many controversial critiques by both Native Americans and non-natives. His works have been on the banned book list many times for his depictions of Native Americans and the lives they lead on reservations. His collection of poetry, *The Business of Fancydancing*, was first published in 1992. He has since written many novels, short stories, poems, screen plays and performed many times as a comedian. Growing up in an alcoholic

environment, Alexie himself became an alcoholic and wrote his first two books while drinking. However, he broke the habit and is now sober. Realizing the impact of the alcoholic circumstances he had both grown up with and later experienced himself, he decided to try to assist others in understanding not all Native Americans will or should fit a stereotype. His works address alcoholism among several other issues affecting Native Americans in the modern age. Many of his stories feature characters based closely on himself and his experiences intermittently on the reservation. His humorous characters helps heal the Native American community from past and present wrongdoings, change perceptions, and inspire others in his community to improve their lives by not allowing stereotypes to limit their growth.

Ethnicized writers often employ characteristic stereotypes and ethnic identifiers in order to comment on racial prejudices, racism, or a problem within the ethnic community. A stereotype is “a fixed, often simplistic generalization about a particular group or class of people” (Cardwell 227). Ethnic identifiers are “physical phenotypes, such as skin color, eye shape, hair texture, and bone structure” which identify the race or ethnicity of the person described (James). The use of ethnic identifiers in stereotypes is common, and these identifiers can become confused or seen as synonymous by those who use them to stereotype ethnicities. Ethnic identifiers such as long black hair often worn in braids and tan colored skin, are often used to represent Native Americans and are used in many works by ethnicized authors, including Alexie. By owning and deploying the stereotypes targeting them, ethnicized authors may help turn these negative depictions into positive changes in their communities. Memorable characters

that break out of the stereotype help change the stereotype-based perception that society holds of their communities.

People with a good sense of humor make others laugh, are able to find the comical side of an otherwise serious situation, and can laugh at themselves. When used correctly, humor can “bring us closer together, increasing our understanding and acceptance of one another. It ‘breaks the ice,’ lowers barriers, and communicates empathy” (Kuhn 10). Humor gives both the comedian and the audience the chance to “explore controversial issues in a safe and comfortable space” (McFadden). Though often the intent of “ethnic jokes is to ridicule and depreciate”, they are also used “to maintain and strengthen a sense of one’s identity” (Berger 65). Sherman Alexie states that “*Humor was an antiseptic that cleaned the deepest of personal wounds*” (qtd. in Grassian 76). Laughter can promote healing in three ways: “it helps us let go and get out of our own way, it opens us to new possibilities and it brings us closer together” (Kuhn 10). Stereotypes are often used in comedy to advocate for change and aid people of the chosen ethnicity in owning the stereotypes and ridding them of their hurtful power.

Sometimes the perception of a joke is dependent on whether an ethnic joke “comes from the inside or the outside, the idea being that when self-deprecating humour comes from the inside, it pushes out the boundaries of acceptable or expected behaviours by making fun of one or more of the group characteristics known to the insider” (Alleen 135). However, if an ethnic joke comes from the outside, they “are more likely to be critical or insulting” or “viewed more negatively” than equally critical jokes from the inside (Alleen 135). Ethnic jokes from the outside of a group causes the group

to tighten the “boundaries or freeze the stereotypes because the outsider is not in a position to bring about group change” (Alleen 136). An ethnic joke told by a member of the group is not always accepted by everyone in the group; however, telling an ethnic joke from inside a group takes the power of criticism away from those outside of the group. In a discussion about the “N” word, Gil Laury stated on his blog that some black people use the “N” word simply because they are the only ones allowed to. Almost everyone understands that it is unacceptable for a person of another ethnicity to say this word due to its historical use as an exertion of “power [and] oppression over an entire population of people” (Laury). Laury states that the use of this word by those inside the group serves as a “reminder to the dominant society that all the power that word once had” over the group “has now been completely stripped away” (Laury). In the same respect, an ethnic joke from inside an ethnic group strips the power that joke has away from those who would use it against those of that ethnicity. It turns oppression into empowerment, and often comedians, including Alexie, are “playing off [others’] expectations of stereotypes, by exaggerating them, to show how ridiculous those ethnic and sexual stereotypes truly are” (“Stereotypes in Comedy”).

Alexie is well known for using Native American stereotypes in his works. He does so in a humorous manner that helps to point out not only the absurdity of some stereotypes but also to bring awareness to genuine issues and realities within the Native American community. The issues he addresses in his works include, but are not limited to, the idea that all Native Americans are alcoholics, live on reservations, and are all wise and spiritual. In his works, Alexie addresses these often stereotyped situations in a humorous way that both confronts the realities and the stereotypes associated with

them. Coulombe notes that “Alexie’s sophisticated use of humor unsettles conventional ways of thinking and compels re-evaluation and growth” (Coulombe 95). Alexie’s characters are often stereotypical, “bleakly absurd and aimless Indians ... imploding in a passion of self-destructiveness and self-loathing” (Evans 47). Some of his critics claim Alexie’s readers, outside the group, are “allowed to come away with a sense that no one is really to blame but the Indians” even though that is not what Alexie intended (Evans 47). Alexie states that his work is often misunderstood because “being funny, people think you’re not being serious” (Nelson 43). For those inside the group, Alexie’s work and the humor in his approach is seen with more clarity and helps to “cleanse wounds”, open the eyes of his readers, and bring awareness to their community needs.

In the following chapters I will address three aspects of Native American life that are not only stereotyped but are also areas where awareness and action are needed to improve the lives of those in this community. Though in his works, Alexie uses the term “Indian” I will only use this term when quoting or when referring to a term or phrase used by a source and will instead refer to these peoples as Native Americans. It is important to note that though Alexie grew up on the reservation in Spokane and many of his stories take place there, the stereotypes I address in this thesis are often used to generalize all Native American peoples, regardless of Nation or tribe. Due to the fact that stereotypes do not discern between tribes, when I use the terms “Native American community” or “Native American society” I am referring to all Native American peoples, as they are all affected. When I refer to “society” in general I am referring to the “dominant” or “mainstream” society which often governs our perceptions and generalizations of sub-cultures.

Alexie, having a diverse range of works, uses all forms of entertainment to bring awareness to the issues he addresses. I will use many of these works in my discussion and analysis, including his novels *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, *Reservation Blues*, *Indian Killer* and *Flight*; his collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*; his poetry collections *The Business of Fancydancing*, *The Summer of Black Widows* and “Alcoholic Love Poems”; and his movies *Smoke Signals* and *The Business of Fancydancing*. Whereas other critiques of Alexie’s works only focus on how he refutes negative stereotypes, mine shows how he uses humor to refute both positive and negative stereotypes and address how stereotypes affect Native American identity. My thesis focuses on three stereotypes: alcoholism, spirituality and life on a Native American reservation. All are aspects that may affect a Native American’s sense of identity. These aspects are so closely tied to stereotypes that the stereotypes may also affect their identity without them realizing. In addition to affecting the identity of those inside the group, a false impression of Native Americans is given to those outside the group and may affect their interactions with those inside the group. Sherman Alexie uses both positive and negative stereotypes within his works to both refute those same stereotypes and bring awareness to related issues through humor.

Chapter One: The Drunken Indian

Is alcoholism genetic

or conditioned? I ask

myself as I weave through another reservation

maze of treaty

and unrequited love, find

a bottle of vodka

and a box of commodity cheese. (Alexie, "Alcoholic Love Poems" 18)

One of the best-known and satirized issues in the Native American community is that of alcohol abuse. Often used to characterize and pigeonhole Native Americans, it is one that "has persisted for more than 500 years" (Hallford vii). What makes it a stereotype is that although it does affect a large amount of the population, it does not affect the whole community. This chapter will explore and explain the realities of alcoholism within the Native American community and provide examples of Alexie confronting this issue, as well as his motives behind using this issue and the stereotypes associated with it. Finally, this chapter will explore his use of humor in regards to this subject and how it affects not only his community but those outside of it and the critical response he has received.

When European settlers first made contact with Native Americans during the sixteenth century, they would exchange gifts with the natives, often including "their first exposure to fortified alcohol" (Hallford 18). Hallford states in the beginning, Native

Americans were often reluctant to drink; they did it to ease anxiety and create harmony with the visitors. However, “after prolonged exposure to the drinking style typical of the European pioneers [...] the Indian-Style drinking pattern finally emerged (Hallford 19). The stereotype of the “drunken Indian” emerged during the sixteenth century; public officials and the press perpetuated, “shaped and sustained” the stereotype through modern-day fictional accounts (Hallford 21). The emergence of the “drunken Indian” stereotype shaped “the way Euro-Americans think about and interact with Indian people and how many Indian people believe they should behave while drinking” thus the stereotype became “the Indian thing to do” (Hallford 26). Many works of popular American authors feature this stereotype, such as the works of Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Leslie Silko, and Sherman Alexie.

Alcoholism is a problem that the Native American community does face, with the rate of alcoholism among Native Americans “six times the U.S. average” (Ghosh). Because of familial use of alcohol, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress, 80% of Native American youth experiment with alcohol (Gale). More so than just in the Native American community, it is also something that Alexie has faced in his personal life: “Well, I mean, I'm an alcoholic, that's what, you know, my family is filled with alcoholics. My tribe is filled with alcoholics. The whole race is filled with alcoholics. For those Indians who try to pretend it's a stereotype, they're in deep, deep denial” (“Big Think”). By stating that those “Indians” are in denial, he is expressing that though alcoholism is often stereotyped by members outside of the ethnic group, it does not mean that it does not exist.

