

**“I’m Indian in My Bones”: Debunking Stereotypes and Subverting
Dominant Culture in the Works of Sherman Alexie**

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Literature tells truths about the past that history cannot articulate. –Joy Porter

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane and Coeur d’Alene American Indian, grew up on the Spokane reservation in Washington but left to attend high school and college with predominantly white students. The reservation clearly made a huge impact on his life as one can see in two of Alexie’s earlier novels, the 1993 short story collection *The Tonto and Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven* (hereafter *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*) and the 1995 novel *Reservation Blues*. Through these two works, Alexie forces the reader to question identity, history, popular culture, and humor.

American Indian identity, as presented in Alexie’s works, is constructed upon the stereotypes found in movies, television, and other media in American popular culture. These stereotypes hinder American Indian identity by presenting them with unattainable goals, but Alexie presents the characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* and *Reservation Blues* with these stereotypes to mark them in pop culture and request for change:

[Native writers] are able to make plain to a Euro-American readership the extent to which negative stereotyping can become internalized and consequently undermine Native individual and community life[...]Native writers can manipulate the image of the drunken Indian or the vanishing warrior as a tool for

self-criticism, as a means of firmly but responsively introducing a catalyst for change. (McCracken 31)

According to McCracken, including harmful stereotypes as some of the main determining factors of American Indian identity expresses the damage they cause, and through Alexie's writing and choice of language, he can take these stereotypes and use them "as a tool for self-criticism."

Utilizing stereotypes in this way can complicate race and racial issues, but "introducing a catalyst for change" deconstructs these stereotypes not only to bring these misrepresentations to light but also allows for the use of humor in a more positive manner than the negative implications behind deconstruction alone.

Ever since the encounter between European Americans and American Indians took place in 1492, European Americans have been constructing negative stereotypes concerning American Indians that leave American Indians with unobtainable goals. Non-Indians hold certain expectations for Indians based on what they have read and seen in popular culture, and these expectations can rarely be met by Indians since the expectations are usually outdated stereotypes. For example, Betty and Veronica, two white women who appear as groupies for the all-Indian band Coyote Springs in *Reservation Blues*, believe all American Indians to hold great wisdom and be at peace with mother earth. When they replace Coyote Springs as the all-Indian band, their first song choruses, "And my hair is blonde/ But I'm Indian in my bones/ And my skin is white/ But I'm Indian in my bones/ And it don't matter who you are/ You can be Indian in your bones" (Alexie 295). Alexie plays with the concept of race through Betty and Veronica, but he also complicates race through them. When these two characters sign with Calvary Records, they employ a false American Indian identity and wear it like a dress or a mask because Sheridan has convinced them that as long as they look Indian, people will accept them as such: "Sheridan reduces Indian identity to skin color and cheekbones. With modern technology, he implies,

anyone can be Indian, as long as they are Euro-American defined and constructed” (Cox 63).

The fact that Betty and Veronica can claim another culture as their own without experiencing the racism and prejudice that comes with that culture simply because they are European American hinders American Indian identity because it can be reduced to appearances and stolen. The chorus raises the question of what exactly an authentic Indian is, and Alexie seems to strongly suggest that it is a mask, or at least misused as one. Claiming an American Indian identity where one does not exist is like hiding behind a mask, asking other people to perceive something one believes is genuine but is false due to the fake pretenses one has about that identity. Betty and Veronica want to be wise, all-knowing, and problem-solving, so they chose to be “Indian” because that is the way they perceive the American Indian race, but they are really a part of the race that oppressed American Indians and are therefore continuing to do so by stereotyping them. Even worse is the fact that the second person “You” in the chorus is mutually exclusive to European Americans because their privilege excludes them from the judgment of other European Americans.

With the issue concerning American Indian authenticity raised, Alexie touches on every possibility of representation. Betty and Veronica may be white, but their manner of dress and other outward appearances point to an American Indian identity, even if their choice of clothing is played up to be fake and overwhelming with “too much Indian jewelry. Turquoise rings, silver feather earrings, beaded necklaces.” In fact, two Spokane women label them as “New Age princesses” (Alexie 41). To be Indian, must one dress in the traditional garb of the plains tribes, or can one simply attribute race to a feeling deep “in your bones.” Through *Chess*, Alexie brings up identity through blood, explicitly claiming that European American identity and American Indian identity do not mix. Alexie defines the children of half white, half Indian parents literally in halves; describing them as “halfway” between two cultures, “half Indian” and as a result also

“half crazy.” The conflict that ensues from having this mixed heritage is described as such: “Half of him will always want to tear the other half apart. It’s war” (Alexie 283). Drawing upon the history of the foundation of the Americas with its famous battles and massacres, Alexie appropriately brings blood into the answer of authenticity. Blood quantum, much like the African American “one drop” rule, defines one’s literal heritage and complex culture.

