ABSTRACT

SHERMAN ALEXIE'S RESERVATION:

RELOCATING THE CENTER OF INDIAN IDENTITY

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Indian reservations are territories within the United States recognized by the federal government as land reserved specifically for American Indians. Indigenous communities still referred to as tribes have some autonomy over the reserved lands, which allow tribes freedom to maintain and preserve cultural heritage. Indian reservations are societies within the larger mainstream America, making physical and social boundaries problematic for cross-cultural exchange. Indian writer Sherman Alexie challenges the misrepresentations of Indians which originated from a EuroAmerican perspective of the "outside looking in" to these cultures. Sherman Alexie presents the Indian perspective of "looking out" at mainstream society. Rather than evoking a desire for one homogenous society, Alexie's narratives reveal Indian identity as a distinct identity compatible with other cultures. The homogenous element Alexie does include in all of his literature is the human condition.

This thesis demonstrates how Sherman Alexie conceptualizes the reservation as a center of Indian identity in three of his novels, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2009). In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, the reservation functions as a center of post-colonial trauma rather than existing as a cultural hub. In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie portrays the center as

a process rather than location of Indian identity. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the center of Indian identity is the Indian character him or herself; the reservation is only elemental as part of the process of Indian experience. As Alexie's work reveals, the reservation is not an experience all Indians can claim but whether in absence or presence, it has an effect on all Indian identity and the Indian culture within contemporary multicultural societies.

SHERMAN ALEXIE'S RESERVATION:

RELOCATING THE CENTER OF INDIAN IDENTITY

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Dedication

To my family,

who taught me that love travels across any distance,

never forget where you came from

and laugh often.

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INTRODUCTION

THE RESERVATION AS SHERMAN ALEXIE'S LITERARY CENTER

The reservation owns complex representations yet holds elements integral to American Indian culture. While reservations were imposed on their inhabitants, the land serves as home to generations of indigenous tribes. Resistance to Western culture continues, although on a modern battleground of contemporary culture. Deeply rooted in oral culture, American Indians' adaptations to written literature are easily assumed in order to claim a voice spoken to all audiences. Moving with the pace of modernity, American Indian authors embed personal experience through poetry, fiction and even screenplays. Such an author is Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene writer who has become a prolific presence in the contemporary literary world. From the time of his birth on October 7, 1966, in Wellpinit, Washington, on the Spokane Indian Reservation, Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr. knew life's challenges. He was born with hydrocephalus and suffered seizures as a small child, but overcame this condition with the help of surgery and medication. Alexie experienced reservation life full-time until he was fourteen, when he elected to attend Reardan, a high school off the reservation. He attended Gonzaga University in 1985 and transferred to Washington State University in 1987, where he began writing poetry. His first collection of poems and short stories published in 1992 is called *The Business of Fancydancing*. Alexie's writing career spans two decades with collections of poetry such as: *I Would Steal Horses* (1992), *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), *One Stick Song* (2000) and *Face* (2009), to name a few. His published fiction includes: *Indian Killer* (1996), *Ten Little Indians* (2003), *Flight* (2007) and *War Dances* (2009), along with films *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002). He is a winner of numerous prestigious awards and honors, a member of various poetry societies, writers' fellowship programs, and has

taught Ethnic Studies courses at Washington State University. He has also been a member and supporter of non-profit organizations which teach Indian youth about media.

Examining specific texts allows the reader to recognize the framework upon which Sherman Alexie's literary warfare develops—the reservation. This thesis analyzes three texts that exemplify Alexie's evolving stages of representing the reservation. His earlier collection of stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), emphasizes reservation trauma, followed by *Reservation Blues* (1995), which presents alternatives of continuance for the Indian, rather than destruction. Later, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) makes the statement that Indians can participate in mainstream America and still maintain Indian values and identity. The loss of culture happens inside or outside the reservation. Each chapter of the thesis will show that as Alexie's representations of the reservation change, a certain mapping of Indian identity takes place simultaneously, ultimately exposing other interpretations of the center. The Indian cultural center typically thought of as the reservation turns out to be something quite different in Alexie's representations.

Alexie adheres to most of the basic themes Indian writers address but sometimes is considered unorthodox in his literary execution. For example, Alexie's style contains the techniques that some other Native American authors abhor and avoid: self-destructive humor, negative degrading stereotypes, and elements of popular culture that maintain all these misconstrued representations. In other words, in some circles, Alexie is criticized for continuing misrepresentations of American Indians. Many scholars and readers are attentive to Alexie's alternative meanings and techniques such as reversal of stereotypes that fill his literary repertoire. His humor, sometimes considered superficial, attacks the dominant culture with the same negative stereotypes Indians are aware exist. Irony and satire are other forms of humor

delivered through character dialogue, which channels Alexie's anger at the colonial victimization that still occurs in modern society. Ingenious blips, quips, and remarks are Alexie's weapons of choice while indulging in the literary warfare of a supposed multicultural society that still marginalizes its indigenous peoples.

Louis Owens, a celebrated Native American author of Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish descent defends the presence of mixedbloods in Indian literature:

> And given the fact that almost all of the more than sixty novels by Native American authors are by writers of mixed Native and European descent—mixedbloods who embody the frontier, transcultural experience—I would suggest that the Native American novel is the quintessential postmodern frontier text, and the problem of identity at the center of virtually every Native American novel is the problem of internalized transculturation. (46)

While mixedblood Indian authors such as Gerald Vizenor or N. Scott Momaday may be successful at writing about subject matter such as the reservation, Alexie argues that they never experienced reservation life. In an interview with scholar John Purdy, which took place in 1997, Alexie expresses his view, which alludes to the tensions that exist between writers:

> Most of our Indian literature is written by people whose lives are nothing like the Indians they're writing about. There's a lot of people pretending to be "traditional," all these academic professors living in university towns, who rarely spend any time on a reservation, writing all these "traditional" books. Momaday—he's not a traditional man. And there's nothing wrong with that, I'm not either, but this adherence to the expected idea, the bear and all this imagery. I think it is dangerous, and detrimental. (Peterson 43)

Alexie is writing about his own experience and doesn't try to create an artificial "traditional" identity for himself. For Alexie, this is the first step in replacing misrepresentations of the American Indian.

The issue of mixedbloodedness is not the only element that separates Alexie's work from other Indian authors. Alexie's work is surrounded by controversy because of the way he represents Indians and Indian culture. Surprisingly, it is within the circle of Indian literati that Alexie receives most of his criticisms. For example, Lakota writer Elizabeth Cook-Lynn considers contemporary Indian writers such as Silko, Erdrich, Ortiz, Bird and Momaday, and their contributions to literary intellectualism in "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story." She notes that Alexie's *Reservation Blues* and Adrian Louis's *Skins* do not contain the literary criteria needed to be included in scholarly debate and states, "Reviews of these works have been published generally on the entertainment pages of newspapers rather than in scholarly journals" (Cook-Lynn 68). She states that "the failure of the contemporary Indian novel and literary studies in Native American studies to contribute substantially to intellectual debates in defense of First Nationhood is discouraging" (68). First Nations is the term which refers to the indigenous peoples of Canada, but in a broader sense, includes all indigenous peoples of the Americas. Alexie is criticized because his work doesn't attend to items of concern to other Indian writers such as land rights and sovereignty. Rather, Alexie's work speaks out against the conditions of reservation life: poverty, alcoholism, disillusionment. Alexie's subject is the reservation and Indian culture, but more generally, with interaction with the dominant EuroAmerican society and the human conditions they share. Also, Cook-Lynn's article was published in 1996, only one year after *Reservation Blues* was published and a couple of years after *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* was published—Alexie was in the early

stages of developing his style and themes. As I will point out later, Alexie is less interested in his works being part of academic debate than in portraying reservation life in all its complexities.

Even if Alexie has no desire to be part of academic debate, the content of his work certainly places him in that realm. Ironically, Alexie's work has gained him equal acclaim in scholarly journals as well as mass marketed magazines. Gloria Bird, Spokane poet/writer grew up on the Spokane reservation, lashes out at the content of Alexie's work. In an article published in the fall of 1995, "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*," Bird blames Alexie for continuing to perpetuate misrepresentations of Indians. She states, "Reservation Blues as the representative 'native' novel, in actuality, omits the core of native community, and exists solely in the marginal realm of its characters who are all misfits: social and cultural anomalies" (Bird 49). Alexie shows the realities of reservation life and misrepresentations so that non-Natives can change the way they see Indians and so that Indians can alter the negative way they see themselves.

In order to provide a context for Alexie's portrayals of reservation life, I would like to provide some background about Indian reservations. While owning qualities that define the reservation in simple terms as established lands reserved for tribal sovereignty, the reservation is also shrouded with the complexities of politics, government, economics and cultural identity. The U.S. government, under the guise of creating reservations to ensure cultural integrity and survival for indigenous peoples, revealed its true intent as a EuroAmerican imperialist entity, enforcing an agenda to acculturate or wipe out the Indian. Expansionist efforts of a modernizing nation from colonial times have suppressed opportunities for Indian tribes. From the time of Grant's presidency (1869-1877) during a post-civil war era, tribes not located within the territorial bounds were forced there by military command of the U.S. government. Historical

events, such as the Battle of Little Big Horn on June 1876, proved resistance would be met with imperial retribution, as evident in the massacre at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890. Even peaceful attempts to recognize Indian relations met with disaster. Such is the case of Lakota Oglala chief Crazy Horse, whose intent was to talk with government officials at Red Cloud Agency, but instead, he was imprisoned and killed. Crazy Horse is one of Alexie's favorite historical characters; therefore images and representations of Crazy Horse are included in many of Alexie's narratives. According to Black Elk, a Lakota visionary who gives personal account of the incident, "[A] soldier ran a bayonet into Crazy Horse from one side at the back and he fell down and began to die. . . . He was brave and good and wise. He never wanted anything but to save his people. . . . [T]hey could not kill him in battle. They had to lie to him and kill him that way" (Neihardt 143). Broken treaties, diminished land size, and depletion of natural resources were caused by events which necessitated a greater expansionist agenda, such as the California Gold Rush (1848-1855) and construction of the Transcontinental Railroad (1863-1869).

To pacify Native and non-Native voices which spoke of impropriety, the Department of the Interior created a division in 1824 called the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which would administer to the needs of tribes because its officials were tribal members. Sadly, the BIA became more of a bureaucracy, betraying its own members and further alienating them within society (McNickle 112). Geographer Imre Sutton, who conducts research which analyzes locales such as the Indian reservation in "Sovereign States and the Changing Definition of the Indian Reservation," states that the BIA " is a façade that obscures the fundamental role of tribal government over its own territory" (Sutton 283). While defining reservations and tripartite entities within their respective geographic locale is challenging, Sutton makes a debatable point: "If it were only necessary to recognize the Indian reservation as an ethnic place, a tribal

homeland that is the locus of Indian identity in a cultural sense, few problems—interpersonal or intergovernmental—would persist and the question of definition would become moot" (Sutton 284). It is precisely within these territorial land barriers that one finds cultural traumas and adversities which diminish ethnic place and identity in relation to the outside world. Not honoring treaties meant to Indian societies not acknowledging the tribal community or the value of their existence. Deterioration of tribal values, poverty, social displacement and identity crisis are all traumas experienced by American indigenous groups. Such elements create a climate of cultural disintegration, which lasting over generations, can become a self-induced genocide. In addition to trauma are the emotions associated with the bitter treatment and betrayal of Indians by EuroAmerican society. Anger, resentment, and hopelessness are often the product of cultural exchange.

The Dawes Act, which Congress ratified in 1887, gave tribes land allotments to sell as they wished, or purportedly be governed by the indigenous groups, which meant sovereignty and autonomy. Unfortunately, the act reduced Indian land holdings and allowed more room for westward migration (McNickle 80). D'Arcy McNickle, acclaimed anthropologist and Flathead Indian who authored the book *Native American Tribalism: Indian Survivals and Renewals* (1973), notes the ability of some tribes to survive when he states, "In spite of many years of turmoil, of border fighting, and Indian defeats and removals, the tribes managed to stay within the general region of their aboriginal domain" (McNickle 15). This did not include the Eastern tribes of the U.S., which were forcibly removed (15) and placed in reservations as far away as Oklahoma because of Andrew Jackson's approval of the Indian Removal Act on May 30, 1830 (McNickle 73). In either case, however, the general region of tribal domain no longer promoted sustenance agriculturally and socially in a quickly modernizing society.

Internalized oppression is a distinct trauma that affects Indian culture; it is caused by a Western culture that marginalizes indigenous groups, justifies negative stereotypes, and trivializes pain experienced in cultural relations, so that the colonizing group maintains its dominant status over the Indian inhabitants of the reservation. In "The Familiar Face of Genocide: Internalized Oppression among American Indians," Lisa M. Poupart explains the origin of internalized oppression thus: "The intense historical unresolved grief and pain that exists is accompanied by an extreme rage at the dominant culture for abuses past and present" (Poupart 89). Poupart continues, "[L]ike Indian grief and pain, this rage is also invalidated by the dominant culture and denied avenues for expression" (89). Rather than suffer the cost of external expression, Indians internalize grief and anger with self-destructive behaviors of violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, and other anxiety disorders (89). All these symptoms socially isolate individuals, further destroying cultural integrity because tribal values depend on community and bonding for continual existence. In essence, developmentally, the tribe disintegrates because these activities replace positive outlets of resistance such as re-culturation efforts to preserve language, tradition, ceremony, and spirituality crucial for survival. Blatantly stated, the Indians destroy themselves.

