Fancydancing: the Art of the Self
Sherman Alexie and the Self-Sovereignty in *The Business of Fancydancing*

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"I'm not limited by writing about Spokane Indians.... I feel challenged by trying to write about Spokane Indians. They're a powerful people, and it's a powerful place. I'm never going to run out of stories or themes. To suggest otherwise, or to suggest I should be interested in something else, is ridiculous."

–Sherman Alexie

Visual images of the drunken, vanishing, or stoic Indian are commonplace within the popular imagination. Indigenous films have provided a medium to challenge and refute these stereotypes. As a Native American writer and filmmaker, Sherman Alexie aims to blur and destabilize the boundaries at the intersections of these categories. Only then do these categories become tangible and meaningful, particularly in regard to their role in comprising the modern Indian identity. Through his film, *The Business of Fancydancing*, Sherman Alexie explores the themes of alcoholism, reservation life, and masculinity within the Native American condition to challenge his audience to negotiate multiple identities. He subverts the stereotypes and categorization of these themes through developing characters who struggle to reconcile these themes within their own identities. With films featuring relatable characters that are complex and flawed, Alexie cultivates sovereignty of self-identity as an artistic and sociocultural practice through filmmaking.

A Spokane/Coeur d'Alene American Indian, Sherman Alexie is a poet, writer, screenwriter, filmmaker, and performer. He has self-identified as an urban Indian since 1994 and currently lives in Seattle, Washington. He is named after his father, Sherman Joseph Alexie, who was Coeur d'Alene. His mother, Lillian Agnes Cox, was Spokane, Kootenay, and Colville Indian, all considered to be related as Salish people with the same spoken language (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 21). Born in 1966, Alexie grew up on the Spokane Indian

Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. At that time, the reservation was composed of approximately 1,000 Spokane Indians.

Alexie's father was an alcoholic and frequently left the house for days at a time. Alexie's mother worked as a clerk at the Wellpinit Trading Post and sold hand-sewn quilts to support her six children. His childhood experiences of alcoholism and the economic realities of reservation life became central themes in his early written work. His father's interest in reading sparked Alexie's passion for language (Berglund and Roush 2010, xi). In an early essay titled "Superman and Me," Alexie speaks about his predilection for reading:

> I refused to fail. I was smart. I was arrogant. I was lucky. I read books late into the night… I read anything that had words and paragraphs. I read with equal parts joy and desperation. I loved those books, but I also knew that love had only one purpose. I was trying to save my life (Alexie as quoted in Berglund and Roush 2010, xii).

Although both fluent in Salish, his parents did not teach their language to Alexie. From a young age, Alexie was told it would not be the Salish language but English that would become his best weapon and lifeline (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 22).

Alexie attended the elementary school located on the reservation. In contrast to tribal culture and his classmates, Alexie was ambitious, competitive, and individualistic. In addition, he had various health problems that excluded him from activities considered to be rites of passage for Native American boys. After eighth grade, he decided to transfer to Reardan High School located off the reservation in a German immigrant community. He was the only Native American attending the school at the time. He discovered that the qualities that had marked him an outcast on the reservation marked him for success at Reardan (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 22).

Alexie earned a scholarship to attend Gonzaga University, a Jesuit university in Spokane, Washington. Alexie eventually transferred to Washington State University. As a

collegiate student, Alexie confronted his own alcoholism, renounced drinking, and has remained sober since the age of twenty-three. Indecisive for a time, Alexie took a variety of different courses related to several majors with the intention of going into medicine. After continually fainting in his human anatomy class, Alexie searched for a career change. The only class that fit into his schedule was a poetry writing workshop. Realizing he had never heard of or been exposed to books written by Indian people, Alexie dove in. His professor, Alex Kuo, gave Alexie a book titled *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back*. This became his first introduction to contemporary Native American poetry by native writers such as Linda Hogan, Simon Ortiz, Joy Harjo, James Welch, and Adrian Louis (Berglund and Roush 2010, xii). For the first time, Alexie saw his own life reflected in the stories and poems of these writers. Nothing he had read before resonated with him in such a way. With Professor Kuo's encouragement, Alexie began writing poetry in the year he still remembers: 1989 (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 23).

