

Between the Reservation and Me:  
Race Identity in the Works of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Sherman Alexie

by

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I will be analyzing the works of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Sherman Alexie, primarily as these works relate to how both authors tackle the issue of racial identity, as well its affect on their writing. In order to accommodate the requirements of an English Studies thesis, I will be discussing the themes of race identity in the writing of these two authors across two mediums each: one primarily textual and one primarily visual. I will also be looking at how their discussion of identity changes from the textual to visual medium.

In the case of Ta-Nehisi Coates, I will predominantly be looking at his prose, specifically his seminal book *Between the World and Me* and how the author tackles race identity and race relations. Finally, to move to the more visual medium, I will be analyzing themes of race and identity in Coates' take on the Marvel Comics superhero Black Panther in Coates' *Black Panther* (2016), *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, and *Black Panther and the Crew*.

Sherman Alexie is arguably the most influential American Indian writer in history. His writing is nearly always grounded in issues of race and identity, specifically as an American Indian in contemporary America. I will first be looking at his fiction writing, including his short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. I will be analyzing Alexie's feature length script *Smoke Signals*, the first all-Indian movie, which is based on his collection

*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.* I will be looking at the script as a piece of visual literature and comparing it to his fiction as it relates to identity, as well as how his portrayal and discussion of race and identity change to fit the visual medium.



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## Chapter 1:

### Between the Reservation and Me:

#### Race Identity in the Works of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Sherman Alexie

Through the work of two of the most influential voices in writing about race, I will analyze the importance of race identity as it relates to the reading and writing of contemporary literature through different mediums. I will focus on the writing of two prolific minority writers: African-American author Ta-Nehisi Coates and American Indian author Sherman Alexie. Furthermore, I will be analyzing and assessing the values and the difficulties of working through different mediums, specifically in both primarily textual and primarily visual mediums when discussing race.

Race identity, as it applies to this thesis, is defined as the internal concept of oneself as a racial body. This can be altered and affected by a number of internal and external sources, such as family, community, and physical environment. While race identity is a primarily internalized concept, any racial body knows that it has real-world implications, and therefore must be discussed and analyzed. The more that racial bodies are able to understand their own race identity, including the reasons behind it, the better they will be able to understand themselves as they exist in the racial world around them. Both Coates' and Alexie's writing have this in mind, and are heavily influenced and informed by each writers' respective racial experiences and identities.

I would make the claim that minority writers often write about racial experiences for a number of specific reasons, one of which is to explore concepts of race identity in their stories and characters. Both Coates and Alexie have chosen to write about characters who are members



of their own race, and who exist in racially isolated environments. This creates an ideal setting for the discussion of race, as well as opportunities to create a great deal of representation for readers (especially young readers) who may exist within these racial bodies. Writing about race from the perspective of a racial/minority body is also one of the only ways that these writers can attempt to accurately portray the emotions and situations specific to that particular racial body. This is true despite that fact that most of these works (even parts of the premise for Coates' *Between the World and Me*) are fiction. Coates and Alexie both use their respective genres and mediums to create characters who not only exist in racial bodies, but are informed by the experiences and identities brought upon by the existence of those bodies.

Ta-Nehisi Coates has risen to prominence in the worlds of English and academia through his works of prose, primarily in his writing published by popular online source *The Atlantic*, as well as the writing of 3 books. In 2015 he released *Between the World and Me: Notes on the First 150 Years in America* to both critical and popular success. Primarily working through non-fiction analysis that heavily relies on his own life and experiences as a black man born and raised in America, Coates covers the struggles of racial identity as well as its roots and effects. Recently, Coates has stepped out of his typical prose writing and worked with Marvel Comics for their release of *Black Panther #1*. By branching out into a medium that is both primarily visual and primarily fictive, Coates is able to reach a new audience. By working with Black Panther, an African superhero from the fictional country of Wakanda, Coates is able to continue to work with questions of identity, racial experience, and representation.

While this analysis will primarily focus on Coates' book *Between the World and Me* as well as his first foray into comic books with *Black Panther #1*, Coates has a larger body of work that is important in discussing his writing as it relates to race relations and race identity.

Primarily, Coates rose to popularity through his writings in *The Atlantic*. In 2017, several of these articles were assembled into a collection entitled *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*. This writing covers many of the articles written by Coates for *The Atlantic* during the eight years of the Obama administration. Coates' work with the Obama administration, including a series of articles on the subject and even completing a character profile for Michelle Obama is an identifying feature of Coates and his work for many people. Historically, his writing is based in race and the realities of living within particular racial bodies in modern day America. These themes and concepts are further reflected in both *Between the World and Me* as well as *Black Panther #1*, despite the change in genre and medium. In fact, Coates is able to use the visual medium as a platform for cultural representation, another aspect of how the author places value in race identity.

When it comes to Sherman Alexie, I hope to make discussion of this prolific author new by not only discussing the concepts of race that so greatly inform his writing, but also through a comparison of different mediums and how these mediums inform Alexie's discussion about race and about identity. Alexie marketed *Smoke Signals*, a loose film adaptation of his collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, as the first all-Native American film to receive mass-distribution. This highlights the importance of the visual medium as a platform for representation. Along with a deep analysis of his work and how it relates to racial identity, I will also be discussing how Sherman Alexie has done so much to define a common identity for American Indians, both for members of the race and those who are not. In this way, identity becomes a tool that Alexie is able to use to change the narrative of American Indian peoples.

Sherman Alexie has a very large body of work, but I have chosen to focus on *The Toughest Indian in the World* and *Smoke Signals* as they are the strongest options for comparison when it comes to discussion of race from one medium to the next. From Alexie's early works including *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992) and *Reservation Blues* (1995), race has been a subject of great discussion and concern. Alexie's writing almost always features primary characters of Native American backgrounds, and their experiences and stories are vital to their existence as this specific type of racial body. For Alexie and his characters, being Indian is not something that one can simply pretend to ignore. This is especially apparent when Alexie's characters are forced to leave the reservation, as seen in *Smoke Signals*.

While it will not be a primary focus of my analysis, it is important to recognize some of the issues and allegations that have come to light surrounding Alexie, as they relate to his work within the literary community and any discussion of race identity. With the allegations that have come forth in 2018 by female American Indian writers, Alexie has allegedly been targeting female racial bodies within the writing community. There is a lot to be said about the implications of this and how they are conveyed in his writing of and about race and race identity, but, as the allegations are very recent, I will limit this discussion to the thesis' conclusion.