With definitions such as blood forming an American Indian identity, Betty and Veronica may not make the cut, but in Alexie’s opinion, there are some exceptions to the rule. Although Alexie clearly establishes that one cannot claim a different heritage and culture than one is born with, he does assert that there are some “adopted” Indians that can empathize with their racial struggles. Historically, African Americans have not only been classified by blood measurements but have also experienced the relocation of the Diaspora much like American Indians, and Alexie describes Robert Johnson, the famous blues player that appears in both works, as understanding “what it meant to be Indian on the edge of the twenty-first century, even if he was black at the beginning of the twentieth” (Alexie 35). Even though this argument seemingly deconstructs Alexie’s previous establishment of a feeling inaccurately representing a differing race, or falsely claiming to be “Indian in [one’s] bones,” the specific suffering of Robert Johnson grants him an affiliation with American Indians. As an African American, Johnson has experienced the prejudice and racism similar to the treatment American Indians receive from European Americans. In short, suffering binds people and not just a people, because life experience can implore more empathy and sympathy for someone than a common skin color alone.

Alexie brings American Indian, African American, and European American culture together in his collection of short stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* as well as his novel *Reservation Blues* in order to place them in conversation with one another and to criticize how American Indian culture has been affected historically through this contact. Alexie presents these

stereotypes through the portrayal of the three main protagonists that appear in both works, all of whom are American Indian males who fit into well-known categories, and deconstructs the categories through his unique brand of humor and sarcasm. Some critics, such as Gloria Bird (Spokane), argue presenting such stereotypical characters to an unknowing or ill-educated reading audience actually affirms and strengthens harmful stereotypes concerning American Indians, but other critics such as Douglas Ford and Joseph L. Coulombe argue that Alexie's humor reaches a wider audience and provides them with a safe space to discuss racial issues. In light of critics such as Douglas Ford, Joseph L. Coulombe, James Cox, Daniel Grassian, and Kathleen McCracken, who all place Alexie's works in high esteem, this paper will argue that Sherman Alexie inserts the Native voice back into the landscape of contemporary American literature by rewriting historical events through magical realism. The indigenous studies critic Joy Porter provides the historical context for the battles and massacres as well as developing stereotypes that appear in Alexie's works. Sherman Alexie debunks harmful stereotypes concerning and surrounding American Indians through his specific utilization of humor and sarcasm, and he rewrites history through an American Indian perspective using the mediums of fiction and magical realism in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* and *Reservation Blues*.

To classify identity and form bonds between people, Alexie employs the experience of shared suffering, as described earlier, and skin color. Skin specifically darker than white forms a common bond between people as the description of Thomas Builds-the-Fire exemplifies in *Reservation Blues*: "Although the Spokanes were mostly a light-skinned tribe, Thomas tanned to a deep brown, nearly dark as the black man. With his long, black hair pulled into braids, he looked like an old-time salmon fisherman: short, muscular legs for low center of gravity, long torso and arms for the leverage to throw the spear" (Alexie 4). Here, Alexie gives a stereotypical description of a traditional American Indian: dark skin, long black hair, and muscular. Once

again, Alexie problematizes race as he introduces the Spokane tribe as a “light-skinned tribe.” Historically, people of color who could pass for European Americans generally received more respect from European Americans, and people of color clearly marked as “other,” as Thomas is, generally received disrespect as Thomas does later in the novel. In fact, Thomas is so stereotypically described that his muscular appearance only serves as a means to an end. In this case, the end is “leverage to throw the spear.” This description is one that could only fit an outdated image of a wax statue American Indian in a museum.