Alexie has collectively published over twenty books consisting of screenplays, poetry, short stories, and novels. *The Business of Fancydancing* was published by Hanging Loose Press in 1992 as Alexie's first book of poetry. The Atlantic Monthly Press published his first book of short stories in 1993 with the title *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. It soon earned a PEN/Hemingway Award for best first book of fiction (Berglund and Roush 2010, xvi). Published in 1995 by Atlantic Monthly Press, his first novel, *Reservation Blues*, was set on the Spokane reservation and told the story of an all-Native American Catholic rock-and-roll band (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 27). Alexie was awarded the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award for *Reservation Blues*. He was named one of Granta's best young American novelists and his short stories have frequently appeared in *The New Yorker* and the

annual O'Henry Award and Best American Short Story collections. Published in 2009, *War Dances* won the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction in 2010 (Berglund and Roush 2010, xvii).

Early on, Alexie expressed personal interest in exploring screenplay writing and filmmaking as a new, powerful medium in reaching a Native American audience since most of his books were predominantly read by non-native people. It was this early success with a non-native audience that propelled people to begin contacting Alexie as a potential filmmaker. However, he declined their offers when they showed interest in implementing changes that conformed Alexie's stories to "commercial Indianness" (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 56). Then, Chris Eyre, a graduate student at New York University at the time, expressed interest in Alexie's work. Eyre's interests and vision aligned with Alexie's dream of indigenous collaboration. This partnership resulted in the production of *Smoke Signals* in 1998 through the film-production company ShadowCatcher. Based on a short story titled "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" in Alexie's first book, *Smoke Signals* was the first feature film coproduced by Native Americans based on a book with a Native American author (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 57). Alexie found the process of transforming a story from book to screenplay relatively smooth "because it's more like poetry—about images" (Alexie as quoted in Alexie and Peterson 2009, 57). Alexie appreciated and enjoyed film as an imaginative, demanding, and immediate form of media.

In addition to film, Alexie has explored poetry, short stories, novels, screenplays, sketches, conversations, and essays as mediums for defying categorization as well as quasi-autobiographical excursions. Arguably one of the most prolific and successful contemporary Native American writers, Alexie characterizes his work as a cultural investigator in search of the subtle layers of identities and meanings that comprise the Indian condition (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 122). Furthermore, he explores "the influence of popular culture and the media,

the importance of orality in Native American tradition, and the significance of humor as a method of survival for Indian people" (Tammy Wahpeconiah as reprinted in Lewis 2012, 87). This multiplicity of analyses makes his work a dynamic force within today's Native American genre.

The Business of Fancydancing as Alexie's first book of poetry came out of his first semester poetry manuscript at Washington State University. Part of the assignment was to submit one's work to a literary magazine. Alexie chose *Hanging Loose* magazine because it was established in 1966, the same year he was born. After publishing several of his poems over the course of a year, *Hanging Loose* asked Alexie for a manuscript, which eventually became *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems* (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 26). It is a collection of five short stories and forty poems. Arguably the most well-known piece of this collection is the seven-stanza poem narrating the story of fancydance aspirants driving through the night to compete in different fancydance contests. They participate in hope of winning enough prize money to survive while they drive to their next competition. Throughout this poem, Alexie employs a powerful incorporation of figurative language to weave native folk traditions in a modern setting.