When discussing the concept of race identity as it relates to the works of these two authors, I will be looking to analyze race identity as something that is representative of the racial experience, both as it exists internally as well as externally. For Coates, race identity has a great deal to do with the performance of this identity: what one wears, how one speaks, and the expectations that come along with being identified as a racial body. Whether a person chooses to meet or subvert those expectations has to do with understandings of their environment, and how safe they feel in their own bodies. For Coates, however, whether one chooses to align with those

expectations or not, they are almost always still considered a part of the larger racial body. For this reason, I will also be discussing the work of Coates as they relate to racial embodiment theory, and specifically how *Black Panther #1* works to emphasize that concept. Alexie, on the other hand, writes about race in a way that is very personal, lyrical, and practical. His writing focuses on the emotion related to being identified as a racial body, specifically a “reservation Indian,” or someone who was born and raised primarily on an Indian Reservation just as he was. Because of the importance of the reservation as a congregation of almost entirely racial bodies and experiences, I will be looking into Alexie and his writing about race and the reservation through a theoretical lens that relates to space and place. For Alexie’s characters, both in the textual and visual medium, the location of the stories matters greatly, whether it be their interactions on the reservation or the dangers and situations that they get into once they have left it.

In the world of minority writers, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Sherman Alexie are some of the most influential voices of the twenty-first century. Many writers look to write from a place of experience, and Coates and Alexie are able to balance beautiful storytelling and rich characters with interesting and valuable commentary on the realities of living within a racial world. Furthermore, Coates’ audience is only getting larger, as he continues to pen other Black Panther comics for Marvel (including *Black Panther and the Crew: We are the Streets* and *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*) and has recently been signed on to write an unrelated film to be directed by Ryan Coogler, director of the *Black Panther* film. 2018’s *Black Panther* was able to open up discussions about race and identity in a way that no other film in recent memory has, and while Coates was not directly involved with the making of the film, it still works to accomplish many of the same things and open up similar discussions of race and inclusion,

specifically in media and academia. Coates looks to not only keep the conversation alive, but to pull black writing and black characters front and center.

Each of the works by these two writers features deeply personal narratives of the struggles and difficulties of living as a minority in America. By comparing these two writers, I hope to answer questions and come to understand more about identity, race, and how they both work to inform writing. By following the common theme of racial identity across multiple mediums, I will be able to analyze and gain further understanding of the value of those mediums as a writer, as well as how to apply the influences of minority voices like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Sherman Alexie to future works by myself and other writers.

## Chapter 2:

### “Living Within the All of It:” Racial Bodies in the Work of Ta-Nehisi Coates

In 2015, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates released his second book *Between the World and Me: Notes on the First 150 Years of America*. This text is often considered a seminal one in the career of Coates, and opened up a great deal of discussion about what it means to exist in a racial body in modern day America. While the book was a huge success, it did not take long for Coates to branch out into other mediums, and in April of 2016, Marvel’s *Black Panther #1*, written by Coates, was released. *Black Panther #1* was the highest selling comic book in the month of April (Schedeen, 2016) and showed the versatility of Coates, a writer most known for his racially and politically charged articles at *The Atlantic*. Regardless of the medium, Coates’ writing is filled with enthralling personality and never shies away from exploring what it means to be a representative of one’s race, one’s country, and one’s own body.

“What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find a way to live within the all of it” (Coates, 12). Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Coates writes the book as a letter to his fifteen year old son, attempting to do the best that he can to prepare his son for the difficult and unfair world of living within a racial body, specifically as a black man, in contemporary America. Coates primarily speaks from experience, weaving through anecdotes, analyses, and the lessons that he learned from each of them. Coates’ primary argument in relation to racial identity is that, while the classifications themselves are arbitrary and problematic, they have real-world effects that any racial body must be prepared for.

To Coates, racism is not the product of racial classification. In fact, Coates argues the inverse to be true: “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition” (7). As Coates discusses, this is a dangerous mindset for any persons who must spend their lives within a racial body. “In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men” (7). From this early point in the book, Coates explains that this is his primary viewpoint when considering racial identity. This is his setup for the racial world, racial country, and racial body that his son will be forced to live in.

Coates, of course, is not the first black writer to discuss the idea of race and racial identity as a product of the way you are seen by the inhabitants of the world around you. Going all the way back to 1952, writer and philosopher Frantz Fanon wrote about many of these same subjects of race in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. Similar to Coates’ idea of race being a child of racism, Fanon states that “As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others” (Fanon, 82). This same concept is also explored in the context of Coates’ *Black Panther #1*, in the sense that Wakanda is a thriving nation of African people and African culture. In *Between the World and Me*, however, Coates understands that this is not the case in America, and that understanding this affects the way that black Americans are forced to go about their day to day lives. Fanon even goes on to say that “...not only must a black man be black; he must be black in relation to the

white man” (Fanon, 82). It seems that Coates would agree, and hopes that his readers are better prepared for this reality.

Following the notion that the very concept of race is one that has simply been superficially manifested, this leads Coates to certain conclusions about the performative nature of race and race identity. Coates makes the claim that America’s treatment of black bodies is one of the strongest pieces of evidence for this claim that America and American conceptions of race are not the work of God as some people seem to think, but simply the work of man (12). For Coates, race identity and the culture associated with it is a necessary byproduct of both the ubiquitous nature and overall malevolence of this construction of race. “When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid...the fear was there in the extravagant boys of my neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions...which was their armor against the world” (14). So much of black culture, then, is a product of the fear that arises when confronted with how to live within a racial body, specifically a racial body that the world around you has free reign to destroy. Coates argues that what is sometimes seen by outsiders as the flashiness and aggressiveness of young black men is in fact a defense mechanism, working to identify their bodies with the similar bodies of those around them, and to compensate for the actions of certain outsiders who may look to identify the black body as weak or inferior. “I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered ‘round their grandfathers so that the branches of the black body might be torched, then cut away (14). Coates goes on to explain the purpose of these actions as they relate to one’s racial body, writing “The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big t-shirts...a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in



firm possession of everything they desired” (14). In this way, race identity becomes a defense mechanism against the machinations of racism, which are in and of themselves a product of the very concept of race, specifically as Americans have presented that concept as a distinguisher of both quality and worth. Again, Fanon shares a similar understanding of the performativity of race, stating that “In the case of display...the play of combat in the form of intimidation, the being gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield” (Fanon, 36). The very idea of “masking” the racial aspects of one’s identity is something that Coates is very much interested in, and permeates through both *Between the World and Me* and *Black Panther #1*.

