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"RESERVATION OF THE MIND": THE LITERARY NATIVE SPACES IN
THE FICTION OF SHERMAN ALEXIE

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

MEREDITH K. JAMES
Norman, Oklahoma
2000

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A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

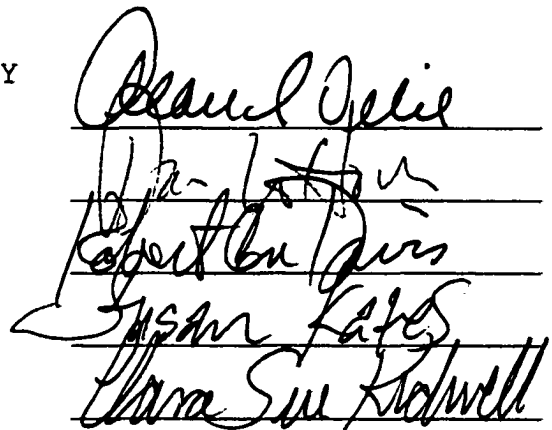

Daniel Ojeda
John L. L. L.
Robert C. Davis
Susan Kates
Clara Sue Howell

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Introduction

In an interview with Cree playwright Tomson Highway, Sherman Alexie claims the impetus for his writing career came from reading Joseph Bruchac's anthology *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back* while he was in college. He cites Adrian Louis's poem, "Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile," as being very influential. Alexie says that the line "reservation of the mind" gave him the sense that finally someone understood what he felt. This dissertation examines the importance of this concept of the "reservation of the mind" not only to Alexie but also to other twentieth century native writers.

I hope that with this project I can raise some compelling arguments about the contradictory nature of what the literary reservation space means in primarily the works of Sherman Alexie, but also including N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, and Louise Erdrich. All of these authors focus on the importance and function of landscape in relation to their stories and characters.

The concept of "reservation of the mind" describes an imposed worldview. The reservation system was and is in theory a modern concept that seeks to contain and

designate ethnicity and culture. I discuss at length the historical implications of this system and its negative effects on Indians and more specifically Indian authors. But rather than dwell on the damaging aspects, I also devote my work to discussing how authors recreate reservation space in positive ways, and how their characters' struggles reflect an ongoing debate about how Indian identity is deeply connected to land. Many authors' characters survive colonial imposition and administration in order to express their hope that Indian cultures will continue. Ultimately, I want to make clear that there is no clear delineation of the physical reservation and the mental reservation.

I would like at this point to discuss what I will not be doing in this dissertation. I can take no position of authority about what it is like to live on a reservation or what it is to belong to any of the tribes of the authors that I discuss. One of my goals is to fill what I perceive as a gap in Native American literature studies which is that there is little scholarship about Alexie that tackles his sense of play with different forms of storytelling such as film and music.

Throughout the dissertation, I return to the concept of the "reservation of the mind." This one line of poetry has proven valuable for considering Alexie's work. He attaches all of his experience to this concept whether his characters never leave the Welpinit Reservation or wander the streets of Seattle. In order to establish this idea, I set up the framework using the history of the reservation system to assert the social importance and the sacredness of land to Indians. I draw parallels between physical consciousness and mental consciousness of native experience and its influence on native authors.

The first chapter deals with concepts of how Indians perceive the land, the history of the reservation system, how Native authors reconcile fragmented identities with the landscape, and how damaging perceptions and policies regarding Native peoples help to form an "American" identity. One element that I emphasize is how land or lack thereof is central to Indian identity. It is impossible, in my estimation, to analyze native works without considering the creation of a literary homeland and how this homeland came about. By discussing the history of the loss of Indian lands and the struggle to maintain what Indians have kept, I hope to make clear how important this is to understanding literary reservations

and why the particular story being told is being related to an audience in such a way that combines landscape, identity, and storytelling. Many of the authors that I discuss focus on a mixed-blood existence in a landscape torn apart by war, the Dawes Act, and other colonizing forces. Alexie's work differs in that it focuses on full-bloods as his attempt to restore the power to the land. He attacks American popular culture notions of Indianness denying a mainstream audience the ability to rely on nineteenth century images of Indians or any other way they could identify with the struggles of his characters. I am not suggesting that an audience could not identify at all; Alexie resists any temptation to pander to an audience unfamiliar with anything but the erroneous images of Indians.

When looking at how he controls the adaptation of *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* into *Smoke Signals*, it is apparent that he has no tolerance for the racist ideologies present in the history of the entertainment industry as far as Indians are concerned. Alexie changes his own text to represent himself by switching the Spokane reservation with the Coeur D'Alene reservation. This act represents both of his tribes, but also makes a direct commentary on how Hollywood often

manipulates a written text's tribal settings, as is done with *Dances with Wolves*. Mainstream Hollywood films often replace one tribe with another in order to appeal to a larger audience or have a more dynamic landscape to capture visually. Throughout the screenplay, Alexie fits in as many references as he can to how popular images of Indians are wrong and ridiculous, and he tears down as many pop icons as he can such as John Wayne.

Alexie's work doesn't only focus on visual representations of native peoples, but also he interprets Indian reservation experience by using blues music. In *Reservation Blues* and the accompanying soundtrack, he tells the story of a reservation band trying to become famous off of the reservation. Alexie makes connections throughout as to how the blues music is directly tied to the land, especially reservation land, and why Indians are the originators of the blues, the music of survival.

In his most sophisticated work to date, *Indian Killer*, he plays with early genres of captivity narratives when telling the story of John Smith, a twenty-something Indian man who grows up with no knowledge of his tribal background. His story is the most pivotal to the novel although all the characters experience captivity on varying levels. In the novel,

Alexie refers much to the visual representation of Indians again, but he also attacks academia, popular fiction, and the urban wilderness.

Alexie's work explores the complexity of Indian identity and how it cannot be neatly divided into categories and framed in arbitrary boundaries, which the U.S. government attempts to do when dealing with Indian matters such as land rights and blood quantum. Alexie manipulates the very landscape that creates from novel to novel in order to get across how the "reservation of the mind" is a dynamic terrain, not a place where one feels boxed in and helpless.

Chapter 1

"Uncle Adrian! I'm in the reservation of my mind":

Native Writers Creating the Literary Reservation

During the 1976 centennial celebration of the Battle of Little Bighorn, which included a pageant sponsored by the National Parks Services, a large group of Sioux protestors "held their own services around the memorial, singing 'Custer Died for Your Sins' while carrying an American flag upside down" (Linenthal 143).

Demonstrations such as these performed by the American Indian Movement during the 1960's and 1970's were intended to symbolic actions of reclaiming and retelling history. The protest against the celebration of Little Bighorn, the occupation of Alcatraz, and the conflict at Wounded Knee in 1973 not only brought media attention to native issues, but also conveyed the Indians' sense of the sacredness of their land and the violence inherent in the landscape. These late-twentieth-century images of reservations, battlefields, and prisons in the living rooms of Americans became AIM's way to force the recognition of Indians' struggles after the government's termination efforts to eradicate tribal sovereignty during the 1950's.

What is significant about the Little Bighorn battleground protest is that the ground was obviously sacred to white Americans who had romanticized the legends of Custer and that "for a century patriotic orthodoxy at the battlefield had. . .helped shape a culturally constructed--hence, an 'artificial'--interpretation of the battle" (Linenthal 143). Mardell Plainfeather, a National Park Service historian, reports that "only about 2 to 4 percent of the visitors to the Little Bighorn are Native Americans--despite the fact that the battlefield is in the middle of a Crow reservation and near a Cheyenne reservation" (Linenthal 155). Important here is the intersection of native living spaces and the remains of violence. The victory of Little Big Horn is significant to Indians, but most of Indian lands have been seen as monuments to loss and bloodshed and are visited more frequently by whites than Indians. Since Euro-American defeat has happened less on the North American continent, they tend to valorize loss more than victory. For instance, no one forgets the Alamo. Many Indians perceived the battlefield to be memorializing Custer and his men, and, accordingly, demanded an Indian memorial. What Means and the other protestors, in 1976, sought to do, according to

Linenthal, was "symbolic guerilla warfare" (159).

Bringing national attention to sacred sites such as these was forcing Americans to reconsider their histories such as the Wounded Knee 1890 massacre.

While AIM was making its presence known, Native authors were gaining recognition in the academy. Authors such as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko wrote stories of war veterans returning to their reservations as aliens, out of tune with the sacredness of their homelands. This detachment from and attachment to land is the driving force of most native authors' works.

Robert M. Nelson asserts,

In recent Native American literature, as in many of the cultural traditions to which this body of literature refers and defers, identity, like life itself, derives from the land.