Alexie believes his first published manuscript remains the most relatable to Native Americans because it was written at a time when Alexie himself was struggling with what it means to be a Native American in the contemporary (Alexie and Peterson 2009, 47). The rawness and authenticity that arose as a result was largely maintained in Alexie's screenplay of the book that later became produced as a film in 2003. After co-producing *Smoke Signals* with Chris Eyre, Alexie was captivated by the tremendous cultural power of film. Wanting to produce another movie, Alexie explored multiple channels in Hollywood. After finding a lack of interest in movies centered on Native Americans there, Alexie became interested in the

economic, social, and aesthetical appeal of self-produced digital video. Alexie took a video class offered by 911 Media Arts in Seattle, Washington. It was from 911 Media Arts that Alexie drew most of his crew, including Holly Taylor as the cinematographer and editor. The film is the story of a trio of Spokane men who grew up together as childhood friends on the Spokane Reservation. Seymour Polatkin, played by Evan Adams, and Aristotle Joseph, played by Gene Tagaban, graduate from high school to leave the reservation to attend college. They leave behind their friend Mouse, played by Swil Kanim, who remains on the reservation. Aristotle eventually returns to the reservation while Seymour graduates from college and becomes a successful Native American poet. With Mouse's sudden death, Seymour returns, confronting the reservation both as a source of his successful poetry and the heritage he left behind. Through the interactions and narratives of these characters, Alexie acknowledges popular Native American stereotypes in order to challenge and destabilize them.

There exists a stereotype of the American Indian as overwhelmed and overcome by alcohol addiction. Alexie refuses to indulge such a reductive stereotype and simple-minded presentation of Native Americans. Rather, he subverts this familiar stereotype to convey "realistic valences of meaning for modern reservation life and people" (Evans 2001, 1). Alexie's drunken Indians, such as Mouse in *The Business of Fancydancing*, possess "artistic and moral strengths" that become focal points of the story (Evans 2001, 1). As one of the first scenes of the film, Mouse's death orchestrates Seymour's return to the reservation. Implied to have involved substance abuse, Mouse's death initially appears to re-inscribe the stereotype of the "drunken Indian." However, Alexie carefully crafts Mouse as the only visible character in the film who suffers from drug abuse and addiction. There is a passing scene of Seymour attending an alcohol rehab group session. Aristotle is shown inhaling gasoline fumes in another scene. However, neither Seymour, Aristotle, nor any other character is shown unable to manage their

alcohol or other drug use. In this way, alcoholism may affect the lives of multiple characters but it is only implied to have ended the life of one—that is, Mouse.

This astutely constructed balance "defies the stereotype at the same time it allows the film to make an honest presentation" (Schweninger 2013, 129). It provides middle ground. Moreover, even in death, Mouse continues to play a vital role in the film as his story unfolds and resonates through each character. Mouse is brought alive to the audience through flashbacks, insights offered by other characters, Seymour's poetry, and Mouse's own scenes filmed by his handheld camera. For example, during Mouse's funeral, his friend Teresa narrates a multi-layered account of his life during which the film cuts to a living Mouse in a flashback. The audience hears Mouse playing his violin as she describes the first time she heard his music. At one point, there is a voiceover where Mouse himself narrates Teresa's story of him. Throughout the movie, Mouse appears to Seymour as if he were a living ghost. His violin-playing comprises most of the film's background music. The characters who knew Mouse bring him to life for the audience as each scene adds another layer to his story (Schweninger 2013, 129). His death may have begun the film, but it is his life that propels its storyline. Alexie develops Mouse as a complex character because his identity is only appreciable comprehensively at the film's end. In effect, a story initially about an alcoholism-induced death becomes a celebration of life.

In *The Business of Fancydancing*, Alexie explores the causes of alcoholism rather than solely focusing on the effects. In this way, the film offers "fuller, more nuanced and more realistic depictions of alcohol consumption and illicit drug use" (Schweninger 2013, 166). For example, in a scene titled "In the Car," Seymour reads one of his poems about four children waiting in a car for their parents to emerge from the reservation tavern. The story tells of how the children were passing the time while the night progressed, despite their parents' promises