Coates’ critique of the performative nature of race identity does not limit itself to ethnic bodies. Coates discusses in-depth the dangers of the concept of “whiteness” as a unifying factor that exists completely separate from cultural and ethnical background. Coates refers to people who “believe themselves white,” saying that they were “something before they were white—Catholic, Corsican, Welsh, Mennonite, Jewish” (7). This provides some context and evidence for Coates’ claim that the very idea of race is one that was created by man for the primary purpose of systematically categorizing and classifying entire groups of people based strictly on the color of their skin. As Coates presents it, there is no true universal concept of “white,” and the label exists exclusively as a socioeconomic precursor. This shows how little race has to do with things like culture, ethnicity, and country of origin. This shows up in any discussion of what it means to be “black” and “white.” An African-American is almost never asked to distinguish their country of origin, because that historical backing has been completely and systematically erased in order to solidify the arbitrary classifications of race. The same is often the case for “white” Americans, and can further be solidified by the fact that what is identified as a “white” racial body can

change from one social situation to the next. During slavery and the years thereafter, a person was disqualified from being “white” if they had even a drop of ethnic blood within them. Similarly, certain countries of origin can be seen as white or non-white depending on the context. Italian, Spanish, and Irish born individuals have fallen on different sides of the spectrum depending on the social/historical climate of the time. This further complicates Coates’s discussion of race, and specifically the identity related to that race.

Although Coates makes important distinctions about the superficial nature of categorizing humans based on skin color, he acknowledges this to be the reality and therefore feels he must adequately prepare his son, his readers, and himself for life as what has been identified as a racial body. Specifically, Coates’ discusses the importance of protecting that body and its sanctity against the outside world, in both a literal and figurative sense. “You preserved your life because your life, your body, was as good as anyone’s, because your blood was as precious as jewels... You do not give your precious body to the billy clubs of Birmingham sheriffs nor to the insidious gravity of the streets” (35). Coates understands that, under the physical borders and classifications that society has created, simply even existing in a black body is a dangerous act. He makes reference to the plethora of threats that he knows his son must face, be it from the outsiders and forces of authority who feel that they have an autonomous power over his body simply for its shade, or streets and their “insidious gravity” that many black bodies fall into. As mentioned earlier, Coates primarily views this gravity and all of the pageantry and performance involved with it to be a result of fear. He acknowledges that existing in a racial body creates many situations, both exterior and interior, that may cause fear, but encourages both his son and his readers not to succumb to things that are the result of fear.

In furthering his plea to protect the black body, Coates uses the black body and its attributes as embodiments of the culture and history of black people, which must also be protected and can only be protected by first safeguarding the racial body. He explains that black people must protect their bodies, especially their most racial attributes. He writes that black people must protect their hair from “processing and lye,” their skin “against bleach,” and their facial features like their noses and lips “against modern surgery” (36). He selects the most ethnic and most often stereotyped aspects of the black body because they are specific to the black race, and therefore work to signify and embody the race as a whole. Coates takes the idea of “blackness” as it relates to the racial body in much the same way that he examines earlier in the book, but uses this concept of embodiment instead to strengthen his argument for the importance of the black body and why it must be protected. This relates to the concept of racial identity because a racial body is an aspect of someone’s life that they cannot change, and therefore must adjust according to the way that the outside world decides to view them. This fear for the protection of a racial body’s most racial qualities leads to certain behaviors and performances as Coates mentions earlier in the text.

Ta-Nehisi Coates’ belief in the importance of the black body as presented in *Between the World and Me* only becomes more interesting when analyzed through the lens of his comic book writing debut, *Black Panther #1*. Coates himself is a very interesting selection to pen the brand new series, as his work for *The Atlantic*, as well as the books he has written such as *Between the World and Me* and *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* have never delved into the realm of fiction before. However, I would make the claim that his jump to the genre of fiction is not as remarkable as his jump into the visual medium. Coates makes the decision to work with comic books rather than, say, film (although he has recently announced a pairing with *Black*

*Panther* film director Ryan Coogler (Chavez)) as a medium that pairs the visual and the literary. This medium offers Coates a slew of opportunities to represent the black body physically, something that the medium of text limits his ability to do. If you do not exist in a racial body, it can be difficult to confront Coates' ideas, as they are forced into the abstract. Through a visual medium such as a comic, the reader is forced to see these racial bodies, making Coates' discussion of them all the more real.

With the selection of the superhero Black Panther, a specifically African superhero who rules as king of the most technologically advanced nation in the world, (an African nation, nonetheless) the reader must not only confront these racial bodies, but become immersed in them. Through the entirety of *Black Panther #1*, the story takes place in the fictional African country of Wakanda, of which Black Panther (or T'Challa, his given name) is king. Because of this, the only characters through the entire comic are African. Every hero, villain, side-character, and passerby is of a racial body. Not only does this create an interesting and original world for Coates to explore, but also provides substantial representation for young racial bodies, specifically black children, as they are able to not just imagine, but to actually see a world all their own. This is yet another aspect of the visual medium that Coates takes full advantage of, providing an entire black world full of rich, black characters.

Coates also makes the decision to include African language throughout the comic, specifically the language of Xhosa. T'Challa is often referred to as "Haramu-Fal," meaning "The Orphan-King," or "Damisa-Sarki," meaning "The Panther." *Black Panther #1* incorporates the Xhosa language willingly, as it would not have been out of the ordinary to assume that everyone in the comic speaks English. This furthers the ideas of racial representation and importance throughout the comic. Representation is only furthered by the themes of Africanism and African

culture that resonate throughout the work. At one point, the character of Tetu, an African shaman and one of the comic's two primary antagonists, tells the story of his African lineage and culture. "Once, when I was tree, African sun woke me up green at dawn. African wind combed the branches of my hair. African rain washed my limbs" (52). All of the characters in *Black Panther #1* are not only rooted in their own racial bodies and their own racial world, but also that of their ancestors. T'Challa is highly protective of his mother, and his sister Shuri is shown speaking to her ancestors as well and seeking guidance. In many ways, this provides the cultural African connection that is missing from the identity of African-Americans, as they have no way to connect the ancestry that has been destroyed and ripped from them. In this way, the audience of young black children can feel, at the very least, what that connection would feel like, as well as some of its value and importance.

The primary of these characters is the series' main protagonist, T'Challa. T'Challa is king of Wakanda and, as all of his ancestors before him, takes up the mantle of Black Panther to protect the citizens of his country. T'Challa, in the most literal way possible, is representative and responsible of an entire race of black people. His actions must be selected carefully, as he must appease both the watchful eyes of the outside world who are expecting Wakanda to fail, as well as the driven, passionate, and intelligent citizens of his country who hold him to a certain standard. In this way, Black Panther is the quintessential black superhero, and becomes a symbol for black racial embodiment as a whole. Everything from his all black suit, his traditional African necklace, and even his suit's abilities of energy absorption relate to the struggles of a racial body. The fact that one of Black Panther's primary abilities is to absorb the kinetic energy from the blows and bullets of his enemies and convert it into a shockwave that emanates from his body and uses that energy against his enemies is no coincidence. If one is to exist in a racial

body, one must learn to take the negative energies of their enemies, of the world around them, and use it to their own advantage.