Whoever wishes either to recover or to sustain a healthy state of existence, then, must enter into some working identity not only with a cultural tradition, but also with a particular landscape. (267)

Contemporary writers that set their stories on and off reservations have a strong sense of the importance to land that Nelson contends is unable to be critiqued

through the basic Aristotelian divisions of character, plot, setting, and theme because "landscapes function not only as the 'settings' of the narratives, but also as 'characters'" (271). The characters and the land are inseparable. The construction of the literary reservation, an imaginary space that native authors create from history and experience, does not seem to depend on the divisions between humans and nature, but on a close relationship that cannot be neglected. Many contemporary Native authors are conducting their own "symbolic guerilla warfare" on romantic notions of the sacred and Indianness. Native authors of the late twentieth century redefine popular notions of Indians, reservations, and tribal culture.

Alexie's fictive reservation is not greatly different from other contemporary Native writers' reservations in terms of playing with actual physical space. Erdrich moves the Turtle Mountain Reservation from North Dakota to Minnesota. Other Native writers also play with geography and portray the land as a character who is vast and dynamic. These writers often go from moments of cathedralizing the setting, often with humor, to conveying extreme moments of despair, a laughing through clenched teeth. Many authors describe

the landscape as beautiful and sacred, but the stories they tell aren't necessarily happy and serve as a powerful contrast to the background.

For instance, Momaday's Abel must reconcile himself with the landscape before he can find any hope. Silko's Tayo, as well, must understand his relationship to the land before he can be healed. Welch's Jim Loney feels trapped by his surroundings. Erdrich's characters try to escape the rez but only find that they must come back to identify with their tribal heritages. Adrian Louis's depictions of reservation life certainly leave little to be desired. His reservation is trashy, full of despicable and raunchy characters.

In order to understand the literary reservation, I will examine the history of the reservation system in the United States and examine of how writers since the Native American Renaissance portray particular tribal landscapes in regard to popular movements in American history. Momaday, Silko, Erdrich, and Alexie in particular go to great lengths to create reservations of the mind to reflect their personal ones and their characters' view of the reservation space.

The concept of the "reservation of the mind" can be used to describe a worldview imposed upon Indians by the

United States government. The reservation system was and is in theory a modern concept that seeks to contain and designate ethnicity and culture. William Everdell notes that the reservations in the Americas were the forerunners of concentration camps which were

a very Modern invention--Modern in their insistence on analysis and fragmentation. The camp begins in the minds of those who have begun to see the human species as fundamentally discontinuous, capable of being separated into parts like Dedekind's number line, or assigned like elements to Cantorian subsets that can be precisely and unambiguously defined. (117)

Reservations were an attempt to separate Indians from the white settlements of the early United States, pushing Indians into arbitrary boundaries. Within these boundaries, the United States forced the residents to abandon religious practices and languages which served to create factions within the tribe based on who wanted to retain as much as the traditional culture as possible. As tribes were being physically separated from their lands or having their traditional lands reduced in size and mentally separated from their culture, the most devastating effect was the colonial administration's

belief that there could be a clear delineation between land and the culture. When approaching the history and literature of native peoples, it is vital to understand that land is the focus of native cultures. As Cherokee poet Carroll Arnett remarks in his poem "Land," "without this what is worth doing" (96). The land that a tribe inhabits cannot be separated from the culture of that particular tribe. Therefore, the concept of "reservation of the mind" suggests that there should be no clear delineation between the physical and mental space of the reservation. It also suggests the irony of trying to give a positive identity to an imposed, restricted space. Native authors recreate reservation space in ways in which their characters' struggles reflect an ongoing debate about how Indian identity is deeply connected to the land or the lack thereof, affecting reservation and urban Indians alike. Many authors focus on characters that survive colonial imposition in order to express their hope that Indian cultures will continue.

No doubt that this idea of Indian cultures' interconnectedness with the land has been greatly misappropriated by the New Age movement and other romantic pseudo-celebrations of Native cultures. Fergus Bordewich notes that

those who romanticize Indians as the ultimate ecologists fail to comprehend the vast diversity of genuinely traditional native religions, and that the majority of modern Indians are in fact Christians. . . .

Romanticizers fail to see that the apparently flattering image of the Indians as selfless caretakers of the earth is, in essence, little different from the ugly exploitation of caricatured Indians as school mascots, for both are equally rooted in the assumption that Indians and their beliefs (real or imagined) are icons free for the taking, to be appropriated for any white man's cause. (212)

The romantic images displayed on posters with the fake speech from Chief Seattle or seen on public service announcements with Iron Eyes Cody shedding a lone tear at the mindless pollution only serve to perpetuate ideas that Indians are merely extensions of the natural, embedded in the landscape, and frozen in a particular moment of history. It is not my intention to champion Indians as the "ultimate ecologists" or even to explain every tribe's concepts of religion in regard to land, but rather to discuss the implications of reservation spaces

in Native literature. Through this analysis, we can begin to appreciate how strongly landscape plays a role in Native literature, and how the real reservation translates into the imagined.

Gail Guthrie Valaskakis notes that "Native Americans add that the meaning of the land is spiritual and thus difficult to express" (155). She also asserts that this meaning is bound in particular tribal experiences, languages, and stories. Valaskakis writes,

The meanings of these territorial and spiritual places are woven together in living traditionalism: the practice of everyday life experienced collectively and individually as heritage, a multi-vocal past re-enacted daily in the play of power and identity. In the language of reconstructed traditionalism, land is both territory and sacred site. The meaning of these two views of the environment is merged in the discourse of Indian Country, a place that gathers all Native Americans together--whether on any reservation, at any powwow or Indian conference, in any Indian bar or Native American Center, participating in any Native ceremony or feast or communal event. In

Indian Country, the struggle over land is told and re-told in the stories of survival that reconstruct, imagine, and most of all, assert Indian experience permeating the memorized past and the politicized future. (156)

The real or imagined history of reservation experience as told by Native authors helps readers to understand the significance of how the "reservation of the mind" exists. Like Valaskakis's description of Indian Country, the characters in Native authors' novels, and often the authors themselves, must come to understand that although separated by distance from their reservations and the "living traditionalism" of their tribe, they must make peace with that separation and see the land and community around them as sacred. "Sacred" in this context means retaining identity in light of forced cultural hybridity. The characters do not necessarily have to be standing on their particular tribe's reservation space in order to understand their place. Native authors re-imagine these reservation spaces, often trying to show them as positive for their characters' journeys of reclaiming their identities. The authors, however, do not neglect to record the violence inherent in the reservation system.

II. Background of the Reservation System

It is very important to examine the history of the reservation system when discussing the real and imagined spaces because it continues to live on in the works of Native authors. For instance, Momaday refers to the relocation program, and Silko addresses the testing of atomic bombs on Indian land. The history of the reservation system is certainly present and reflects the culmination of Indians' experiences when communicating with the land. As I mentioned earlier, the "reservation of the mind" can be a term used to describe an imposed colonial worldview. The control of Indian land was justified by early European philosophers and explorers. Ward Churchill writes that

From the outset of the 'Age of Discovery' precipitated by the Columbian voyages, the European powers, eager to obtain uncontested title to at least some portion of the lands their emissaries were encountering, quickly recognized the need to establish a formal code of juridicial standards to legitimate what they acquired. . . . In order for any such regulatory code to be considered effectively binding by all Old World Parties, it was vital

that it be sanctioned by the Church. (*Struggle for Land* 35)

Churchill goes on to discuss sixteenth Spanish jurists and the development of the "Doctrine of Discovery" and the "Rights of Conquest" (35). These doctrines are important because they set important legal precedent, as well as establishing moral rights, for the occupation of land. As Britain broke off from the papal state, it included the "Norman Yoke," which declared that "land rights were said to rest in large part upon the extent to which owners develop a willingness and ability to 'develop' their territories in accordance with a scriptural obligation to exercise 'dominium' over nature" (*Struggle for Land* 37). Inherent in these early documents is the division between "wilderness" and "civilization" and the concept that only those that can utilize the "wilderness" for profit are entitled to the land.

Early American settlers in the colonies believed in these concepts, and much of early Indian policy was developed for monetary gains. Early descriptions of the American landscape were caught between an appreciation for its beauty and a fear of the unknown savage wilderness, and one way out of this trap was an emphasis

on converting the land for profitable uses. For early American settlers and policymakers "land had an almost mystic significance that put it at the heart of the glorious future that they foresaw for the United States. Not the least attractive qualities of such a resource was its versatility" (Dorothy Jones 162). The versatility that Jones describes obviously refers to the potential financial gain that the early settlers saw, but it can also apply to the treatment and displacement of indigenous peoples on the North American continent. The vast American landscape provided many places into which Indians could be pushed, away from encroaching white settlements.