The issue of alcoholism among Native Americans is often stereotyped, but it does have truth, just an incomplete truth. The Nigerian writer Chimanda Adichie points out this major pitfall with stereotypes: “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete” (Adichie). 80% of youth is not 100% of youth; six times the U.S. average does not mean that every Native American is an alcoholic. In fact, Shannon Ridgway states that a study published by the National Institute On Alcohol Abuse And Alcoholism (NIAAA) concludes that white men “are more likely than any other demographic group to drink alcohol on a daily basis, start drinking at a younger age, and drive while under the influence of alcohol”(Ridgway). Alexie also no longer drinks; he states that he “didn't want to be another disappointing Indian. The mess [his] father was, it broke [his] heart. [He] didn't want to break an Indian kid's heart” (Jaggi).

Though stereotyping is often seen as negative and destructive, if used correctly, it can shed light on social problems and create solutions, both inside the group and outside the group. Stephen Evans quotes Bird as saying that using stereotypes does not create solutions but “becomes a part of the problem, and returns an image of a generic ‘Indian’ back to the original producers of that image” (51). However, Alexie uses his works as “a satiric mirror” to reflect the reality of life in the Native American community and the struggle with assimilating or not assimilating into white society, while accepting or denying their own culture (Evans 49). By using these stereotypes in his works, he is able to use humor to both address the issues and promote change within his community and ethnic perception from outside the group.

Humor is the way that Alexie deploys stereotypes in his work. He presents the characters in a humorous light not only to ease the tension of the serious situation surrounding them, but also to expose the stereotypes as exaggerated fragments of an issue the community faces. In Alexie's novel *Flight*, Zits makes fun of his experimenting with alcoholism. He says "Yeah, I'm a drunk, just like my father. I'm a good drunk, too. Gifted you might say. I can outdrink any of those homeless Indians and remain on my feet and still tell my stories" (Alexie, *Flight* 7). He uses the "drunken Indian" stereotype to show how the carefree "fun" life of a homeless, drunken, Native American can appear to a child who has lost his identity and how it can perpetuate that lifestyle. Zits tries to use humor to brush over his feeling that alcoholism is inevitable because of his ethnicity. This humor masks a pain that Zits is trying to express. He goes on to say, "Those street Indians enjoy my company. I'm good at begging. I make good coin and buy whiskey and beer for all of us to drink. Of course, those wandering Indians are not the only Indians in the world, but they're the only ones who pay attention to me" (Alexie, *Flight* 7). The only Native Americans that he can connect to are the ones using him to feed their addiction. He is so starved for attention that he dives into the lifestyle head first, in an attempt to find a place to belong. Alexie's depiction of an alcoholic teen shows that the issue of Native American teen drinking should be explored more thoroughly to address the causes.

Later in the novel, we meet his father, during one of the "flights" that Zits takes on his journey to self-discovery. The scene with his father is tragicomic. Alexie draws on several stereotypes for this character and uses absurd and shocking language in the conversations he has with the white people he encounters. We see the first hint at

stereotyping from outside the group in this interaction with the white couple. Zits, in the body of his father, asks the couple, “How do you know I’m Indian?” to which they reply, “Your braids. And your shirt” (Alexie, *Flight* 133). Zits goes on to describe the shirt that he is wearing as one that depicts Geronimo and captions “FIGHTING TERRORISM SINCE 1492” (Alexie, *Flight* 133). This is humorous in an ironic sense because he is a man who is idolizing a Native American warrior while destroying his own life with alcoholism.

Zits’s father is absurd in how he speaks to the white couple trying to aid him; he blames them for his problems, because they are white. This is understandable due to the oppression Native Americans have faced because of whites, however, he takes it too far when the woman tries to explain that they are trying to care for him. He replies to her concern for his welfare with “Do you want to fuck me?” because she appears sincere and that “makes her weak and easily manipulated” (Alexie, *Flight* 137). The suddenness of this question takes the white couple aback and shocks the reader, adding tragicomic humor to this situation. This man is pitiful, full of bitterness and self-loathing; in addition to drinking his life away, he blames everyone else for his problems. Alexie paints a humorous but not favorable picture of alcoholism, helping to express this as a negative aspect of Native American life. In *Reservation Blues*, the narrator states that “All Indians grow up with drunks. So many drunks on the reservation, so many. But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians. On television, the drunk Indians emote. In books, the drunk Indians philosophize” (Alexie, *Reservation Blues* 151). Alexie is proving here, through humor, that “the problem arises when people substitute the stereotypes for the reality and then start believing the stereotypes are the

reality” (“Sherman Alexie on Stereotypes”). He has his characters exhibit the negative stereotypes to bring to light the reality behind the issue and the stereotype. Zits’ father let the stereotype become his life. It consumed his life and took him away from his family, which then caused his son to adopt the stereotype because he thinks this is what it means to be a Native American. Thankfully, through his journey, Zits escapes that life and become his own person; he creates his own identity, free of stereotypical expectations.

Among other themes, Sherman Alexie’s movie, *Smoke Signals* (1998, directed by Chris Eyre) shows the effects of alcoholism on Victor’s life, through the actions of his parents, specifically his father. This movie, based on his short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, is one that breaks down stereotypes surrounding the Native American community and depicts the reality of poverty and alcoholism on the reservation. Alexie uses this movie to reach a wider range of people the stereotype has affected, either as an insider or an outsider to the group. It shows the effect the stereotypes have on both those inside and outside the group as well as how the perception of those outside the group, based on the stereotypes, can affect those inside the group, during their interactions.

The beginning of *Smoke Signals* shows Arnold Joseph saving a baby thrown from the window of a burning house. Baby Thomas' grandmother tells Arnold that he has done a good thing. Arnold replies, “I didn’t mean to” as he begins to cry which hints to the reader that Arnold may have been to blame for the fire (*Smoke Signals*). This is not confirmed until the end of the movie, when Suzie tells Victor that at the 4th of July party, Arnold was shooting off fireworks while drunk. One of fireworks was mistakenly

shot into the house and started the fire. This confirmation of guilt gives the viewer more insight into the actions of Arnold throughout the movie. Alexie uses this fire to show how alcohol can ruin the lives of so many people within a community due to the actions of even just one person while under the influence.

After the fire, Arnold cut his hair “in mourning” and seemingly began drinking though we discover ultimately that his drinking was not something that started after the fire but before. Alexie is not using alcohol as a means of self-admonishment in Arnold but rather shows that alcohol is the means of his self-destruction. His inability to stop drinking while on the reservation shows how many Native Americans feel alcoholism is closely tied to a stereotypical sense of identity. The viewer watches as Arnold drinks while driving, including when Victor is in the car. In one scene, Victor spills his beer while in the truck and Arnold hits him for it, then pulls another beer out of a box and begins drinking again. He always has a beer available, dependent on it and willing to risk his life and the lives of his family to cling to this vice. Alexie uses these scenes to show the dependency and desperation of alcoholics on the reservation. He wants his viewers to understand the severity of the issue plaguing those in his community.

After one party, the house littered with beer bottles, we see Victor throwing empty bottles at Arnold’s truck. Victor’s mom, waking up from a hangover, sees this and tells Arnold that they have to stop drinking. She tries to enforce this and will not allow him to have any money for beer. Victor’s mother breaks free of her alcoholism and recovers, proving that this is only a stereotype; it is not a requirement of being Native American. The forced sobriety angers Arnold and causes him to hit his wife and then leave, abandoning his family. Victor blames himself and when Thomas asks him “Why did he

leave, does he hate you?" Victor responds by beating him up. Alexie has Thomas ask these questions because alcoholism in the movie appears to be a normality of Native American life. It seems more realistic that the father would leave because of the son rather than because of alcohol. Alexie uses this sad irony in a way that shows the audience members both the severity of the situation and allows them to recognize the true reason Arnold left.

The "drunken Indian" stereotype is one that is, however, debunked in the movie through the actions of both Thomas and Victor as neither of them has ever drunk alcohol. This presence and negative perception of the "drunken Indian" stereotype is obvious towards the end of the movie when the police question Thomas and Victor about a car accident. The sheriff tells Victor that a complaint filed against him claimed that during the altercation Victor was drunk. Victor states that he was not intoxicated and that he has "never drank a single drop of alcohol" in his life (*Smoke Signals*). The sheriff then replies "What kind of Indian are you?" which suggests he believes the stereotype that all Indians drink (*Smoke Signals*). His response is one typical for the dry humor found throughout the movie.

Although the depiction of Arnold and Victor's lives is not humorous, humor does exist in the story. Thomas is the comic relief throughout the movie. He exhibits many of the Native American stereotypes; he wears his long hair in braids and is famous for his stories. He spends the most of the movie telling stories glorifying Arnold Joseph, unknowingly idolizing the man who had killed his parents. It is an example of the tragicomic humor that Sherman Alexie specializes in. Whereas the alcoholism and its effects on the people in the movie are sad, the humor brought by Thomas and his

outrageous stories provides comic relief as well as an opportunity to gain deeper meaning from their situations. His fictional stories offer hope, understanding, and alternative outcomes to poor situations which he uses to enlighten the listeners and inspire personal growth.

Alexie's short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* features characters of the same names as in the movie *Smoke Signals*. The book is a collection of twenty-two short stories about Native Americans who live on the reservation. Often the stories are accounts of daily life on the reservation and the realities of life as a Native American living in a world dominated by whites. Alcohol plays a part in many of the stories, as it does in most of Alexie's works.

In the first short story "Every Little Hurricane," Victor witnesses a drunken fight between his uncles at the New Year's Eve party. He likens their fight to a "little kind of hurricane", the two uncles acting as opposing storm fronts colliding (*Lone Ranger* 3). He later mentions that hurricanes flatten houses and damage and change memories (*Lone Ranger* 4). This shows the effects that alcohol has on their lives, their families, and their memories. At nine years old he is already having his memories of his family damaged by the effects of alcohol and his night ends with him sleeping between his two parents passed out from their drunkenness. During the story, he talks about how he dislikes the rain and how he would have nightmares about drowning. This leads into him talking about dreams of "whiskey, vodka, tequila, those fluids swallowing him just as easily as he swallowed them" (*Lone Ranger* 7). The storms in his life seem related to alcohol and its effects on the people around him, including the death of an older man who had passed out and drowned in a mud puddle at a pow-wow (*Lone Ranger* 7). The

symbolism of the storm when Victor is speaking about his family, the tribe, and alcoholism shows the emotional turmoil that he is going through. His “personal hurricanes” are storms involving alcohol, anger, hurt, and betrayal - all a result of interactions between Native Americans and whites.