One famous trope that Alexie addresses in *Reservation Blues* gathered from the images of American Indians in museums is “the vanishing Indian,” and he confronts this trope through ignorant white characters who, like many other Americans, have obtained this image because of the placement of American Indians next to the dinosaurs, giving one the idea of extinction. When a waitress inquires as to whether the fry cook has seen some American Indians in his deli, he responds, ““Oh, I ain’t seen none of those around for a long time. I saw a few in a book once. You sure there are still Indians around at all?”” (Alexie 239). The fry cook is one such individual that thinks of American Indians as an extinct race. The fry cook also remains an example of the European American that treats “other” races with disrespect simply because their skin is darker. Instead of giving the members of Coyote Springs service in the restaurant or help with locating their missing members, the waitress and fry cook banter back and forth debating whether or not Thomas and Chess are Puerto Rican or Middle Eastern. Again outward appearance is brought into the equation of race and authenticity, yet the one, common, and reoccurring stereotype that seems to heavily define American Indian identity is the image of a traditional Indian.

In Alexie’s works, American Indians are pressured to change present conditions and even the future by returning to the land and to the traditional culture of the Spokane tribe. Unfortunately, the land to return to remains the reservation, a reminder of oppression and forced

relocation. According to Alexie through the opinions of the female character Norma Many Horses in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, the traditional culture of the Spokane tribe dies with every elder, a reminder of an oppressed culture and forced assimilation. Therefore, to uphold an image of tradition, Alexie presents his characters with stereotypical attributes. By giving his strong, individualistic characters stereotypical qualities of American Indians one would find in books, on television, or even in a museum, Alexie actively confronts the many forms of racism and makes his reading audience aware that these racist stereotypes continue to exist. Upon learning about Victor's father's death, Thomas sarcastically responds, "I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight. Also, your mother was just in here crying" (Alexie 61). Thomas takes on the role of traditional storyteller, and tries to comfort Victor with humor, but also fits the traditional trope while doing so by stereotypically referring to nature as a truth-revealer. Although Alexie pokes fun at this trope through Thomas, he also utilizes it as a vehicle to express reservation issues, as is the case with James in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*:

Jesus I say don't you know that James wants to dance and to sing and to pound a drum so hard it hurts your ears and he ain't ever going to drop an eagle feather and he's always going to be respectful to elders at least the Indian elders and he's going to change the world. He's going to dynamite Mount Rushmore or hijack a plane and make it land on the reservation highway[...]He'll make gold out of commodity cheese. (Alexie 120)

First, Alexie gives the reader an outdated, romanticized image of American Indian tradition with singing, dancing, drumming, and refusing to drop a sacred eagle feather. Then, Alexie shifts to a still outdated, but more recent image of American Indian activism with Mount Rushmore and the reservation highway. Finally, Alexie leaves the reader with an image that continues to haunt many reservations: poverty. Every month, the government hands out commodity food to

American Indians that qualify for the services due to insufficient income. Alexie describes these foods as cheap and almost always in canned form. The fact that James is going to take a symbol of reservation poverty and transform it into a symbol of wealth transcends the traditional trope associated with American Indians by recreating a sense of community through the image of a meal. Through the stereotype of tradition, Alexie suggests that James will live life to the fullest by valuing the resources around him, even if those resources are symbols of poverty.

While the instance of tradition with James forms a possible positive outcome, Alexie also actively divulges that stereotypes are harmful to American Indian identity. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Victor drives past Thomas and leans out the window to invite him to Benjamin Lake “to do this new drug I got. It’ll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit” (Alexie 14). Here, the stereotype of a traditional Indian impedes identity. Because Thomas, Victor, and Seymour have the image of an Indian doing drugs as a religious and masculine act, they feel that they must participate in this traditional ceremony in order to receive visions and therefore have a stronger claim to an American Indian identity. According to Daniel Grassian, “Indians on the reservation have been led astray by American popular images of bellicose male Indian warriors as the epitome of masculinity, a virtually unrealizable standard that often leads men to despondency and drug abuse” (79). Alexie interrogates the stereotype of American Indians taking drugs to receive visions, which is accomplished through this drug and these characters. The pressure to return to tradition and to uphold a “virtually unrealizable standard” as an American Indian man has caused Victor, Seymour, and Thomas to get high on multiple occasions and drop other pending responsibilities such as showing up for work on time or even finishing work, which Grassian would classify as the beginning of their “despondency and drug abuse.” Alexie emphasizes the harm that the traditional stereotype has had through Thomas, Victor, and

Seymour and he debunks this stereotype by having the boys throw the remains of the drug into Benjamin Lake once they realize the visions they are receiving remain painful and out of reach.