One of the primary conflicts in *Black Panther #1* is the internal conflict that T'Challa faces as he must balance being both a soldier and a king. In one of the many instances where the protagonist seeks council from his mother, she reminds T'Challa that he is “not a soldier,” but “a king. And it is not enough to be the sword, you must be the intelligence behind it” (12). This not only serves as a reminder to the black youths who serve as the primary audience for the comic, but also as representative of the balance that any black person, especially black leader, must take. There is a special balance between force and restraint, something that Coates discusses at length in many of his writings about the Obamas, that T'Challa must grow to understand. Ultimately, however, T'Challa decides that he must take action against his enemies. “No more discourse, no more deliberation, no more excuses. No more mercy... We are Wakanda. We will not be terrorized. We are terror itself” (91). In this way, the parallel can also be made between T'Challa and the heroes of Coates' youth such as Malcolm X. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates writes that Malcolm X was everything that Coates wanted to be—“controlled, intelligent, and beyond the fear” (35). He writes that Malcolm X would not “be your morality” and that he admired that (36). Through both of these examples, Coates explains that a strong black person must be willing to take action as well. While T'Challa is a king before he is a soldier, he is still willing to do what must be done to protect himself (a black body) and his people (a collection of black bodies).

Looking at *Black Panther #1* through this lens, it's clear that Coates looks to say certain things about racial bodies, as well as the concept of embodiment when it comes to race. T'Challa is the literal embodiment of his people, and serves as both a diplomatic leader and a protector. In

this way, T'Challa's body is representative of the bodies of his people. Coates' writing maintains this theme and puts a great deal of importance on the body, specifically as it relates to racial identity. In *Between the World and Me*, he pleads with his son to protect his own body from those who wish to harm it. Even Black Panther wears a completely protective suit that covers him from head to toe. William James, American philosopher and psychologist, believed that "The world experienced comes at all times with our body as its center, center of vision, center of action, center of interest... The body is the storm center, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view" (James, 1912/2003, p. 89). It seems that Coates would agree with that, but would also place additional value on the racial body as a representation of one's race as a whole. The need and desire to protect these racial bodies also leads to certain specific behaviors in Coates' eyes. "To survive the neighborhoods and shield my body, I learned another language consisting of a basic complement of head nods and handshakes" (Coates, 23). Coates draws the connection here between embodiment (both as it relates to the protection of one's body as the center of experience, as well as how a racial body works to "embody" its entire race) and race identity, drawing the conclusion that race identity often comes from a place informed by the value of racial embodiment.

All in all, the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates works to speak to those who are in possession of a racial body, specifically a black body, and the plethora of responsibilities that come with it. Most of these responsibilities are specific to the black racial experience, and are a result of generations and generations of racial classification. Returning to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon asks "What does a man want," and, more specifically, "What does the black man want?" Fanon goes on to "propose nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself" (Fanon, 2).

While Coates may agree that the classifications of race do create undue and unjust limitations for certain racial bodies, Coates' focus is on, as he puts it, "living within the all of it," acknowledging what perhaps ought to be, but instead focusing on what currently is. Regardless of how arbitrary these classifications may be, Coates acknowledges that we must live with them, and work to fight against them if for no other reason than the mere survival and sustaining of our own bodies. Through *Between the World and Me: Notes on the First 150 Years of America*, Coates pleads with his son to try and find ways to be comfortable within his own body, and to not allow anyone else to take that away from him. In *Black Panther #1*, Coates is able to take this message and reach out to young black children all around the country and inspire them through vivid characters and deep African representation. Coates is able to give his readers a hero that takes the qualities of his own heroes: the willpower of Malcolm X, the restraint of Barack Obama, and give young black readers a source for inspiration, representation, and an exploration of what it means to exist in a black body in contemporary society.



### Chapter 3:

#### This Is What It Means To Say “Indian Identity”

Sherman Alexie is one of the most well known authors in the world, and arguably the most influential American Indian since Jim Thorpe. He creates characters that are deeply complex, troubled, and realistic. Alexie accomplishes this through writing that is thick with meaning and identity, narratives that are as lyrical as they are honest. The experience of being American Indian is what defines Alexie’s stories in a way that few others who have written about race identity ever have. For Alexie, being Indian is both an incredible reward and the ultimate punishment. Ultimately, however, Alexie creates stories that illustrate what it means to be this very specific sense of “other” that is a reservation Indian. Through his first collection of stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) to his writing and production of the first all-Indian movie *Smoke Signals*, Alexie uses the internal conflict created by the juxtaposition of the American Indian identity with the perceptions and values of modern white America to work through the toughest questions of racial identity.

After publishing a handful of well-received poetry collections, (though it is hard to limit them to that terminology with as freely as Alexie moves between poetry and prose, line-breaking and yarn-spinning) his first collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was released in 1993. From the very beginning, the title evokes a distinct image with clear and valuable representations as it relates to the identity of an American Indian man in contemporary America. The character (or caricature, depending on which iteration you are most familiar with) of Tonto is one that aptly represents the internal conflict that Alexie and his

characters face throughout the interconnected stories of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Tonto is something that, for many Americans, was one of the primary visualizations of American Indians in the twentieth century. And, just as with Alexie's characters, this lack of significant and interesting representation is something that often haunts the identity and self-perceptions of American Indians in contemporary America. The question of what it means to be a "real Indian," and to what extent an Indian should commit to this strong, historic culture that has been mocked and marketed throughout United States history is one that Alexie chooses to tackle head on. Alexie uses his stories to confront this very conflict, and to create an entirely new concept of the American Indian: one that is troubled by the violent history their people have been through; one that struggles with alcoholism, violence, and loneliness; and one that is still ultimately proud of their racial identity in spite of the adversity that is so engrained in that identity itself.

The collection begins with "Every Little Hurricane," a story that introduces the character of young Victor, a Spokane Indian boy who lives with his parents on a reservation. "Every Little Hurricane" uses the extended metaphor of a natural disaster as a point of comparison for a fight that takes place during a reservation party. Alexie weaves in and out of this metaphor effortlessly, creating a sharp and vivid series of images for the reader. "Although it was winter, the nearest ocean four hundred miles away, and the Tribal Weatherman asleep because of boredom, a hurricane dropped from the sky in 1976 and fell so hard on the Spokane Indian Reservation that it knocked Victor from bed and his latest nightmare" (Alexie, 1). Alexie works to set up this metaphor immediately, noting that despite everything that would typically be required for such an event to happen, the reservation does not follow these same rules. The decision to use the metaphor of a hurricane is a worthy point of discussion, as it is not only

something that creates a large amount of destruction in its wake, but something that is also seen as both natural and completely unavoidable. Alexie sets up each of these characteristics to be representative of violence in and around a reservation home. “The two Indians raged across the room at each other. One was tall and heavy, the other was short, muscular. High-pressure and low-pressure fronts” (Alexie, 2). The author even refers to the two men causing the commotion as Indians before he refers to them as anything else, as this is the most important and defining detail to Alexie when it comes to conveying this experience. He continues this concept by drawing further comparisons to the struggles that Indians have had to face all throughout history. “‘They’re going to kill each other,’ somebody yelled...Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. Victor’s uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if somebody was to die” (Alexie, 3). For Indians living on a reservation, this is a common occurrence. Anger, violence, and even death have been a part of Indian history as far back as they have been called Indians. Alexie knows this, and uses these stories of violence to once again establish that eternal conflict, as well as their position as natural occurrences that can hardly be defined as disasters, if only for their commonality. He forces the reader to ask questions about history and identity, and about whether it’s possible for one to exist without the other.