The short story “Because my father always said he was the only Indian who saw Jimi Hendrix play ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ at Woodstock”, is one of the stories that we see adapted into the movie *Smoke Signals*. In the movie we got a slightly different version of his dad but the level of alcoholism that he exhibited remained the same. In the story, Victor tells the reader about his father and how he eventually leaves their family. He explains he would play a Jimi Hendrix tape for his father as part of a nightly drinking ceremony and that his father would listen to it repeatedly until he passed out. His father would guiltily apologize in the days following, but the cycle would continue. His mother tells Victor that his conception took place during one of his parents’ drunken binges. Victor states that half of him was “formed by [his] father’s whiskey sperm, the other half by [his] mother’s vodka egg”; a “goofy reservation mixed drink” (*Lone Ranger* 27). After a dream where he believed he heard his dad’s voice, he makes the statement, “It was so quiet, a reservation kind of quiet, where you can hear somebody drinking whiskey on the rocks three miles away” (*Lone Ranger* 35). This statement and statement about Victor's conception shows how ingrained in Native American society alcoholism is considered to be, even by those within the group. Though his statements are exaggerated, the absurdity of the statements shows to what extent alcoholism has affected his life and those of his family.

In the short story "Amusements" Victor and his friend Sadie find a drunk, Dirty Joe, passed out at the amusement park. They notice that the white people "watch [them], laugh, point a finger, their faces twisted with hate and disgust" (*Lone Ranger* 55). They try to move him, to get him away from the attention. As they are trying to move him, they realize he is too heavy for them to move very far. What occurs subsequently in the story "is a criticism of the state of the treatment of alcoholism by white and Indian" (Miles 26). They decide to put him on the roller coaster, though they realize that "that's a real shitty thing to do" (*Lone Ranger* 56). Though they realized it was mean to do, they did not expect that the attention would increase (*Lone Ranger* 56). Soon, a white crowd gathered around Victor and Sadie, "jury and judge for the twentieth-century fancydance of these court jesters who would pour thunderbird wine into Holy Grail" (*Lone Ranger* 56). Instead of just laughing at Dirty Joe, they were now laughing at Victor and Sadie as well. They realized they were making it worse and that this attention could get them in trouble, so they took off after a security guard spotted them. At the end, he compares himself to an "Indian who offered up another Indian like some treaty" (*Lone Ranger* 58). The attention that they received from the whites alerted them to the fact that Dirty Joe was perpetuating the "drunken Indian" stereotype and that they were not only helping to bring more attention to it but were making things worse. Not only were they helping to perpetuate a stereotype but they were sacrificing him to the attention of the whites. They were hurting the reputation of Native Americans instead of helping it. They were making their own lives worse even though they tried to believe they were helping. In the end, instead of defending Dirty Joe and Native Americans in general, they joined in and humiliated him further and furthered the racist

beliefs held by many. Though the image of the intoxicated man on the roller coaster may have initially been amusing, in the end, it was sad and pitiful and the way the two acted is reprehensible. The funhouse mirrors aid Victor in acknowledging the error of his ways. Through the distorted images, reflected are his misdeeds just as the humor in Alexie's stories reflect the misdeeds of those living out stereotypes.

In Alexie's movie "*The Business of Fancydancing*", an adaptation of his collection of poetry by the same name, only a small part concerns alcoholism but it is a powerful one that shows how it affects the children of alcoholics. Seymour tells a story about himself and his sister when they were younger, waiting outside of the bar in a truck with Mouse and Aristotle, as they wait for Seymour's parents. This story, presented as a poem, reveals the "drunken Indian" stereotype in that he claims all Native American children have to live with alcoholic parents.

We waited in the car
outside the bar
my sister and I
for just a couple of drinks
as we had heard it so many times before
like all Indian kids have heard before from their parents
disappeared into the smoke and laughter
of our reservation tavern
emerging every half hour
with soda pop, potato chips and more promises.
And like all Indians have learned

we never did trust those promises.

We knew to believe something when it happened

learned to trust the source of a river

and never its mouth. (*The Business of Fancydancing*)

The line “like all Indians have learned, we never did trust those promises” suggests the relationship of alcoholism to the broken promises made to Native Americans when the white settlers took over their land. We do get a small amount of humor in this scene, when he mentions playing tricks on their drunken parents. To entertain themselves during their wait, they "refuse to open the locked door for [their] parents, [leaving] them to gesture wildly and make all of [them] laugh because there was nothing else left to do” (*The Business of Fancydancing*).

Seymour states “but this is not about sadness” several times. He wants the viewer to focus on how they survived, how they changed the stereotype with their stories, their jokes, their songs and their friendship. Seymour is not seen drinking in the movie. It appears he did break the stereotype, as he broke many. In one scene we see Seymour in an AA meeting, introducing himself and reading a poem he has written.

Alcohol is a drum calling me.

Alcohol calls me.

Sometimes it's so hard not to hear that drum.

Sometimes it's so hard not to dance.

You told me once that the best sex we ever had

was one winter night in February

after I had spent the whole day drinking.

I made love to you drunk,
during a black out,
and can't remember any of it.
After you told me,
I wanted to know if I had used another man's name,
not because I loved someone else.
I wanted to know
because my imagination always increased
when I was drunk. (*The Business of Fancydancing*).

Though initially it appears Seymour did not escape the stereotypical "drunken Indian" fate, half way through the poem his features flash and those of Aristotle appear, revealing this as yet another story he stole from his friend. Later at Mouse's memorial, when Seymour is speaking to Agnes, she exclaims that Aristotle has been on the wagon for some time. However, the poem does such a good job of showing how hard it is to resist drinking, as an alcoholic. The line "Alcohol is a drum calling me / alcohol calls me / [...] sometimes it is so hard not to dance" shows that a person is always an alcoholic once they have become one; it will always call to them. The fact that the poem likens it to a drum shows how ingrained alcoholism is in the Native American community. It is always there, tempting them and threatening to drag them into the stereotype, turning them into another statistic against themselves.

The humor here is once again tragicomic; it is obvious that Seymour is jealous of Aristotle and Mouse. They are comfortable in their own identity, whereas Seymour is not, and so the motivation behind his petty words and the acts of thievery are obvious to

those viewing the movie. Their lives are not amazing, and he is much more successful, but he is not happy. His jokes and stories about fun adventures he and his “brothers” had on the reservation are humorous and entertaining, but the motivation behind his telling them are sad and pitiable. He hates who he is, but he is successful by societal standards and they are not. He is not able to enjoy his life, but he would not be able to enjoy theirs either. It appears that the only way he can live both lives is through his stories, where he can choose which parts he can live and remember. He creates his own fictional life through his stories and there he can be happy, even if he is not in real life.

The book on which the movie was based, *The Business of Fancydancing*, is a compilation of short stories and poetry. It is not explicitly similar to the movie. The “Seymour” in the book is not a gay, self-loathing poet; he is a reservation Native just like the others in the book. Several of the characters in the book appear again in the short stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

In the short story “Traveling,” we see how the “drunken Indian” stereotype affects those inside the group, through the actions of those outside the group. In the story, Victor, his son, and a friend are returning home from a basketball tournament. A trooper pulls them over and when Victor asks what the problem is, the officer replies “You were weaving back there. Been drinking much?” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Traveling”). After taking his license and registration, the officer returns to the car and asks Victor to “step out of the vehicle” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Traveling”). He then proceeds to conduct an inebriation test on Victor, but it goes much further than normal tests. Instead of performing a typical inebriation test, the trooper asks various

random questions, such as “Who holds the major league record for most home runs in a single season?” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Traveling”). When asked this question, Victor replies correctly, “Roger Maris,” but the Trooper replies “No, it’s Babe Ruth. You must be drunk” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Traveling”). After this, Victor gave a few brash answers to a couple of questions and then realized if he did not answer the way the Trooper wanted, he would end up in jail. He started answering the way he knew would satisfy the Trooper. The trooper assumed he had been drinking because he was Native American and was so intent on proving that he was that he went above and beyond to “test” Victor’s sobriety. Whereas Victor’s brash reactions to some of the questions -- such as the question “Who invented Velcro?” to which he responded “You did” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Traveling”) -- were humorous, they could have landed him in more trouble because he was pointing out that the Trooper was ridiculous in his questioning. The trooper subscribes to the stereotype that all Native Americans are alcoholics and was out to prove not only that Victor had been drinking, but that he was superior to him. Though Victor did as he had, to avoid jail, this echoes the relations between whites and Native Americans which created the real threat of alcoholism in their community. At the end of the story, Victor’s son says, “I turned back to the van, put my shoulder to the cold metal and waited for something to change” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Traveling”). The situation they found themselves in that night makes this statement carry more meaning. More than just waiting for a heavy van to become light; it could signal a hope for their community to change their reputation and for outsiders to treat them with respect.

In the poem “No Drugs or Alcohol Allowed,” Alexie shows how those inside the group who believe their identities are reliant on the stereotype, hold down others in the group and perpetuate the stereotype. Seymour, Lester, and the narrator enter the Spokane Tribal Centennial Celebration, a dry event where no drugs or alcohol are permitted. The trio follow Seymour’s lead and decide to sneak in a 5th of whiskey. They do this in a humorous manner by taking mouthfuls of whiskey and walking past the guards to Seymour, who is standing on the other side with an empty bottle. They spit the whiskey into his bottle and make several more trips, until the bottle is full. They seem to believe that this is something expected of them and it is not until they sober up that they realize the truth. The narrator states, “I guess / you could say / we won again but it was only Indians versus / Indians [...]” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “No Drugs or Alcohol Allowed”) and suggests that even though they have “won” in sneaking past the guards, he knows he is doing more damage to his people by taking advantage of those alcoholics in the group. The Tribal Council is attempting to protect their people from such vices. The trio do profit from the alcoholics in the group by selling the shots for a dollar a piece. When they sober up, Seymour starts fights with the whites at the pow-wow but he ends up getting “the shit kicked out of him by a softball team / from Spokane / all of them white” after a reporter “[...] files / a live report / highlighting the renewed rivalry / between whites and reds” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “No Drugs or Alcohol Allowed”). It is again a tragicomic and ironic humor because there has not been a lull in the rivalry between Native Americans and Whites. The whites have always come out the victors, having an unfair advantage (in this case an entire softball team against one person).