In "The Social Construction of American Indian Drinking: Perceptions of American Indian and White Officials," an exposition of alcoholism and investigation of revitalization efforts for reservation Indians, Malcolm Holmes and Judith Antell survey perceptions of alcoholism among Indians versus white officials and conclude that, "Thus, revitalistic movements repudiate the symbolic-moral universe of whites and attempt simultaneously to revitalize the symbolic-moral universes of the indigenous peoples" (Holmes and Antell 155). This revitalization promotes a sense of empowerment, dispels destructive behavior, and displaces

white oppression and superiority. Lisa Poupart implies that it is critical for Indians to understand these issues because if they are not addressed, disintegration of tribal unity ensues and indigenous peoples become "oppressors unto ourselves" (Poupart 95).

During the twentieth century, the study of Indians changed from a strictly anthropological point of view (outside cultures writing about Indians) to an ethnographic and autobiographical point of view (Indians writing about Indians). Instead of reading texts or literature produced by the white observer, scholars and general readers placed more value on an authentic version of the Indian point of view. Author/lawyer/ theologian/ Standing Rock Sioux, Vine DeLoria, Jr., makes some interesting and valid points about the usefulness of anthropology to Indians in *Custer Died for Your Sins*: "Lumping together the variety of tribal problems and seeking the demonic principle at work which is destroying Indian people may be intellectually satisfying. But it does not change the real situation" (DeLoria 86). He further asserts, "The very real and human problems of the reservation were considered to be merely by-products of the failure of a warrior people to become domesticated" (91). The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of other forms of Indian texts: theory, critique, fiction and autobiography by Indian authors. Louis Owens, Gerald Vizenor, Vine DeLoria Jr., Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Gloria Bird and Paula Allen Gunn are among some of the Indian writers and critics that adhere to traditionalism of Indian culture. N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, and Sherman Alexie are Indian authors who keep some semblance of tradition remaining tribal in their work, yet incorporate contemporary issues into their subject matter, placing their work in a more cosmopolitan light.

Sherman Alexie goes in a different direction from many Indian writers because instead of using only literary devices to get his point across, his messages are blatant. The reality he wishes to convey and his humor can both be described as unforgiving. Alexie is attentive to

the realities of reservation life in his work because his personal experience is filled with ambivalence toward the reservation. In a radio interview with Lorena Allam in 2006, Alexie reveals that he grew up in the midst of traumas such as alcoholism, and at an early age, decided to attend school off the reservation. He states, "I always knew I was leaving. My mom always teased me—she still teases me, 'You were born with a suitcase.' I always dreamed of leaving the rez, as you do, I'm sure it's the same here. I wanted my walkabout to keep going, to keep walking—no 'about,' just 'walk'—'about' implies you're coming back" (Peterson 162). Alexie recovered from alcoholism that began during his college years, so he knows the meaning of survival and continuance. His work reflects identity crises associated with reservation Indians. Alexie states later in the same interview with Allam, "I have these two amazing cultures to choose from—this sort of world culture/American culture and then my own tribal background. They're both filled with magic, and I'm angry at the people who taught me I had to choose between them" (165).

Chapter one of this thesis, "Re-Writing History: Locating the Reservation Center" highlights Alexie's Indian reservation as a chaotic center, an actual location that presents the trauma and disarray of Indian culture. Chapter two "Following the Blues: A Changing Center," reveals the Indian center as a potential, or undiscovered place within an individual, rather than a location outside the individual. Chapter three "Part-Time Indian: The Reservation as Continuance" shows the center of Indian identity to be distinctive qualities within the individual that contribute to a collective cultural identity.

CHAPTER ONE

RE-WRITING HISTORY: LOCATING THE RESERVATION CENTER

Typically revisiting past painful experiences in light of colonial oppression only fosters feelings of anger, hurt and revenge. For writers, idealizing a happy ending could be just as detrimental to readers who look for this possibility in reality. Sherman Alexie is doubly challenged when he strategizes thematic structure and subject matter for Indians and reservation life. His Indian perspective reflects a certain dichotomy between tradition and mainstream life. Alexie's texts contain recurring characters which reflect this double consciousness; through the character Thomas Builds-the-Fire, he is loyal to aspects of tradition such as storytelling, yet through Victor he re-writes misrepresentations including modern images of pop-culture such as John Wayne. Kelley Blewster makes a notable perception about Alexie's characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* during an interview titled "Tribal Visions" conducted in 1999, which helps explain Alexie's double consciousness, or point of view as an Indian who has lived on the reservation and Indian who now lives outside the reservation. In the course of her interview, Blewster comments on the dynamics between Victor and Thomas in "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," a short story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*: "Around this time, while Alexie was finding his early voice, his characters Victor and Thomas emerged. Like twins separated at birth who have evolved into a pair of not-quite-halves, these recurring players in Alexie's reservation world represent flip sides of each other—but it's a fidgety, rather reluctant coupling" (Peterson 78). It is arguable that Alexie is uneasy in how he represents the pair because, as he states in a 1993 interview for *Bloomsbury Review* conducted by John and Carl Bellante, Victor and Thomas reflect aspects of himself, or pieces of his personality (Peterson 4). Alexie's characters personalize complex aspects of Indian identity.

Alexie's early work, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), is a collection of short stories highly notable for the exposition of the realities of reservation life and the way Alexie presents issues relative to these realities to his readers. Twenty-two short stories create a portrait of reservation life because each one features the realities associated with that life. Some stories involve recurring characters such as Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Junior Polatkin, and Victor Joseph, while other characters are recounted by an unnamed narrator; yet other stories introduce characters that do not appear elsewhere in the collection. Each character recounts a tale that exemplifies some aspect or trauma of reservation life: alcoholism, identity conflict, relations with each other, relations with urban Indians, perceptions of white culture and modern society, parental neglect, hunger, poverty and tragedy. The characters however, find humor, mysticism, affection and a hint of potential for locating their identity within their respective experience. Alexie refers to a not-so-distant past at times through memories, which centers the stories, or makes them relevant in modernity to the traumas that still exist for indigenous peoples. He places the stories within contemporary circumstances of popular culture to evoke clearer images of reservation life and to make American Indians more relatable to audiences who have never encountered similar situations.

My interpretation will contest critics such as Louis Owens, who attacks Alexie's narrative form in *Mixedblood Messages*. He calls *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*:

> A fiction that shows Indian communities in dysfunctional disarray, fragmented and turned inward in a frenzy of alcoholism and mutual self-destruction—whether the community be Pine Ridge or a Spokane reservation—is both entertaining and comfortable for the non-Native reader. Such fiction tells the reader that the Indian

> is a helpless, romantic victim still in the process of vanishing just as he is supposed to do. (Owens 77)

However, I would argue that Alexie's use of popular culture defies the vanishing stereotype by enfolding accounts of historical characters who speak to the persistence into the present of colonial oppression on the reservation. Analysis will demonstrate that Alexie brings historical characters such as Crazy Horse, Custer, Colonel Wright and Qualchan into popular culture to make a statement about the persistence of colonial oppression and its presence on the reservation. I will provide examples of continued colonial oppression that builds on author James Cox's assertion that Indian authors such as Alexie are re-writing images of popular culture which foster "colonial domination and conquest" (Cox 11). Cox labels the negative representations of Indians in popular culture as "'white noises' that not only enact, enhance, and justify colonialism in the past but also continue to do so in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" (Cox 11). In *Muting the White Noise* (2006), Cox claims that Alexie's "revision of non-Native storytelling traditions constitutes a significant challenge to colonialism and the imagination that informs it" (Cox 12). Adding to this statement, storytelling about the reservation as the epicenter of residual colonialism serves as the groundwork for Alexie's biting humor, negative stereotypes, and resurrection of historical characters all within popular culture to call attention to the oppressed state Indians still endure. This chapter demonstrates that Alexie's purpose in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is to expose the traumas of the reservation rather than a romanticized version of Indian life, which perpetuates a false center of culture.

The reservation, at this early point in Alexie's writing career, is the center for continuance of colonial oppression. This is a crisis he takes to task by first locating the center as reservation life. Alexie notes in an interview with John Purdy, "Whenever you have any group of

individuals in any literature who start to define the center, then everybody has to ask whether or not that's sufficient over time" (Peterson 43). Although Alexie's intent is not to become caught up in defining a center, he does define it by revealing that one still exists. Often, a center assumes an imperial model, but Alexie's work shifts this paradigm to elements of Indian origin which are affected by colonialism. Consequently, the reservation is a center of cultural education that teaches how to recognize and resist colonial oppression.

For purpose of clarity, this thesis approaches the center, or reservation, as a polemic—geographically, socially and psychologically. In other words, as a consequence of colonial authority, the center is a chaotic place filled with crisis and fosters isolation from mainstream society. As the result of confrontation and resistance to the colonizer, the reservation is also a center for culture and refuge from outside society. Because of this dualistic quality, inhabitants often want to escape the reservation because of a lack of economic or social promise, yet are pulled back by familial ties, communal contact, or tribal identity the reservation offers.

Post-colonial discourse proves difficult when applied to Indians because the reservation is technically an internal or domestic U.S. colony, yet still a sovereign Indian nation. In addition, Owens makes a valid point in a discussion about Native voice in American literature that, "in fact Native American writing is not postcolonial but rather colonial, that the colonizers never left but simply changed their names to Americans" (Owens 51). In either choice of term, evidence of colonialism remains apparent in contemporary society. Postcoloniality offers a useful lens to engage texts because so many Native writers and activists are working toward a goal of decolonization. Alexie's reservation can be labeled as what post-colonial theorist Seodial Deena defines as a "colonial apparatus": "The institutions responsible for these forms of oppression and exploitation are what I call colonial apparatuses, which undermine the colony and colonized to a

status of disorder and mimicry. These apparatuses become agents of power and subjectification reducing the colonized to powerless objects whose futile acts result into betrayal, playacting, corruption, and failure" (90). The reservation system was developed by the dominant EuroAmerican society, which on the surface maintained the territories as a place of refuge where Indian cultures might remain viable. In reality, physical boundaries separated Indians from society and undercut their ability to develop economically at the same rate as the rest of the nation. These themes form the basis of Alexie's work: displacement, violence, negative stereotype, forced acculturation and religious doctrine, exploitation, language loss, and genocide. He shows the other side of reservation life—a volatile environment where the inhabitants often revert to the corruption of alcohol and violence to cope with the consequences of imperialist power. Mimicry in this case, only proves a more destructive force that creates more chaos for Indian society and destroys it as a cultural center. Alexie's narratives in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* could be considered an admonitory process that exposes mimicry and popular culture as destructive remains of colonialism unless confronted and altered.

Even the American Indian literary experience has suffered the exploitation of the colonizer, positioning the colonizer's point of view as more valid and intellectually stimulating as compared to the Indian author. Cox claims that "consequences of these non-Native storytelling traditions continue to be so vast because of the monopoly non-Native authors have had on the production, dissemination, consumption, and criticism of stories about the colonization of North America" (Cox 6-7). Alexie tips this apple cart simply by re-writing the Indian narrative within the setting of popular culture, perhaps imitating the colonizer on two levels. On one level, Alexie uses mimicry (imitation of the colonizer), implied by Deena as a condition of colonialism (90), as a reciprocal gesture of narrative authority—or power—when he

incorporates stereotypes of Indians within his text. His stories satirize the colonizing power. On another level, Alexie speaks to fellow Indians through characterizations that, hurtful or not, call attention to a situation of inherent colonial oppression and internalized oppression. In other words, Alexie's portrayal of reservation life epitomizes the blatant complacency and indifference which dominant society and Indians have toward the reservation situation. His characters call upon negative stereotype as a sort of mimicry, yet imply they are in control of their own identity, even though it may not be easily identifiable to white dominant society. Clearly then, Alexie's characters become aware of an empowerment the narratives allude to by using traditional storytelling technique and moving from past to present, indicating that, although much time has passed, colonial oppression has remained constant. In a discussion about Indian cultural representations in "Return of the Buffalo," David L. Moore points out, "If power is not a one-way street, Native writers can also redistribute powerlessness across the colonial divide in the name of reversing the present and past" (Moore 70). In other words, Indian writers can assume a sense of power by bringing back powerful images of the past to contemporary literary works (Moore 53). This gesture recalls a time when EuroAmericans did not have power. Alexie does more than reverse the past and present in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, he reverses who is seen as the "Other" in history.

Articulating this resurgence of historical characters, Alexie's characters refer to a sense of liberation and resistance to oppression rather than retreat, confinement, and marginalized status within mainstream society. In the story "A Drug Called Tradition," from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Victor recalls the image of Crazy Horse through song lyrics:

> *Crazy Horse, what have you done?*
>
> *Crazy Horse, what have you done?*

it took four hundred years

and four hundred thousand guns

but the Indians finally won

Ya-hey, the Indians finally won.

Crazy Horse, are you still singing?

Crazy Horse, are you still singing?

I honor your old songs

and all they keep on bringing

because the Indians keep winning.

Ya-hey, the Indians keep winning. (18-19)

Alexie defies colonial oppression by including three elements of subversion Kathleen McCracken addresses in her survey of cinematic context in Alexie's texts in "Appropriating with a Purpose: Cinematic Contexts and Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Sherman Alexie." She contends that Alexie's novels include subversion by "recounting North American history, and expressing the Native American experience, from a Native point of view; telling those versions through conflations of popular genres and the techniques of oral storytelling . . . and deconstructing stereotypes" (McCracken 27). Victor speaks to Crazy Horse, the famous Lakota warrior, who represents resistance to white oppression and victor against Colonel Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn in June of 1876. Victor's lyrics are heard by white and Indian people, but what is more notable is Alexie's reversal of power when Victor says, "All the white folks come to hear my songs, my little pieces of Indian wisdom, although they have to sit in the back of the theater because all the Indians get the best tickets for my shows. It's not racism. The Indians just camp out all night to buy tickets" (Alexie 18). In addition to guitar playing, the

popular genre McCracken notes, and the song as the mode of storytelling, Victor discredits negative stereotypes and appears as a reputable singer entertaining his crowd. Most interesting is Alexie's underlying humor, which if read closely, attacks dominant white society in two ways. First, it ridicules the colonizer for the romantic image of reservation life they create and the fact that they desire something from the Indians—wisdom. Secondly, Alexie censures the misrepresentation of the Indian worldview and replaces it with an authentic representation, which is inherently not founded in conquest and racial violence; the Indian worldview is based on preservation of sovereignty, land rights, and culture.