of leaving soon. The poem assuages the listener as Seymour recites, "This is not a story about sadness / This is about the stories I created / How I build landscapes and imaginary saviors" (*The Business of Fancydancing).* The scene unfolds with images and sounds of children rough-housing within the close quarters of the car, Mouse playing his violin, and their shared laughter. Coupled with Seymour's rhythmic reading of the poem's compelling language, the vivid imagery evokes one of the most powerful scenes in the entire film. What began as another narration of Native American alcoholism transforms to a story about bonds, laughter, love, trust, forgiveness, and imagination. The story ends with the children tucked safely into bed, listening to their parents breathe deeply, and "in the reservation dark, that meant [they] were all alive and that was enough" (*Business*). Through humanizing the "drunken Indian" stereotype, Alexie presents alcoholism as a reality rather than a categorization. In this way, Alexie creates new meanings when the "images of the drunken Indian function as 'open containers'… to house or decant realistic valences of meaning for modern reservation life and people" (Evans 2001, 1). Consequently, Alexie provides a middle ground upon which Native Americans can negotiate the role of alcoholism within their own identities.

Alexie explores the Native American struggle to resolve the past and present through his representation of reservation life in *The Business of Fancydancing*. Alexie boldly delves into "the dysfunctional nature of contemporary reservation life," which ultimately amounts to "the fragmented, often alienated 'bicultural' lives of characters who daily confront the white civilization that encaptives their world—physically, historically, spiritually, and psychically" (Evans 2001, 1). This is most exemplified by Seymour, who "fetishizes his own definitions of 'Indianness' and his own identity as a Native person" as well as the identities of those he left behind on the reservation (Meredith James as reprinted in Lewis 2012, 243). Both poet and poetry are clear contradictions. Seymour's work criticizes mainstream notions of "Indianness,"

yet it is the approval of his white audience that he associates with success. The reservation and heritage he abandoned as a young adult becomes the source of his poetry and resulting success. This is the great conflict of the film.

Alexie illustrates the contemporary Native American identity as a conflict between conforming to the category of a reservation Indian or an urban Indian throughout the film. When Seymour tells Steven, his male partner, of his decision to return to the reservation, Steven refutes Seymour's connection to his past when he states, "They aren't your tribe anymore. I'm your tribe now" (*Business*). Steven claims Seymour must abandon his "old" Indian self in order to embrace a "new" Indian identity. Since leaving the reservation, Seymour has attempted to cut off any and all ties from his heritage. He does not visit or attempt to contact any friends or family. He takes on a white boyfriend and enjoys the success of achieving the American Dream. He perceives his reservation Indian heritage as a permanent and concrete part of his past. His poems are essentially stories of Aristotle and Mouse frozen in the past as reservation Indians who are "unable to break free from the romantic and damaging notions of 'Indianness'" (Meredith James as reprinted in Lewis 2012, 246). These scenes depict Seymour's attempts to maintain a separation between a reservation Indian identity and an urban Indian identity as stark categories.

However, Alexie asserts such a separation is superficial at most and in reality, a blending occurs to compromise between the two categories. Similar to his portrayal of alcoholism, Alexie presents a middle ground. When an unnamed interviewer claims 95% of Seymour's poems are about the reservation, Seymour responds by saying, "Every time I sit down to write a poem, I want it to not be about the reservation. But the reservation just won't let me go" (*Business*). It is the first time in the film that Seymour verbally admits to a discrepancy in his constructed separation of reservation and urban Indian life. Additionally, the

juxtaposition of Aristotle and Seymour also highlight this discrepancy. When Aristotle announces he is leaving the university, he asks Seymour to join him in returning to the reservation. When Seymour declines, Aristotle accuses him of performing his role as Indian:

> You like it out here, don't you? Playing Indian, putting on your feather and beads for the white folks? Out here, you're the Public Relations warrior, you're Super Indian, you're the expert and authority. But back home, man, you're just the tiny little Indian who cries too easy (*Business*).

Aristotle refers to the pressure of conforming to a particular category as an Indian off the reservation. As a successful poet, Seymour becomes an authority, expert, and representative when he is away from the reservation. Though "[t]he whole world is a prison with a million confines, wars, and dungeons," Seymour asserts "[t]he reservation is just the worse of them" (*Business*). In this way, the film displays the pressure to conform to multiple identity categories according to different physical locations. This allows the discussion of the geopolitics of identity by exploring how each character reconciles differing performances within a single identity.