All parts of Alexie’s stories are ripe with concepts that are specific to the culture of a reservation Indian. In “Every Little Hurricane,” Alexie writes, “Victor’s mother would rise with her medicine and magic. She would pull air down from empty cupboards and make frybread. She would shake thick blankets free from old bandanas. She would comb Victor’s braids into dreams” (Alexie, 5). It’s clear that several instances of Indian culture, history, and ideology appear in Victor’s memories of his mother. Even the simple mention of “medicine and magic”

produces a very specific cultural image, the pairing of these two things not often seen in contemporary western medicine. His mention of frybread and bandanas are also culturally significant to the Indian experience, and are concepts that he brings forth in this initial story and references again throughout the others. Finally, Alexie makes mention of Victor's mother combing his braids into dreams, a traditionally Indian hairstyle that his mother is once again able to pull some sort of parental mysticism out of. This can also be seen as representative of the resilience of the American Indian people as a whole, which Alexie continues to mention throughout the work.

Throughout *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie explores the inner conflict and deep-rooted levels of self-hatred that manifest themselves in the confusion of living with ones race. Another short story in this collection, "Crazy Horse Dreams," shows how this self-loathing can manifest itself into unrealistic expectations for other members of the same race, specifically when it comes to romantic partnerships. After an evening of love making in the Winnebago of an Indian woman that Victor meets at a carnival, he asks her "Why don't you have any scars?" to which she responds, "Why do you have so fucking many?" (Alexie, 41). This is an Indian woman who understands what she is, and does not seem to have quite the same self-hating tendencies that Victor is used to seeing. Whether this frightens, frustrates, or intimidates the character is unclear, but he follows up with the words "You're nothing important... You're just another goddamned Indian like me." He goes on telling her "You're nothing. You're nothing" before leaving the Winnebago at the story's end (Alexie, 41). Victor ends up projecting his own issues of identity and self-esteem onto the Indian woman for the simple fact that she is comfortable within her own skin and he is not. A similar encounter occurs in Alexie's film *Smoke Signals*, a somewhat loose adaptation of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*

*Fistfight in Heaven*, when Victor meets the character of Suzy Song. Suzy, a close friend of Victor's father who has just recently passed away, is young and very beautiful. She reminisces fondly upon memories of Victor's father, and the relationship she had with him that Victor never got. This forces Victor to have a similar backlashing, and never quite warms up to her character despite her best attempts.

As expected, Alexie's discussion of the struggles of how race defines identity is riddled with ambivalence and contradiction. In "Crazy Horse Dreams," Victor recalls the heroic Indian women of old. "The Plains Indians had women who rode their horses eighteen hours a day. They could shoot seven arrows consecutively, have them all in the air at the same time. They were the best light cavalry in the history of the world" (Alexie, 39). This creates an interesting paradox of identity that many people of many ethnicities and racial background seem to fall into: the glorification of a cultural past. Victor does not take issue with Indian women as a whole. Throughout *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Victor fondly recalls memories of his mother and of other hypothetically strong Indian women. For Victor and the other Indians, these stories of strong warriors permeate throughout his existence as a constant reminder of what he is not. In "A Drug Called Tradition," Thomas Builds-the-Fire, one of Alexie's other lead characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* tells a story shortly after Victor, Thomas, and Junior, another reservation Indian, have just finished tripping on psychedelic drugs. "It is now...Although it is the twentieth century and planes are passing overhead, the Indian boys have decided to be real Indians tonight" (Alexie, 20). The implication here is that "real Indians" are required to behave in certain ways: to be spiritual, to go on adventures, and to have visions that lead them to profound understandings about the universe and about themselves. It is this very concept of "real Indians" that Victor is working so hard to chase throughout these stories,

and the idea of being a “real” member of one’s race is something that resonates with many racial bodies. As with Victor, this is often due to the expectations built up by one’s family, the stories of the “good old days” that members of the older generation may tell. For Victor, this is paired with a self-loathing because of his inability to live up to these expectations. It presents the discussion of what it means to be an active participant in one’s own culture, and the guilt that is often associated with the performative nature of one’s race that often comes forth in an attempt to reach these unrealistic expectations for yourself and for other members of your race.

This is not to say that, in many ways, Victor does not love being Indian. He takes a great deal of pride in his culture, which is a large part of what sets up these expectations. In “Indian Education,” Victor recalls his life up through grade school and the struggles that he had both on and off of the reservation. He recollects the bullying that he suffered, but stands up for himself in a way that is backed by his Indian pride. “But the little warrior in me roared to life that day and knocked [him] to the ground, held his head against the snow and punched him so hard that my knuckles and the snow made symmetrical bruises n his face...But he wasn’t the warrior. I was. And I chanted *It’s a good day to die, it’s a good day to die*, all the way down to the principal’s office” (Alexie, 172). This continues the concept of the strong, Indian warrior that Victor wants to be, and the ways that he attempts to prove that to himself and others. Throughout “Indian Education,” Victor becomes a student of his culture and the world around him more than anything else. This furthers the internal conflict between Indian pride and a deep, pervading sadness that seems to come along with it, with the knowledge that these proud peoples have been beaten, abused, and robbed. Lines such as “...the most valuable lesson about living in the white world: *always throw the first punch*” (Alexie, 176) and, after hearing about a fellow Indian who has committed suicide “...when we look in the mirror, see the history of our tribe in our eyes,

taste failure in the tap water, and shake with old tears, we understand completely. Believe me, everything looks like a noose if you stare at it long enough” (Alexie, 178), continue to convey these deep-rooted and reservation-wide understood concepts of Indian Identity.

Alexie works this continued contradiction in throughout his work, specifically in the use of dark humor. This is apparent throughout both *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and continues into its film adaptation, *Smoke Signals*. Though there are some significant changes that take place in the way these stories are told from text to film, Alexie’s humor permeates his tales, regardless of medium. In the opening shots of *Smoke Signals*, we hear a disc jockey, “The voice of the Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation” for KREZ radio. Shortly, the jockey mentions Lester Falls-Apart, who is going to report the traffic from a broken down van on the side of the road just outside the reservation. Lester says “A big truck just went by...now it’s gone” (Eyre, *Smoke Signals*). This humor continues to show throughout, often representing the resilience of the Indian people despite the dire and often ridiculous conditions in which they are forced to live. Even when Alexie acknowledges the isolation and the lack of a competent weather correspondent, he uses humor to show that it does not bother the members of the community; this is simply the way things are.