In another story in the text called "Crazy Horse Dreams," Alexie re-visits history again with the image of Crazy Horse, but he interjects another message in the dialogue between Victor and the unnamed "small Indian woman" (Alexie 38). After Victor explains knowledge of Plains Indians in conversation, the woman responds, "'Just my luck,' she said. 'An educated Indian.' 'Yeah,' he said. 'Reservation University'" (Alexie 39). Although Alexie's sharp humor buffers the dialogue, he exposes a staggering issue apparent to Indians but perhaps not non-Natives. The reservation, holding traumatic elements of colonial oppression and more specifically, limited opportunity, still provides knowledge integral to positive cultural advancement. Victor struggles with ambivalence; he is a well known member of his community, yet his remarks convey a sense of lost worth or fractured identity. This is evident as dialogue continues, Victor says, "I'm a Spokane." The woman replies, "I should've known. You got those fisherman's hands." Victor states, "Ain't no salmon left in our river. Just a school bus and a few hundred basketballs" (39).

Later, Alexie challenges internalized oppression in general, using the small Indian woman as a positive image to counter the association of self-defeatism with reservation Indians. Victor asks, "Why don't you have any scars?" She replies, "Why do you have so fucking many?"

(Alexie 41). Here, Alexie embeds the internalized, self-deprecating lack of identity Indians face when Victor delivers his angry reply, "'You're nothing important,' he said. "You're just another goddamned Indian like me.' 'Wrong,' she said" (Alexie 41). Alexie sends the message within the dialogue of these individuals that each person must take charge of his/her identity in order to be beneficial to the community. Joseph L. Coulombe asserts that, contrary to many critics, Alexie's humor exposes the injustices against Indians because it is "an emotional and intellectual meeting ground for his readers to reconsider reductive stereotypes and expectations" (96). In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* the reservation provides the literal and symbolic meeting ground Coulombe refers to in which inhabitants foster alliances or confront conflict associated with the " Indian anger and frustration with white America" (111). Both characters revert to images of Crazy Horse; the small Indian woman wishes Victor were like Crazy Horse, and Victor wishes the same, associating with her positive qualities of strength, perseverance and resistance. Here, Alexie suggests that mimicry can be a productive act; good qualities in heroes can be imitated instead of destructive behaviors that Indians partake to cope with trauma. Even though Victor and small Indian woman disagree, it is ironic that each character conjures the same image of Crazy Horse. Carroll asserts that Alexie connects "heroic Indians of the past and the culturally alienated Indians of the present into dialogue with each other . . . united by the experience of negotiating cultural boundaries to create an identity within a world that refuses to situate Indians" (Carroll 76). Not only do the characters seek the positive warrior qualities found in Crazy horse, but they associate with him on another level—the experience of confrontation with the colonizer—the ability to fight back or possess the power to allude white authority and protect Indian integrity.

Alexie changes narrative voice in “The Trial of Thomas Builds-The-Fire” to Thomas, whose stories appear as testimony in court. He speaks to the crowd as the one horse that evaded the historical slaughter of eight hundred Palouses by Colonel George Wright in September of 1858. This event was an act of retaliation, during the Coeur d’Alene War, against Indians for an earlier defeat of Colonel Steptoe’s forces. The strike devastated Indians on many levels; horses were valued as a sign of wealth and military power, and considered creatures which shared natural and spiritual world of the Indian (Wilma 1). This aside, the act certainly made hunger and starvation eminent and surrender to the U.S. Army the Indians’ only option. Thomas recounts the past event, and by doing so, perhaps alludes to the genocide and forced relocation of Indians since colonial times. The narrative continues, “Thomas opened his eyes and found that most of the Indians in the courtroom wept and wanted to admit defeat” (Alexie 97). Alexie immediately changes gears, suggesting Thomas is the mediator between past and present and becomes a depiction of future change. In other words, Thomas does not allow past Indian defeats to write his Indian future. He presents another strategy, not defeatist, but one of resistance, “I would continue the war. . . . They could not break me. Some may have wanted to kill me for my arrogance, but others respected my anger, my refusal to admit defeat. I lived that day . . . and galloped into other histories” (98). Thomas’s response elicited a change in the demeanor of the Indians in the courtroom. Hope is apparent because of Thomas’s refusal to accept defeat or negative image of the Indian. Just as the colonizer assumed his actions were justified, so too are the Indian reactions to threatening measures the colonizer posed to their society. Alexie adheres to traditional storytelling by including a mystical component in the act of Thomas opening and closing his eyes. Each time he closes his eyes he is able to conjure another character or story. When he opens his eyes, the act is a restorative process which provides him the energy to resist

and confront. The act also symbolizes a time paradox: Thomas doesn't author the past so he doesn't control it. The present is the realization process, a middle-ground called living. The future is the knowledge that each person has the power to control their destiny. The reservation also provides the same restorative process Alexie alludes to in Thomas.

Alexie exposes the reader to an entirely Indian perspective of past events—not to gain sympathy—as evidence that other cultures own a different worldview than the one Western society has attempted to impose on other societies. As Cox observes, "He [Thomas] tells a story of survival that revises any narratives that promise only Native absence and begins to re-populate non-Native imaginations with contemporary Native Americans" (Cox 160). Alexie goes as far as giving a voice to an animal, employing what Brajesh Sawhney's describes in "That the People Might Live: Strategies of Survival in Contemporary Native American Fiction," as an "imaginary alternative," a strategy of survival used in contemporary literature by Indians as a method of decolonization (Sawhney 22). Alexie's imaginary alternative in "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" is a Palouse horse's testimony which otherwise suggests the genocide Indians have endured throughout history. Alexie re-invents an image of the Indian as a vital participant in a multicultural society rather than a vanishing artifact. At the same time, Alexie's tactic of confronting the colonizer, by means of personal testimony to atrocities committed by the colonizer demonstrates that the Indian will no longer retreat.

Escape is only an option if taken to mean abandonment from self-fulfilling prophecies that deteriorate reservation life. Andrew Dix compares narrative dialogic and the theme of escape in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Storyteller,* an autobiographical collection by Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko published in 1981. He suggests that Alexie goes beyond the conventional means of using a theme of escape to signify "liberation

from white America," as Silko does in *Storyteller* (Dix 162). Instead of using the stories as a means of escape from colonial oppression, they become a self-reflexive process by which Indians can re-evaluate their own authority. In other words, the deterioration of the characters in Alexie's text symbolizes the larger scope of deterioration of reservation life and tribal values in their community. Self-empowerment is accomplished by an individual acting upon social responsibilities. This agency appears as the ability to provide an alternative ending to one's own narrative, which in effect is one's own choice in life.

Next, Thomas's narrative becomes the testimony of Qualchan, another historical figure involved in the Coeur d'Alene War. Thomas relates past to present when he says, "The City of Spokane is now building a golf course named after me, Qualchan, located in that valley where I was hanged" (Alexie 99), suggesting the ridiculous action of patronizing a colonized people instead of constructing a memorial as an act of reverence for loss of human life. In effect, Alexie's message is clear; the colonizer makes no association of equality even on a human level. Western culture therefore, distorts images of the past and Alexie's task is to re-present those images. Finally, Thomas's testimony becomes Wild Coyote, a warrior who is also present during the warfare between U.S. forces and combined tribes in 1858. Wild Coyote reiterates the statement, "You must understand" (100, 101), demanding some authority for the testimony he revealed to members of the court. Specifically, Alexie delivers messages to both native and non-native attendees. As Stephen F. Evans points out in "'Open Containers': Sherman Alexie's Drunken Indians," Alexie uses satire and irony in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* "as materials for constructing a realistic literary document for contemporary Indian survival" (Evans 48). Thomas's testimony then, as a Palouse horse, underscores an alternative meaning of the survival of Indians. The account functions as what Evans calls "a modern

survival document from which his readers gain strength by actively participating in the recognition of reality as viewed through Alexie's satiric lens or from the reflections of his satiric mirror" (52). Second, Alexie adheres to the tradition of storytelling, most notably through voices of historical characters, making the narrative indisputably collective. Alexie's powerful stories speak to the audience on a larger scale about his concerns with issues such as nationalism and sovereignty. Alexie's collection, as Dix points out, "invites us to reflect upon a relationship between nation and narration" (Dix 158). Tribal voices must be collective like the voices in Alexie's work and assertive in order to be heard on either level.

Although Alexie does not change Thomas's defeat—Thomas receives a guilty verdict—he does change other aspects of the narrative. Thomas goes to prison; he is not executed and receives an opportunity to tell his story in court. Most significantly, Alexie reverses—by means of narrative authority—the power from colonizer to colonized in the fact that Thomas was able to tell his truth. On a national and personal level, Alexie embeds this authority over power by means of the story itself. Dix expands this idea:

> Historically, of course, Native American peoples often conceived of themselves in national terms, able to negotiate treaties with European settlers or, later, with the US as the sovereign power to another. However, the conception of the Spokanes that emerges in *The Lone Ranger* is of a now dispossessed, subaltern people, subject to the full authority of the US. Such authority manifests itself not merely in institutions (the BIA federal courtrooms, the reservation itself) but in a greater power of storytelling, with America's nationalistic narratives of progress and assimilation evidently making it difficult to construct stories of which the tribe and its members are the enduring subjects. (158-59)

At the end of the story, Thomas—as Wild Coyote—is found guilty for killing two soldiers and is transported to prison. He describes prison as a "new kind of reservation, barrio, ghetto, logging-town tin shack" (Alexie 103). Alexie suggests a greater crisis because to many Indians this is how they perceive the reservation because this is what it has become.

Alexie offers more realistic representations of the reservation in the title story "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven," when the nameless narrator explains, "When I got back to the reservation, my family wasn't surprised to see me. They'd been expecting me back since the day I left for Seattle. There's an old Indian poet who said that Indians can reside in the city, but they can never live there" (Alexie 187). "What are you going to do with your life?" his mother asks him. "Don't know," the narrator responds (187). What Alexie makes evident here are the complexities or polemic involved with reservation life. Indians must decide that if they do leave the reservation to pursue other opportunities, the possibility of remaining in mainstream society or return to the reservation and achieve fulfillment there. Decisions about social networks, financial stability, and betrayal of the reservation community are all conscious realities Indians must contend with on some level. Alternatively, Alexie shows the ambivalent nature of reservation life; the preservation of tribal elements which are inherent to Indian culture, language and tradition, typically takes place on a reservation. The storyteller admits he attended college, so this might leave the reader frustrated that he has no answer for what he will do with his life. This is an instance that Alexie allows room for the reader to come up with an alternative answer after associating with the dilemmas of a reservation. In other words, we must each write our own story. To achieve some sense of individual fulfillment, an Indian can be part of two societies and a fully functioning participant of both environs.

In “Imagining the Reservation,” Alexie makes a powerful point in the equation, “Survival = Anger x Imagination. Imagination is the only weapon on the reservation” (Alexie 150). It contains elements of humor, healing, and resistance all within a basic formula that is easily identifiable to a pop-culture audience. Working on the reservation 7-11 convenience store, the unidentified narrator contemplates the items that surround him: *Rolling Stones* magazines, fireworks, Pepsi-Cola, and the television program “The Tonight Show” (151). Humor interconnects his streamline of thoughts, “Imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C.” (149), to the thief that attacked him while at work and left him “between the expired milk and broken eggs” (150), and a memory of Moses, who “spit his false teeth in the air” (151). Anger in this equation is a positive motivating force which fuels one’s determination to resist and be heard. Imagination implies the search for ways to heal, forgive and be in control of one’s destiny. Alexie’s representation of the reservation starts to change in this story; the reservation is no longer a place or people neglected by modern society, but by the indigenous peoples as well.

Lori Jervis, Paul Spicer, Spero Manson, and the group called Ai-Superpfp Team conducted a study of Grass Creek Reservation, located in the northern plains region of the United States. In “Boredom, ‘Trouble,’ and the Realities of Postcolonial Reservation Life,” the authors note that some Indians within the Grass Creek community blame the degeneration of reservation life on popular culture. Indians interviewed suggest that, “Part of this culture loss was a growing intergenerational rift in values and lifestyle. Young people, it was said, were more interested in popular culture than they were in Native culture” (Jervis, Spicer, and Manson 48).This is the reason that Alexie incorporates popular culture and humor in his narratives, to show that modern society—inside or outside the reservation—is inundated with pop-culture and humor. He also

implies that it is personal responsibility not to allow pop-culture to replace cultural heritage, yet to be familiar with pop-culture makes mainstream society's messages easier to interpret. Alexie corrects much misconception about pop-culture in relation to Indians in an interview with Matt Dellinger in 2003:

> I would argue that reservation Indians are much more assimilated into American society that people would assume, or believe, depending upon the reservation. A majority are very assimilated, and, aside from particular cultural things and ceremonies, there's not a whole lot of cultural difference between poor white people and Indians. Indian culture is, by and large, pop culture. (Peterson 123)

Owens agrees that while Alexie's prose may be "original and in many ways brilliant and extra-ordinary," Alexie's humor is an essential component that "allows authors to maintain an aggressive posture" of their own Indian identity within their work (Owens 76). Alexie implies in his stories that Indians are their own agents of change, so identity must be cultivated at an individual level in order to be productive to the community. Faye Lone-Knapp argues in "Rez Talk: How Reservation Residents Describe Themselves" that identity perspective should be community based with an "expanded spatial definition" (Lone-Knapp 640). While it can be agreed that Indian culture establishes its core as the community, social constructs depend upon how individuals perceive themselves in relation to the community.