Alexie uses the juxtaposition of Seymour and Aristotle to discuss the role of "truth" in reconciling constructed categories within a contemporary Native American identity. In a scene narrating a childhood experience of stealing apples, the film alternates between Aristotle and Seymour's differing versions of the same event. This exposes Seymour's poems as his selection of exaggerated, blurred, and silenced experiences (Berglund and Roush 2010, 250). The tension between Aristotle's and Seymour's respective perceptions of truth reaches a climax at Mouse's wake. Aristotle accuses Seymour of living in an illusion while reminding him "it's real" on the reservation. In response, Seymour argues the impossibility of his continual return to the reservation to save every Indian. Believing he deserved it, Seymour states he made a better life for himself without help from anyone. Aristotle potently reminds Seymour of the source for his poetry and life: "These Indians you write about, they are helping you every day.... We've been

helping you since you were born" (*Business*). Aristotle's words remind Seymour the reservation has been and always will be an integral part of his life. Rather than a symbol of a vanishing past, the reservation is not only a place existing in the present but also a spirit that will continue to exist through its people.

Ultimately, Alexie shows that Seymour's struggle between being a reservation Indian and an urban Indian is a product of negotiating between the past and present according to the geopolitics of identity. The reservation becomes a dialogue internalized by each character rather than existing as a physical space. This internalization subverts the idea that reservations are superficial remnants of the past. The film exposes Seymour's role as simultaneous insider and outsider. The concluding scene shows Seymour backing out of the driveway to return to Seattle, leaving behind a mirror image of himself at the house. The scene cuts to a solitary Seymour gradually ceasing to fancydance. He falls abruptly to the ground before slowly removing his ceremonial regalia. This suggests to the audience that Seymour's internal conflict between reservation Indian and urban poet may never be reconciled.

If this attempted reconciliation is futile, "[w]hy do we spend all of this time talking about the impossible?" (*Business*). In responding to Agnes' question, Seymour also responds to the audience when he answers, "Because the rest is silence" (*Business*). Alexie argues this attempted negotiation is a part of the contemporary Native American identity, despite the possibility it may never be reconciled. Alexie claims the struggle inherent in every contemporary Indian identity combats silence by making noise and causing ripples. Consequently, this continual negotiation creates meaning where identity categories intersect. In effect, it is this struggle that is not only inherent but integral to the identity of the modern Native American.

Another familiar image within the popular imagination is that of the stoic Indian warrior dressed in feathers, decorated with war paint, and armed with a tomahawk. At the beginning of the film, Alexie acknowledges this stereotype when Mouse's ceremonial garb is displayed at his wake and funeral. The headdress, beads, and decorated tunic do not stand out because it is consistent with the mainstream portrayal of the Native American male. It implies the existence of a hegemony of heterosexual masculinity that is pure, distinct, and historically perpetuated in the present. And yet, Alexie challenges this stereotype by developing male characters that are emotional and reactive. His portrayal of Native American masculinity is both heterogeneous and complex. Firstly, Seymour is a gay protagonist. In the director's commentary, Alexie states his decision to create a homosexual character was partially influenced by his desire to confront the homophobia he grew up with on the Spokane Reservation (*Business*). He aimed to confront the hegemonies of heterosexuality and masculinity he had experienced first-hand.

Alexie uses Seymour and Mouse to "[destroy] the romanticization of the stoic male heterosexual Indian warrior prevalent in classic American Westerns and photography" (Brian Klopotek as cited in Estrada 2010, 1). In one scene, Aristotle and Mouse repeatedly punch and kick a white male stranger whose car had run out of gas on the side of the road. This unprovoked brutality directly disrupts the popular image of the stoic and reserved Indian. Seymour is a successful character in expanding the role of masculinity within the modern Indian identity because he "both 'queers the Native American sphere' and disrupts white fantasies of 'utopic' Native American homosexual traditions" (Quentin Youngberg as quoted in Estrada 2010, 1). Seymour is neither wholly homosexual nor wholly heterosexual. Throughout the film, Seymour sways between his attraction to Steven, Agnes, and Aristotle. This challenge of the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality questions the very idea of a pure

identity. Rather than homogenous and harmonious, identities are fragmented and multi-faceted. Thus, Alexie creates space for his characters, and consequently his audience, to negotiate sexuality as well as multiplicity within their identities.