Concepts of what it means to be Indian are often peppered with humor as well. In both the film and the book, once Victor finds out that his father has died, he goes to the trading post to cash a check. Once there, he sees Thomas Builds-the-Fire, who tells him that he is sorry about his father. “How’d you hear about it?” Victor asks. “I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt in the sunlight. And your mother was just in here crying” (*Smoke Signals*, 22). Victor and his mother even have an exchange before he leaves to go to Phoenix to gather his father’s remains. Arlene makes Victor promise that he’ll return, afraid that he will leave her like Victor’s

father Arnold did. Victor asks Arlene if she wants him to sign a paper promising his return. Arlene replies “No way, you know how Indians feel about signing paper” (30). References to the struggles and plights of Indian peoples as they have suffered at the hands of big government are almost always presented in the form of dark humor. This self-aware Indian identity manifests itself in situations throughout the film. Thomas’ unconventional mysticism is somewhat off-putting to some of the other Indians, especially Victor who thinks himself disillusioned to the concepts of magical stories and happy endings. This continues later in the film when Victor tells Thomas that he needs to be a “real Indian,” a concept that can seem somewhat loaded in its definition. “First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain’t supposed to smile like that. Get stoic’ *Victor gets a very cool look on his face, serious, determined, warriorlike*” (*Smoke Signals*, 61). Alexie is able to actually show this to the viewer using the visual medium, something that he cannot accomplish simply through text. This moment of Victor attempting to show Thomas what a real Indian looks like is not featured in the short story collection for that very reason. Victor continues to explain that the reason behind this is that “White people will run all over you if you don’t look mean” (62). This shows that Victor’s concept of identity and representation, the very face and persona that he feels he must give off, is at least partially based in his concept of the antagonizing nature of white people. At this point in the film, Victor and Thomas have just gotten on a bus from Idaho to Arizona, and are forced to interact with the very first white people that we see in the film, most of which are hostile towards the duo. This concept of white strangeness and antagonism is first brought up by the characters of Lucy and Velma, a pair of Indian women. “Yeah, do you guys got your passports?” Velma asks. “But it’s the United States,” Thomas responds. “Damn right it is! That’s as foreign as it gets. I hope you two got your vaccinations” (41). To them, anything outside the reservation can be seen as foreign. Beyond



that, the mention of vaccinations furthers the concept that anything outside the reservation is also likely to be hostile or, at the very least, dangerous. This is another moment that Alexie chooses to add into the film that did not exist in the short story collection. From a visual standpoint, Lucy and Velma are the last Indians that Victor and Thomas see before they start their journey. They have just given them a ride off of the reservation, and use this final warning to emphasize the visible change in surroundings (including the people they are surrounded by) that Victor and Thomas are about to go through.

There are more ways throughout the film that Thomas is presented as a very unconventional Indian male. For example, frybread is often used as a symbol of femininity and female caretaking throughout Alexie's work. In *Smoke Signals*, it's said that Victor's Mother, Arlene, makes the best frybread in the world. This traditionally American Indian dish is cheap to make, and is also something that every Indian on the reservation has had, and therefore has opinions about. Later in the film, when Victor and Thomas meet Suzy Song, she prepares some frybread for them, which Thomas describes as "almost as good" as Victor's mom's. "'Ain't no bread as good as mom's'" Victor replies (73). Not only does this amplify Victor's skepticism of Suzy as well as their situation as a whole, but it also works to set up his expectations of female Indians besides his mother, to which he holds a very high standard. On top of all of this, Thomas is the only male who is seen cooking frybread throughout the entire movie. He does so early on in the film while talking to his grandmother about Victor's character. By showing Thomas, raised by a single woman, completing tasks that are typically seen as feminine, it forces the viewer of the visual medium to make these comparisons on their own. Even more apparent later in the film is the shirt that reads "FRYBREAD POWER" that Thomas wears throughout the second half of their adventure after Victor tells him to be a "real Indian." Thomas picks

something that is still definitively Indian, but nonetheless somewhat unconventional based on the behavior of the other characters and the symbolism of frybread used throughout the film.

One of the starkest contrasts between the visual and textual medium for Alexie is the ability to show characters, both Indian and white, to create a heavy contrast between the reservation Indians and the white people that they meet on their journey into Phoenix. Obviously, this is only possible within the visual medium, and Alexie uses this visualization to pull the reader into the world of the reservation, one that is almost entirely secluded from the white world. Being an “All-Indian film,” it is sometime before you see a non-Indian character receive any screen time. This doesn’t happen until Thomas and Victor board the bus to Phoenix, and the moment is surprisingly tense as they walk down the aisle and receive looks of judgment and disdain from the non-Indian bus riders. Eventually, a pair of white men take Victor and Thomas’ seats, which the two are helpless to fight against. Their only recourse is to begin loudly singing about cowboy movies and John Wayne’s teeth in a traditional Indian song style. “Oh, John Wayne’s teeth, John Wayne’s teeth, hey, hey, hey, hey, ye!” (66). This bothers the white people sitting on the bus enough that they turn to see the cause of the commotion, but not enough that Victor and Thomas are in any real danger. Even when the characters are down on their luck and completely alone in a foreign space, they rely on their racial identity to be a source of strength, unity, and self-defense. Furthermore, the film medium allows Alexie’s audience to hear these traditional Indian songs and melodies. Even if this scene were in the collection, it would not have the same effect, as any reader who was unfamiliar with the sounds of traditional Indian chants would simply have to guess what those sounds are like. Alexie takes the opportunity to allow his audience to listen to the singing of his characters, creating a powerful and moving moment.

The benefit of being able to visually show the setting of the reservation to his audience is no small detail, either. The very concept of an Indian Reservation, a phrase that elicits images of nature preservation or protection of some endangered species, is one that informs the experiences of Alexie and his characters. As Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook state in their 2011 article “Location Matters: The Rhetoric of Place in Protest,” certain locations are able to pack a certain rhetorical punch. Because of this, these places are often used for specific rhetorical events such as protests and speeches (Endres & Senda-Cook, 257). For Alexie, the reservation is certainly one of such places, and he uses this rhetorical importance as an intentional backdrop for the stories that he tells, and the visual medium allows Alexie to show this to the viewer. The same thing could be said for many locations in storytelling, just as Roxanne Mountford discusses in “On Gender and Rhetorical Space.” “When one walks on the streets of the New York City financial district for the first time, one feels dwarfed by the size of the skyscrapers. Repeated over and over in Hollywood films, this scene represents the awesome power of this queen of American cities” (Mountford, 50). The reservation creates a very different, albeit still very powerful image for the viewer, and the characters that inhabit it are inarguably affected by its rhetorical value.