Other tendencies to return to tradition harm Victor's identity as he starts down the path of alcoholism in *Reservation Blues*, "He had enough anger inside to guide every salmon over Grand Coulee Dam. He wanted to steal a New York cop's horse and go on the warpath. He wanted to scalp stockbrokers and kidnap supermodels. He wanted to shoot flaming arrows into the Museum of Modern Art. He wanted to lay siege to Radio City Music Hall. Victor wanted to win. Victor wanted to get drunk" (Alexie 230). In this passage, Alexie juxtaposes each traditional image with a modern image to demonstrate the harmful thinking behind trying to act like a traditional, authentic Indian in a modern, 20th century world. In fact, Victor seems to carry the anger of the past all the way into the future, which was brought on by the intrusive and negative interactions with European Americans and suggested to be fixed through the traditional warrior ways of American Indians. First, Victor will set a part of nature back to her original glory by leading salmon back to their original breeding spots in the dammed-off river. Then he will steal a modern authority figure's horse to "go on the warpath." Victor will move on to scalping modern "scalpers" and kidnapping modern images of female beauty. He will then "shoot flaming arrows" into one of the many modern museums that display American Indians next to the extinct dinosaurs. Finally, Victor will "lay siege" to a modern entertainment center where people come to watch and listen to famous celebrities and artists. This juxtaposition shows that stereotypes should not exist in contemporary American society because the stereotypes themselves are literally outdated, yet they appear in present times. Alexie portrays Victor as an alcoholic because he wants to accomplish what his name implies; he wants "to win," but because the traditional solutions he has come up with are outside of his reach due to modern times, he turns to alcohol as other American Indians have since the introduction of it by European Americans

during the fur trades of the 1800s (Porter 47). Although alcohol may have been introduced hundreds of years ago, alcoholism remains an issue for American Indians, as Alexie exemplifies through Victor and its detrimental effect on his identity.

Because Victor's only solution to any problem throughout both *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* and *Reservation Blues* is alcohol, Alexie unfolds the identity problems Victor experiences as a result of his addiction. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Seymour watches his lazy best friend Victor occasionally drive the Bureau of Indian Affairs garbage truck only to spend all his money on booze at the Trading Post. When Seymour is questioned on how long Victor has been standing in front of the beer cooler, he answers, "Some say he's been there for hours. That woman[...]says Victor has been standing there his whole life. I think he's been there for five hundred years" (Alexie 89). Again Alexie portrays Victor as carrying the burdens of the past wrongs committed by European Americans to the American Indian race as Seymour's description of Victor's position reaches back over five hundred years.

In fact, Alexie portrays history in both his works through a type of magical realism that closely resembles dream sequences alongside time travel. Because issues American Indians were dealing with over five hundred years ago still exist on the reservation today, Alexie ties the past with the present in order to link the problems and educate the reading audience of actual past events. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, the chapter titled "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" contains such instances of magical realism as the character Thomas explains to a court the wrongs committed by him and to him through the consciousness of different historical figures. Thomas begins by explaining the Spokane horse slaughter of 1858 through the perspective of one of the horses: "It all started on September 8, 1858. I was a young pony [...] and] there was so much to fear on that day when Colonel George Wright took me and 799 of my brothers captive[...]They were rounded into a corral and then lassoed, one by one, and dragged out to be

shot in the head. This lasted for hours, and all that dark night mothers cried for their dead children” (Alexie 96-97). Alexie utilizes magical realism in this section to emphasize the merciless and unnecessary slaughter of 800 lives through the first person narration, which personifies the horses and makes them more relatable in a human-emotional sense. The only reason Colonel Wright murdered all those horses was to prevent the Spokane Indians from having transportation in future battles. This moment both in history and in the fictional work becomes a turning point for the war because without proper supplies to fight with, the Spokanes would not be fighting but surviving, not participating in a battle, but being slaughtered in a massacre. According to James Cox, “Thomas establishes himself as a trans-historical and mythological figure who creates victories for his tribe out of defeats. He writes a narrative of survival that subverts any narratives about a ‘vanishing race’ and repopulates the landscape with Native Americans” (59). Thomas creates “victory for his tribe out of defeats” because he gives his perspective on the historical event, thereby subverting the dominant narrative of history, or white perspective, and places the American Indian voice into history through the horses. Therefore, the horses symbolize the Spokane tribe and how they were slaughtered like animals in this massacre. The last line “all that dark night mothers cried for their dead children,” humanizes the horses and remains applicable to other horrific scenes of death experienced by the Spokane tribe. Screaming horses also appear as a recurring motif in *Reservation Blues* whenever a wrong is done to one of the Indian characters by European Americans or American culture in general, thereby sealing the metaphor of the horses as the Spokanes.