Alexie's stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* are thematically structured around the ambivalence the reservation represents. They also reveal the author's personal ambivalence toward reservation life; Alexie grew up on the reservation yet lives outside the reservation in Seattle, Washington; the rest of his family lives on the reservation and according to Alexie in an interview with Duncan Campbell in 2002, "He [Alexie] visits every

month" (Peterson 119). Deena asserts that writers and characters are seriously affected by colonialism's limitations and escapisms (Deena 91). Alexie exposes this in his narrative collection because he experienced reservation life and is familiar with its effects and limits. Alexie discloses: "Yeah, I could write about fry bread and fried bologna. And the great thing is I didn't know you could combine, the traditional imagery and fried bread and fried bologna. The way I lived my life, and the way inside me, and the way I thought, which is a mix of traditionalism and contemporary culture" (Peterson 48). Alexie models this concept that individuals are agents of their own transformation, which is a recurrent theme, while he exposes the realities of reservation life in his stories. In effect, individual growth and empowerment turn into a community's control and viability of the reservation. A chaotic center now becomes a center of potential.

Instead of being forced to choose between the reservation or mainstream society, perhaps Alexie and his stories inform the reader that hybridity does not eradicate any one culture or identity, but allows one the comfort and freedom of experiencing two cultures without the constraints or limitations of boundaries. Alexie's representations of reservation life reveal that colonial oppression resides in many facets of the reservation, but does not diminish a tribe's authority as something strictly affected by imperialism. Much of his work is immersed within pop-culture and humor, but this is the style that makes his voice heard. Humor is a buffer, anger is an avenue and pop-culture serves as his setting, but writers choose their own devices, and these work for Alexie. The reservation has a dual nature undeniably the result of colonial expansion. It represents a cultural hub for its inhabitants (and those urban Indians who might be considered expatriates to the reservation), a colonial apparatus which has left damaging consequences for its indigenous people.

Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* demonstrates a masterful representation of realities of reservation life without forfeiting Indian authority over the past, yet provides Indians with a unique energetic identity. In doing so, Alexie creates the possibility that Indians do not have to lose any cultural integrity by becoming more apparent in mainstream society or by strengthening tribal values and community by participating in reservation life. Alexie implies that the reservation can be a place of acceptance and resurgence, a new creative force which motivates its inhabitants, but only if the inhabitants act upon their own authority for change. The reservation can be seen as an evolving, just like the process of Alexie's narrative storytelling.

CHAPTER TWO

FOLLOWING THE BLUES: A CHANGING CENTER

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven allowed Sherman Alexie an opportunity to vocalize malcontent toward the misrepresentations of Native Americans contemporary literature. Alexie exposes the reservation as a center of polarity between Western influence and Indian culture and lessens the tension between cultures by making his characters active participants in cultural exchange. Indians who leave the reservation for outside opportunities are sometimes thought of as traitors to their tribe, yet if an Indian remains on the reservation, he/she may be limited in opportunity. In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie further challenges the concept of a center, suggesting it is merely a part of Indian identity rather than a location of culture. Alexie re-writes the image of the reservation; it becomes less of a space limited by boundary constraints associated with the reservation, and becomes a center of a living, moving collective space. Alexie modifies representations of the reservation to include an individual's authority to map out qualities such as integrity and resistance instead of submitting to the traumas of colonial oppression. His characters own the ability, then, to move between the spaces of the reservation and discern which elements of reservation life will be acceptable within the mapping process. Analysis of *Reservation Blues* underscores Alexie's work as a contribution to Indian literature that contains certain traces of theory critical to the Native American canon. Alexie's text includes dialogic as the social interaction between characters suffused with pop-culture. Furthermore, it reveals Alexie's work contains elements of cosmopolitanism; Alexie doesn't use character voices to preach a universal or national agenda, as Arnold Krupat suggests is the motive of some Indian writers (Krupat 198), but represents Indians with individual and collective voices in a multicultural society. This chapter unveils Alexie's alternate image of the

reservation's center, which changes from an element found in a place to a potential characteristic within a person. Alexie makes this clear in *Reservation Blues* because he includes cultural encounters between characters that show an ability to change from the intercultural experience. Blues music is the common element that cultures encounter one another in the text.

Reservation Blues, Alexie's first novel, was published in 1995. Although met with much criticism, the book became a national bestseller and winner of the American Book Award. Alexie's narrative is a story of the visit of blues legend Robert Johnson to the Spokane Indian Reservation to find healing from mystic Big Mom, who lives atop Wellpinit Mountain. Robert is haunted by the past, and the devil—who wants to collect his spoils—is close at his heels. In his search for Big Mom, Robert meets Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin, characters who originally appeared in Alexie's earlier work *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Robert's guitar, animated to a degree, finds its way to Thomas for a period of time, then moves on to Victor. The band Coyote Springs is soon formed by Thomas, Victor and Junior. The guitar provides the band an opportunity to journey outside the reservation not only to claim their fame, but find out who they are as individuals. Alexie includes the motifs for which he is becoming quite notable: unique metaphor, cutting humor, and pop-culture. For example, the guitar always finds its way back home, a symbol of reservation Indians crossing between cultures. Pop-culture elements pervade the novel: Betty and Veronica, who are characters from the comic magazine *Archie's Gang*; Calvary Record Company, which producers are named after historical characters; Robert Johnson, who is a historical blues legend. Pop-culture names appear as Big Mom's previous students, who are also rock and roll's most celebrated musicians: Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Paul McCartney and Diana Ross.

Alexie still interweaves the traumas associated with reservation life in his narrative, but this time he shows the reservation in a more positive light, a place of healing and nurturing, not just a location of dusty government shacks. The Spokane Indian Reservation not only serves as a setting for Alexie's novel, but presents as a personification of Indian historical perspective. Crow/Creek/Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story," condemns Alexie for not representing the reservation as the center of traditional identity and healing, the way Indian literary predecessors Momaday or Silko do in their texts. She contrasts Alexie's work to Momaday's and Silko's, stating that Alexie's literature doesn't represent "a responsibility of art as an ethical endeavor or the artist as responsible social critic, as marked departure from the early renaissance works of such luminaries as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko" (Cook-Lynn 68). Alexie is somewhat of a literary rogue in comparison to his colleagues because of this departure from the conventional style of representing Indian images. It is ironic that Cook-Lynn makes this accusation about *Reservation Blues* because Alexie's process of changing the image of the reservation relative to Indian identity is anything but devoid of ethical or social commentary. For that matter, one would think Cook-Lynn might applaud Alexie's effort to take part in post-colonial dialogue that she mentions in "The American Indian Fiction Writer: "Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and First Nation Sovereignty," which she authored in 1993. She states that "any kind of post-colonial dialogue seems to be either of little interest to the mainstream or too strident" (27). She brings the works of Momaday, Silko and Erdrich into her conversation, yet avoids Alexie, who has already been published by this time. All of Alexie's work contains undercurrents of the colonial situation, sometimes brought up with his sarcastic humor, and the largest percentage of his reader base is mainstream society.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven illustrates the realities of reservation life. In *Reservation Blues*, the reservation is an ambiguous entity, having human qualities, suggesting it is a participant in the interactive process that Native Americans experience in what Mary Louise Pratt identifies as the "contact zone." For example, as the blues guitar played music, Alexie portrays the reservation as capable of listening, or owning a human capability: "The reservation arched its back, opened its mouth, and drank deep because the music tasted so familiar" (Alexie 24). The reservation then, is a living participant in the contact zone or as Pratt explains, "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 34). Alexie's literary technique of personifying the reservation solidifies Pratt's assertion that modern writings of contact zone experiences are identified as "testimonio" (Pratt 35). She explains that it is a connection between literature and experience: "In recent decades autoethnography, critique, and resistance have reconnected with writing in a contemporary creation of the contact zone, the *testimonio*." (35). In other words, the voice of the reservation is included in the Native American testimonio. Alexie mentions unidentified voices a few times throughout the narrative, suggesting that the reservation itself was the voice, collective or individual. For instance, Thomas wakes up one night and goes out on his porch "and listened to those faint voices that echoed all over the reservation" (Alexie 46). Another interpretation could be that it is the reservation speaking among its inhabitants. Alexie includes the reservation as a member of a collective voice. Alexie implies that alternative interpretations of the how the reservation "speaks" to its people also allows alternative ways for Indians to voice concern about issues relevant to reservation life.

Reservation Blues depicts the reservation as "gone itself, just a shell of its former self, just a fragment of the whole. But the reservation still possessed power and rage, magic and loss, joys and jealousy. The reservation tugged at the lives of Indians, stole from them in the middle of the night, watched impassively as the horses and salmon disappeared. But the reservation forgave, too" (Alexie 96-97). The reservation resulted from colonialism yet still exists in contemporary society. Alexie implies that instead of remaining static, the reservation—or the Indians who live there—must be in constant interaction with mainstream society. Contact begins with forgiving the colonizer on some level for the traumas brought with the situation of colonization, or accepting a EuroAmerican presence in society. Alexie suggests this attitude toward the colonizer is helpful because it removes psychological barriers. On the surface Alexie changes the image of the reservation, but clearly sensitizes the reader to a shift in literary representations of post-colonialism to representations of postmodernism, or the interaction of different cultures. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, theorists who critically examine schools of thought about borders in "On the Borders Between U.S. Studies and Postcolonial Theory," assert that borders must be engaged in terms of "what connects such groups as well as what separates them" (Singh and Schmidt 7). Robert Johnson initiates border crossing with his visit to the Spokane Reservation to seek Big Mom, who possesses healing powers and appears to him in a recurring dream. Alexie's characters take part in cultural exchange because Native and non-Native characters cross reservation borders, whether it be internal (Natives travelling between tribal reservations) or external (outside members of society coming into the reservation), changing the perception of reservation borders from divisions to connections, or what Singh and Schmidt refer to as, "the construction and mobilization of difference" (Singh and Schmidt 7). For instance, Chess and Checkers Warmwater are Flathead Indians who interact with Spokane

Indians Thomas, Victor, and Junior. Robert Johnson is an African American blues man visiting the Spokane Reservation. Blues is the connection which the characters use to navigate across social and cultural borders; therefore, the music becomes part of the cultural exchange process. Yet blues music unites individuals with intimate and spiritual elements of their identity. Alexie presents out of the ordinary ways which locate the Indian center of culture; in this text he uses blues music as the medium which helps characters find out who they are in relation to others inside or outside their culture. Blues music and elder figures such as Big Mom help characters realize that the Indian center is not the choice of where to live, but how to live. For example, taking part in blues music helps Thomas and Chess decide they would rather live outside the reservation. Robert Johnson's sentiments reveal he is a greater asset on the reservation. Victor also remains on the reservation. Within a literary scope, these representations further situate Alexie's work as cosmopolitan in the literary canon.

Alexie does not suggest forgetting about past traumas, but does imply that forgiveness is an integral component in relation to cultural survival. Alexie's description of the reservation also provokes the reader to engage the reservation in terms of what literary scholar David L. Moore terms "cultural property" in "Return of the Buffalo: Cultural Representation as Cultural Property" (Moore 62). Representing the reservation with transformative qualities maintains expressive elements sacred to Indian culture, such as oral tradition, yet acknowledges the Western presence as part of Indian experience. Conceding that a shared existence with Western culture remains everlasting, Indians face the challenge of protecting and maintaining cultural distinctions within contemporary society. Post-colonial literary theorists Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin make an interesting point in *The Empire Writes Back* that "An acceptance of post-coloniality as part of the American formation is no longer 'a badge of shame' or immaturity, but

a sign of distinction and difference, a difference which has been potent in American culture as a creative force" (Ashcroft 163). Alexie's creative force is evident in his representations of the reservation as culturally distinctive to Indian identity.

By giving the reservation human characteristics, Alexie makes it an active participant in the dialogic of the text. Dialogic, in this case, references the dialogism of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, which Clark and Holquist define as, is "an account of relations between people and between persons and things that cuts across religious, political, and aesthetic boundaries" (348). Blues is the primary feature of the cultural dialogue between Thomas Builds-The-Fire and blues legend Robert Johnson from the time they meet at the crossroads. The image of the guitar man and devil meeting at a crossroads is common to Western mythology; however, Alexie changes the idea to reflect the redemptive qualities of cultural exchange instead of recalling past images of the EuroAmerican as a devil. Alexie personifies Johnson's guitar as he does the reservation, making it a participant in Alexie's dialogic narrative. The guitar speaks to Thomas the way another character would by providing insight to Thomas: "The blues always make us remember. Y'all need to play songs for your people. They need you" (22-23). The narrative continues, "Music rose above the reservation, made its way into the clouds, and rained down. The reservation arched its back, opened its mouth, and drank deep because the music tasted so familiar. Thomas felt the movement, the shudder that passed through tree and stone, asphalt and aluminum" (24). Blues music becomes the point from which the characters discover strengths and weaknesses when mapping their Indian identity and confronting complexities of cultural boundaries. Blues is the focal point for multicultural conversation between characters because the music Coyote Springs produces enables them to interact with New York producers Calvary Records and groupies Betty and Veronica, who are girls from EuroAmerican mainstream society.

Alexie still includes popular culture, historical characters, humor, negative stereotype and traumas as part of the narrative as in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*; however, in *Reservation Blues*, instead of just exposing the realities of the post-colonial condition, Alexie reveals that cultural boundaries are a moving changing process, interdependent with the center. Alexie shows the center as a potential which opens to positive opportunities instead of the traumas which make cultural regeneration impossible.