Again we see Seymour in the poem “Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987” as he is drinking around a fire at a powwow. He is wearing a “colored blanket” and “all the old men / laugh and call him Arnold” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987”). But he replies “I / don’t have no brothers except this night / and the moon and this bottle of dreams” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987”). Drunk, he “swallows mouth after mouthful of / dreams / until he believes his beautiful blanket / is a pair of wings” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987”). Soon someone makes the joke “Seymour is sure drunk tonight. / He thinks he’s a goddam Indian” (Alexie, *Business of Fancydancing* “Spokane Tribal Celebration, September 1987”). This sadly ironic joke shows that even within the group, the “drunken Indian” stereotype is expected to be perpetuated and suggests that alcoholism is directly related to Native American identity. However, this joke also allows the opportunity for readers inside the group to rebel against this expectation and establish their own identity, free of this stereotype.

Alexie stated in an interview for Big Think that his tribe is full of alcoholics and that Native Americans who believe that Alcoholism is just a stereotype are fooling themselves (Big Think). There are alcoholics in the Native American community, but the problem comes in when those inside the group begin to believe they should act this way and when those outside the group begin to stereotype those within the group. Alexie’s father died from alcoholism and he suffered through alcoholism when he was younger (Schaffer 13). He wants to change the idea that Native Americans are pre-destined alcoholics and must live this life to maintain their identity. When a white person sees a

Native American and believes that s/he must be an alcoholic because s/he is of that race, it furthers racism and prejudices that hold back Native Americans. Alexie's work helps to change these stereotypes in several different ways. He shows those outside the group that though the stereotype is present, it is not a guaranteed trait nor is it something permanent: those who do suffer from this can change. His work shows those within the group that they do not have to be alcoholics just because they are of a race where it is prevalent. It shows them that if they are alcoholics not only can they change, but that they should change. In his interview with Big Think, Alexie states:

By writing about it, maybe it will help people get sober and it has, I've heard from them. The social function of art is very important to me, it's not just for art's sake. I have very specific ideas in mind for what it can do, I've seen it happen. It is writing about alcohol that helps me stay sober and I think reading about alcoholism helps other people stay sober. (Big Think)

He writes to change his world and those of the world around him. He does this through humor and through seriousness, by holding a mirror up to himself and his community, and by dispelling stereotypes held by those outside the group. With his works, he has created change that is not only important to him but to the world around him.

Chapter 2: The Noble Indian

"White people want to be Indians. You all have things we don't have. You live at peace with the earth. You are so wise." [...] "You've never spent a few hours in the Powwow Tavern. I'll show you wise and peaceful".

(Alexie, *Reservation Blues* 169)

Often in literature and film the depictions of Native Americans are ones that involve dressing in full traditional garb, displaying an intense sense of spirituality and wisdom as well as being deeply connected to their communities and nature (Miles 5). Though this is considered a positive stereotype, it can still be damaging to those who do not live up to it. The problem with this stereotype is that the Native Americans are represented in a way not reflective of the lives they lead today. Though there is a tradition of spirituality among Native American nations, modern Native Americans may not maintain this tradition. Even so, Native Americans are still depicted as they were in their past, showing no progression or growth, and these depictions create unrealistic expectations by both those inside and outside the group (Miles 8).

The Native Americans that we often see in the media are considered "Hollywood Indians". "Hollywood Indians" are the representation of Native Americans that does not accurately reflect their past or their present realities. Instead it shows how those in Hollywood choose to represent them: picking, choosing and creating aspects of their "culture" that they want society to believe about this community. We first saw depictions of Native Americans in Westerns, showing Native American images of a "savage

warrior”, a “heroic and noble warrior / hunter, depicted as stoic, in touch with nature, and peace loving but willing to fight when necessary,” and/or a shaman who would represent a “deeply religious and mysterious character” (Mihelich 130). Native Americans are often depicted as “fierce horseback-riding warriors and buffalo hunters, replete with war bonnet and face paint, whooping and yelling war cries as they attack the wagon trains of innocent White settlers; or they are wise seers who lament the demise of their culture and advocate a life in harmony with mother earth” (Gruber 20). The biggest problem with such clichéd images is that it generalizes all Native Americans when they in truth had and have “immense cultural diversity and vastly diverging lifestyles” (Gruber 20).

These stereotypes “confine Indians to a long gone past and most forcefully deny Native people contemporary identities” (Gruber 20). These stereotypes are still used in present-day film, though differently and perhaps even more offensively as was recently noted in an upcoming Adam Sandler film, *The Ridiculous Six*, which depicts Native Americans in negative, stereotyped fashions. The Natives in the movie were supposed to be Apache, but they are actually depicted to be Comanche. This showed that the producers are not only ignorant of the differences but that they have generalized all tribes and attribute not only the same actions but also the same fashions to all tribes, completely eradicating their individual identities. Some of the most offensive parts of the movie that have been released so far have to do with the names of a couple of the characters. These names relate to the idea that all Native Americans continue to have a connection to nature and spirituality, and that idea is often stereotyped. Stereotypical representations have often incorporated common ideas of “Indianness” and “Indian naming has been the source of many a joke about Indian culture” (Miles 46). The

character “Beaver’s Breath” had Native American extras on set so upset that many of them quit, and one of the actors, Loren Anthony, stated that they had been told the movie “would be humorous but not racist”, but after one day on set he stated, “Nothing has changed. We are still just Hollywood Indians (Carroll). For years, the concept of “Indian naming” has been ridiculed and misconstrued through "jokes, cartoons, films and literature [that] perpetuate the notion that each Indian has an 'Indian' name, a mystically-produced symbol that identifies the inner being of the person who bears the moniker” (Miles 47). Alexie also uses an “Indian name” in the character of “Thomas Builds-the-Fire” in his novel *The Long Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Being that Thomas’s parents were killed in a fire, the name appears ironic on Alexie’s part. Thomas also is a character that exhibits stereotypical traits in an exaggerated or, in the case of his name, ironic way in an attempt to bring attention to the stereotype and refute it. Adam Sandler, as a white man, is an outsider to the group he is now depicting, in a negative way, for the sake of entertainment. There is no motive behind the name “Beaver’s breath” other than the intent to ridicule and perpetuate stereotypes. Though Alexie may represent some Native Americans in a negative light, the difference is that he is inside the group. His representations are offered in a humorous and ironic way to combat those stereotypes or to bring awareness, through exaggeration and humor, to a real issue.

The problem with positive stereotypes is that even though they may be positive they still strip away the identity of the individual and lump them in with others in a group. When a person does not live up to the stereotype, that person may feel inadequate compared to others in the group. They also may be resentful of the others in the group

who do live up to the stereotype. What Alexie does is take this stereotype and use it in a way that shows the absurdity of the generalization and makes fun of people who expect all Native Americans to be wise, noble, and spiritual.

In most of Sherman Alexie's works, at least one character represents this stereotype of nobility and spirituality. After all, "Indians were supposed to have visions and receive messages from their dreams. All the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do" (Alexie, *Reservation Blues* 18). These characters are typically good people, admired by some and disliked by others. Their spirituality or nobility is usually exaggerated and sometimes done in mockery. This mockery achieves two things: it brings humor to the stereotype, and it throws it in the face of the reader and brings awareness to the fact that this stereotype is false.

In the collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, many scenes show a character who has a connection to nature or spiritualism. Throughout many of the stories, this character is Thomas, the storytelling cousin of Victor. He appears more wise and noble than the other characters. Victor is the opposite; he often seems lost and searching for his identity. Often Native American identity seems tied to stereotypes, especially the positive stereotypes. When the wise Thomas pairs up with the searching Victor, it is not surprising that Victor tries to connect to his "Indianness" by attempting to exhibit this stereotypical characteristic. In "A Drug Called Tradition" we see Thomas and Victor at a party that Thomas is hosting. Victor helps convince Thomas to join him and Junior at a lake on the reservation and take drugs to induce visions, which Victor states is "[...] very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit" (Alexie, *Lone Ranger* 14). The three boys have visions about each other. One stands

out as the most connected to the spiritual, Junior's vision about Thomas, since Thomas is the most spiritual character. He sees Thomas dancing naked. He is dancing to heal his wounds, bring back dead Native Americans and the buffalo; he dances to rid the land of white people (*Lone Ranger* 17). Thomas' dance is one that "is both painful and beautiful" (Tatonetti 9). He states that his "tribe is gone" and that the white people "have killed [them]" and that he is the last one and must "dance a ghost dance" (*Lone Ranger* 17). He describes dancing "one step and [his] sister rises from the ash" and how "with every step, an Indian rises" and that "with every other step, a buffalo falls" from the sky (*Lone Ranger* 17). This vision appears to take place "sometime in the nineteenth century when several smallpox epidemics swept through the Native population on the Plains (Tatonetti 10). The fact that the vision takes place in the past also shows how the connection with the spiritual world is one that may have been traditional and something expected in the past but Thomas' proclamation of "I don't dance" shows that this is no longer a norm.