Alexie then has Thomas assume the conscience of Qualchan, a brave Spokane warrior fighting for peace yet accused of disrupting it, in order to present an American Indian voice over the dominant voice of European Americans in another historical moment:

“My name was Qualchan and I had been fighting for our people, for our land[...]Wright had taken my father hostage and threatened to hang him if I did not come in. Wright promised he would treat me fairly. I believed him and went to the colonel’s camp and was immediately placed in chains[...]After I was beaten down, they dragged me to the noose and I was hanged with six other Indians[...]The city of Spokane is now building a golf course named after me, Qualchan, located in that valley where I was hanged.” (Alexie 98-99)

Thomas’ conscience takeover of Qualchan remains important for two reasons: Alexie ties the past to the present and Alexie provides a different perspective of history that alters history if only fictionally. Firstly, Alexie portrays the lack of respect given to Qualchan both in the past and the present due to Wright’s broken promises and the city of Spokane’s development. Secondly, yet most importantly, Alexie gives the historical instance of the hanging of Qualchan an American Indian perspective, which deviates from the white perspective of history. Alexie turns the idea of “history written from the conqueror’s perspective” on its head. He provides an American Indian voice in a historical instance, even though the medium is fiction, and therefore adds American Indians into the landscape of history.

Thomas continues claiming other consciences in *Reservation Blues* to express the metonymy between the tribes of American Indians and the American Indian race. Even though there was not any Spokane or Flathead Indians at the Battle of Wounded Knee, Alexie explains through Thomas that every single American Indian felt the pain and suffering of loss: “There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow. All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted ‘Jesus Christ’ as they ran swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you’re trying to sleep, when you’re praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter?” (Alexie 167). Thomas indicates that he can feel the pain of another

because they share the same race though they are from differing tribes. This metonymy of one American Indian representing all American Indians has traveled through time to reach Thomas and Chess specifically, but Alexie claims that these painful historical events touch all American Indians and bind them communally to their racial identity.

Once again, suffering binds a people and here specifically suffering through religious oppression binds American Indians. Due to the process of “salvation” and relocation, many tribes share the horrifying experience that was Catholic boarding schools: “The ‘boarding school experience’ from 1875 to 1928 was, as David Adams has called it, an ‘education for extinction.’ Essentially, it was a new form of war, both ideological and psychological, waged against children” (Porter 52). Alexie portrays this experience through Victor, who was molested by a Catholic priest: “*There’s no reason to be afraid*, the priest said, taking a softer tone[...]The priest touched Victor’s newly shaven head. *It’s a shame we had to cut your hair*, the priest said. *You are such a beautiful boy*. Victor looked up at the priest and smiled. The priest smiled back, leaned over, and kissed Victor full and hard on the mouth” (Alexie 148). Again Alexie utilizes metonymy to express communal identity among American Indians, but this time on two levels: separation and control. The separation involves a metaphor that represents severed ties. As a boarding school student, Victor is separated from everything common and well-known, like his family, friends, and home. To represent this metaphor, Alexie presents the reader with the image of “Victor’s newly shaven head.” His braids have literally been cut off, much like his tie to the Spokane community. The control involves the actual molestation, since the molestation of Victor remains a metaphor for control. The white Catholic priest takes advantage of Victor’s confusion upon relocation by giving Victor a hint of something familiar that he lost with the separation from his family, or a friendly bond between another human being. He assures Victor that “*There’s no reason to be afraid*” and even provokes a smile out of Victor with a compliment, but

then proceeds to overpower Victor with actions that are supposed to be used for friendship or love but are used here as abuse.