Douglas Ford, in his essay "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues," states that, "Aboriginality consequently becomes an ever-changing state for Alexie since contact with cultures of other continents constantly transforms one's means of representing aboriginality. Nobody remains untransformed by this contact, not displaced Native Americans, not enslaved Africans, and not even the apparent conquerors, the European colonists" (Ford 197). Blues music could be paralleled with Ford's transformative ability of culture contact; blues music affects all who come into contact with it, making it a mode of cross cultural exchange. Scott Andrews criticizes *Reservation Blues* in "A New Road and a Dead End in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*," disputing that while *Reservation Blues* may engage the idea of cross cultural exchange, the novel doesn't explore the opportunities cultural exchange offers; it falls into Alexie's typical portrayal of despair and survival (Andrews 137). Blues has a history that is based on oral tradition and calls attention to the loss a culture suffers by recalling memories through music. Alexie adapts this cultural element from African American culture and crosses cultural barriers incorporating it into the Indian experience. Alexie explores the fortuity of cultural exchange when Thomas gives Robert a ride and when Robert leaves the guitar in Thomas's van. These acts are how Alexie develops his whole message of individual potential throughout the novel.

The reservation is a static presence or a background silence when Thomas picks up Robert at the crossroads. Metaphorical representations become evident in the image of the crossroads. For example, at the crossroads, Robert notices the sign for the town, "Welcome to Wellpinit, Population: Variable" (Alexie 3). Crossroads is the symbol for cultural exchange. Robert walks past three churches at the crossroads: Catholic, Assembly of God and Presbyterian, signifying colonial missionary effort to convert Spokane Indians to Christianity. The Christian Church then symbolizes another mode of cultural exchange. The church was introduced to reservation Indians but became altered by contact with Indian culture. The relationship between Father Arnold and Checkers best represents contact and cultural exchange. Throughout the novel Checkers has a growing affection for Father Arnold, which comes to a climax when she kisses him (192). Father Arnold becomes confused about his identity and resolves to leave the priesthood rather than betray his position. This decision changes because he talks out the problem with Checkers, who apologizes for kissing Father Arnold. Checkers and Father Arnold mutually forgive each other (287), which signifies the forgiveness between EuroAmericans and Indians for past transgressions that have fostered a conflict between cultures.

The fact that Robert is an African American seeking Big Mom, the woman on the mountain, is itself an act of crossing cultural boundaries. The crossroads, like the blues, underscores the theme of cultural exchange, although Alexie uses crossroads as a metaphor for choices and opportunities rather than specific outcomes of cultural exchange. For instance, Big Mom repeats several times throughout the novel that it is up to each person to make his/her own decisions. Junior Polatkin left the reservation on the same journey Thomas and Victor did, yet he despaired and took his own life. The fact that he at least had opportunity available is what Alexie alludes to in this text. Scott Andrews makes another criticism of Alexie's work,

contending that “the novel cuts short the possibilities of this ‘new road’ and the music is silenced” (Andrews 137). The “new road” Andrews defines as “a new way of seeing old problems and defeating them” (137). This is not Alexie’s intent, as the characters simply find themselves at the metaphorical crossroad and must engage in a self-reflexive process of identity. In other words, Alexie doesn’t make a dramatic shift by presenting results of cultural exchange in the novel, but gradually moves from the oppressive elements of reservation life to the connectivity it offers in cultural exchange and optional alternatives available to Indians such as experiencing life outside the reservation.

Alexie makes a pointed statement about an individual’s authority of mapping identity and the center as an evolving process through cultural exchange. Alexie placesThomas and Robert’s meeting at the crossroads to show that cultural exchange is part of the process of mapping individual identity. Thomas, who carries on the art of traditional storytelling, encounters problems throughout the narrative typical of contemporary reservation Indians. According to Brajesh Sawhney, whose essay “That the People Might Live: Strategies of Survival in Contemporary Native American Fiction,” describes Indian writers’ methods of writing survival strategies as a process of decolonization, “[T]he Euro-Americans emphasize the thematic aspect of myths, while the Native Americans emphasize the behavioral aspect of myths which includes healing and regeneration” (Sawhney 17). Thomas’s stories contain mythical qualities revered by Spokane Indian culture because they contain a lesson or an element of healing. Sawhney further explains this process:

> The native writers believe that every individual brings with him his sorrows, questions and triumphs of life when he takes part in a ceremony or ritual. He provides some openness to the myth to become one with it. Thus, the individual

> becomes one term of the metaphor while the myth becomes the other and the tension between the two releases an energy that culminates as vision, intuition or insight. (17)

Thomas's songwriting indicates his participation in oral traditions, which opens one's insight, or a consciousness that enables him to evaluate his inner self in relation to his surroundings. Thomas's reflection about his surroundings helps identify his purpose on the reservation, evaluate opportunity off the reservation, and what he may contribute to his tribe by either choice. The narrative alludes to Thomas's insight in the text, "Thomas looked around at the little country he was trying to save, this reservation hidden away at the corner of the world" (16). The band Coyote Springs is comprised of Junior, Victor and Thomas, who are later joined by Chess and Checkers Warm Water. Thomas continues his ritual of storytelling, which is a strong part of his identity, by writing lyrics for the band's music. Thomas's mapping, or formation of identity, takes place in the act of songwriting because his words speak to modern audience yet refer to a cultural past. Mapping is a complex process that also involves identity in relation to mixed cultures and where an individual feels where they are most needed and where they may make a greater contribution to the society they choose. Mapping also includes the mental dialogue or subconscious evaluation a person takes part in to make decisions relative in the identity process. Alexie makes this evident with his explanation of Thomas: "After he [Thomas] woke up, he paced around the room, stood on his porch, and listened to those faint voices that echoed over the reservation" (46). Thomas is a young man with deep tribal roots but struggles with the choice to leave the reservation to seek a better life because he is aware there is limited opportunity for him if he remains on the reservation.

Alexie uses the element of popular culture to facilitate issues concerning Indian cultures today. For example, Chess accuses Victor and Junior of betraying their cultural heritage when they sleep with Betty and Veronica, two white groupies who follow the band. Thomas's relationship with Chess sparks topics of conversation such as mixedblood Indians, which Alexie subliminally embeds as conflicting worldviews within immediate members of Indian reservation society. The topic is not only a general perception of some Indians; Alexie makes it part of the process of identity, and how the characters engage or respond to the topics. Personal issues become part of greater issues in relation to the world at large. Alexie does not engage the subject of mixedblood Indians with racism but does insert the issue into his narrative from the perspective of reservation Indians who consider this problematic to preserving cultural heritage. Thomas agrees with Chess, "but he also know about the shortage of love in the world and the half-breed kids at the reservation school suffered through worse beatings than Thomas ever did" (Alexie 82). By confronting complex internal cultural issues of Indian life such as mixedblood Indians and preservation, Alexie moves away from past stereotypical images and traumas. John Mihelich's exposition notes the presence of popular culture in literature, which is typically seen as a hegemonic literary element, and challenges that Alexie uses pop-culture as a counter to these previous tendencies. He critiques Alexie's cinematic representations of characters such as Thomas and Victor in "Smoke or Signals? American Popular Culture and the Challenge to Hegemonic Images of American Indians in Native American Film," and brings up a valid point about individuals negotiating between two cultures that appears throughout *Reservation Blues*. He describes Victor and Thomas thus:

> In their personae and their struggles, Alexie simultaneously develops characters with both specific Indian qualities and more common American aspects. In doing

> so, he promotes a more complete human image of contemporary American Indians to a popular American audience. This significant contribution is achieved through a rather simple formula: the major protagonists portray contemporary American Indians in a specific world that is at once American and Indian. (131)

Ironically, the protagonists that appear in the novel *Reservation Blues* and the film *Smoke Signals* are Thomas and Victor, suggesting Alexie's hallmark—challenging misrepresentations of Indians and using popular culture as the method. Mihelich calls Alexie's use of popular culture, "an effective avenue for confrontation and transformation in American culture (133). Simultaneously, Alexie challenges Indians with other elements which compound the crisis of identity mapping—the perception of mixedblood Indians—found in *Reservation Blues*.

Alexie negotiates another element inherent to identity mapping by including the topic of spirituality. Later, Thomas asks Chess to listen. "To what?" she asks Thomas. "What do you hear?" Thomas presses Chess. "The wind" is Chess's response. "No," Thomas tells her. "Beyond that," Thomas directs. "Chess listened. She heard the Spokane Reservation breathe. . . . She heard something else too. Some faint something" (86). Chess's reflection implies not Christianity as the cultural exchange, but each person's cultivation of personal faith and communication with a higher power. Additionally, the reservation in this case refers to the spiritual awareness of consciousness necessary when developing one's identity. Alternatively, Chess confronts Thomas with another question, which opens another dialogue that shows the complexities associated with the human condition. Chess asks Thomas to go to church with her, and Thomas responds, "How can you go to a church that killed so many Indians?" (166). Thomas questions atonement, paying for sins, faith and murdered Indians. Chess responds, "How do you explain Crazy Horse or Martin Luther King? There's good and bad in the world. We all get to make the choice.

That's one of the mysteries of faith" (167). In analyzing *Reservation Blues*, Douglas Ford's "Sherman Alexie's Indigenous Blues" describes how Alexie "bridges two different American experiences, African and Indian, and, in so doing, also helps bridge discourses" (198). While Ford suggests Alexie uses the blues as a "trope" in the identity process (203), blues facilitates the significance the reservation has in an Indian's identity process.

Big Mom can be referred to as a catalyst in each person's mapping process; she is identified as a music teacher, but her teaching goes beyond music lessons. Big Mom's agenda includes building integrity rather than continuing patterns of trauma, marking her as a hub of transculturation. Not only do Indians interact with her but white and African American musicians as well. Alexie implies the struggle to establish one's own identity is a condition present to all humans in the social process, not just an element which presents conflict to the Indian community. Dreams serve as a communication pipeline for Big Mom, giving her a mystical quality and magnetic force for those who require healing. She also possesses a timeless presence because she was witness to the slaughter of horses Colonel Wright commanded more than a century ago. Alexie uses this dream state so characters easily move between past, present and future to demonstrate that time is a continuum on which traumatic events still occur. Big Mom is an enigmatic personality who represents the power of oral tradition mixed with modern culture. Andrews points out a tension within Big Mom's role and states, "Big Mom's role reflects the apparent contradictions that inform the entire novel—the simultaneous resistance of and participation in mainstream American culture" (142). However, this is a part of Thomas's Indian identity that has been discovered because of his exposure to Big Mom. Ford suggests this is part of Alexie's purpose: "Alexie calls our attention to the Indian around us, the Indian who emerges unexpectedly out of forms considered securely defined and thus outside his or her sphere" (212).

Alexie makes Big Mom the medium for Indians who want to successfully build their identity on cross cultural experiences.

Alexie alludes to the power of oral tradition which develops in the narrative. He shifts in literary style from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, where Thomas recalls the slaughter of horses to validate the Indian perspective, now to *Reservation Blues*, where the horses are a metaphor for human suffering, not explicitly Indian suffering. Alexie clarifies this point:

> In 1992, Big Mom still watched for the return of those slaughtered horses and listened to their songs. With each successive generation, the horses arrived in different forms and with different songs, called themselves Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Marvin Gaye, and so many other names. Those horses rose from everywhere and turned to Big Mom for rescue, but they fell back into the earth again. For seven generations, Big Mom had received those horses and held them in her arms. (10)

Big Mom is known to have healing powers, and like most authorities, she is challenged by other characters in the narrative such as Victor and Michael White Hawk. Big Mom tells Victor, "It's up to you. You make your choices" (216). Alexie suggests an introspective look at a conscience that makes alternative choices, rather than falling into a pattern of learned limitations handed down from generation to generation. Michael White Hawk evokes more response from Big Mom than Victor, and Big Mom takes the opportunity to comment about Michael's apparent identity crisis. She explains to Michael, "Don't you understand that the musical instrument is not to be used in the same way that a bow and arrow is? Music is supposed to heal" (208). Michael offers Big Mom a rebuttal: "'But Big Ma,' White Hawk said, 'I'm a warrior. I'm 'posed to fight'"

(208). Big Mom reminds Michael, “No, Michael, you’re a saxophone player and you need to work on your reed technique” (208). Alexie implies that as a result of forgetting tribal customs and heritage, this neglected space is taken over by darker images of reservation trauma. Those who didn’t listen to Big Mom forget how to play and stand around trying to remember, which signifies Indians attempt to remember forgotten tribal customs. Consequently, Indians return to Big Mom and blame her saying, “But look what you did to us. I didn’t do anything to you. You caused all this. You made the choices. What can we do? You can change your mind” (210). The excerpt shows that Alexie describes the human condition; the problem is not specific to Indians. All humans struggle with forgetting their heritage, remembering ancestors or neglecting spirituality. Big Mom’s voice symbolizes a conscience or conversation with a higher power. By making the dialogue apply to all audiences, Alexie brings the non-Indian audience to a level of understanding other struggles Indians face.

Coyote Springs goes to Big Mom’s home at the top of Wellpinit Mountain, per her invitation, before embarking for New York City. Although Alexie refers to the band collectively throughout the novel, only individual members are open to her healing power. Alexie alludes to healing as a collective process, but promotes that in order for the process to be effective, healing must commence on a personal level. Coyote Springs fails to secure a record contract, and so returns to the reservation, but not without being changed by the experience. Big Mom’s lessons are within the memory of each band member; however, it is the decision of each person to resolve internal conflict by making valid, optimistic choices. Thomas, Chess and Checkers decide to seek opportunities outside the reservation; Victor is resolute and will not leave the reservation, but does look for employment. Junior, alternatively, chooses despair, which results in suicide. Alexie illustrates the variety of ways which the characters map identity and either

identify with positive elements of one's culture and environment, or fall prey to the negative elements which traumatize and deteriorate the condition of reservation life.