Another way that colonists justified their treatment was the celebration of the noble savage. In colonial America, images of the noble savage were put into use in order to justify the rejection of monarchy. Helen Carr writes that "the idea that the American colonist was, like the Indian, natural and virtuous by contrast with the corrupt, over-civilised European court was a constant motif in independence rhetoric" (24). Carr then points out the paradox that if the American colonists needed to "legitimise the movement across the continent by which that empire could be achieved, they would have to re-

invoke all the European assumptions of Indian otherness and savagery, their inferiority and deficiencies" (24). What was created by this need to establish an American empire was the time-honored motif of the Red Devil/Noble Savage dichotomy, which in turn created a hateful paternalism within government agencies that dealt with Indian affairs. Carr asserts that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "attempts were made to evoke the Indian as a symbol for America" and that "eventually, as with the political iconography of the Indian as representative American, the tide of dispossession and denigration disrupted and skewed such intentions" (53). Carr attributes this to the American Enlightenment's "fusion of the narrative of progress through reason and science with the contradictory vision of a modernity hopelessly corrupted by excesses of power and greed" (51). This greed is described, for instance, by the U.S. Commission on Human Rights report, "A Historical Context for Evaluation," which states that at the turn of the nineteenth century the Louisiana Purchase and the gain of Florida created a "new impetus" for the removal of Indians (Lyman and Letgers 19). This "new impetus" was obviously rooted in power and greed.

During the early nineteenth century, some of the greatest of these excesses occurred as Indians were relocated. Russell Thornton notes that the larger relocations were those of "the Nez Perce, the Northern Cheyenne, the Navajo, and the 'Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast,' that is, the Cherokee, the Creek, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Seminole" (113). Most notable was the Cherokee removal, known as the "Trail of Tears," because before their relocation they had argued and won a case in front of the Supreme Court, in which they were acknowledged as a "sovereign nation with a definite territory" (Thornton 116). The Cherokees were not considered completely sovereign, but it was agreed that "they enjoyed internal self-government and should not be put at the mercy of the states" (Bolt 61). Despite Justice Marshall's ruling, President Andrew Jackson forced the Georgia Cherokees off their land and into Indian Territory. This was an important ruling because it set a legal precedent for the removal of other tribes. According to Christine Bolt, "During Jackson's administration, some 100 million acres of Indian land east of the Mississippi had been secured through nearly seventy treaties" (59-60). The Northeastern tribes were also in a predicament since they "were not given a

specific region as a permanent western home" (Bolt 64). According to Robert Trennert, Jr., "The concept of reservations, of course, was known at this time, and indeed since the Puritan era Americans had been setting aside defined lands where the Indians could be forcibly civilized" (3). Barriers had been devised by the War Department early in the nineteenth century in order to create a distinguishing line to separate Indians. In the 1830's and "again in 1846 a number of congressmen tried to create an Indian state, but the proposals met defeat from legislators unwilling to guarantee the Indians a territory of their own" (Trennert 6-7). This lack of response to the need for specific definitions of Indian territory only signaled future disruption in Indian communities

While white settlers were moving into the mid-western regions, "clamour was mounting for the removal of tribes and bands which had already undergone that searing experience" (Bolt 64). These tribes were being continually displaced further away from their original tribal lands into more unfamiliar surroundings with other tribes. It became more difficult for the eastern tribes to maintain specific tribal units and cultural ties to their communities as they were pushed westward. This

early relocation project set the tone and justification for the reservation system to be put into place.

III. The Invention of the Reservation

William Medill, commissioner of Indian affairs during the 1840's, made public in his annual report in 1848 the beginning plans for reservations (Trennert 30). According to Medill's plan, Indians would be put on small parcels of land which cut down on the number of Indian agents and allowed more missionaries to become involved with civilizing the Indians (Trennert 31). The physical genocide of Indian peoples was now turning into cultural genocide; missionaries were becoming the new military (French 45). Medill's plan set an example for future commissioners.

During the 1850's and 1860's the reservation policy began to take form, and by now 1851 "a definite reservation psychology can be noted in the thinking of government officials responsible for Indian affairs" (Trennert 59). The idea of the "reservation psychology" is rooted deep in racist ideology and greed. During this period and throughout the nineteenth century, scientific documents were published that pronounced Indian peoples inferior (*American Indian Policy* 157). As the missionaries operated as the second wave of military, the

anthropologists and ethnographers were the third wave of military. With so much anti-Indian sentiment present, it is no wonder that much of the literature of the era, such as James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* and Mark Twain's Indian caricature "Injun Joe" were popular and reflected the current attitudes toward Indians. Not only did these works maintain the noble savage/red devil dichotomy, but they also perpetuated notions of separation between whites and Indians. Most Indian characters died or vanished, especially half-breeds who symbolized the merging of the two worlds which again reiterates keeping the cultures separate. Trennert contends that "American culture in the nineteenth century was impregnated with ethnocentrism; so strong in fact that there could be no serious thought of conceding any value to Indian life and society" (194).

The American public gave general approval of the reservations. Bolt writes, "By 1860, the reservation policy had been initiated in California, Washington, Oregon, and New Mexico" (68). The Civil War and post-Civil War Indian policy reformers were key in establishing reservations, and it is during this time that the reservation system "has its philosophical origins" (Trennert vii). William P. Dole, Lincoln's

appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs, saw "no possibility of red men and white men occupying the same territory without the rapid contamination and ultimate extinction of the Indians" (Prucha, *American Indian Policy*, 106). Dole wanted larger reservations, perhaps reducing the number to three (Prucha 106). The Office of Indian Affairs sought to implement an impossible task, which was to force different tribes with different worldviews, languages, and systems of law. into small areas of land assuming that they would conform to Euro-American expectations of civilization.

Grant's Secretary of the Interior, Columbus Delano, continued to struggle with how to create reservation spaces. Prucha describes Delano's efforts as a "number game, trying to fit all the Indians into one large reservation" (*American Indian Policy* 108). Reduction of reservations meant the reduction of Indian lands. Yet there were other problems that Delano had to face because "many of the Indians, once confined to the reservations designed for them, refused to stay within the set limits" (*American Indian Policy* 111). More military force was used in order to control the Indians' whereabouts.

Delano's successor Zachariah Chandler "seemed less enthusiastic about what all this would do for the Indians

and more concerned about saving money and trouble for the government" (111). Chandler and other Indian policy reformers of the time refused to recognize that "the Indians were deeply attached to their homelands, and the topographical and climatic conditions were psychologically if not physically of tremendous importance to their well-being" (Prucha 113). The lack of attention paid to the Indians forced the Indians to escape reservation lands. For example, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce and his band, even after being defeated, refused to give up on going back to their home territory in Idaho.

As the reservation system fell into place, evangelical reformers and other missionary troops began to take on more responsibilities for "civilizing" Indians. The strong evangelical movement of the late nineteenth century had a great impact:

What marked the last decades of the century, however, was an intensification of the desire for unity, a new energization of the 'quest for a Christian America,' and an increasing emphasis on a secularized as opposed to a theological formulation of goals and activities. And it was exactly at this time--

for better or for worse--that the 'Indian problem' demanded solution. (Prucha 152)

The reformers did what they could to make Indian religious practices and languages illegal. Many Indian children were sent to boarding schools so that they might become progressive members of white communities. Other reformers focused on ideas of personal property and how these concepts were a central concern if the Indians were to become more individualistic and, therefore, more American. Merrill Gates, who had been President of Rutgers and Amherst and who later served as President on the Board of Indian Commissioners from 1890 to 1899, argued that unless tribal ownership of land was broken up on the reservations and personal property was allotted to each individual Indian, "there would be no strong development of personality, and he noted that the Savior's teaching was full of illustrations of the right use of property" (Prucha 155). The Christian reform movement helped foster major land losses for Indian peoples such as the Dawes Act of 1887.

Vine Deloria, Jr., writes that the Dawes Act of 1887 "divided the reservations up into allotments of 160 acres, and each Indian was given a piece of land for farming. The remainder of the tribal holdings was

described [as] 'surplus' and opened to settlement by non-Indians" ("The War" 118). By the early 1930's, "some 90 million acres of land left Indian ownership in a variety of ways" ("The War" 119). Indians were given the land to work and farm; however, as Deloria notes in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, "nothing was done to encourage them to acquire these skills and consequently much land was immediately leased to non-Indians who swarmed into former reservation areas" (46-7). The Dawes Act and other allotment treaties recall the "Norman Yoke" and the question who is deserving of the land. Again with the Dawes Act, Euro-America continued to justify controlling Indian land. Policymakers, whether conscious of the results of the act or not, were setting up Indians to look like complete failures and incompetents in land matters.

While land was being separated under the Dawes Act, so were the people. The reason that the surplus existed, according to Ward Churchill, was that there was "for the first time a formal eugenics code--dubbed 'blood quantum'--by which American Indian identity would be federally defined on racial grounds rather than by native nations themselves on the basis of group membership/citizenship" (*Struggle for Land* 49).