Furthermore, Alexie juxtaposes the theme of masculinity with femininity primarily through the character of Agnes Roth. Agnes serves as a moral and spiritual focal point of the film. From a Spokane and Jewish heritage, Agnes is introduced as a character of mixed background, immediately contributing to Alexie's theme of multiplicity within modern Native American identities. Not only has Agnes appeared to have reconciled the two halves of her heritage, she also decides to return to the reservation to teach after graduating from college. Unlike Aristotle and Seymour, Agnes does not appear to exhibit an internal struggle in reconciling her identity as a reservation and urban Indian. Agnes fluidly assimilates within the reservation's men, who regard her with respect and deference. Also Seymour's ex-lover, Agnes maintains a deep friendship with Seymour, who looks to her as a source of wisdom and support.

After his return, Seymour and Agnes talk about the role of the reservation in their lives. After comparing themselves to "Indian products and commodities," Agnes challenges Seymour to "realize the absurdity of commodifying his identity… and that material ambition without a sense of home will lead to his destruction and the destruction of his people" (Meredith James as reprinted in Lewis 2012, 248). She helps Seymour reconcile his success as well as restore his place on the reservation. When she says, "The res has missed you," Agnes reminds both the reservation men and Seymour of his heritage, his home, and his right to belong to a place. Agnes tells the other men Seymour has kept in touch through his poetry. And in telling Seymour, "You can always come back," she lends her unconditional support while allowing Seymour time to resolve his internal conflict himself (*Business*). As Doug Marx notes, "[t]he need for female strength and wisdom is a primary theme of Alexie's" (as reprinted in Alexie and

Peterson 2009, 17). Alexie asserts femininity is a fundamental part of the modern Indian identity. In tying the reservation and its people to Seymour and vice versa, Agnes not only exemplifies the strength of an individual who negotiates between multiple identities but also the tremendous potential of a community who does so as well.

In subverting familiar stereotypes of Native Americans, Alexie acknowledges the system that categorizes the world in order to destabilize the categories. Like many postcolonial artists, Alexie "appropriate[s] culturally relevant symbols or images and reinvent[s] in a way that disrupts or disturbs the originally intended meaning" (Jones 2011, 174). Furthermore, Alexie openly acknowledges filmmaking as a social process that perpetuates visual images within the public imagination. He utilizes the character of Mouse as cameraman to develop a sense of self-reflexivity that exposes the artifice of film (Schweninger 2013, 129). In addition to reservation life portrayed in Seymour's poetry, Mouse becomes Seymour's coauthor as he selects what scenes to film as documenter. Mouse's power of filmic selection hints at the documentary genre that so long portrayed Native Americans as subjects or objects of films and history rather than creators.

The visualization of Mouse's handheld camera reminds the viewer there are two cameras, one seen and one unseen. In an ingenious and astute way, Alexie simultaneously "evoke[s] the idea of documentary and… expose[s] its artifice and represent[s] it as the construct it is" (Schweninger 2013, 133). The interplay of reality and representation in film is also present in stereotypes. Just as film can provide various "lenses" through which to perceive reality, stereotypes are also a means of shaping perception. Alexie calls attention to the nature of stereotypes and categories as social constructs that are neither universal nor absolute. They can be denaturalized and broken down just as they can be built up.