Later in the story Junior notes that Thomas does not need drugs, that he is always telling stories and "talking about strange shit" (*Lone Ranger* 20). Victor tells Junior, "I think he got dropped on his head and I think he is magic" (*Lone Ranger* 20). This shows that Victor is aware that Thomas is connected to their culture, nature and spirituality in a way that others are not. Thomas represents the Native Americans that are in fact noble, spiritual and connected to nature, whereas Junior and Victor represent those that are not. At the end of the story, Junior and Victor are outside of a convenience store when "Big Mom" comes up and gives Victor a tiny drum. She tells him it is a pager and that he just needs to tap it to summon her if he needs her. He does

not use it but states that he keeps it close to him because it is “the only religion I have,” and “I think if I played it a little, it might fill up the whole world” (*Lone Ranger* 23). He doubts the legitimacy of a connection to the spiritual but appears to crave that same connection; he 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 as a possible source of plenitude to ‘fillup’ a world seemingly bereft of continuity”. (DeNuccio 89)

Alexie uses the humorous situation surrounding their drug-use to show that for some, the only way they can be spiritual and wise is through drugs. He uses their interactions to show that the stereotype is just that, a stereotype and not a reality for all Native Americans. Sadly, the three boys feel they have to take the drugs “in order to receive visions and therefore have a stronger claim to an American Indian identity” (Means 9). However, Alexie has them throw the rest of the drugs into Lake Benjamin to combat the stereotype because the visions “remain painful and out of reach” (Means 10). He also uses their visions to show a loss of culture due to the white settlers and how they have changed the lives of the Native Americans. Whereas Junior sees Thomas connected to the earth and his ancestors, Thomas sees Victor stealing a horse and Victor sees Junior singing for white people. Victor and Junior have lost their connection to their heritage and Thomas has not. Timothy Egan quotes Alexie joking about this disconnection during one of his standup routines: “what’s with all these sensitive New Age guys beating drums in the woods, trying to be Indians? Hey, Indians gave that up a hundred years ago. Now we’re sitting on the couch with the remote”

(1). Thomas is considered strange for his connection, showing how though they crave a connection to their culture, they are not as willing to accept it as perhaps they should be. This is an issue that Alexie is trying to bring awareness to, the loss of a culture and the inability of modern Native Americans to accept those who try to connect to their past even while they crave that connection themselves.

One device of note during the vision scene with Thomas' ghost dance is the declaration that the ghost dance returned the buffalo, a stereotypical symbol used by those outside of the group to represent all Native Americans even though the buffalo were prevalent in the plains, where the Plains Natives hunted them. In Spokane, the Natives were Salmon fishermen. Alexie appears to use the buffalo as a reference to the stereotype placed on all Natives, perhaps in a way to make those outside the group recognize the danger and pain the white settlers had brought to all Native Americans, not only his tribe. However, in *The Summer of Black Widows* Alexie states:

Let's begin with this: America.

I want it all back

now, acre by acre, tonight. I want

some Indian to finally learn to dance the Ghost Dance right

so that all of the salmon and buffalo return

and the white men are sent back home

to their favorite European cities. (*Summer of Black Widows*, 138)

Once again, Alexie mentions a ghost dance but this time demands that the salmon is returned in addition to the buffalo. Lisa Totonetti says that by including the salmon, a symbol of the Spokane Native Americans, he "recalls the adaptable spirit of the 1890

Ghost dance, which often melded with the beliefs of those who adopted the religion” which adds to the seriousness of his request (Totonetti 16). The imagery of buffalo and salmon falling from the sky may be a humorous one but it is also a powerful one. It erases the damage that was done to the land, the people, and their cultural identity. Alexie’s novel *Indian Killer* refers to the Ghost Dance as well as other spiritual and magical references. This murder mystery novel displays smaller amounts of humor, often in the form of exaggeration or irony, rather than the typical humorous situations found in Alexie’s works. One example of this exaggeration is when Boo is describing the murderer and states:

“This Indian Killer, you see, he’s got Crazy Horse’s magic. He’s got Chief Joseph’s brains. He’s got Geronimo’s heart. He’s got Wovoka’s vision. He’s all those badass Indians rolled into one” (*Indian Killer* 219).

Many real Native Americans, used to stereotype future generations were included in his description. These Native Americans are used to hold others to impossible standards of “Indianness”. His description is comical because of its exaggeration of the murderer’s personality, as he is describing the “perfect Indian” and the impression is one of awe and fear all at the same time.

When the Indian Killer abducts Mark Jones, he notes that this act is “the true beginning, the first song, the first dance of a powerful ceremony that would change the world” (*Indian Killer* 192). He is trying to find a connection to that tradition of ghost dancing, of riding the world of the white people and bringing back the dead through ceremonial dance. The way that he does it though is through a “dance” with the white

people in the community around him, by murdering them his dance is working. His actions rid his world of the white presence.

However, in the novel, Marie Polatkin claims that the dance has not worked because not all the white people have gone, but she suggests that the *Indian Killer* is rather a product of the dance, rather than the dancer. She asks “How many Indians would have to dance to create the *Indian Killer*? A Thousand? Ten thousand? Maybe this is how the Ghost Dance works” (*Indian Killer* 314). The ironic humor in this scene comes when she addresses her professor, a white man who teaches Native American Literature. She states “You just love Indians so much...you think you’re excluded from our hatred. Don’t you see? If the Ghost Dance had worked, you wouldn’t be here. You’d be dust” (*Indian Killer* 313). Because he loves them, studies them, teaches their literature and celebrates them, he believes he is excluded from the blame of his ancestors and fellow white Americans. She points out that he is not exempt, that he is still white and the Ghost Dance is meant for him as well. She later points out in a statement to the police that “the Indians are dancing now and I don’t think they’re going to stop” (*Indian Killer* 418). This shows that though the actual act of a ghost dance may not be possible any longer, the act of rebelling against the whites, of self-awareness and reclaiming their identity will continue. She claims the “Noble Indian” stereotype and changes it, fitting it to the reality of the modern Native American and their continuous fight against oppression and persecution. The threat of them continuing to dance brings entertaining imagery of Natives all over America dancing and though her statement was not literal the imagery of it provides the reader with the information they need to glean the meaning behind her words.

In the movie *Smoke Signals*, Thomas is still a storyteller, still thought of as weird but wise and spiritual. However, the Thomas in the movie is much more sarcastic and fantastical with his stories and his references to the spiritual. When Victor finds out that his father has died, he goes to the store and runs into Thomas. Thomas asks Victor about it and Victor wants to know how he knows. Thomas responds sarcastically, "I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight. Also, your mother was just in here crying" (*Smoke Signals*). Thomas is a character that everyone looks to for entertainment, and his stories are ones that people find wise and informed. We see this in the scene where Victor and Thomas need a ride off the reservation and Velma and Lucy trade them a ride for a story. Thomas closes his eyes and holds his hands together, making a serious face while he tells a story about Victor's dad. When the story is complete, Velma asks if it is true, impressed and believing Thomas, but Victor states that Thomas is "full of shit" and they all laugh (*Smoke Signals*).

Thomas tends to tell fantastical tales about Victor's family; he is always serious and in some instances gives the impression he actually believes the stories he tells. His stories are wise and he is overtly connected to the history of Native Americans and the struggles they have gone through; he just expresses his knowledge and connection, through the oral tradition - a stereotypical and expected trait of spirituality and wisdom. His tales have morals of togetherness, sacrifice, family and "being Indian in the 20th century" (*Smoke Signals*). Alexie based this character on himself, their personalities similar since he is an author and Thomas is a storyteller (Hearne). His sarcasm and humor, even while serious, is a trait that Alexie is well known for. Alexie says, "comedy is simply a funny way of being serious" (Bernadin 52).

We see this mix of humor and seriousness in his character in another short story from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Thomas is on trial in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" for "a storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need to tell the truth;" he was considered "dangerous" (*Lone Ranger* 93). Clearly a satire, the story is full of irony, used to emphasize the violence and injustice that the Spokane tribe experienced during the Indian Wars. Thomas is accused of the crimes even though he tells his stories from the point of view of the victims, not the criminals. Though the crimes were committed by white men more than a century prior to the trial, Thomas is the one who must pay for their deeds. The police want to eliminate him because he speaks the truth; they want to have him put in prison for a "felony charge". They arrest him without knowing what they will charge him with, and when before the judge, they still do not have a charge against him. Thomas tells his stories, ending with the story of the warrior who kills two soldiers. Thomas tells the story from the point of view of the warrior, he takes responsibility for the murders and is then charged with them, even though it is not possible that he could have committed them. Throughout his story telling, Thomas keeps his eyes closed; he goes into a trance-like state, as if possessed by the spirits of the narrators; he mesmerizes the courtroom, causing the Native Americans in the room to smile, cry, exclaim joyfully, in outrage and make a "leap of faith towards Thomas" and then fight the officers holding them back (*Lone Ranger* 99). He is a person that people respect and look up to as someone who is wise and looks out for the well-being of his people. Alexie uses the irony and the humorous imagery in the courtroom to bring awareness to the issues and injustices that the Native Americans have suffered at the hands of whites.

Alexie chooses to use the “Noble Indian” stereotype in his works because it is one often mocked even though many believe it to be true. He has grown up with this stereotype controlling many aspects of his young life and influencing much of his adult life. Though he rarely gets sick, Alexie notes that when he does get sick, his “Indian friends” tell him he should “go into the sweat lodge and pray” to get well, something that he is aware would do the opposite of curing him (“Sherman Alexie Part 2”). Alexie states that he disparages this stereotype, “‘this earth mother and shaman thing,’ as he calls it, ‘because we don't live this way anymore’” (qtd. in Egan 2). Though it is a positive stereotype, Alexie makes a serious statement about it, during one of his standup routines:

We have to be careful. We get so much negative stuff about us, we get subjected to so many negative stereotypes; we get vilified and misunderstood in so many ways that we fall in love with the positive stereotypes. We fall in love with them and we start believing that stuff [...] (“Sherman Alexie Part 2”).