Churchill goes on to assert that there were "fewer identifiable Indians under the federal eugenics criteria than land parcels within the reserved areas of the 1890's" (*Struggle* 49). Not only did the General Allotment Act seek to destroy natives' land base, but it also disrupted tribal customs and cultural ties.

IV: Conflicts Over the System

According to the U.S. Commission on Human Rights, in 1910, after all of the devastating effects of the removal efforts, reservation systems, assimilation tactics, and allotment acts, "a small group of Indian lawyers had emerged to do battle in the courts over the questions of Indian lands, citizenship, allotment procedures, and the enforcement of treaty rights" (Lyman and Letgers 25). Despite the poor living conditions on reservations, they still existed not only "as a means to deprive Indians of their lands," but also "they represented the last remnants of Indian land and, as such, were held sacred by the tribes" (Lyman and Letgers 25). Such movements as these began tribes' attempts at reforming federal policy with legal aid in order to create better living conditions and to halt the eradication of their land bases and cultures. This feeling toward land is present among contemporary Native authors as they seek to

reconcile the violence of the reservation system with its present meaning to Indians who inhabit that space. Some characters feel trapped and others depend on the land in order to define themselves.

By the 1920's, through government policy, especially the Dawes Act, native peoples' land, population, and culture had been decimated. At this time, John Collier, Franklin Roosevelt's Commissioner of Indian Affairs, worked to "make others see that traditional Indian beliefs and ceremonies were a natural resource that must be preserved at any price" (Bordewich 71). Even though much of Collier's romantic enthusiasm to help Indians was misplaced, sometimes lost in the noble savage cliché, he was diligent in his work. Bordewich writes that Collier created the Indian New Deal which included

the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which halted the conversion of reservations to the private property of individual Indians. .

.reversed the doctrine of assimilation that had guided federal policy since the 1880's, and committed the federal government firmly to the strengthening of the tribes. (72)

Collier's efforts did not go unappreciated, but are often criticized for overly sentimentalizing what he perceived

as the tribal unity that existed among all Indians. His plan gave complete control to the elected chairman and elected council. Worse, it ignored Indian concepts of government all together. Bordewich notes that Collier did not set up the system based on "true American democracy, for it glaringly lacked the separation of executive, legislative, and judiciary powers" (72). The lack of this structure still haunts many tribal governments as they try to settle land disputes and combat corruption in their own tribal governments. George P. Castile writes that during Collier's administration "most reservation land bases stabilized, and some even grew, though these small increases were not enough to break the prevailing pattern of poverty and underdevelopment" (167). Collier's work was good and useful, but it was not enough to stop the termination movements in the 1950's. In fact, much of the termination policy developed by Congress can be traced to Collier's reform.

In 1943, the Senate Interior Committee was ready to do away with the Indian Bureau (*Custer Died* 55). Tensions mounted, and committees were called together to find ways to end federal supervision of Indian tribes. By February 1954, Senator Arthur Watkins, head of the

Indian Subcommittee of the Senate Interior committee, pushed to "get rid of as many tribes as possible before the 1956 elections" (*Custer Died* 62). Termination procedures sought to abolish tribes' power and to regain reservation land. Churchill states that "termination was coupled with the 'Relocation Act,' a statute passed in 1956 and designed to coerce reservation residents to disperse to various urban centers around the country" (*Struggle* 52). Along with termination proceedings, the enactment of Public Law 280 "placed many reservations under the jurisdiction of individual States of the Union, thereby reducing the level of native sovereignty to that held by counties or municipalities" (52). Many Indians moved to large cities and did not experience a significantly better lifestyle.

The American Indian Movement began as an attempt to counter federal Indian policy that had created another Indian migration. Two inmates in the Stillwater State Prison in Minnesota, Clyde Bellecourt and Eddie Benton Banai, decided to organize Indian protests and programs to encourage native peoples to take pride in their heritage. During the sixties, along with George Mitchell, Dennis Banks, Russell Means, and others, they created programs for inner-city youths, jobs, and better

standards of living. AIM was created as a "direct result of the termination and relocation programs that dumped thousands of bewildered Indians into the cities" (Matthiessen 35). The termination policies of the 1950's were not carried out during the administrations of the 1960's and 70's.

AIM staged several symbolic events such as the taking of Alcatraz, the siege on the BIA building in Washington, D.C., and the famous seige at Wounded Knee in 1973. AIM brought national attention to the living conditions of Indians on reservations and of Indians everywhere. They also exposed the federal involvement in corrupt Oglala tribal elections. AIM carries negative connotations today after many of their leaders were caught up in the Hollywood spotlight of the late 1970's and 1980's, and many people have forgotten Leonard Peltier. However, during the late sixties and early seventies they created a powerful force of Pan-Indianism that worked to bring more Indian scholars, writers, and artists to the forefront of the American academy.

By the mid-seventies, most Americans were more acquainted with contemporary Indian issues and reservations spaces, places the general public had never much considered. No longer could the general public only

identify Indians with John Ford westerns and Tonto.

Television coverage of AIM activities forced a cultural confrontation. People could no longer ignore Indians; reservation spaces permeated everyone's mind.

V: The Contemporary Reservation

With the decline of AIM came the decline of interest in Indian issues unless referred to by New Age gurus or in popular entertainment. The reservation of the last thirty years is now symbolic for native and non-native scholars and artists as places which help define Indian and other American identities. Much has been written on how reservation lands have been exploited over the last few decades for uranium and have been contaminated by chemical waste and residue from the atomic bomb testing during the second World War. According to Russell Lawrence Barsh, "Between 1920 and 1974 Indian lands also produced 2.5 percent of all U.S. coal, and nearly one-fifth of all coal produced from lands under federal administration" (211). M. Annette Jaimes reports that "some 60 percent of all 'domestic' uranium reserves also lay beneath reservation lands" (118). Despite this testimony, George P. Castile examines how hegemony functions in Indian policy, and how little impact Indian reservations have on the overall United States economy:

The sums spent to maintain the reservation system while not vast by federal standards are substantial, and the yield to local Western interests who are the primary beneficiaries of these sweetheart leases is nowhere near the opportunity cost. The reservation system is a costly and inefficient Rube Goldberg device if its supposed aim is profitable exploitation of Indian resources rather than a scheme based on their exploitation. . . . the 'use' of Indian policy, its rational benefit to the state, can best be understood in this context of its contribution to the securing of ethnic hegemony. (168, 176)

Castile's analysis can be pushed further to say that despite any moral obligation that the government might feel to keep tribes together on reservation spaces in an effort to maintain their cultures' values, reservations really serve as national monuments of victory for the United States. Moreover, reservation space is still exploited politically and economically. Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke discuss that as federal funding was cut for Indians during the 1980's and 1990's, "native people are driven for bare sustenance into the arms of the very

corporations with which they are purportedly to 'negotiate' over use of their land and extraction of their resources" (246). Although some tribes are negotiating lucrative contracts and enjoying more financial gains than ever, this combination of government and corporate hegemonic structures seeks to continue to force native peoples into corners and to strip them of what sacred resources they have left. As well these structures ensure that moneys will never be distributed evenly between tribes or tribal members. As was with the early American colonists using Indians as symbols of the "natural" in order to justify the break with the English monarchy, so reservations, Indian identity in the form of land, are present to help create a sense of American identity, as national monument and bottomless resource.

Castile asserts that "federal policy on the reservations often seems to be explicable as such a demonstration to 'keep the faith,' not for the Indians themselves but for larger ethnic constituencies who cannot be more directly aided" (178). Castile's theory of why the reservations are still in existence is deeply rooted in the "securing of ethnic hegemony" (176). However, the existence of reservations cannot be reduced simply to the status of monuments. Reservations stand as

symbols for American identity for whites and other minorities no matter how visible or invisible they appear to the general public. For native peoples, they are the sites of retention and struggle and more importantly the sites of home. However, in business, activism, and scholarship, many Indians are being taken more seriously, rather than accepting roles as antiquities of historic interest on the reservations.

VI: Native American Literature and Reservations

The transition from termination to civil rights movements regarding Indian policy was fostered and encouraged by the Native American Renaissance in literature. In 1969, when N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, academics began to take an interest in the emerging field of American Indian literature. Momaday, Leslie Silko, and James Welch are three of the widely recognized Indian authors of the time. Momaday and Silko have characters that are of mixed-blood heritage returning to their reservations, while Welch's characters in *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney* don't leave their homelands, but have difficulty finding their identity on their homelands. Just as the Dawes Act fractured tribal lands into smaller parcels, the characters feel as though their mixed-blood

identities have forced further fragmentation. The eugenics code of identifying Indians by blood quantum, which was contemporary with the Dawes Act, sought to limit the number of Indians. Although many tribes are dedicated to using blood quantum as a determinant of Indian heritage, this system is based on how English way of breeding horses and cannot be entirely effective in assessing Indianness. The importance of homelands to the characters in these novels is equal to their mixed-blood status. Attempts at resolving difficulties with the community who inhabit tribal lands is an extension of trying to resolve the history of the forced boundaries of tribal land.