Furthermore, the setting of the reservation creates a very specific set of boundaries (both literal and figurative) for the characters that Alexie looks to present and represent. In a reservation, the only interactions that occur for most people are interactions with fellow Indian bodies. This is emphasized in *Smoke Signals* by Velma’s warning when Victor and Thomas attempt to leave the reservation. She describes the outside world as “foreign,” despite the fact that they are still traveling within the United States. This highlights the nature of living in an

environment that is largely isolated and almost solely inhabited by a single race of individuals. Alexie knows this, and that is where the heart of this particular story lies.

Sherman Alexie is able to take all of the complex, multi-faceted aspects of being Indian in contemporary white America and reflect them through characters that are deeply troubled, but ultimately hopeful. This mix of dark humor with tragic backstory is what makes Alexie's stories and characters feel so authentically Indian. They are riddled with flaws: alcoholism, domestic abuse, violence, abandonment, and unrealistic expectations for themselves and for those around them. But what defines Alexie's Indians, and what the writer wants his readers to know of all Indians, is that they are a peoples of incredible resilience, who are able to find joy, happiness, and magic in even the smallest of things. When all else seems hopeless, Alexie's characters are able to sing songs in the backs of buses, pull air down from cabinets to make frybread, and crack a few good jokes along the way.

## Chapter 4:

### Conclusions on Coates, Alexie, and the Visual Medium in Racial Identity

For anyone interested in creative writing, it can be a means to express complex thoughts and emotions that can often be difficult to say or express otherwise. Writing can be an outlet for reactions to the world around us, and an attempt to understand and decipher that world, as well as our place in it. For racial bodies, especially those that exist in a postcolonial society where race serves as a definitive and permanent characteristic, trying to understand ourselves and the world around us often falls back into those very concepts of race. For writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Sherman Alexie, a Black man and an American Indian man, respectively, their writing is rich with discussion about the importance and turmoil of racial identity in modern day America. These writers are able to tell stories through both the textual and visual mediums that are permeated by the question of what it means to be a racial body. Both writers are also able to use the visual medium to its fullest, creating a physical and visual representation of the lives and world of their respective racial bodies. Regardless of medium, the writings of both authors are largely concerned with two concepts important to the racial experience: representation and identity.

*Between the World and Me* serves largely as a series of experiences, lessons, and ruminations from Coates' personal experiences being a black man in America. Coates acknowledges that this is one of, if not the primary way that those around him identify him, and so he must live within that identity and all that it comes with. Racial identity is something that Coates takes the time to identify as arbitrary and performative, but nonetheless an aspect of the

daily experiences of a racial body. In this way, race identity simply is a part of your own identity, albeit a large part, and so taking these steps of introspection and understanding will help you to better understand your own identity and the world around you. It is an unfair reality, but a reality nonetheless. The book is addressed to his son, but works to speak to all racial bodies to have a better understanding of themselves and what they must do to feel comfortable and safe within their own bodies.

In *Between the World and Me*, Coates writes an extended letter to his son in which he explains the hardships of being a black man in modern day America. In *Black Panther #1*, also penned by Coates, he writes about the protagonist's struggles to represent his nation and race in a way that is both dignified and effective. Many of the lessons learned throughout are similar, and Coates continues to speak to black children regardless of medium, asking them to avoid the sins and downfalls of their ancestors before them. Of course, *Between the World and Me* is, on a larger scale, written with adults as a primary audience. For *Black Panther #1*, the adult audience still exists, but functions instead as a secondary audience. Either way, Coates hopes that young people are able to learn these lessons, and older people will be better equipped to help their own children with them. This is only amplified in the effect of the 2018 film *Black Panther*, which was a massive critical and commercial success. While Coates was not directly involved with the making of the film, the lessons and representation offered through the film are very much the same, but on a much larger scale. In this way, the character of Black Panther has brought race identity and the value of black culture to the forefront of American popular culture. "The wrong kind of obsession with racial identity can create social divides. But perhaps what [Black Panther] illustrates best is the potential for infinite expressions of a deeper identity. The color of one's skin defines one aspect of identity, but it does not limit expression of individuality, creativity, or

intelligence. Nor should it limit what one can imagine for one's self" ('Black Panther' challenges limits on identity, 2). This is exactly the type of focus that Coates would want on racial identity, exploring the benefits of representation in media.

Similarly, both stories are really providing representation, both literally and figuratively, to young black children who so often are in need of role models and a voice that understands them. The lessons taught in *Between the World and Me* are a bit more straightforward, which is one benefit of the textual, nonfiction medium which Coates has decided to utilize here. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates can talk directly to his son, and make those lessons explicit, speaking directly to his son about experiences that Coates has witnessed of his son firsthand. "That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free...you stayed up till 11pm that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none, you said 'I've got to go'" (Coates, 11). This example specifically is one that many young black people will relate to. However, in a work of fiction such as *Black Panther #1*, Coates must implement these lessons into the story. Whether this is a limitation or a benefit of Coates' fiction is hard to say, as interpretation is a valuable part of fiction. It is also true, however, that Coates is able to reach a wider audience through fiction, and that his lessons reach that audience as well. Nonetheless, the overall teachings of *Between the World and Me* (protect your body, be proud of who you are, be respectful but stand your ground) can be seen in the very conflict and character of the titular Black Panther, who must decide how he will rule his nation. Coates understands that, at a point, every racial body is representative of its own race, especially in the eyes of people who exist outside of that race. T'Challa (the Black Panther) is a somewhat exaggerated version of the quandary of racial identification and how it affects the way that one is viewed by those around you.. He is both king and protector of his people, and must be

multiple things at once. He learns throughout the issue that while diplomacy is often the place to start, one must be willing to stand your ground. In a sense, Coates is trying to say that every racial body must be at least a little bit Black Panther. Throughout *Black Panther #1*, T'Challa must make decisions for the good of his entire country, which often comes at odds with the decisions that are best for himself and for his immediate family. Even when T'Challa is not in active physical combat, he is wearing his Black Panther suit, ready for any danger that may come upon him and his loved ones. While the mask of the Black Panther does retract, allowing for a more personal and diplomatic T'Challa for the reader upon seeing his face, the mask and the suit itself are always shown as a part of him. In this way, T'Challa must not only protect his body, as Coates preaches to his son so vehemently in *Between the World and Me*, but also serve as the literal face of Wakanda. Coates works to balance this struggle between conflict and diplomacy, as he understands all racial bodies must do as they serve as embodiments of their respective race and people.