He then follows up with comedic relief through his facetious statement that “every Indian in here, man or woman in here, secretly or not so secretly, believe they can talk to animals” (“Sherman Alexie Part 2”). No they do not believe this, but if they are holding themselves to unrealistic standards of Native American identity, their connection or lack thereof, with nature is one that may affect them. He recognizes that this is an issue in his community and therefore he makes fun of it to point out to his audience that it is a stereotype they do not have to live up to. He uses humor to bring awareness to this issue in the Native American community and his use of this stereotype helps those

listening reconcile the reality of their lives and their identity with the unrealistic expectations of the stereotype.

Being wise, noble, spiritual and having a connection with nature are not traits required to be a member of the Native American community. This positive stereotype, though perpetuated by some is not the standard of measure for Native American identity. Alexie recognizes that though he may exhibit some or all of these characteristics, as do some of his characters, they are not necessary to claim his heritage and they do not make him more “Indian” than others in the community. He uses his works and his humor in a way that helps to bring this realization to his readers not only inside his community, but also to those outside of the group which helps to reduce the expectation of this trait by those outside the group, when interacting with those within the group.

Chapter Three: Reservation Life

“But we reservation Indians don’t get to realize our dreams. We don’t get those chances. Or choices. We’re just poor. That’s all we are” (Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* 13).

Many, but not all, of Alexie’s works focus on the lives of Reservation Natives. Alexie himself grew up on the Spokane reservation in Spokane, Washington, though he currently lives in Seattle. Many of his main characters fight to escape the reservation. Alexie depicts the reality of reservation life, rather than how many stereotypes portray it as. Many people outside of the group may be like Father Arnold in *Reservation Blues* and believe that all reservations are populated by natives who speak their own language rather than English and who hunt buffalo like the Native Americans on television (Alexie, *Reservation Blues* 36). Stereotypes concerning reservation life not only affects the perceptions of those outside of the group but some stereotypes also affect those inside the group, dividing those Native Americans who live on reservations from those who do not. Alexie shows what reservation life is like; he is brutal in his criticisms in some works, and in others he portrays reservation life in a more positive light. The reality is that though reservation life is not perfect, it has both positives and negatives and it is up to those living there to decide how to make the best of it. He uses humor to show the differences between stereotyped expectations and reality. By doing this he makes fun of those who would believe outrageous claims, alerting them to their

naiveté, and he shows Native Americans that their identity is not tied to where or how they live.

One stereotype that some Americans believe true is that all Native Americans live on reservations. In truth, there were only 324 federally recognized reservations in 2010, and 617 “legal and statistical areas” that provided the Census Bureau with statistics concerning Native Americans, and only 22% of all Native Americans lived in those areas (“Facts for Features”). The Native Americans who live on reservations “usually have very secure identities” whereas those who do not, the “Ethnic Indians” as Champagne calls them, can have trouble relating to their Native American heritage (Champagne). “Ethnic Indians can be defined as persons of Indian descent who are not members of a tribal community and often their families have not had contact with a home community for generations” (Champagne). Whereas those who live on reservations can confirm their authenticity through their “local reservation community”, “ethnic Indians” will question their authenticity due to “stereotypes and images that are common within American society”, of what it means to be a Native American (Champagne). Having to base one’s identity on stereotypes causes confusion and could cause resentment and frustration at not living up to the “standards” believed to be linked to one's heritage.

Statistically analyzing the population of America, “there are more non-Indians in the U.S. than reservation Indians” and the views of the “non-Indians” drown out “reservation understandings of Indian authenticity” (Champagne). As with other minorities, there are those who would conform to the stereotypes and “images of authenticity” presented to them, in hopes of being accepted by those outside of their

group. Before the 1980s, some Native Americans would dress in “Plains Indian” clothes and headdresses in hopes that “non-Indians” would accept them as genuine Native Americans (Champagne). Alexie uses his works to show that by conforming to expectations of those outside the group, by perpetuating stereotypes those Native Americans are not true to their identity but are hurting it by not being true to themselves. They are allowing these stereotypes to rule their identity and their community and Alexie uses his humor in a way to open minds and warn against this in an attempt to bring about change.

Frederick Busch reviewed *Reservation Blues* for The New York Times and called it a “stinging commentary” on reservation life that presents the poor conditions the Native Americans live in, in a way that readers are “uncertain” whether they should “laugh or cry” (Busch). In this novel, Alexie uses non-Native Americans to show how stereotypes are received by those inside the group when presented as reality by those outside of the group. Thomas, Junior and Victor introduce the reader to two white groupies, Betty and Veronica who state that they want to be Native American because they are “at peace with the earth” and “wise;” two Spokane women label Betty and Veronica as “New Age princesses” (*Reservation Blues* 41) because of their stereotypical representation of Native American dress. They wear “too much Indian jewelry. Turquoise rings, silver feather earrings, beaded necklaces” (*Reservation Blues* 41). Alexie has created these two obnoxious characters to show the absurdity of the idea that to be Native American you must dress the part. Betty and Veronica feel that if a person “looks” like a Native American they can claim the heritage as their own; they even go so far as to agree to get plastic surgery to look more authentic. They sing:

And my hair is blonde

But I'm Indian in my bones

And my skin is white

But I'm Indian in my bones

And it don't matter who you are

You can be Indian in your bones. (*Reservation Blues* 295)

The problem is that these women are not Native American but want to claim the heritage as their own by dressing the part, whereas there are those Native Americans who do not live up to the stereotypical "look" and do not feel they can claim their own heritage. Marla Means asks, "To be Indian, must one dress in the traditional garb of the plains tribes, or can one simply attribute race to a feeling deep 'in your bones'" (Means 4)? She is positing that it is not necessary to look the part, to belong to a specific heritage, however, as with the case of Betty and Veronica, feeling it "in your bones" does not mean they are genuine.

In order to point out the issues with race, appearance and identity, Alexie creates his characters in a way to exemplify specific Native American "categories", including appearance but does so in a way that it is obvious that the character is stereotypical. Thomas is a great example of this because in every work this character is in, he exhibits stereotypical characteristics but does so in an exaggerated way. In *Reservation Blues* Alexie describes Thomas in a way that exemplifies the stereotypical appearance of his tribe as well as points out the absurdity of stereotype by expressing their benefits while hunting/fishing, something he would not be doing: "long, black hair pulled into braids, he looked like an old-time salmon fisherman: short, muscular legs for the low center of

gravity, long torso and arms for leverage to throw the spear” (Alexie 5). Alexie deconstructs the stereotypical Native American “categories through his unique brand of humor and sarcasm” (Means 6). This allows readers to be entertained and recognize the differences between the reality and the stereotype.

The state of living on the reservation is one that many outside the group are not aware of. Some believe that all Native Americans still live in teepees and wear “plains Indian clothing,” and others believe that because of casinos, all Native Americans are rich, getting money from the casinos and government handouts. The truth about the state of living on reservations is a sad one. The reality is that “most tribes are heavily in debt, cutting budgets” and are “still being shaken down by state governments” (Padgett). Timothy Egan quotes Alexie as saying, “Have any of you ever been to a reservation? A guest house is a rusted car up on blocks out behind an H.U.D. trailer” (qtd. in Egan 1). This is imagery that many do not picture when initially thinking about reservation life, but it is a reality that Alexie wants his readers to recognize and accept. Compared to 65% of the overall population, only 54% of all Native Americans on reservations and in “legal and statistical” areas owned their own home, as of 2011. To debunk the “rich Indian,” or “casino Indian” stereotype, Michaelle Douglass traveled to the Warm Springs Indian Reservation to document the reality of reservation life. She lets pictures speak for her, and they say so much about their state of living, abandoned houses on the brink of condemnation, boarded up with collapsing roofs, trailers on cinderblocks and a barren land devoid of any “luxury” besides the casino itself. The “casinos do well, but the money does not trickle down to those who live on the reservations”; residents of the reservation can get jobs at the casino but that does not

provide them with the wealth the stereotype suggests (Douglass). She states that “not everyone lives in run down homes” but that “the nicest building on the reservation was the Casino itself” and that “Native Americans are not profiting from the money that is spent in the Indian Casinos” (Douglass). In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, Alexie addresses this issue through Junior. He states that all the people in the town of Rearden believe that the

“Spokanes made lots of money because [they] had a casino. But that casino, mismanaged and too far away from major highways, was a money-losing business. In order to make money from the casino [a person] had to work at the casino” (*Part Time Indian* 13).

Since his family did not, they were poor. Junior states, “Poverty doesn’t give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor” (*Part Time Indian* 13). The idea that Casinos make Native Americans rich is absurd. Just like other communities, just because some are rich, it does not make the whole community rich, it only makes the differences greater between the rich and the poor.

In the short story “A Drug Called Tradition,” from the collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the boys live on a reservation dependent on HUD houses, the BIA and commodity foods, where “tribal ties” and a unified “sense of community” have diminished (*Lone Ranger* 74). The story begins by showing how the government is still taking from the natives and how they try to compensate those that they take from by providing them with government money. Washington Water Power paid Thomas for putting power poles across his land. Thomas used the money to throw a party for the

reservation. Victor, narrating the story says, “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. I think they’re laughing at pretty much everybody” (*Lone Ranger* 13). Here Alexie points out the double edged sword that is government compensation. Whereas the landowners are compensated for the land they are losing, they are still losing to those who have taken so much from them. The monetary compensation is not sufficient to reduce poverty on the reservation, and the alcohol it buys does not numb the pain of reservation natives’ past. The whole collection shows a “haunting sense of personal and cultural loss that generates a paralyzing sense of ineffectuality” (DeNuccio 86). Jaime Shaffer uses the description of the trading post in *Reservation Blues* to explain just how inefficient the government is when providing for the reservation:

“shelves [...] stocked with reservation staples: Diet Pepsi, Spam, Wonder bread, and a cornucopia of various carbohydrates, none of them complex.’ The symbolically American-brand products available at the Trading Post serve to represent the government’s half-hearted attempt to provide Indians with an American-like lifestyle that is as empty in substance as the commodity food it supplies to them” (13).