In *House Made of Dawn* (1966), Momaday creates a fictional pueblo based on the Jemez Pueblo where he was raised as a child. He is not Jemez Pueblo, but Kiowa. The main character, Abel, finds himself as an outsider of the community because his complete bloodline is not known largely because he is illegitimate. Louis Owens contends that "Abel's obscure parentage weakens his sense of self, setting him apart from the pueblo" (97). The connection that Momaday is making is symbolic of the simultaneous uneasiness of lack of heritage in the blood and the land. The beginning of the novel has Abel coming back from war

but not feeling as though he has returned home. Owens notes that

Abel, returned from a foreign war in which the adversaries were Hitler and fascism--embodiments to the Allied forces of an absolute evil that must be destroyed--and a war in which the atomic bomb (ultimate symbol of the world's destruction through fragmentation, the splitting of nuclei) came into being, has been severely wrenched from the Pueblo worldview.

(105)

It symbolizes that the forces that Abel is fighting created and maintained concentration camps, the forced migration and containment of people, which reminds us of the words of Everdell and the concept of the concentration camps. The atomic bomb is also important for other native artists, as in Kiowa T.C. Cannon's painting *Who Shot the Arrow, Who Killed the Sparrow?*, which portrays a Navajo woman watching the atomic bomb testing in the desert background. Not only was the bomb a looming presence during Abel's military service, but also in his own homeland. As well, Silko's *Ceremony* explores the issues of the detonation of the bomb near

Tayo's pueblo which fragments the land symbolic of Abel and Tayo's mixed-blood experiences.

Throughout the novel Abel migrates to Los Angeles, as part of a relocation program, and eventually returns to the pueblo. At the end of the novel, there is a sense of hope that Abel has reconciled his identity with the landscape. Owens notes that Abel is able to see his space, but more importantly he is part of the space. Momaday writes, "He was alone and running on. All of his being was concentrated in the sheer motion of running on, and he was past caring about the pain" (212). Rather than being the lonely runner at the beginning of the novel, which Momaday describes as "almost to be standing still," he is able to utilize the motion of the landscape while he runs at the end of the novel, which indicates that he has a better knowledge of the land around him (2).

Silko's mixed-blood character Tayo has a similar experience to Abel, in that he is a "shell-shocked" World War II veteran returning to his home pueblo in New Mexico. In Silko's *Ceremony*, Tayo's healing process and journey to reconcile his identity is facilitated by two very important themes throughout the novel--his changing relationship to the landscape and his understanding of

the importance of storytelling. Storytelling is also important to Abel because both he and Tayo are incapable of expressing themselves with their language or any other; their language, too, is fragmented. More significantly, the lesson to be learned from Silko's novel is that everything is connected, that the Western desire to separate and compartmentalize is not applicable when appreciating the status of mixed-bloods. Tayo must not only understand his connection to his personal heritage but also his connection to a larger universe. Tayo recognizes his ties to tradition and that tradition is a dynamic reality; he is not stuck or confined by his Indianness but rather liberated.

Tayo's relationship to the landscape determines his journey. Tayo is not an aimless wanderer in a wasteland; his thinking must follow Betonie's traditional pattern the land and the land's natural properties. Silko writes, "Their days together had a gravity emanating from the mesas and arroyos, and it replaced the rhythm that had been interrupted so long ago; now the old memories were less than the constriction of a single throat muscle" (227). Because Tayo is so close to uncovering the old memories, he must find the rhythm of the landscape and interpret these memories, which are part of

the storytelling. At one point in the novel, Tayo looks at the landscape and thinks about the laboratories that created and exploded the first atomic bomb not very far from where he lived:

There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers panned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. (246)

This is important because it describes the fragile balance between life and landscape. Different from Abel,

Tayo is not associated as closely with fighting Western forces as fighting the Japanese, who are more closely connected to his fate because of the atomic bomb. Owens notes that Tayo comes to the realization that "the uranium comes from mother earth and cannot, therefore, be evil. The evil results in separating the rock from the earth and in separating elements within the ore. . . . Separating and dividing are the tools of witchery" (189). This vast universal quality of understanding what power the land holds correlates to his experiences of being overwhelmed by being human. More importantly the desire to separate human existence from the power of land has negative consequences.

Key to the previous passages is examining the practice of storytelling. At the beginning of the novel, Silko establishes the importance of this practice with a story of Thought-Woman and on the following page, she writes, "I will tell you something about stories,/ [he said]/ They aren't just entertainment./ Don't be fooled./ They are all we have, you see,/ all we have to fight off/ illness and death" (2). Silko gives one of the answers to Tayo's search for identity at the very beginning, yet until the old men in the kiva at the end of the novel begin crying and singing, having heard Tayo's story, Tayo

himself doesn't fully recognize the power that stories carry. Telling the story of his journey across the landscape gives meaning to his existence; it gives order. Tayo realizes that his white heritage is not necessarily evil because whites are merely manipulated by witchery and that witchery comes from within the community. Witchery is responsible for bringing the white people and the separating and dividing of tribal ancestry and lands. In order to combat the witchery, Tayo is saved by his storytelling because he is able to suggest an alternative ending to ones previously established for literary mixed-bloods.

In Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, there is more of a sense of movement on and off the reservation. Within the novel, there are two definite ways that Erdrich expresses her characters' search for identity--the characters leave the reservation and the families reorganize. For some of Erdrich's characters, leaving the reservation becomes symbolic of their attempts at abandoning their culture. Experiences of harsh acculturation from severing ties with the reservation are experienced by Nector Kashpaw, June Morrissey, Henry Lamartine, Jr., and Albertine Johnson. Louise Flavin notes that the characters' "leaving home is not the road

to fulfillment" (56). Within the text, Flavin asserts that "alienation from tribal customs and a historical past creates conflicts for the Indian who relocates in an environment away from the reservation" (55). For these particular characters, the reservation is the center of their heritage and is what their identities are grounded in. A rejection of the reservation equals a rejection of self, and each character returns in some form to repair his or her fragmented identity.

Perhaps the two most interesting characters who don't achieve the kind of healing ceremony that Abel and Tayo achieve are June Morrissey and Henry Lamartine, Jr. Off the reservation, June, a mixed-blood, tries several occupations, such as beautician, secretary, waitress, and salesclerk; she also attempts to be a wife and a mother. In the first chapter, "The World's Greatest Fisherman," Erdrich describes June as "a long-legged Chippewa woman, aged hard in every way except how she moved" (1). This description of her "hardness" continues throughout the chapter, as if her time off the reservation calcifies her at every turn. Jeanne Smith asserts that "June's alienation from her home parallels a striking disjunction from her own body" (14). Here there is the clear division from physical well-being because of separation

from the sacred. June dies before she is able to make it home in her physical body, but she does arrive spiritually as a ghost.

Henry Lamartine, Jr., returns to the reservation from the Vietnam war in a state of confusion. Like Abel and Tayo, he is inarticulate, unable to recount his experiences to anyone. He is physically and psychologically scarred; like June, his physical separation from the land causes a rupture with his spirituality. Henry eventually jumps into the river and drowns. As his brother Lyman watches, he pushes Henry's convertible in after him, thereby destroying any symbol of Henry's mobility. Unlike June's, Henry's death doesn't evoke transcendence because he did not prepare himself as a warrior before he was sent overseas, and also because of his rape of Albertine. His lack of respect for order in his Chippewa community signals doom.

Lipsha Morrissey, the son of June, is capable of establishing his identity even though he has to leave the reservation to do so. He is never told about his true parentage until he meets his trickster father Gerry Nanapush and has to drive him to Canada to elude the authorities. Lipsha transports him in his mother's Firebird, the only thing he has of hers. James Ruppert

notes that Lipsha's driving Gerry to safety is significant to Chippewa myth in many ways. He writes,

At the bridge, Lipsha delivers the trickster Nanapush/Nanabosho physically into Canada, but the communal level of identity provides unnoticed support when it is remembered that for many Midewiwin initiates the land of the dead is also called Nehnehbush's land and the passage of the physical world to the spirit world is made over a bridge. . . . These actions show us that his identity will be defined communally as something akin to a Midewiwin official, a healer, and mythically as a new reincarnation of Nehnehbush. (239)

Lipsha's identity is completed by his journey and his knowledge of the landscape which helps get his father to safety. Lipsha completes his search for identity by driving home to the reservation in a car bought with his mother's life insurance money. The car comforts Lipsha's sense of loss and secures his place in Chippewa culture. But like his mother, he is re-born with a desire to be on the reservation. Lipsha says, "But the truth is we live on dry land. I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross

the water, and bring her home" (367). Lipsha is able physically and spiritually to reconcile his fragmented identity with the land. He does not drown like his uncle Henry, nor die in the snow like his mother. His circular journey is not unlike Abel's or Tayo's, but unlike them, he never believed that his search for healing would come from any place except the reservation.