Therefore, Alexie not only includes these painful historical moments to point out how history has harmed American Indian identity and to rewrite historical moments from an American Indian perspective, but also to show how the past influences the future. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Alexie invites the reader to “imagine” an alternative present if past historical events had been different: “Imagine Crazy Horse invented the atom bomb in 1876 and detonated it over Washington, D.C. Would the urban Indians still be sprawled around the one-room apartment in the cable television reservation?[...]Imagine Columbus landed in 1492 and some tribe or another drowned him in the ocean. Would Lester FallsApart still be shoplifting in the 7-11?” (Alexie 149). On June 25-26, 1876, Crazy Horse and other Sioux Indians defeated General George Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn, and as Alexie suggests, he could have accomplished more had history allowed, if only hypothetically. Alexie suggests that bombing Washington and thereby ridding the United States of its capital would have saved the next generation of more advanced or “urban Indians” from poverty-stricken reservations. In 1492, Columbus “discovered” America, and as Alexie suggests, could have died if “some tribe or another drowned him in the ocean.” If only hypothetically, the future of a race and more specifically one man, Lester FallsApart, would have been different, and that change could be considered so dramatic that one could read improvement from the altercation.

Through history and the specific historical events Alexie criticizes in his works, contemporary American culture has gained negative images concerning American Indians; those negative images transformed into harmful stereotypes, and those stereotypes still exist in popular culture today:

Where place names and laws and raids robbed Indians of cultural identity a hundred years ago, so too have Westerns, team mascots, comics, Tonto, and other caricatures stolen Native cultural identity and sovereignty. Contemporary visual culture, movies and television in particular, have erected identities for them. So effective has the modern media been in altering how Indians see themselves that many Native writers talk about growing up sympathizing with cowboys and ridiculing the Cheyenne and Arapaho. (Rader 149)

American pop culture not only presents stereotypes surrounding American Indians and keeps these misrepresentations alive through the media, it also creates pressure for American Indians to copy or emulate the misrepresentations of their identity. The pressure to conform to a falsified identity is personified through non-Indians who also see these incorrect images of American Indians in the media and expect them, as Betty and Veronica expected wisdom from Coyote Springs. Therefore, Alexie criticizes pop culture alongside history to actively point out blatantly harmful American Indian stereotypes. When the issue of Junior and Victor's religious status comes up, Thomas explains, "All they know about religion they saw in *Dances with Wolves*" (Alexie 145). The movie *Dances with Wolves* can be categorized as a "going Native" film because it is based on a white man who leaves his settlement to join an American Indian tribe and subsequently "becomes Indian" through his involvement with the tribe. The most important aspect of this movie, though, is the portrayal of European Americans. Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche) describes *Dances with Wolves* as portraying white people in a disgusting manner to such a degree that they can barely eat their food with their hands and chew with their mouths closed. Smith even calls the white people "Nazis" (46).

Alexie also utilizes movies to turn his work into a metanarrative, which some critics would argue detracts from the piece, but actually adds humor to the piece and points out the

flaws in major movies of American pop culture. In *Reservation Blues*, Victor interrogates Thomas' optimism about band practice by saying, ““Jeez,[...]You sound like we're in some goddamn reservation coming-of-age movie. Who the fuck you think you are? Billy Jack? Who's writing your dialogue?”” (Alexie 211). Through this quote, Alexie alludes to many important aspects of his novel. The “goddamn reservation coming-of-age movie” refers to the fact that his novel much resembles a bildungsroman because the characters have left the reservation and discovered the world to be a cruel place, thereby forcing them to lose a sense of innocence and naiveté. The reference to *Billy Jack* sarcastically suggests that Thomas is acting like a reservation hero, trying to fight racism with justice in a racist, unjust society. The reference to *Billy Jack* also reveals how movies can harm American Indian identity. Even though the character Billy Jack could easily be idolized as a hero, his pursuit of evil causes his girlfriend to be raped. Paul Chaat Smith talks about how cinematic portrayals of rape, kidnapping, and murder are touted “among the best American films ever made” (44). Therefore, the movie reference to *Billy Jack* reminds the reading audience that its popularity is misguided due to violent content. Finally, the question “Who's writing your dialogue?” remains rhetorical, since Alexie wrote the dialogue and therefore refers to himself as the mastermind behind all the allusions that contain harmful, violent images of American Indians.