The government has failed the reservations. The government has doomed them to a life of poverty and the reality is that they are tragically used to it, they don’t expect better because they do not believe they deserve better. Alexie grew up in this same environment and says:

We were poor by most standards, but one of my parents usually managed to find some minimum-wage job or another, which made us middle-class by reservation standards. I had a brother and three sisters. We lived on a combination of irregular paychecks, hope, fear and government surplus food (“Superman and Me”).

Alexie got out of his situation and now wants to show others through his works that they do not have to settle for less in life and can do better for themselves as well.

Another issue often stereotyped by people outside of the group is the intelligence of Native Americans. Native Americans were often stereotyped in the past as uneducated, ignorant savages. Though many accomplished Native Americans, this stereotype has a grain of truth in that Native American communities, especially on reservations, have problems with literacy. Walking Shield, an organization that strives to provide Native American families with financial assistance to aid them in obtaining proper health care, housing, and education, lists a series of statistics about Native Americans, on their website. They cite the U.S Department of Education, stating that in “2002, the college graduation rate for American Indians [was] 38.3%,” 17% less than the national average (Walking Shield). They also state that “according to the 2003 National Adult Literacy Survey, 32% of American Indian adults failed to attain basic reading levels, compared to only 13% of White adults” (Walking Shield). This is an issue that Alexie seems determined to bring to light through his works, not only to promote literacy in the community, but to prove to those judging authenticity by stereotypes that these stereotypes are not required and that as a community they can improve and defeat this stereotype. Alexie states that “Literacy saved [his] ass” and that education, reading and

writing was his ticket out of the “reservation’s stifling poverty and intellectual entropy” (qtd. in Nelson 47). However, he realized that he had to use that education and his talent for writing to aid his community “not by gratuitously pillorying its failings but by conscientiously identifying its deficiencies toward improving the lives of the people who stay there, or at other places of home” (qtd. in Nelson 47). He writes to help his community improve and realize that they are better than the stereotypes, to bring awareness to the real issues in their community but that they are more than a stereotype.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, Junior seeks a better life for himself than that on the reservation. By transferring schools and attending Rearden, a white school thirty minutes away from the reservation, he shows determination to improve his life. He tells his best friend, “I have to go. I’m going to die if I don’t leave” (*Part Time Indian* 52). He wants to give himself a better education and he knows he will not get it at the school on the reservation; as long as they are so poor they cannot buy new textbooks and continue to use the same books for more than thirty years (*Part Time Indian* 31). His teacher, Mr. P tells him “If you stay on this rez, they’re going to kill you. I’m going to kill you. We’re all going to kill you. You can’t fight us forever” (*Part Time Indian* 43). Mr. P is referring to Junior’s spirit, his hope and his determination to be better than his circumstances. Mr. P tells him he has to get off the reservation and that he will “find more and more hope the farther and farther [he walks] away from this sad, sad, sad reservation” (*Part Time Indian* 43). That is when Junior decides he has to go to Rearden. Rearden, “where more than half of every graduating class went to college” and which was “the opposite” of Junior, his family and “the rez” (*Part Time Indian* 56).

He does well there and Alexie uses his story, in first person point of view, to show how a person is not limited to the life they are born into. A Native American can leave the reservation, they can improve their lives, and they can demand a better education and work towards changing the statistics. This humorous story shows how when one wants something enough, they can achieve it, but it also shows how poor the education system is on the reservation and how Alexie feels it needs to change. This book brings awareness to both those inside the group and outside the group to the state of the education the reservation children are receiving, and his works encourage them to change the way things are, to change themselves for the better.

Because so much of Native American identity appears tied to where they live, in Alexie's novels involving reservation life, his characters make a big-deal about leaving the reservation, even for a day. The boys discovered this the hard way in *Reservation Blues* when an old woman tells Thomas that the reservation people are not happy with them for leaving the reservation. They only left once to perform off the reservation, but they still lived there. The old woman told Thomas, "But you left. Once is enough" (Alexie, *Reservation Blues* 180). It did not matter that they only left once and it did not matter that they still lived there. They had left and brought back two white women. They had, in a way, sold out their tribe not only by leaving but by selling out to the whites.

We see this theme in many of Alexie's works. In *The Business of Fancydancing*, we watch as the film jumps between the reservation and the city. Seymour has left the reservation. He is a successful writer in the city, but he still writes about the reservation. Seymour experiences a substantial amount of internal conflict between his life as a Native American who grew up on a reservation and his life as a city dwelling gay poet.

He mentions during the movie that he has tried to escape the reservation but it keeps pulling him back. This shows that the Reservation is closely tied to his personal sense of identity even though he does not wish to accept it. He cannot ignore that part of his life, but he is not comfortable with it. He is not comfortable with his life in the city either because he is denying part of himself. This shows how those Native Americans who reside on the reservation may have trouble reconciling their identity with the idea that “all Native Americans live on reservations” or that if a Native American grows up on a reservation they have to stay there. The humor in this movie is only in small doses; it is only used to relieve the tension felt between Seymour and Aristotle as well as Seymour’s internal conflict but even the small amount of humor allows the viewer to examine the situation in a less severe light which may cause them to be more open to accepting the message Alexie is attempting to deliver to his audience.

Seymour experiences a substantial amount of self-loathing; he seems to want to deny who he is. He mentions that everywhere he goes “some stupid Indian” has an issue with him (*The Business of Fancydancing* 2003). Seymour seems to feel he is superior to those who stayed on the reservation, and those he has “left behind” know it. Aristotle points out, “You always thought you were too good for us” (*The Business of Fancydancing* 2003), and Seymour does not deny it. Even though he denies where he came from and the people he has known, he has stolen their lives and sold them as his own, benefiting from their continued poverty. Alexie uses this conflict to show that inside the group there is tension between those that are societally successful and those that are not due to the reality that so many Native Americans live in poverty.

Much like Alexie, Seymour draws on his life on the reservation for inspiration and borrows from the lives of his childhood friends to create his works. Mouse and Aristotle stay on the reservation, and whereas Seymour becomes successful, Mouse ends up dying of an overdose. Seymour and Aristotle are involved in a confrontation when Seymour returns for the funeral. Aristotle demands to know where he has been over the years. Aristotle feels abandoned and blames Mouse's death on him. Seymour replies that he could not have saved Mouse, and that Aristotle could not even save Mouse and he was "right under [his] nose" (*The Business of Fancydancing*). Aristotle points out to Seymour that he could not have been successful if he had not had the stories from the reservation and makes it clear he thinks Seymour is ungrateful and has used them. He left them, he left the reservation, and he improved his life while they continued to live in the conditions they were born into on the reservation. Seymour states that he deserved a better life than the one he was born into and he made it happen. When he returns home to visit his family, even Alexie "is sometimes snubbed as the big-shot city writer" by his tribe, for leaving the reservation (Egan 3). Alexie shows both sides of the argument and does so in a way that allows the reader to understand both separately. Neither of them are happy with their lives and both feel the draw of the other person's life but they would not be happy with that life either. Caught between poverty and abandonment, they are faced with the fact they need each other. However, they recognize that to live in the other's world, they would have to relinquish their assumed identity. At the end of the movie, Seymour sees himself off, leaving a part of himself behind on the reservation. It will always be his home but he knows that now that he has left, has changed, that he will never truly fit in there and must move on and accept his

new life, doing what he can to maintain his identity on the reservation. Though the confrontation is not humorous, other parts of the movie that are, and this part is better accepted because of that humor. Coulombe states that

“Alexie himself said in an interview: ‘You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak up on them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they’ll listen or laugh’ [...] He uses humor to draw readers in and entertain them; once he has them, he communicates his world view” (Coulombe 108).

He does not have to use humor constantly to be effective; he just has to use it for a sufficient amount of time to disarm his readers, and then he can get to the real issues he wants us to face.

In the movie *Smoke Signals*, the idea of leaving the reservation is met with sarcasm when Thomas and Victor tell Velma and Lucy that they are leaving. Velma states, “You’re leavin’ the rez and goin’ into a whole different country, cousin,” and Lucy adds in “That’s as foreign as it gets. Hope you two have your vaccinations” (*Smoke Signals*). Though the viewer is aware the girls are being sarcastic, through large amounts of laughter after their statements, some truth is revealed of how they feel. The reservation is a safe haven where they can be themselves, even if limited and dependent on the government. They will be judged once they leave the reservation, discriminated against and treated as outsiders. This is proven near the end of the movie, where the white police officer assumes that since they are Native American, they are intoxicated and have caused the car accident. Though the reservation residents did

not turn on them like those in *Reservation Blues* and *The Business of Fancydancing*, the reservation is linked to their identity as they travel outside of it.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, we once again see reservation residents turn on one of their own, when Junior decides to transfer to the white school on the reservation. When he makes the decision and tells his parents what he wants, his mom states, “You’ll be the first one to ever leave the rez this way,” “The Indians around here are going to be angry with you” (*Part Time Indian* 47). His best friend gets angry and punches him when he tells him. The following morning when his dad drives him to Rearden, his new high school, he tells him that he can change his mind and return to the school on the reservation. Junior says that would not be possible: “You can’t just betray your tribe and then change your mind ten minutes later” (*Part Time Indian* 55). When he goes to the reservation to play at a basketball game, all the reservation Natives turn their backs on him, signifying that they no longer accepted him as their own because he had abandoned them (*Part Time Indian* 144). When he runs onto the court, one of them even throws a quarter at him so hard that he needs stitches after it hits him in the forehead (*Part Time Indian* 145). The imagery that Alexie uses during these scenes paints a picture so vivid that the reader might actually feel as if they are in the gym with Junior, and the thought of Junior laughing in the gym after they turn their backs, and then later hit with a quarter, is humorous and simultaneously infuriating because of their desire to hold back one of their own. It is shocking that keeping all their residents on the reservation is so important to them that they are willing to physically harm someone for doing it, acting like children who have lost a toy. Alexie uses this to

show how absurd it is to expect Native Americans to confine themselves on a reservation as if that were the only place they could possibly belong.