Like many postcolonial artists, Alexie openly presents his work as only one deconstruction of a set of stereotypes amongst a multitude of possible portrayals. He approaches his work as an artist would. Presenting his work as one possible interpretation opens the way for other interpretations either complementary or contrary to his. It is this freedom of artistic interpretation that "identifies stereotypes and biases and breaks them apart through exposure representations that do not conform to the predictable visual codes" (Jones 2011, 193). Because it results in the liberation of meaning rather than limitation, art is essential to postcolonial thinking. Its inclusive nature facilitates a dialogue between varying interpretations. Art then becomes an essential force in creating visual sovereignty as "the space between resistance and compliance wherein indigenous filmmakers and actors revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions" (Raheja 2007, 1161). Furthermore, in simultaneously "operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions," indigenous people establish visual sovereignty as a sociocultural phenomenon (Raheja 2007, 1161). In other words, indigenous media production becomes an act of self-determination and cultural autonomy "that reclaims the screen to tell aboriginal stories from aboriginal perspectives" (Dowell 2013, 2).

The Business of Fancydancing provides a space for Indians to simultaneously critique, deconstruct, and reconcile the historically constructed cultural knowledge that Hollywood films have produced (Raheja 2010, x-xi). In the director's commentary, Alexie asserted the film was not only a discussion of his politics but also the embodiment of them in the production of the film (*Business*). Alexie wanted to create a space to not only discuss the multiplicity of identities but also to assert and practice this multiplicity. Being director allowed Alexie to become a communistic leader and create an atmosphere where everyone involved was an equal within the production process. Alexie wrote the screenplay as a series of stories, poems, and

scenes that were loosely connected, leaving room for creativity and imagination. Scenes in the film were largely improvised with biographical details of Alexie, the actors, and production staff. (Aileo Weinmann as cited in Alexie and Peterson 2009, 101). Therefore, the stories represented on-screen serve as a vital off-screen catalyst for communicating, creating, shifting between, and reconciling different cultural identities. More than a mere representation of cultural narratives and traditions, indigenous films "are also constitutive of aboriginal social relationships" (Dowell 2013, xii). Due to its communal nature, indigenous media is characterized by a responsibility to the community, creating a unique indigenous aesthetic.

Alexie employs the interpretative freedom of art and the sociality of visual sovereignty within his presentation of "fancydancing" in the film. Consequently, it became a means of expression and dialogue. Alexie includes scenes of his characters "fancydancing" following major focal points of the film. In this way, "fancydancing" isn't a physical act but a mental, emotional, and spiritual outlet for the film's characters. Therefore, "fancydancing" transcends geographical limits and boundaries. It becomes a cultural practice through which "landless Native Americans maintain a sense of connection to their tribal homelands and urban spaces through participation in cultural circuits and maintenance of social networks" (Ramirez as quoted in Dowell 2013, 35). In the same way, the production of indigenous media provides a physical space or "hub" for social expression and interaction. This "hub," however, functions more importantly as a social phenomenon that connects people regardless of physical space. In this way, participants involved with the film actively engage with both the production process and the multiplicity of the indigenous identity that is the film's focus. In effect, in order to claim a place within indigenous media, one must claim an indigenous identity.

Sherman Alexie utilizes indigenous media as a medium to create a space for the self-definition and self-representation of a contemporary Native American identity. Reflective of

visual sovereignty, *The Business of Fancydancing* is a retelling of indigenous stories from an indigenous perspective. In this sense, it not only confronts but also refutes the politics of visibility and ownership of representation. Furthermore, Alexie emphasizes film production as a "hub" for expression and dialogue. In engaging with the social process of film production, one also engages with the multiplicity of identity Alexie proposes. In *The Business of Fancydancing*, he creates multi-dimensional characters by subverting the stereotypes of alcoholism, reservation life, and masculinity. Alexie's characters are complex and flawed, making them relatable. In this way, Alexie presents the struggle of reconciling multi-faceted identities as not only integral to the Native American condition but also as inherent to the human condition. Consequently, Alexie suggests indigenous film is less about ownership and more about the resulting experiences and social relationships that form. Therefore, it is the exigency to make these raw experiences and authentic social relationships visible that creates an indigenous aesthetic within every person, connecting us all as human.

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