Thomas's interaction with Big Mom reveals a continued identity mapping and clearer perception of a center for Thomas. For instance, Thomas asks to borrow Big Mom's guitar to play a particular chord. Big Mom tells Thomas, "'All Indians can play that chord,' Big Mom said. 'It's the chord created especially for us. But you have to play it on your own instrument, Thomas. You couldn't even lift my guitar'" (Alexie 207). The guitar is a metaphor for personal experience. Playing the chords represents each person's mapping process. The music that results is one's identity. The guitar is also a guide on each person's road to personal redemption therefore cannot be played by another person. Thomas' explanation of Big Mom's mystical abilities to the rest of the band shows Thomas's regard for her authority as a tribal elder. Thomas states, "She's powerful medicine, the most powerful medicine. I can't believe she called for us" (199). Although Spokane Indian author Gloria Bird criticizes Alexie's novel stating, "There are no signs of elders, with the exception of Big Mom whose figure is exalted to mythical disproportions. Pan-Indianism becomes the axiom for *Indianness,* a borrowing from various native cultures and traditions that, in the end, misconstrue what is Indian, or specifically Spokane, to the general public" (Bird 49). Alexie responds to criticisms such as this and explains the tensions of choosing between public and private material in cultural literature in a 2000 interview with Joelle Fraser. When Fraser notes the tension between protecting a culture yet exposing a culture by describing it in written publication, Alexie responds:

> I don't write about anything sacred. I don't write about any ceremonies; I don't use any Indian songs. . . . I approach my writing the same way I approach my life. It's what I've been taught and how I behave with regard to my spirituality. . . . My

> tribe drew that line for me a long time ago. It's not written down, but I know it. If you're Catholic you wouldn't tell anybody about the confessional. I feel a heavy personal responsibility, and I accept it, and I honor it. It's part of the beauty of my culture. (Peterson 93)

Alexie doesn't specifically name elders in the novel because what his characters seek is opportunity, an identity and redemption. Elders in the real life Alexie writes about do not necessarily have redemptive qualities; they share knowledge or lessons they have experienced. Redemption in Alexie's novel is something the characters find in each other. Furthermore, it is not Alexie's intent to misconstrue Indian representation if his whole purpose of the novel is to represent the realities of reservation life, notable to Indians who struggle with the reservation experience. Alexie underscores what is ultimately the concern of many Indians; he is not concerned with whether a specific tribal voice will be heard, just that the Indian voice will be heard. Common concerns should not be misconstrued as pan-Indianism, because according to Vine Deloria, Jr., pan-Indianism is an anthropological term, in which the Indian leaves his tribe to emerge as "one nationwide Indian community" (Deloria 246). Deloria further explains, "Pan-Indianism implies that a man forgets his tribal background and fervently merges with other Indians to form 'Indianism.' Rubbish" (246). Alexie implies that Coyote Springs, who represent members of the Spokane tribe, want to be heard, to have a voice that people recognize as unique, easily interpreted as the Native American voice within mainstream society.

Alexie presents identity mapping as a very complex process because Coyote Springs is considered a collective identity yet is comprised of members who are mapping their identity on a personal individual level. An event occurs which is critical to Thomas's identity mapping process while the band is in New York City. The band members hear a beautiful voice, and

search for the source, to find an old Indian man singing while Victor played guitar (Alexie 152). Alexie implies the beautiful music—the combination of guitar and voice—also symbolizes the result of cultural exchange. This event is important to Thomas's identity mapping because his insight allows him to see cultural exchange as an element of Indian preservation. Thomas makes a mental note of the old man's bandaged hands and concludes, "That old man could not play the guitar anymore, because he'd played it until his hands were useless. Thomas remembered Robert Johnson's hands; he felt pain in his hands in memory of Robert Johnson's guitar" (153). Thomas sees that playing the guitar, which is a redemptive process, can be painful yet fruitful because of the experience and future it provides. The guitar, which seems to find its way home, represents Indians who desire to leave the reservation yet always have the option to return to their family and cultural heritage.

After some self-evaluation, Thomas, Chess and Checkers decide to leave the reservation to pursue other opportunities. Paradoxically, Thomas sees Robert Johnson at a gathering before he and Chess leave the reservation. Thomas asks Robert if he would like a ride with them. Johnson replies, "'I'm goin' to stay here,' Johnson said. 'On the reservation. I think I jus' might belong here'" (Alexie 303). Alexie reverses the negative perception of the reservation in this dialogue. Ironically, Robert Johnson has found purpose and a home at the Spokane Indian Reservation. Alexie implies identity mapping continues all through life. Johnson has changed; he is also a teacher of sorts, a catalyst like Big Mom for those forming their own identity. He tells Thomas, "I think these Indians might need me. Maybe need my music. Besides, it's beautiful here. And Thomas, I *have* seen everythin'" (303). Alexie personifies the reservation throughout the novel and Johnson's comment to Thomas is evidence that the reservation speaks to people—

not exclusively Indians either. Johnson has heard some of the things the reservation had to say about forgiveness and always being there for those who decided to leave.

The Wellpinit road sign that reads “population variable” at the beginning of the novel, might be interpreted to refer to births and deaths, but in the context of the narrative, it also suggests the desire to leave and return to the reservation. Ironically, Robert desires to stay on the reservation for the opportunities it offers him, and Thomas desires to leave to seek opportunities in mainstream society. Douglas Ford considers how characters shift between Indian and non-Indian cultures and connects blues with this exchange: “[A]s a blues musician, Johnson knows the finer workings of crossroads, the transit system that allows the complex interchange we see most vividly in song and discourse, but experience most profoundly at the level of selfhood” (Ford 211). Consequently, the reservation experience has allowed specific characters to identify with their inner self and determine that is where the center is located. It is a moving invisible force easily associated with a person’s spirit. Alexie re-writes a new authority over the center—the individual’s choice in how they define their center—which gives Indians the ability to move beyond cultural boundaries to strengthen the collective Native American voice. Big Mom’s statement to Thomas, Chess and Checkers leaves them with a positive idea of the reservation instead of estrangement from the reservation, by saying, “You can always come back” (Alexie 304).

Alexie still positions the reservation as an ambivalent entity, noting its complacency when Indians decide to leave or return. The narrative reflects Alexie’s point, “Meanwhile, the reservation remained behind. It never exactly longed for any Indian who left, for all those whose bodies were dragged quickly and quietly into the twentieth century while their souls were left behind somewhere in the nineteenth. But the reservation was there, had always been there, and

would be there" (Alexie 220). Rather than defining the reservation in terms of territorial boundaries, Alexie highlights migratory effort of characters who wish to leave or enter in terms of identity. Instead of portraying the reservation as a place of refuge, Alexie re-writes the image of refuge as a quality found in people—each other—which Indians can reconnect with their culture. This builds on Evans' assertion that, "Alexie's impulse in his works up to and including *Reservation Blues* is not to destroy the reservation, but rather to mirror his vision of its present reality for the moral purpose of refashioning it and its members" (Evans 64), which solidifies his presence in the Native American literary scene, defying Bird's accusation that, "[I]t is the exaggeration of despair without context that doesn't offer enough substance to be anything more than a 'spoof' of contemporary reservation life" (Bird 51). Alexie demonstrates that individuals experience failure in the novel, whether they reside inside or outside the reservation. The reservation is not the determining factor for failure; inability to find value in oneself or in relation to others deteriorates a center, making cultural preservation a failed effort. Alexie's center is not confined to a place, but rather is located within individuals who move beyond the margins literally and physically, and who collectively represent a living viable culture.

CHAPTER THREE

PART-TIME INDIAN: THE RESERVATION AS CONTINUANCE

Alexie's earlier work *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* focuses on realities evident in reservation life while his later novel *Reservation Blues* exposes cultural conflict relative to identity. Alexie's literary presentation of reservation life evolves significantly in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*; not only does he document the experiences associated with the dichotomy between traditional and mainstream Indian identity in American society, but Alexie also shows the results of the choices made by an adolescent Indian. The narrative is told by Arnold Spirit—nicknamed Junior—and contains much of Alexie's own autobiographical experience of reservation life. What makes this work different from Alexie's previous works is that he features the emotions affiliated with the ambivalence of reservation life. He reveals how Arnold negotiates between the elements of Indian identity that can be adapted and the elements of cultural integrity that can be preserved, in order to remain accepted within both Indian and mainstream cultures. This chapter explores Arnold's adaptation as a source of continuance and reveals that he moves between the spaces of sacred and profane, which helps foster his own protected space—his identity. In other words, we see Alexie's center of Indian identity evolve through Arnold's experiences. Arnold works through this process of creating a space that is his own by means of his journal. The sacred space is the tribal values and loyalty to the reservation; his profane space is the exposure to pop-culture and mainstream society.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian demonstrates Alexie's narrative voice in dominant white society and serves as a model for other Indians who contemplate leaving reservation life. This chapter considers Alexie's unconventional representation of Arnold's

Indian center as more than autoethnography or autobiography, but an experience of the human condition across cultures. The chapter underscores how Alexie's literary approach evolves and facilitates Indian inclusion in the American literary canon. Furthermore, Alexie uses Arnold to expand his theme of a moving viable cultural center. Instead of depicting Indians as static characters in a marginal society, Alexie focuses on the Indian that is empowered by the multicultural experience. Rather than just showing the center as a part of one's Indian identity, or identity in crisis, as in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* or *Reservation Blues*, Alexie concentrates more on decision making and the dynamics among characters because of the choices they make. In other words, the outcome of some experiences may not be what the character expects, but the process of learning from the experience is central to Alexie's purpose. Stylistically, he adheres to the elements of pop-culture and quirky, yet serious humor to ground his point. Alexie's protected space and profane boundaries are clearly built on humor, but elicit emotional and serious content.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, (2009) is the witty account of Junior, or Arnold Spirit, a Spokane Indian adolescent who decides to break cultural barriers and attend high school at Reardan, an all-white school outside the reservation. He decides to go beyond the limits of reservation life; the story recounts more than Arnold's decisions but the actions and courage that motivate him to move outside cultural boundaries such poverty or a better education. Arnold opts for a better life. Much of the character Alexie depicts is based on his own life experience and Alexie's presentation is replete with elements of humor, tragedy and pop-culture for which he is well noted. The novel won the National Book Award and was named a *New York Times* Bestseller, *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, and *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year, among a list of other awards.

Like Pratt's contact zone, Alexie's representation of reservation life is very complex. Pratt contends that autoethnography and transculturation are products of the contact zone experience (Pratt 36). *The Autobiography of a Part-Time Indian* is a multi-faceted work because it represents three types of experiences. First, the text is the experience of an adolescent man, Arnold, who represents Alexie at times, making the work a semi-autobiographical account based on facts and experiences of Alexie's life. Second, the text contains general experiences of reservation Indians, as witnessed by a reservation Indian, so the narrative is also an autoethnographic account of Indian life. Pratt defines an autoethnographic text as "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (Pratt 35). Alexie's narrative is autoethnographic because the autobiographical account is a response to two groups within the contact zone—EuroAmericans as the dominant white group and mixedblood Indians with European descent, who claim to know reservation life and write about it, yet have never lived on a reservation. Finally, the text is transcultural because it is the experience of an Indian individual who moves between two cultures and adopts elements of each culture to form his own sense of identity.

Alexie's contact zone is a narrative replete with sketches, cartoons and vignettes labeled with Arnold's intimate thoughts in addition to dialogue throughout the text. Forney discusses how she and Alexie decided on the graphics in "Interview with Ellen Forney," an afterword to *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in which the publisher includes general questions to Forney. She explains: "Sherman would give me a few chapters of his manuscript and ideas for what I might draw, and I'd do thumbnail sketches using his list as a bouncing-off point. Later, we'd go over what I'd come up with. About a third of the graphics were Sherman's ideas, a third were real collaborations, and a third were my ideas that struck me as I read the

text" (*Absolutely True Diary* n. pag.). In one way, Alexie's collaboration with artist Ellen Forney is similar to the collaborative effort autoethnographic texts represent borrowing from the conqueror (Pratt 35). Alexie's "borrowing" occurs when he uses a technique of placing illustrations within his text, a comic book style popular to the EuroAmerican mainstream. Alexie's and Forney's illustrations intensify the emotional response typically drawn from the audience by the startling humor and use of pop-culture, characteristic of Alexie's literary style.

A prominent example of character illustration in this novel is Alexie's and Forney's execution of Mr. P., a white teacher at Wellpinit reservation high school. The depiction of Mr. P. marks an autoethnographic response to Indians' experiences of poverty and neglect. Mr. P. hands out geometry books at the start of new school year. Ironically, Arnold's book has been used by his own mother some thirty years ago. Alexie depicts Arnold's futile attempt to rationalize these experiences by exposing Arnold's thoughts:

> I couldn't believe it. How horrible is that? My school and my tribe are so poor and sad that we have to study from the same dang books our parents studied from. That is absolutely the saddest thing in the world. And let me tell you, that old, old, old, decrepit geometry book hit my heart with the force of a nuclear bomb. My hopes and dreams floated up in a mushroom cloud. (31)

Here, Alexie shows the emotion associated with Arnold's action—Arnold throws the book, hitting Mr. P. in the face, an action resulting in suspension (32). Arnold is angry because he sees no opportunity in a reservation school which offers students little beyond books containing obsolete material. On an ethnographic level, Alexie implies that Indian reservations lay on the wayside of academic concern in comparison to mainstream society.