In *Reservation Blues*, it is not long after the reservation turns on him that Junior commits suicide. He appears to Victor after shooting himself and Alexie uses humor to soften the seriousness of the situation. Alexie writes that Victor closes his eyes and when he opens them again, Junior is there. "Happy reservation fucking Halloween,' Junior said, and Victor screamed, which made Junior scream, too. They traded screams for a while" (*Reservation Blues* 289). The imagery of these two boys, one a bloodied mess and the other scared and sad, sitting in a van by the lake screaming at each other, provides comic relief for an otherwise tense scene. When they calm down, Junior asks if he is happy to see him, and Victor responds, "what do you think this is? An American Werewolf in London? You're supposed to be a ghost, not a piece of raw meat," which reminds the reader of the sad reality of the situation, but concurrently it makes an allusion to a popular movie, which inevitably brings a relief of tension to the encounter. Means states that "laughing at such a serious act brings to surface a method for which to discuss or address the issue at hand" (18). The reality of the situation is that on reservations, the rate of suicide is double that of the rest of America and "Native teens experience the highest rate of suicide of any population group in the United States" ("Fast Facts"). For Native youths in the 15-24 age group, suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death, and in 2001, "16 percent of students at Bureau of Indian Affairs schools reported having attempted suicide in the preceding 12 months" ("Fast Facts"). Alexie uses Junior's suicide and the resulting conversation between him and Victor to bring light to the serious issue of teen suicide on reservations and the causes. Junior

states that he shot himself because “life is hard,” “[b]ecause when [he] closed [his] eyes like Thomas [he] didn’t see a damn thing. Nothing. Zilch. No songs. No stories. Nothing,” and he “didn’t want to be drunk no more” (*Reservation Blues* 290). Junior, like many reservation residents, had trouble with alcohol; the reservation living conditions were poor, and his sense of identity was dependent on the stereotype that all Native Americans were spiritual. He exemplified most of what Alexie is trying to bring awareness to, what he is trying to change through his works. The scene with Junior is a sad one; however, Alexie’s unconventional humor spots the scene with jokes, sarcasm, and irony. This humor allows for re-evaluation of the situation and the underlying issues surrounding it to promote growth in the characters and the reader.

Though, like other Native American writers, Alexie’s reservation stories are more well known, he has other works that focus on “Urban Indian stories,” and he chooses to write those stories because the majority of Native American literature only tells the reservation stories; he states that producing “Urban Indian stories” feels “revolutionary” (Nelson 39). He uses his works to disprove stereotypes, so whereas his reservation stories refute stereotypes about reservation conditions and those who reside on the reservation, his urban stories prove that authentic Native Americans do exist off the reservation. There are positives and negatives to both lifestyles, and he shows those in his works. For example, John Smith in Alexie’s *Indian Killer* has trouble reconciling his identity because he grew up on the reservation, in a white family. It is an “urban Indian story” that shows those Native Americans off the reservation have just as much trouble with their identity as those on the reservation, just in a different way. It is important for both those inside the group and outside the group to realize that these images of

authenticity are not the rule in the Native American community. Alexie is quoted as having stated "I write about the kind of Indian I am: kind of mixed up, kind of odd, not traditional. I'm a rez kid who's gone urban" (qtd. in Lincoln 11). He uses his work and his humor to open the minds of those who read his works and to reassure his Native American readers, both on the reservation and off it, that they do not have to live up to a stereotype to be authentic.

Conclusion

Sherman Alexie's characters are not always the most lovable, some are ones that a reader may want to hate for how they act, but they all have a purpose. They work together to refute the stereotypes assigned to them. They assist those outside of the group in creating an image of Native Americans that is true rather than based on stereotypes. More than anything, his characters depict Native American life in a way that not only refutes stereotypes but brings awareness to issues affecting their community to promote change. His characters may be "caught [...] in the 'framework of other people's words' about them," but "there is always something that only [they themselves] can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing second hand definitions" (DeNuccio 91). Through his works, his characters also aid those inside the group to dispel myths and secure their identity in truth. His humor makes his works enjoyable and entertaining; it makes it easier for people to listen, to watch, to read and to spread truth instead of lies. Alexie had a choice when he began writing; he could participate in the "suspended Indian" concept that was "manifest in film and literature," or he could "use the stereotypes as tools to circumvent the expected Indian character" (Miles 12). He chose the latter - using his works to refute stereotypes by throwing them in the faces of his readers through humor, sarcasm and irony (Miles 12). On this subject, Alexie makes a statement about how he uses stereotypes in his movie *Smoke Signals* in a way that he hoped would make it impossible for future film makers to portray Native Americans in a stereotypical view. He says,

we told the story but at the same time it is also very subversive, to take on "Indian cinema" and the images in the movies: about the Warrior, about storytelling, there's all sorts of little jokes along the way about the ways Indians get viewed in the movies, and in culture, as we're telling the road movie stories. (qtd. in Purdy)

Instead of the typical "back-to-tradition" story that one would often see in Native American literature, Alexie's stories have his characters go on journeys into the future and discover their true identity (Miles 57). Alexie's main characters always find their place in the world; always discover what is best for them. Their discoveries are rarely the stereotypical expectations for Native Americans; they do not always match the common notion of being an "Indian". They take the stereotypes, both negative and positive and weigh them against the reality of their lives, and then they can discern what is right for them. They can create their own identities despite what society expects of them as Native Americans. Alexie's novels provide Native Americans a way to recognize issues in their communities that have become stereotyped and connect to the characters in the stories during their journey of self-discovery.

Stereotypes hold people back from reaching their full potential. They could be destroyed by preconceived notions of what it means to belong to their group, if people within the stereotyped group allowed it. If they are constantly told they must live up to society's expectations to belong, they may experience serious issues with building and maintaining self-esteem and an individual sense of identity. Alexie has made an impact on many people, and if an extensive polling of Alexie's readership was completed, it would be found that his unique brand of humor does change the opinions of those

inside and outside of the group. In an interview with John Purdy, Alexie notes that he has noticed that more young writers are beginning to write like he does,

writing about what happens to them, not about what they wish was happening. They aren't writing wish fulfillment books, they're writing books about reality. How they live, and who they are, and what they think about. Not about who they wish they were. The kind of Indian they wish they were. They are writing about the kind of Indian they are. (qtd. in Purdy)

These are just the ones that he has noticed, within the Native American community. It is safe to say that many others affected in similar ways by his works have gone unnoticed.

Readers outside the group have the option to take Alexie's stories and use them to further preconceived notions about Native Americans. The stories could be used to further perpetuate stereotypes, finding confirmation of prejudices in the stereotypes used in Alexie's works. However, Alexie uses stereotypes in a way that the irony, absurdity or exaggerations are obvious in a way that it would be difficult for a reader to miss the meaning behind his scenes. Alexie's intention in his works is not to provide fodder for furthering stereotypes by those outside the group, but to provide an opportunity for those outside the group to grow and recognize realities in the community rather than accepting the stereotypes as reality.

If I were to do more research on Sherman Alexie's works it would be to focus on the maternal or matriarchal figures present within his works. Most of the critique on Alexie's works focuses on stereotypes, some focus on the absent fathers but I did not find many that focused on the maternal figures ever present in his stories. The maternal figures are often presented to the readers as wise and mythical. They provide guidance

to the characters and often play a bigger part than it would seem at first. I believe this is an interesting aspect to his work that deserves more attention and exploration. There may be a connection to Native American myths or stereotypes involving matriarchal figures but it was not discussed in length in any of the critiques that I came across. Alcoholism, spirituality, and the life of a reservation Native are stereotypes closely tied to Native American identity and that is a serious reality which Alexie confronts through the humor in his works. Alexie uses these stereotypes in a way that refutes them but also addresses the serious issues related to them. Alcoholism is present in the Native American community and should be addressed in a way that one day the statistics will be less. It also needs to be resolved because alcoholism should not be a requirement of Native American identity, held by anyone whether they are inside the group or out of it. Alexie refutes the stereotype and confronts the reality of the situation to acknowledge both outcomes. Spirituality, nobleness, wisdom and a connection to nature are heavily stereotyped as another aspect of "Indianness" yet not every Native American possesses these abilities. Alexie refutes this stereotype through his works and confronts the reality that a Native American is not required to be wise. Lastly, identifying as a Native American is not dependent on the location of their residence. Alexie stresses that reservation life is not what those outside the group believe it to be and he uses the stereotypes concerning the reservation to examine the reality that those Native Americans living on the reservation often have trouble with their identity. He also proves that reservation natives can leave the reservation but maintain their identity while facing the reality that some consider it abandonment. His use of stereotypes in these three situations provides not only entertainment but an avenue for growth and progression as

a nation, to dispel myths and improve the Native American community by addressing issues of identity and reconciling them with the stereotypes assigned to them. Sherman Alexie is quoted in Ase Nygren's "A World of Story-Smoke" as saying:

You can never measure up to a stereotype. You can never be as strong as a stereotypical warrior, as godly as a stereotypical shaman or as drunk as a drunken Indian. You can never measure up to extremes. So you're always going to feel less than the image, whether it's positive or negative. One of the real dangers is that other Indians have taken many stereotypes as a reality, as a way to measure each other and ourselves. (qtd. in Nygren)

By refuting these stereotypes, he is helping to improve his community by opening the eyes of his readers to the realities of Native American life and identity.

Through his works, Alexie has provided insight into a community that many may not have had access to, he has provided reassurance to those inside the group who may have been unsure of their identity, and he has entertained everyone while opening the door to discussion about many issues concerning Native Americans. His unique brand of humor and how he uses that humor to refute stereotypes and confront realities in the Native American community is unlike any other author. Through his works, he is an inspiration and a role model to those inside the group and an entertainer and a teacher to those outside the group.

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