Sherman Alexie's Welpinit reservation differs greatly from his literary predecessors. He does create within his fictional landscape a sense of play like Erdrich. Alexie has very few mixed-blood characters; as far as the reader knows, all of his characters are full-bloods unless he specifically identifies them, as in the case of Reggie Polatkin from *Indian Killer*. Alexie's almost exclusive portrayal of full-bloods is not only his attempt to record a life closer to his own, but also to keep tribal images intact. Rather than discuss the mixed-blood experience on and off the reservation, Alexie wishes to show how fragmentation affects full-bloods. Separation from culture, family, and land doesn't necessarily occur from being off the reservation and not knowing tribal heritage; it can also happen within the boundaries of the reservation.

Alexie does set up specific boundaries that separate Indian life on the reservation from mainstream American life, but he includes descriptions of how Indians incorporate certain elements of American pop culture in order to make it their own in their attempt to re-define Indianness. As Valaskakis notes, the sacred is in the living traditionalism of day to day life. Pepsi and frybread become markers of every Indian meal. The Welpinit Indians love Jimi Hendrix and Robert Johnson, but hate Jim Morrison. Alexie is using popular images of products and Indians to make a point about native culture. There are things on the reservation that are American, but the reservation is not American. The American Dream is missing from Welpinit, and instead the characters have dreams that are important and sacred about the land on which they stand, as in his short story "A Drug Called Tradition."

Alexie recreates the reservation he was raised on with humor and storytelling. Momaday also re-invents the Jemez Pueblo, but Momaday's story of Abel is a very modernist tale with bittersweet moments. Alexie's description is laughing through clenched teeth. The stories are funny and heartbreaking, and this need to tell a story in such a way is to present the culmination

of emotions shared on his reservation, and to show the lack of separation among these feelings. But Alexie does present a similar struggle to that of Momaday, Silko, and Erdrich; he shows the separation of tradition from modern living and tries his best to reconcile this problem among his characters, especially Thomas Builds-the-Fire.

Alexie, no doubt somewhat influenced by the Indian protests of the 1960's and 1970's, seeks in some ways to break apart the artifice of what Indian identity is and replace it with stories from Indians. He is committing symbolic guerilla warfare by taking certain corporate hegemonic structures forced upon his people and making them inherently Indian, and inherently Welpinit. Even outside of his writing he manipulates other forms of media in an attempt to get his point across, as in music and film. By bombarding people with images of Indians and their sacred places, he is again forcing a reconfiguration of defining Indian identity.

Chapter 2
Dances with Worlds: Alexie's Cinematic Translation
of *The Lone Ranger* and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

It seems everyday ends with a miracle here. And whatever God may be, I thank God for this day. To stay any longer would have been useless. We had all the meat we could possibly carry. We had hunted for three days losing a half a dozen ponies and only three men injured. I have never known a people so eager to laugh, so devoted to family, so dedicated to each other. And the only word that came to mind was harmony.

I. Alexie and Costner Fistfight on the Screen

This romantic speech and scene which reflects in a couple of minutes the history of the Hollywood representation of Indians, comes from the 1990 epic *Dances with Wolves*. Kevin Costner's, or rather Lieutenant Dunbar's, voiceover is heard as he watches the band of Lakotas ride off into the setting sun visually portrayed as mere silhouettes. The gold colors used in the scene are reminiscent of Edward Curtis's gold-coating, which worked as a forced nostalgia that implied the end of Indian peoples. Dunbar's image is larger than the setting sun. He is wearing a breastplate over his cavalry uniform, and in the next scene he dances around a campfire, alone in the dark, imitating the dances he has seen the Lakotas do. He is the lone light on the

prairie. This is an example of how, according to Ralph Steadman, that Indians have been "ensnared, then filmically embalmed" (155), and Dunbar is an example of what Robyn Wiegmen would refer to as a "renegade son of Europe."

Dances with Wolves serves as a culmination of the racist ideology historically present in Westerns which has been modified into romantic, apologetic films influenced by the civil rights movement. However, historically, Indians have been portrayed as the enemy. Considering when the film industry began flourishing, it is understandable that early directors like Griffith, DeMille, and Ford were heavily influenced by the Indian wars of the late nineteenth century. Steadman asserts that "every Indian play or story known to these pioneer filmmakers before they stepped onto a studio lot would have been written by an author who had come of age while the Western battles were raging" (156). Certainly, they were influenced by popular forms of entertainment in the nineteenth century such as "Indian" dramas and dime novels, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows. This connection of the early westerns to the actual Indian wars is, perhaps, the impetus for Ralph and Natasha Friar to write that "the cinematic assault upon the Native

American is only comparable to the actual massacres at Sand Creek, the Washita, Summit Springs, and Wounded Knee" (203). Correlating actual warfare to the representation of native peoples can be construed as offensive to families and tribes who suffered through inhumane treatment and genocide; however, symbolically, the Friars are boldly declaring that the erroneous portrayal of Indians has been detrimental to their political power and has only served to continue the erosion of their cultures.

In 1999 Sherman Alexie's book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* appeared as the film *Smoke Signals*. The primary significance of this film, beyond the fact that it was written, directed, produced, and acted all by native people, is that Alexie attempts to overturn contemporary stereotypes that still persist in Hollywood and mainstream American culture. The film is a standard buddy movie, but it subverts the Western format, makes fun of the overly romantic portrayals of Indians, and critiques other conventions expected in a film about minorities living in the United States. Alexie's screenplay reflects complex issues such as the nature of older Hollywood films, his sense of play, his acceptance of and resistance to buddy movies, the political issues

on and off the reservation, and issues of gender and family.

II. *Man, the cowboys always win, enit?:* Storytelling and Film

Historically, Hollywood portrays Indians as impediments to progress--they attack trains, Pony Express riders, forts, wagon trains, and any other god-fearing settlers who gets in their way. If only there had been planes in the nineteenth century, Indians could have been international hijackers. (Although 1996's *ConAir* almost made that a reality, as one prisoner tells an Indian prisoner on board the plane, "Don't get all Wounded Knee 73 on me.") Alexie's awareness of these early stereotypes and his eagerness to defy them are present in his collection of fiction and his screenplay. He particularly goes after John Wayne, having his characters sing the 49 song "John Wayne's Teeth." Throughout the film he uses these references to the early days of Hollywood to show a lack of trust regarding representation.

Americans in general have had a long history of accepting fraudulent notions of the indigenous people on this continent. From the early settlers' accounts of

"savagery" to the most recent attempt of some anthropologists to cling to the original theory of the land bridge, Americans rely on false accounts of history and science to explain the nature of being Indian. It is hard to bring attention to important native issues without having them superseded by pop culture representations. Vine Deloria contends that the AIM protests were misunderstood:

The way, Indian activists concluded, to affect the American public was to parade as warriors of old, and, at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in the winter of 1972, they provided the television-viewing public with a seventy-two-day Indian war. The relevant social issues of the revolt were buried by the spectacle of Indians on horseback racing around before the cameras. . . .they served primarily to reinforce the worst suspicions of whites at a time when the ancient and derogatory image could have been buried once and for all.

("American Indian Image" 49)

Deloria is critical of the AIM movement, and he has every right to be. However, the symbolic warfare waged by AIM was somewhat out of their control because ultimately the

media were able to manipulate images of AIM. Alexie's symbolic warfare is more subtle than that of AIM despite the involvement of Miramax and Hollywood heavyweights such as Harvey Weinstein who was pivotal in the production of *Smoke Signals*.

Film has operated as a powerful tool in defining for non-natives who Indians are, yet it has also played a role in defining for natives who Indians are. When Indians first came into contact with the portrayal of Indian peoples in the entertainment arena, many were confused and outraged. During the nineteenth century "Indian" dramas, which were pathetic plays about Indian peoples, became popular. None of the Indian roles were ever played by Indians, and Indians were portrayed as farcical. Albert Keiser reports that one of the most popular plays of the era, *Metamora, or the Last of the Wampanoags* was not only appreciated by white audiences but that "Indian delegations from various tribes were much impressed, and their pleasure and approval unqualified"; however, Keiser continues to write that many of these Indian delegations were unaware that the play was even about Indians (76). Raymond Steadman writes that "in 1911, representatives of four western tribes journeyed to the national capital to protest their

screen treatment to Congress and President William H. Taft" (157). This kind of protest has existed for the last two hundred years with very few people listening. Even in 1911, Indians understood the symbolic warfare of cinema.