The incident sets the stage for Alexie's greater message of forgiveness, cultural exchange and opportunities outside the reservation. Arnold and Mr. P. engage in dialogue regarding Arnold's actions. Mr. P. confesses, "We were supposed to make you give up being Indian. Your songs and stories and language and dancing. Everything. We weren't trying to kill Indian people. We were trying to kill Indian culture" (35). Mr. P.'s confession revisits the colonial missionary agenda but makes it relevant in modern day by showing that because Indians live on a reservation and are taught by white teachers, they are marginalized even in education. In "Sherman Alexie's Autoethnography," John Newton suggests that although Alexie's texts contain postcolonial references, Alexie is postmodern in the sense that the images he depicts only set the stage for decolonization in contemporary society (427). Alexie's autoethnography, according to Newton, although not adhering to a specific historical referent, does result in a "'postcolonialism' that makes no claim to disentangle itself either from the colonial past or from the postmodern present" (415). In other words, Alexie's characters do not refer to historical occurrences merely to blame a dominant Western society for trauma, but to show the present situation of the marginalized reservation Indian unchanged from the past.

Alexie's process of signifying the center of Indian identity changes from representing the center as the reservation to an attribute within the Indian. Arnold Krupat compares different types of Indian autobiographies to anthropology in his work *The Voice in the Margin* (1989) and notes differences are in the technique of reading and writing: "autobiographies by Indians rather than Indian autobiographies—that have been most noticed have presented themselves in relation to the category (not of religion, history, or science, but) of the *esthetic*, as art" (Krupat, *Voice* 142). Alexie's work builds on the idea of literary art or an esthetic as Krupat labels autobiography, and includes a social critique of the human condition. Alexie makes reference to

a postcolonial situation in all of his texts, yet in *The Autobiography of a Part-Time Indian* the references are used to lay groundwork for a harmonious multicultural experience to exist. Alexie does not represent a romanticized Indian perspective, which Native and non-Native writers tend to confuse with aesthetically pleasing or traditional Indian texts. Cook-Lynn's perspective is similar to Krupat's in that both writers advocate Indian literature as art. "American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story" relays Cook-Lynn's disappointment in Alexie's portrayal of the realism of the reservation. She argues that both Alexie and fellow Indian writer Adrian Louis, who authors the text *Skins*, portray "the deficit model of Indian reservation life" (Cook-Lynn 68) because neither author defends the reservation as "treaty-protected reservation land bases as homelands to the indigenes" (68). This is one of the things Alexie takes to task, the fact that a small percentage of treaties have ever been acknowledged. The reservation to Cook-Lynn is the image of a treaty that is acknowledged, one that defends reservation lands; Alexie's insights and images of reservation life deviate from her expectations. Alexie's model isn't "deficit" because the text doesn't address issues other Indian authors do; Alexie shows that the reservation is deficit of many opportunities that mainstream society claims.

Echoing Bakhtin, the conversation between Mr. P. and Arnold represents a real dialogue between oppressor and oppressed that acknowledges colonial culpability. The conversation opens the door to forgiveness, change and cultural exchange. Therefore, when Mr. P. tells Arnold he has to leave the reservation and why, Alexie implies a greater involvement in dialogic as a means of social exchange in EuroAmerican society. Alexie suggests that the Indian should be present and included in mainstream society rather than remain invisible on the reservation. Mr. P. states, "The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up . . . all these kids have given up. All your friends. All the bullies. And their mothers and fathers have given up, too. And

their grandparents gave up and their grandparents before them. And me and every other teacher here. We're all defeated" (Alexie 42). The "we" is significant because the white schoolteacher is sharing "defeat" with the Indian boy. This is evidence of a greater system that has produced a deadly stasis that imposes itself on everyone. Even though Mr. P. and Arnold share very intimate and powerful thoughts, Alexie implies a collective force behind the speaker. Mr. P. acknowledges a collective responsibility on the part of mainstream culture. He also admits that a collective loss of hope is shared among the whites and the Indians in this situation. Hope is more important in this exchange than blame. Mr. P. tells Arnold, "You can't give up. . . . [S]omewhere inside you refuse to give up. . . . [Y]ou kept your hope. And now, you have to take your hope and go somewhere where other people have hope" (Alexie 43). Previous conversations between EuroAmericans and Indians have tended to be monologic, or one-sided—either the colonizer/educator gave directives to Indians or Indians blamed the whites for their situation. Alexie creates real dialogue between Arnold and Mr. P. in which the white educator accepts his cultural guilt and encourages the Indian boy to find hope where he can, outside the cycle of oppression and blame. Personal communication allows Arnold to pose questions to M. P. directly and receive honest answers; the direct dialogue serves as a model to multiple audiences yet speaks a different message within the dialogic to each audience. For example, an Indian audience can identify with the concept of hopelessness and understand it is within an individual's power to build on an Indian identity, yet accept opportunity away from the reservation and not feel a traitor to his/her culture.

Alexie underscores the image of an Indian center that moves, a center that is part of Indian identity. Instead of Indians remaining absent or invisible on the reservation, they emerge as a viable part of modern mainstream society because of their culture. The passage brings the

feeling of hopelessness to a personal level, and helps non-Indian audiences to better understand why things are the way they are on the reservation. The exchange also suggests that remorse or at least attestation of past wrongs is important in cultural exchange. Consequently, the reader parallels personal loss to the lack of opportunity within reservation life, validating the authentic emotion of hopelessness.

Through a second-person narrative style, Alexie evokes the emotional response associated with Arnold's experiences with the reader because Arnold can speak directly to the reader; the reader sees Arnold's rationalizations and decisions behind his actions in a more direct way than third-person narrative might allow. For example, Arnold is aware of the repercussions of choosing to attend Reardan, an all-white high school off reservation land. Although Arnold chooses to attend Reardan because the reservation school can't provide him a good education, Arnold must decide what elements of the two cultures benefit his identity. Arnold, even as a teen-ager, can recognize cultural difference and learn from his exposure to family, friends and adults. He states, "My sister is running away to get lost, but I am running away because I want to find *something*" (46). Arnold takes part in a personal journey of daily life off the reservation; he is committed to that decision and confronts problems that transpire because of the choice he made to attend school outside the reservation. Arnold confronts his best friend Rowdy, who asks, "And when are you going on this imaginary journey?" (49). Later, he accuses Arnold, "You always thought you were better than me" (52). The passages expose two contact zones to the reader—one inside the reservation and one outside the reservation. The former implies a tension between Indians because reservation Indians who choose not to leave the reservation consider Indians who do leave traitors to the tribe or Indian culture. The latter contact zone refers to experiences within mainstream society and exchanges with cultures other than Indian.

The space Arnold works from is a contact zone that enables personal development, nurturing his identity with both sacred and profane elements. Sacred elements suggest tribal values, ethical values or a spiritual part of the human identity that brings one closer to a higher power or being; profane suggests elements which tempt the flesh, easily found in the commercialism of popular culture prevalent in mainstream society. Alexie gives a straightforward response to the question of his portrayal of sacred and profane within his works in a 2007 interview with James Mellis, in which he states, "I like to make the profane sacred and the sacred profane" (Peterson 186). Moving between sacred and profane becomes complex because the terms do more than suggest the dichotomy between good and evil in the human condition. Alexie implies the movement between the boundaries of sacred and profane is similar to people who move between cultural boundaries. Each person chooses the elements that become part of his/her unique identity. Arnold recognizes elements common to both cultures such as humor and popular culture and builds from those in his journal.

Anishinabekwe Indian author and critic Kimberly Blaeser identifies components of a sacred journey cycle in "Sacred Journey Cycles: Pilgrimage as Re-Turning and Re-Telling in American Indigenous Literatures" (83). Arnold experiences all the steps of the sacred ritual cycle Blaeser defines as a pattern of "preparation, verbal performance, physical enactment, spiritual transformation, followed again by re-turning and re-telling" (85). Blaeser's work deepens insights into Alexie's text, which contains similarities to Blaeser's description of a sacred journey. Arnold takes part in sacred Indian tradition including ritualized steps Blaeser identifies in the cycle as "repetition of motion, memory, or voice" (84). Alexie puts his profane twist to the contemporary journey with pop-culture references and dicey humor that surface within each step of the ritual cycle. For instance, preparation for Arnold's journey already appeared as dark

humor in the action of Arnold's throwing a geometry book at his teacher's face. Arnold's verbal performance is the dialogue he shares with friends and family, the confrontations with them about his intent to attend school off the reservation. Physical engagement occurs on many levels. The first altercation occurs when Arnold punches Roger in the face because of Roger's racist slur. Arnold reflects, "He acted like he was the one who'd been wronged. . . . I felt brave all of a sudden. Yeah, maybe it was just a stupid and immature school yard fight. Or maybe it was the most important moment of my life. Maybe I was telling the world that I was no longer a human target" (65). In this case, spiritual transformation begins when Arnold's grandma explains that Roger did not retaliate as a sign of respect (68). Arnold reflects further, "Wow, he didn't kick my ass. He was actually nice. He paid me some respect. . . . Maybe Grandma was right" (72). Arnold takes part on a daily basis in the ritual journey that Blaeser describes.

Although leaving the reservation is considered a perfidy among some reservation inhabitants, Blaeser alludes to the positive ways in which journey informs Indian life: "[T]ravel, repetitive patterned movement, forms the basis for physical survival and spiritual well-being in many tribal societies" (Blaeser 84-85). Arnold thinks about the fact that his family always lived on the reservation: "Ever since the Spokane Indian Reservation was founded back in 1881, nobody in my family had ever lived anywhere else. We Spirits stay in one place. We are absolutely tribal" (Alexie 89). Arnold and his sister challenge the perception of many reservation Indians, who think tribal means to remain on the reservation. Arnold discovers his sister left the reservation without telling anyone, only leaving a note. Instead of considering his sister's leaving an act of betrayal, Arnold shares a different perception of leaving the reservation, "Man, that takes courage and imagination" (90). Later, Arnold reflects, "But I just kept thinking that my sister's spirit hadn't been killed. She hadn't given up. I felt inspired" (91). Alexie takes the word

"spirit" which suggests a very personal facet of one's identity and makes Arnold's family surname—Spirit—a metaphor for a collective family or the human condition.

Arnold, as an active participant of the contact zone, experiences what Pratt describes as transculturation, another "phenomenon" of the contact zone (Pratt 36). Arnold's relationship with Gordy, a friend he makes at Reardan, suggests that cultures inform one another. Instead of portraying Arnold's experiences as assimilation or acculturation, which in Pratt's opinion are reductive terms "used to characterize a culture under conquest" (Pratt 36), Alexie makes Arnold and Gordy's friendship an act of transculturation. Assimilation and acculturation imply imposing one culture onto another culture; transculturation refers to a sharing of cultural knowledge or experience. Pratt further explains, "While subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for" (36). Therefore, Arnold seeks friendship with Gordy because they are both lonely: "I was an Indian kid from the reservation. I was lonely and sad and isolated and terrified. Just like Gordy. And so we did become friends. Not the best of friends. Not like Rowdy and me. . . . No, we studied together" (Alexie 94). Alexie recreates the typical Indian journey that Blaeser lays out, as a not re-emergence of Indian identity but as a reconciliation between cultures. In N. Scott Momaday's rendition of the journey in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, the Kiowa people had in Blaeser's words, "the courage to transform their lives as they journeyed into new territory" (Blaeser 89). Blaeser notes that the Kiowas' journey is "one toward a new way of understanding identity" (89). Alexie adds a new dimension to the journey motif by taking it into the new territory of mainstream U.S. culture. Although Alexie illustrates a different kind of journey than Momaday's, Alexie's character does work toward a new understanding of mixed identity. Alexie's rendition of journey reflects a shift from a post-

colonial to a more postmodern way of understanding identity that suggests Indians are significant contributors to a larger multicultural society.

Alexie's theme of transculturation is illustrated in the dialogue and dynamics between Arnold and his friends at Reardan. Arnold is no longer concerned with issues of Indian versus white, so much as he is with his adolescent identity within the larger world. For example, when Gordy asks Arnold about his cartoons, Arnold responds: "I take them seriously. . . . I use them to make fun of the world. To make fun of people. And sometimes I draw people because they are my friends and family. And I want to honor them" (Alexie 95). Arnold's cartoons are his map to "understand the world" (95). Gordy replies, "If you're good at it, and you love it, and it helps you navigate the river of the world, then it can't be wrong" (95). Another example of transculturation occurs in the dialogue between Arnold and classmate Penelope. She tells Arnold: "I hate this little town. It's so small, too small. Everything about it is small. The people here have small ideas. Small dreams" (111). Rather than presenting Arnold as the marginal "other" expressing the limitations of the reservation, Alexie focuses on the shared experience of small town life. A deeper philosophical message becomes clearer from the conversation; every human wants to make a difference in the world, to leave their mark, to be remembered. Arnold asks Penelope why she wants to study architecture. Penelope responds: "Because I want to be remembered." And Arnold replies, "And I couldn't make fun of her for that dream. It was my dream too" (112).