Alexie, however, is writing from a place of experience that is both more secluded and less known than that of Coates'. For Alexie, the setting of the reservation is just as important as any other aspect of the story. Alexie knows that most of his readers have never seen or engaged with an Indian reservation in any way. In this sense, he is creating a narrative for people outside of his race as well as those within it. For some people, the writing and public persona of Sherman Alexie are their only experiences with the Native American people and culture. Alexie uses this to create characters that are complex and real, but are ultimately proud of their heritage and who they are. Alexie works to subvert many of the stereotypes associated with reservation Indians, but to still present it in a way that is realistic and representative of his own personal experiences. Of course in a textual medium such as *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie is



able to weave language in and out in a way that a medium such as film does not allow so easily. Alexie is able to discuss the inner thoughts of his characters, which are often complex. In *Smoke Signals*, Alexie benefits from the visual medium by showing the living situations of those Indians who are born and raised on the reservation. Going back to the start of the film, it opens with a joke about the isolated nature of the reservation, with a reservation-radio traffic reporter sitting by the highway atop an abandoned van. When asked about the traffic report, the reporter responds with “a big truck drove by earlier...now it’s gone” (*Smoke Signals*). In the visual medium, Alexie is able to show his viewers the disparity and isolated nature of the reservation in a way that the textual medium simply cannot. Similarly, when Thomas Builds-The-Fire exits the gas station with his shirt that reads “Frybread Hero,” his hair flowing and unbraided for the first time in the film, viewers are able to see the visual change in character of Thomas. Shortly, however, Thomas places his large glasses back onto his face, which let’s the viewer know that while some character growth has occurred, this is still the same old Thomas. Both of these moments are present in the film, but do not occur in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. This shows how Alexie’s decision to use the visual medium is far from arbitrary, and he makes the decision to implement visual aspects in his storytelling as a way to accurately, realistically, and often comically represent his story and his characters.

Both writers also use the visual format to provide a literal representation to viewers and readers of their race as well. Between the “first all-Indian movie” *Smoke Signals* to the setting of *Black Panther #1* in the fictional African country of Wakanda, these writers have intentionally created situations and environments that exist specifically for their race. In Coates’ case, Wakanda is a black utopia, full of technological advancements and rich with culture. Wakanda has always been set up as a Pan-African paradise, and Coates’ rendition is no different. This

creates a world for black children to not only read about, but to actually see black faces and black skin accomplishing such great and amazing things. This is one of the primary benefits of the visual medium when looking at the racially focused storytelling of a writer like Coates. Black Panther and all of his companions are characters who are comfortable in their world, a specifically racial world, who are not forced to feel different or out of place from those around them. In Wakanda, Coates is able to show an African utopia, complete with advanced cities and technology. He is sure, however, to include art, characters, settings, and costumes that are all very traditionally African. Through the comic, Coates is able to show images of Wakandan rulers conversing atop massive skyscrapers and using futuristic technology while still donning dreadlocks, dressed in traditional African dashikis, boubous, and kufis. Coates is able to change the narrative of African cultural artifacts, clothing, hairstyles, and tattoos by taking them into a world that is more technologically advanced than any that we have seen. This alters the common misconception of African cultures being “primitive,” and allows for positive representation for black readers. In this advanced society, his characters are able to be proud of their heritage, and this pride is then reflected onto the reader who is transported to this place of racial comfort and unity. It’s also worth noticing that Brian Stelfreeze, the illustrator of *Black Panther #1* is also a black man, and so these representations built by Coates and Stelfreeze speak from personal experience.

For Alexie, representation is a little different. With the first all-Indian movie, this title extends not only to the cast, but also to the crew of *Smoke Signals*. Alexie was able to create and mass distribute a major motion picture with an entirely Native cast and crew, something which had never been done before. However, Alexie works to create a realistic representation of life on an Indian reservation, specifically that of the Spokane reservation on which Alexie grew up.

While this still accomplishes many of the things that Coates' visual work does such as creating heroes and characters for racial bodies and children within those bodies to admire and connect with, it also works to show the most realistic image possible of life on a reservation. This includes issues such as poverty, alcoholism, and the sheer isolation mentioned earlier and brought up by the reservation traffic reporter. In this way, Alexie is able to show the negatives just as much as the positives of living on an Indian reservation. For example, Victor doesn't even have the means or finances to travel out to Arizona to gather his father's remains. It was even his father's alcoholism that led to the death of Thomas Builds-the-Fire's parents. In the visual medium, we are able to see these issues in a way that is much more personal and direct: the half-empty savings jar that Victor's mother gives him, the drunken stumbling of his father that eventually causes the fire that kills Thomas' parents, and the reaction Victor's father has to his heinous actions. Alexie furthers this advantage by showing his father saving Thomas before showing his father causing the fire, allowing us to understand aspects of the character of Victor's father, such as his underlying compassion and good intentions. Throughout this, Alexie is speaking to more than just his fellow American Indians, he is also speaking to those who have no concept of the hardships that reservation Indians are forced to face. It is one thing to be told a story of these hardships, and another to witness actual racial bodies suffering in the ways that Alexie's characters do. This is one of the many ways that Alexie tries to expand his work outside of exclusively racial bodies, and instead create work that is representative of the Indian experience, all the while employing and benefiting real-life Indians in the production of the film.

While Alexie and his work on *Smoke Signals* clearly provided a great deal of work and representation for Indians both within and outside of the film industry, I would be remiss not to mention the alleged damage that Alexie has done to the Indian literary community. A series of

women have come forth with claims of sexual harassment against Sherman Alexie (Gupta, 2018). What makes these allegations increasingly disturbing and relevant to the issue of racial identity is that Alexie has allegedly been specifically targeting American Indian women, and even more specifically, female Indian writers within the literary community. This becomes a complex issue when looking at the work that Alexie has done in the past for creating outlets for Indian writers and workers to convey their art (i.e. *Smoke Signals*), and is of course inexcusable behavior for any person to partake in if these allegations are true.

It may also be worthwhile to consider Alexie's writing of Indian women throughout *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Smoke Signals*. While the character of Victor (a clear parallel to Alexie himself) appears to have a close relationship with his mother, we never truly see him warm up to any of the female characters in either iteration of the story. In fact, more often than not, Victor appears to be intimidated by these women, especially as they present themselves as more comfortable within their own racial bodies than he is (see "Crazy Horse Dreams"). While it is of course unfair and irresponsible to project the behaviors of a character onto the behaviors of their creator, it does seem noteworthy given the recent allegations.

For both writers, the visual medium serves as a way for them to show much of what they have been telling throughout their writing. While words can be powerful and moving, providing an image, especially for an issue that is so largely based around a visual aspect of another human being, can be even more moving. For those members of the racial experience, the visual medium provides representation, heroes and characters for them to relate to in a way that is tangible and real. It speaks to these racial bodies and lets them know that they are not alone, that people who are like this, who look like you, can accomplish great things. Like you, they are complex and flawed, but they are real and their stories matter. For readers who are not members of a minority

racial experience, it shows them a side of that experience that they have no other tangible way of seeing. Either way, writing about race is incredibly important work. And while it may not resolve the issues of racism, classism, and discrimination that all racial bodies must face, it at least provides something that they can connect to and be proud of, so that hopefully they can find that same pride within themselves.

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