In *Smoke Signals*, a young Victor and Thomas discuss the "disappearance" of Arnold Joseph and whether he will come back to the reservation. Thomas tells Victor, "When Indians go away, they don't come back. Last of the Mohicans, last of the Sioux, last of the Navajo, last of the Winnebago, last of the Coeur D'Alene people. . ." (9). Thomas already at a young age recognizes the standard "last of" motif that was so accepted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thomas's view of the future of his people is what earlier protesters feared--an acceptance of cultural defeat. But as an adult, Thomas realizes the ridiculous nature of this acceptance. As Thomas, Victor, and Suzy sit watching a western on television, Thomas says, "You know, the only thing dumber than Indians on television is Indians sitting in front of the television" (73). Thomas knows that the popular images on the screen, without the tools to critique them, only serve to pull Indians

further from their cultures--the warfare on the screen is internalized.

Thomas as a trickster/storyteller functions as a bridge linking oral storytelling, written storytelling, and visual storytelling. He disrupts Victor's perception of his father and ideas of Indianness. On the bus, Victor explains to Thomas how to be an Indian, first admonishing him for having seen *Dances with Wolves* over a hundred times, but then reinforcing the very same stereotypes put forth by films such as that. Victor tells Thomas to "quit grinning like an idiot" and to "get stoic" (61). He also tells Thomas that he needs "to look like a warrior. You got to look like you just got back from killing a buffalo" (62). Even though Thomas corrects Victor about the nature of the Coeur D'Alenes' hunting habits, Victor continues to impress upon Thomas that fishing is not as noble as buffalo hunting. The false image is more credible than the truth. Thomas's transformation is humorous, because it lacks the "warrior" image of Victor. Clad in a "Frybread Power" tee shirt and grinning from ear to ear, Thomas still doesn't have the menacing presence that Victor wants him to have.

But this scene in the film is perhaps the most important because throughout their bus ride they have been closely watched by the surly bus driver who constantly checks his rearview mirror, his eyes concealed behind dark sunglasses. The tension between the real and false images comes to a head when Victor and Thomas try to reclaim their seats on the bus and are brushed away with racist language by the cowboys occupying the seats. The bus driver and other passengers alike watch as Victor and Thomas move to the back of the bus. However, the intensity breaks when Thomas tells Victor that the "warrior look doesn't always work" and argues that the cowboys always win and they sing 49 style "John Wayne's Teeth" (66). Not only is there a realization that Hollywood images of Indians are false, but Victor and Thomas capture the attention of the passengers again as they sing, loudly making fun of a beloved Hollywood hero. Standard perceptions are overturned; they "indianize" a racist icon, giving them power over false representations. Their seeming defeat has become a small victory.

III: *What? You want me to tell the truth? Or do you want lies? (Suzy): From Fiction to Film*

Alexie undermines popular Hollywood images with phrases like "some days it's a good day to die and some days it's a good day to eat at Denny's" and Victor's warrior training; however, Alexie plays more with his original narrative, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. There are many differences, the first being a novel dealing with the Spokanes is now a movie about Coeur D'Alenes. Alexie, part Spokane and part Coeur D'Alene, feels free to represent both tribes, being careful not to privilege one over the other.

In adaptations of other works that deal with Indians, one tribe is often replaced with another. The book *Dances with Wolves* is about the Comanches, but in the film it is about the Lakotas. John Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* uses Navajo extras instead of Cheyennes. Also, Indian roles were and are often played by Whites. Chuck Connors played Geronimo, Rock Hudson played Taza (son of Cochise), Elvis Presley and Audrey Hepburn both played Kiowas, and Val Kilmer played a Lakota. And sometimes whites are the best Indian, from Natty Bumppo to Lieutenant Dunbar. Alexie's sense of play, using his own genetic make-up, speaks as a commentary on this, whether he intended this or not. The reversal of his own tribes is significant because as an Indian author from two

neighboring tribes he is able to speak of similar experiences, yet also able to distinguish them both. His replacement of one tribe with another differs from the Hollywood replacements because his is of a personal decision obvious to people who know his background.

There are other ways in which he plays with the original story. Since *The Lone Ranger and Tonto* is a book of short stories, he takes several characters and changes them in the screenplay. Lester Falls Apart is not as important in the film as he is in the book. Suzy Song was only a minor character in the book who serves to comfort an unknown narrator (probably Victor), but in the film she plays a vital role as the keeper of Arnold's secrets. The characters Velma and Lucy don't appear in the book, but they drive a car backwards in the film, which Simon does in the book. Alexie's adaptation of his own book does not corrupt the authenticity, but rather establishes his authorial control and his commentary on the dynamic power of storytelling. Like most other adaptations of fiction into film, Alexie's screenplay isn't different in the sense of taking creative license, but it is different because one of the themes in the film is about how the stories we tell affect those around us and how these stories are part of who we are. Because

Alexie changes certain personal elements such as tribes, he makes this project his own.

The most noticeable change is with Victor. In the book of short stories and in *Reservation Blues*, Victor is a mean alcoholic. Alcoholism was a problem that Alexie himself dealt with in his younger years. The literary Victor is angry, much like the filmic Victor, and Alexie's retelling of Victor's story is much the same, but the filmic Victor does not suffer from alcoholism. The film is largely adapted from the short story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." Alexie's resistance to making Victor an alcoholic is also used to resist stereotypes of reservation and Indian life in general. Although Victor's parents are portrayed as alcoholics, it is significant that Victor refuses to fall into the same pattern.

Alcoholism is a serious problem in Indian communities, and Alexie does address it, but he doesn't let it take over the film. Although many films portray Indian alcoholism, few do anything except serve to make fun of the drunken Indian. In 1970, *Flap, or Nobody Loves a Drunken Indian* was released and was popular with many Indians; however, it did not really express the problems or even come close to offering solutions or

hope. More recently, Steven Seagal, the king of repetitive repertoire, starred in *On Deadly Ground* (1994) in which he saves a drunk Indian in a bar and the Alaskan wilderness. This scene was also reminiscent of Paul Newman in the opening of *Hombre*. Drunken Indians had only been used as another way for the leading actor to become a white man savior.

In *Smoke Signals* there is no white savior. In fact, the only two male white characters with significant roles are Burt Cicero, the man responsible for the car wreck, and the police chief, played by Tom Skerritt. At the car wreck, Burt did nothing to help and the police chief is not abusive to Thomas and Victor. The film thus establishes the complexity of the characters rather than clearly designating them as "good" and "evil." In contrast, in *Dances with Wolves* and *Thunderheart*, there were no sympathetic white characters. In fact, they are portrayed as extremely evil with the exception of the white protagonists. I believe because this film was written and directed by Indians it was not an attempt at assuaging the social consciousness of a white audience or an attempt to villainize the dominant culture, but rather an effort to manipulate the standards of Hollywood's clear

distinctions of good and bad, which truly makes it an Indian film.

IV: *No, it's more like we're Tonto and Tonto: Buddies, Saviors, and White Indians*

The absence of the white man savior, the symbolic "Lone Ranger," is especially significant considering the number of buddy films made in the nineteen eighties, such as *Lethal Weapon* and *48 Hours* in which a minority character always must be accompanied by a white character. Only in the nineteen nineties has there been an attempt to pair minority characters with other minority characters in *Bad Boys* and *Rush Hour*. However, the majority of buddy films have a white man playing the dominant, more important character. Again, Alexie is trying to resist stereotypes that have flourished since the nineteenth century as to the dominance of the white male and to eliminate the dominance of white characters altogether.

Arguably, one of the first instances of the indigenous sidekick is the portrayal of the disgruntled Caliban in *The Tempest*, although more significant are the portrayals of distinctly Indian characters such as those that Raymond Steadman (who refers to Defoe's creation)

titles a chapter "Men Friday." Steadman also notes that the evolution of the character Friday has evolved from being a Caribbean Indian to being often interpreted as an African slave and that "the enslavement of the peoples of the Indies became a historical footnote" (43-44). Such historical and literary misinterpretations, not only of Defoe's work but of others as well, only serve to leave the genocide and colonization of Indian peoples as peripheral history. Indians are the romantic backdrop, the haunted burial ground, which white characters may act upon or react to.

This pattern was not always so firmly established. In the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper created Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, perhaps the most famous relationship of all the Indian-white teams. True, Bumppo is a better Indian than either Chingachgook or Uncas and definitely better than Magua. Bumppo prevails as the best hunter and possesses the romantic ability to know everything about the forest and Indians; in this respect, he anticipates John Wayne's performances in *Hondo* and *The Searchers*. Wayne's characters in both of these films seem to know more about the Indian tribes than the Indians themselves. The more interesting of the two movies is *The Searchers*, in which Ethan knows the

differences between Caddo, Kiowa, and Comanche arrows, speaks some of the Comanche language, and is familiar with their ceremonies. He acts as an interpreter not only for the benefit of his search party, but for the audience. Ethan is the credible voice.