Another allusion to a popular movie that Gloria Bird incorrectly argues destroys the seriousness of suicide is the reference to *An American Werewolf in London*: “The comic entry of the visitation[...]overrides the seriousness of Victor's questioning as to *why* Junior committed suicide” (48). Bird addresses Alexie's use of humor, but she does not address his specific brand of humor, or use of sarcasm. The scene starts with a sarcastic understatement describing Junior's appearance, which resembled someone who had shot himself in the head with a rifle: ““Happy reservation fucking Halloween,’ Junior said, and Victor screamed, which made Junior scream,

too. They traded screams for a while. ‘So,’ Junior said after the screams had stopped, ‘are you happy to see me?’ ‘Jesus,’ Victor said. ‘What do you think this is? An American Werewolf in London? You’re supposed to be a ghost, not a piece of raw meat’” (Alexie 288). Alexie’s use of humor counteracts the horrific and violent act of Junior’s suicide, it does not subtract from the main issue of the actual suicide. Indeed, Bird makes a good point about this passage because phrases such as “They traded screams for a while” seem almost too ridiculous in a humorous sense to address such serious issues, but upon reading further one will discover the description “raw meat.” At this point in the passage, the reader can understand the true gravity behind being visited by someone who looks like they have been shot in the head with a rifle. Besides, Junior’s suicide is only one individual example of a larger problem concerning death on the reservation. Douglas Ford states, “Junior’s death makes up only a small part of a larger, more disturbing, pattern of eradication,” which is the alarming rates of suicide on Indian reservations (199). Alexie utilizes Junior as a metonymy for reservation suicide to bring to light this terrifying issue, and employs humor to present this issue to his reading audience because the humor behind this passage allows the reader to cope with the problematic suicide of Junior. Laughing at such a serious act brings to surface a method for which to discuss or address the issue at hand, as Joseph Coulombe asserts: “Alexie’s[...]humor unsettles conventional ways of thinking and compels re-evaluation an growth[...]and forces non-Indian readers to reconsider simplistic generalizations[...]Alexie’s use of humor encourages readers to think anew by creating a space of shared inquiry and reciprocal empathy” (95). Alexie’s use of humor actually disarms the reading audience and allows them to meet on the same intellectual level as Alexie to discuss these issues, such as suicide, more frankly. Alexie himself once said in an interview: “You make people laugh and you disarm them. You sort of sneak up on them. You can say controversial or rowdy things and they’ll listen or laugh” (Coulombe 108). Alexie utilizes understatements and

sarcasm to draw readers in and make them laugh. Then, he expresses his opinions about the reservation, history, and pop culture, which makes them more acceptable or at least easier to discuss since he brought his audience to common ground with humor.

Although Alexie names specific movies that generate problematic images of and for American Indians, most of his blame for the misrepresentation of American Indians heavily lies with television in general. Seymour Polatkin Junior, the only Indian character in Alexie's works who is smart enough to go to college yet returns to the reservation, connects his college education with the traditions of American Indians that are stereotyped: "In Psychology 101, Junior had learned from Freud and Jung that dreams decided everything. He figured that Freud and Jung must have been reservation Indians, because dreams decided everything for Indians too...Indians were *supposed* to have visions and receive messages from their dreams. All the Indians on television had visions that told them exactly what to do" (Alexie 18). By following the advice or example of television Indians, Junior subjects himself to eating disgusting peanut butter and onion sandwiches because he feels he is "*supposed* to." Television places pressure on Junior to behave a certain way, and even if eating disgusting sandwiches may not seem harmful at first, one has to wonder what else Junior feels he is "*supposed* to" do in order to present himself as an authentic Indian, such as take inhibiting drugs as cited above.

Indeed, television incorrectly educates America about race, especially in the case of Father Arnold from *Reservation Blues*. When Arnold first arrives at the reservation, he expects "tipis and buffalo, since he had never been told otherwise" and is "genuinely shocked" that the American Indians spoke English there. One Spokane woman correctly educates Arnold saying, "There weren't any buffalo here to begin with. We're a salmon tribe. At least, we were a salmon tribe before they put those dams on the river," to which Arnold still gives a confused response, "What about the buffalo? I mean, Indians were always hunting buffalo in television" (Alexie 36).

Television has provided Father Arnold with an image that is not geographically possible, and that image also happens to be racist. Buffalo cannot survive in certain areas due to weather, terrain, and lack of edible plant life. The Spokanes were salmon fishers because of their geographic location next to rivers, thereby making salmon a staple in their diet due to convenience. Father Arnold remains ignorant to these facts due to television and makes racist remarks through his projection of one image onto an entire race of people.