Arnold's discovery of common elements within EuroAmerican and Indian culture is the greatest part of his daily journey. Simultaneously, Arnold crosses and moves within cultural boundaries rather than simply crossing reservation lines daily to attend school. Alexie does more than create dialogic narrative through Arnold's experiences, but provides situations relative to

multiple audiences, evoking emotions from Indian and non-Indian readers. Alexie's narrative exposes limitations and problems that cross cultural lines, opening discourse to a multicultural and contemporary perspective instead of strictly postcolonial. For example, Arnold struggles with socially fitting in with the others at school. He finds more comfort in not easily fitting in because he witnesses white kids who have problems too. Penelope tells Arnold she is bulimic because "everybody thinks her life is perfect," yet she is lonely on the inside (Alexie 108). Alexie's narrative reflects a different kind of journey, one of self-reflection and consideration of others. As Blaeser explains, "Thus in the literal, and in the literary journey which recounts it, the passage finds meaning in continuance, simple going on, the process of the journey, the process of being" (Blaeser 94). Arnold's "process of being" is taking part in two cultural experiences yet still remaining Indian. Arnold is the epitome of continuance, even when ostracized by members of his own culture. Although his immediate family is supportive of his decision to attend school outside the reservation, he is tormented by others on the reservation. Gordy helps Arnold put this into perspective when Arnold explains his problem, "Some Indians think you *become* white if you try to make your life better, if you become successful." Gordy says, "If that were true, then wouldn't all white people be successful?" (Alexie 131). Alexie makes the statement that the center of Indian identity is not a place (the reservation), but values found within the individual. Alexie also makes ceremony, language and custom something sacred to all cultures, a spiritual element of continuance. Alexie implies that values are necessary to make cultures cohesive socially, even if exchange is just among a few people. Gordy explains this difference between contemporary and primitive society to Arnold: "So, back in the day, weird people threatened the strength of the tribe." Arnold rebuts, "But we're not primitive like that anymore." Gordy argues, "Oh, yes, we are. Weird people still get banished." Arnold adds, "You mean weird people like

me." Gordy agrees, "And me." Arnold says, "All right, then . . . So we have a tribe of two" (132). Alexie creates a contemporary multicultural "tribe" comprised of a white and Indian young man. Later in the narrative, Arnold responds to a cruel comment his teacher Mrs. Jeremy makes to him, which results in all the students walking out of class. Arnold tells Mrs. Jeremy, "I used to think the world was broken down by tribes. . . . By black and white. By Indian and white. But I know that isn't true. The world is broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not," and "walked out of the classroom" (176). Arnold's actions reflect an intolerance of cultural invisibility and intolerance of the absence of moral values as part of his continuance. Furthermore, Alexie reveals Arnolds' ability to live simultaneously in two cultures and be a viable participant in each culture.

The culmination of Arnold's journey is the basketball game between Reardan, the team in which Arnold is a member, and Wellpinit, the team which his reservation friends and best friend Rowdy represent. All Arnold's conflict, grief, and struggles are encapsulated within this basketball game. At first Arnold thinks he has to prove "he is stronger than everybody else" (Alexie 186), but later he realizes that traumas are situations all people survive if they choose hope. Arnold discovers there is no real difference between his team and the reservation team: "We were all boys desperate to be men, and this game would be a huge moment in our transition" (187). Arnold sees his father move beyond cultural barriers: "And then I took my three-pointer and buried it. . . . People wept. Really. My dad hugged the white guy next to him. Didn't even know him. But hugged and kissed him like they were brothers, you know?" (193). Yet Arnold's transformative experiences are not devoid of extant ambivalence individuals living within two cultures endure. In others words, Alexie's narrative never becomes romance; the story never betrays real life existence. Arnold reflects after the win over his reservation friends:

"I was suddenly ashamed that I'd wanted so badly to take revenge on them. . . . I was crying tears of shame. I was crying because I had broken my best friend's heart" (196). Alexie's choice of title is significant to identity because, "Part-Time Indian" is how Arnold saw himself at the beginning of the narrative, yet his experiences reveal that no matter where he goes, he is Indian. Values and culture are sacred; they travel within an individual. Identity is not something you put time into, but is inherent. Cultural integrity, on the other hand, is a process of preserving spiritual and social values of a specific culture and sharing these values among individuals of other cultures in society.

Arnold's transcultural experience balances some of the hurt in his life with hope. Arnold thinks, "I felt hopeful and silly about the future" (Alexie 227). The reconciliation between Arnold and Rowdy signifies another type of reconciliation—one between cultures and within the same culture. Arnold realizes that bonding with others in the community is considered a tribal value; therefore his friendship with Rowdy is sacred. Arnold's evolving center, or identity formation allows him the insight that although friendship is sacred in terms of the tribe, it is sacred to humanity. Alexie removes the tension between EuroAmerican and Indian cultures by focusing on the common human experience. Rowdy tells Arnold, "I was reading this book about old-time Indians, about how we used to be nomadic. . . . Well, the thing is, I don't think Indians are nomadic anymore. Most Indians, anyway." Arnold agrees, "No, we're not." Rowdy responds, "I'm not nomadic. Hardly anybody on this rez is nomadic. Except for you. You're the nomadic one. . . . I always know you were going to leave. . . . I had this dream about you a few months ago. . . . You looked happy. And I was happy for you" (229). Rowdy recalls the past not to remember a painful experience but to bring up a time that Indians' physical movement over the land was accepted, sacred and tribal. In other words, Indian identity in the past was a moving

center because the people were nomadic. The center moved with the people because it is within the Indian identity, so Alexie's confrontation with the colonizer is removing this part of its oppressive power. In early days the Indians had freedom to move as they wished and remain loyal to their tribe, so it is possible in contemporary society for Indians to do the same.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian explores the complexities of negotiating between physical and literal space of the reservation, incorporating traditional and contemporary elements into the text. Alexie's conceptualization of the reservation advances beyond old stereotypes of loss, limitations, and invisibility to include transculturation, travel and identity transformation. Instead of fulfilling negative representations of the savage drunken Indian which contributes nothing to society, Alexie narratives serve as a model for reservation Indians to connect with the power within them to be part of a larger multicultural network. The reservation as the center of Indian identity evolves from place or community to tribal, spiritual element within all Indian identity. This eclectic representation of the reservation makes Alexie's work cosmopolitan. In "The American Indian Fiction Writer: 'Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and First Nation Sovereignty,'" Cook-Lynn names Momaday, Silko, Welch, and her own work in a discussion of cosmopolitanism, but states that Third World scholars involved in the debate of nationalism verses cosmopolitanism "argue that 'cosmopolitanism' becomes the enemy of 'resistance literatures' specifically because its criteria are the fodder of western tastes, in other words, for aesthetic reasons" (26). Again intellectual debate centers on aesthetics. If the term aesthetic refers to pleasing images of the Indian in literature, then Alexie cannot be overtly labeled a cosmopolitan writer. Alexie challenges Cook-Lynn's statement; his works are resistance literature and his style is cosmopolitan. In the chapter titled "Blood Trails" in *Mixedblood Messages*, Owens agrees with "certain key principles" of the criticisms Cook-Lynn

makes of Alexie's work, yet suggests that "dynamic energies" are the source of an individual's "Indianness," or identity (Owens 154). This "dynamic energy" is the source of Alexie's and his characters' "Indianness," which gives his works a redeeming quality to some critics. Alexie goes beyond the Indian images previously represented in the Indian novel, written by Native or non-Native authors, and exposes situations which make all audiences uncomfortable. In doing so, Alexie reveals an intimate glimpse of Indianness new to American Indian writing. An example of Alexie's Indianness can be found in his dedication: "For Wellpinit and Reardan, my hometowns" (Alexie n. pag.). Alexie's perception of himself is reflected in the characters he writes about; he considers himself an individual coming from two hometowns and two cultures, making one unique Indian identity.

CONCLUSION

THE RESERVATION: ALWAYS PART OF IDENTITY

Sherman Alexie doesn't ignore the fact that some Indians have minimal or no reservation experience. He challenges representations of urban Indians and Indians growing up in mainstream society, because these Indians are also misrepresented in contemporary society and carry the same stigmas as those who came from the reservation. Alexie's narratives about non-reservation Indians underscore the same reservation traumas such as violence, anger and identity crisis. Alexie's accounts render the power of the reservation as "absence" the reservation for non-reservation Indians. One such novel is *Flight*, published in 2007, portrays the teenage existence of an Indian orphan named Zits, who is caught up in the foster care system of mainstream society. Zits suffers displacement from the reservation, Indian culture and a permanent home inside or outside the reservation. He decides that violence will fill the void of loss and enters a bank with the intent to take lives. The instant Zits pulls the trigger, he is shot back through time into a past in which he inhabits multiple characters who share some aspect of Indian history: the Battle of Little Bighorn, the civil rights era, and today. Zits's journey enables him to connect to the Indian culture that was always absent in his life and transform his self image as one of loss to one of integrity. Alexie uses Zits's intent to kill to mirror the Euro American conception of the reservation. Alexie makes this assertion in an interview with Dave Weich in 2007, after the publication of *Flight*. Alexie states, "One of the things we forget as natives and non-natives is that reservations were created as concentration camps. They were created so Indians would be shipped there and die. I really think that's still their purpose: to kill" (Peterson 171). Alexie later notes that, "The amount of money flowing through any particular tribe has increased, but the social problems persist. They may not be as poor materially, but

they're poor spiritually. A big change: Almost 70 percent of natives live off reservations now. The flight from the reservation just keeps happening" (Peterson 171). Alexie makes firm the idea of relocating the center of Indian identity from the reservation to the Indian because if the Indians are migrating off the reservation to find other places to call home, they must take with them a culture to preserve and with which to identify. Alexie makes connection to Indian identity part of his relocation program, but he foregrounds the human condition through his incorporation of humor and popular culture.

Alexie's narratives have engaged the idea of the transformative qualities of a journey. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* he leaves the stories open-ended, implying that transformation, or relocating a center exists, but possibilities are up to the individual to find. In his depiction of the reservation, Alexie does not present the reservation as an element in the process of Indian identity. Rather, Alexie's intent for this early collection of stories is to portray the dislocation of the reservation from the rest of mainstream society and identify colonial influences the reservation still holds which are traumatic to Indian culture. Misrepresentations of the Indian, internalized oppression, and remembrance of the past are used by Alexie as a means to confront continuing patterns of colonialism in society in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. He begins his revision of the Indian identity with revisions of the Indian story, making the focus resistance and the Indian point of view. He leaves his stories open-ended to give insight to the non-Indian reader and to stimulate Indians to finish their own story.

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie's characters all experience some degree of transformation and connection to Indian identity, but in some cases this process does not come to fruition. Critics such as Louis Owens and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn accuse Alexie of perpetuating negative representations of Indians, yet Alexie uses these images to re-present the Indian. Owens, Cook-

Lynn and Bird criticize Alexie for incorporating popular culture into his texts but as Alexie alludes in his interview with Dave Weich, popular culture is apparent everywhere—even on the reservation—where "social dysfunctions take on pop culture guises" (Peterson 171). Alexie's text still portrays traumas of reservation life, but suggests forgiveness as a beginning point to a survival beyond anger. He portrays characters such as Thomas Builds-the-Fire as acting upon their own authority to create their unique Indian identity and becoming more visible and active in a multicultural world. Alexie challenges the reservation as the location of an Indian center as related to culture to the center as more abstract or spiritual inside every individual. Physically and metaphorically, the center becomes a moving body. The boundaries which are crossed by the players in the text not only signify the exchange between EuroAmerican and Indian cultures, but the exchange among many cultures, since Alexie incorporates blues and the African American experience in the story.

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Arnold exercises his decision to leave the reservation, at least on a part-time basis to attend school. He and realizes whether he leaves the reservation for good or not, he is the living presence of a center that is within every Indian. Alexie confronts the emotions associated with the process of forming an Indian identity. His mode of storytelling—the fictional autobiography—makes the Indian process of identity more personal by relaying the experience from a point of view all audiences have known—adolescence. The topic of forgiveness is more evident in this narrative because instead of just portraying the Indian as participating in "border crossing," Alexie's content suggests more transcultural exchange. In other words, Alexie makes the identity process important to Indian cultural survival, but a process familiar to all humans. Alexie's narrative portrays more of a transcultural exchange because the term transcultural evokes personal involvement or active

participation in a positive formative process of cultural exchange. The term cross-cultural suggests an impassive, less personally involved way of engaging other cultures. While reaching for the common elements of humanity, Alexie is criticized by Gloria Bird for creating a pan-Indian representation of Indians. Alexie's intent is to make the Indian voice heard, so if he goes beyond the Spokane Indian experience and is recognized for his Indian voice alone, I applaud his notoriety.

Alexie himself is always moving or evolving as a writer, not only in the way he identifies a center of Indian identity, but as a topic of debate. Instead of leaving his stories open-ended as he did in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie now leaves interpretation open-ended. In the chapter titled "The Struggle for an American Indian Future" from his book *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, Robert Allen Warrior makes a striking statement when he compares the works of Vine Deloria, Jr. and John Joseph Mathews, two celebrated Indian intellectuals. He discusses the importance of Indian perspective in critical studies and the concept of speaking for/representing one another in literary works. Additionally, he references a phrase of Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz, "this America has been a burden" (Warrior 113), and states that this perspective continues a self-denial of the Indian, which in turn contributes to more suffering (113). Warrior's perspective is to refuse denial and see suffering itself or accounts of suffering as "the beauty of resistance" (113); he explains, "With this open-ended perspective we can further humanize ourselves and our works by engaging our particular questions in the context of other Others around the world who face similar situations" (113). Alexie surpasses other celebrated Indian authors of our time in the way he represents the Indian experience and solidifies his own presence in the Native American and American literary canons. He accomplishes this feat because he goes beyond showing the suffering, resistance and

transformation of the Indian. Alexie highlights the strength of Indian peoples, culture, and identity to survive such long-term and concerted efforts at eradication. Alexie's literary impact comes from the voice he has created, not "speaking for others," but speaking his own truth and experience as an Indian. Through his texts he confronts negative images, challenges misrepresentations and offers the possibility that the Indian can be visible and a participant in mainstream culture without losing tribal integrity. Alexie's themes revolve around the reservation, whether present or absent in the life of Indians. During his literary evolution, Alexie relocates the center of Indian identity from the reservation to a process of identity formation that draws on what supports understanding and hope in multiple cultures. Alexie's future representations of the reservation may include it as a past existence to which he often refers in his works. To some Indians such as Alexie, this is a good thing.

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