American pop culture may project outdated racist images of “traditional” American Indians, but it also projects developed stereotypes of more modern American Indians, specifically alcoholic Indians: “All Indians grow up with drunks. So many drunks on the reservation, so many. But most Indians never drink. Nobody notices the sober Indians. On television, the drunk Indians emote. In books, the drunk Indians philosophize” (Alexie 151). The irony behind this quote from *Reservation Blues* is the fact that almost all of the background characters and about half of the main characters in this novel and in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* are either hardcore alcoholics, party drinkers, or bar hoppers, and sometimes one character can be all three, as in Victor’s case. Even though these characters display the negative characteristic of drinking alcohol, the above passage explains that the very reason so many alcohol consumers show up in Alexie’s work is because they mimic pop culture and they bring to light this harsh stereotype. Bird strongly disagrees with presenting American Indian characters this way because “Stereotyping native peoples does not supply a native readership with soluble ways of undermining stereotypes, but becomes part of the problem, and returns an image of a generic ‘Indian’ back to the original producers of that image” (49). Although Bird brings up an excellent point concerning an uneducated reading audience, she fails to recognize that a reading audience does not need to be thoroughly educated to see the characters’ individuality. Since “Nobody notices the sober Indians,” Alexie provides his readership with drunk Indians, “so many” drunk

Indians, but he also presents them as real, flawed people with individual personalities that can hardly think and talk while intoxicated, let alone “emote” or “philosophize.” Also, they each respond differently to alcohol due to their differing backgrounds and childhood experiences with alcohol. For example, Thomas and Victor both grew up with alcoholic fathers, yet Victor turns toward drinking to feel numb and less guilty about not meeting non-Indian expectations surrounding American Indians while Thomas turns away from drinking so as to not inhibit his traditional storytelling abilities associated with American Indians.

Through Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, and Seymour Polatkin Jr., who all appear as the main male American Indian protagonists in both *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* and *Reservation Blues*, Alexie educates his reading audience on the stereotypes that have developed throughout history and are presented in American popular culture, which have a very real impact on American Indian identity today. Alexie makes his reading audience aware of the realities American Indians face in the United States, specifically on the reservation; raising issues in both works such as poverty, alcoholism, and suicide that need to be discussed and changed. Specifically through Thomas, Alexie also rewrites historical moments to add the American Indian voice back into the landscape of history and subvert dominant culture’s white perspective, if only through fiction: “Imagining alternative histories might not change the present, but conceiving of other possibilities, revisioning a history in which Native Americans write Native Americans back into the landscape, will influence the future” (Cox 58). As James Cox asserts, “Imagining alternative histories” will change the future because Alexie places hope for historical accuracy without racism in both works. If all battles could be labeled appropriately as massacres due to the numerous deaths, and if all massacres could be considered an evil act of violence due to the numerous murders, then maybe history could be colorblind.

In fact, the only difference between a battle and a massacre is the word itself, yet their definitions remain the same: there existed a fight with the outcome of one side winning and the other side losing. The only difference is who tells the story. Since the dominant culture of America is European American, when the whites won the slaughter was a battle, and when the whites lost the slaughter was a massacre. Either way, there was a slaughter and language is the only factor that dictates who voices history. Therefore, Alexie's weapon against history is language and his medium remains fictional literature: "Native Americans see language as a viable weapon to protect cultural identity and sovereignty. When physical resistance becomes necessary; stories can be told about the white devil, power songs sung, spells invented, and myths constructed" (Rader 148). Retelling historical events through fiction transforms what is considered a loss by American Indians into a victory because their side of the story was told, even if it is discredited by history's dominant standard of factual accuracy.

Alexie accomplishes historical accuracy through fiction, though, no matter what the standards for proper historical events may be because he engages and entertains his reading audience through his second weapon against dominant culture: humor. After experiencing decimation during war, "salvation" during Catholic boarding school, and distribution among reservations, the American Indians have endured enough oppression and suffering to last many generations to come. Certainly Alexie could take an insulted or negative attitude towards history and pop culture, and certainly the undertone of Alexie's references towards history and pop culture do contain some amount of contempt, but instead Alexie jokes about historical events and the stereotypes in pop culture. Alexie adds an American Indian voice to history, but he also keeps his race alive in history. Vine Deloria Jr. (Sioux) states, "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that people can survive" (167). Alexie helps the survival

of the Spokane Indians and American Indians in general through his representations of history.

The American Indian presence in Alexie's works informs readers of their continual existence and their struggle for representation in history books, museums, and television.

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