In the case of the Indian characters, however, Steadman notes that Cooper gave Chingachgook a greater emotive range than one sees in the stoic Tonto-speak that came about in the twentieth century:

The decades which saw the frontier hero step out of moccasins and into cowboy boots saw also his sidekick. . . slip into a two-dimensional aspect one would more logically expect to find in a faithful horse or dog. . . . Never was a latter-day Indian companion concerned with self--except as his own fate affected that of the man he served. (51)

The rise of the inarticulate Indians in the twentieth century coincided with the advent of sound in motion pictures. Indian communication was usually reduced to "smoke signals"-- an irony that was not lost on Alexie. Ralph and Natasha Friar note that when sound was introduced "rarely does a Western go by without Indians signaling each other with bird calls, whistles, and

animal barks or howls" (200). Not only could there be little to no emotion or logic displayed within the speaking roles, but Indian roles were merely a set of animal sounds, thus again forcing a parallel between Indians and savagery. They are not separated from the landscape, but they are closely associated with the wild terrain waiting to be tamed.

The twentieth-century revival of the Bumpo-Chingachgook team took the form of the Lone Ranger and Tonto. On radio and television, people could tune in to follow the adventures of the primary figure, the Lone Ranger. The white man and Indian sidekick theme was well-established, and since Tonto had a "real" voice and presence, as opposed to a literary one, he spoke in broken, stilted English and initiated very little of the action. The character Tonto has come to symbolize the most colonized of all Indian characters. Tonto, whose tribal identity is ambiguous, stands as an "everyman" for stereotypes of Indians and is often used as a racial slur. Being called a Tonto in certain Indian communities is equivalent to being called an "Uncle Tom" in African-American communities (also Tonto is referred to as an "Uncle Tomahawk"). The character Tonto even reinforces these stereotypes, such as the Noble Savage-Red Devil

dichotomy. In one of my "favorite" episodes, he and the Lone Ranger have to fight an unknown band of Indians. The Lone Ranger asks Tonto if it troubles him to fight his own kind; Tonto replies, "Some Indians good. Some bad." He has no particular tribal culture, no grammar skills, and no desire to disobey the Lone Ranger. He lacks the feistiness of Caliban and resembles a watered-down Chingachgook.

After the Civil Rights Movement and AIM activism, Hollywood made an attempt to right the wrongs of the earlier westerns and melodramas. However, the white savior theme and Indian sidekicks still prevailed. *Billy Jack*, *Little Big Man*, and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* all make attempts to validate Indian characters, but unfortunately kept them in supporting roles. *Billy Jack* starred Tom Laughlin, who has never declared Indian ancestry yet plays an Indian. The visibly white Indian is the best Indian in this case. Like Tonto, Billy Jack has no specific tribal heritage and lives on an undisclosed reservation, but he does take part in a Hopi snake dance (kind of). He does have a visibly Indian sidekick in the film, who is constantly beat up by the bad kids in town because of his pacifist beliefs. Eventually, he is killed, and Billy Jack saves the day after he has a

shoot-out with the local authorities, an eerie omen of the Wounded Knee '73 standoff.

Little Big Man and *Outlaw Josey Wales*, both starring Chief Dan George, focus on white men who are the heroes and are often portrayed as being more Indian than the Indians around them. *Little Big Man* is clearly narrated by Jack Crabb, who speaks as the voice of authority about the Cheyennes. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, Wales is the one who makes peace with Comanche chief Ten Bears, not Lone Watie, his Indian companion, or the Navajo woman who incidentally doesn't get to speak English throughout the course of the film. To their credit, these films were groundbreaking because of their sympathetic and humane treatment of Indian people; however, the Indian characters still did not hold positions of control or authority in the way the story is told.

The end of the nineteen-eighties and the beginning of the nineteen-nineties brought two influential cinematic representations of Indian people, *Thunderheart* and *Dances with Wolves*. *Thunderheart* stars Val Kilmer as a quarter-blood Lakota FBI agent who is sent by his superiors to help solve a murder of a tribal council member on a reservation, presumably Pine Ridge. Ray Levoi must settle matters between the Aboriginal Rights

Movement (a caricature of AIM) and the corrupt tribal government (a manipulation of Dick Wilson and his GOONS who AIM attempted to depose by protesting at Wounded Knee). Kilmer's character Ray staunchly refuses to identify with the Lakotas on the reservation, but as the action progresses and with the help of his Indian guide and companion, Grandpa, played by Ted Thin Elk, and tribal cop Walter Crow Horse, played by Graham Greene, Ray learns how to be Lakota and helps solve the mystery of the uranium mines and of the murder of Leo Fast Elk.

At the beginning of the film, Ray has a very light complexion and is undoubtedly blonde. His FBI partner Frank even comments on his lack of visible Indianness at the beginning of the film: "You know in the right light you could be Sal Mineo in 'Flaming Arrows Across the Prairie'." Throughout the rest of the film, with the use of lighting techniques, Ray becomes visibly darker and his hair loses much of its earlier blonde tint. Also in the film, he has several visions, much to the chagrin of Crow Horse, who apparently has been waiting all of his life to have one. Ray reconnects with his tribal heritage, spiritually and in appearance. More importantly Ray reconnects with a descendant from the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre, asserting his dominance over

a land once foreign to him. Ray is the noble savage and eventually gains the recognition of the tribe as a modern warrior.

Ray's connection to the land is indicated by wide-angle sweeping aerial shots of the reservation, literally giving the audience a bird's-eye view. These shots are interspersed with the screaming of eagles to emphasize the point. Through Ray's point-of-view and several scenes such as these, the audience is able to transcend physical and spatial boundaries that might exist between whites and Indians. This transcendence seems to relay to the audience a sense of superiority over Indians and their culture. However, the last scene of the film re-establishes the boundaries. As Ray leaves the reservation in his rez car with his rez dog, the camera pulls away slowly, showing Ray's car at the edge of the reservation at a crossroads of a highway where cars speed by. The reservation is re-asserted as it was in the beginning of the film as an isolated, barren place that most people on their daily commutes don't even realize is there.

Although several respected Indian actors appear in the film, the manipulation of historical events and the acceptance of a white man as the Indians' savior detract

from the importance that such a film could play in the consciousness of a largely white audience. This film was simultaneously released with *Incident at Oglala*, a documentary about AIM activists and the wrongful imprisonment of Leonard Peltier. Also in the documentary are the wide-angle shots of the Pine Ridge reservation, serving much the same purpose as they do in the film. Much of the documentary describes the reservation as poverty-stricken and violent. Although I do not dispute the testimonies and interviews done with the people living on the rez, but not every reservation suffers from the despair that the Lakotas do, and so the overall impression here is misleading. For instance, the Mississippi Choctaws have thriving casino businesses and provide nicely for the tribal members who still live on the reservation. Unfortunately, there are no documentaries about Mississippi Choctaws and their flourishing tribal enterprises. Rather, the images of AIM and Pine Ridge linger in the minds of many Americans as a model for reservation life.

More influential than *Thunderheart* in terms of the representation of Indian peoples is *Dances with Wolves*. Although the film is set in the nineteenth century after the Civil War, before reservations were clearly

established, the film does insidiously imply that whites were entitled to Indians lands. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the scene awkwardly juxtaposed next to the monologue scene is important because Dunbar is mocking the dances of the Lakotas as the lone light on the prairie as his horse and faithful companion Two Socks watch. This phony ritual asserts Lieutenant Dunbar as embarking on a mythic quest for an American identity embracing and interpreting only what he wants of the original inhabitants but still maintaining his European luxuries such as the coffee pot and other accoutrements introduced by Western civilization. Even at the end of the film, he never truly abandons his European heritage or completely accepts his Indian one.

Dances with Wolves is largely about Dunbar's search for American self; however, he does not make this journey alone. With the aid of Kicking Bird, played by Graham Greene, he quickly learns the Lakota language quickly and teaches the Lakotas new battle techniques. Much like Natty Bumppo, he becomes the best Indian. Kicking Bird and Dunbar share many scenes of looking at each other's culture ignorantly and mostly this is displayed as playful comic relief. However, Dunbar masters the Lakota

way of life faster than Kicking Bird can comprehend of the Western way.

Often the audience is reminded of the loss that Dunbar has experienced in the Civil War and this is often equated with Kicking Bird's losses of family and friends. Dunbar eventually connects with Kicking Bird's adopted white daughter, who lost her family to the "evil" Pawnees (who also were portrayed negatively in *Little Big Man*). His first encounter with her finds her mourning for the death of her husband. There is a subtle attempt to connect Dunbar's losses in the Civil War and in his personal life with those of the Lakotas. Everyone suffers, therefore, everyone is equal.

Alexie's screenplay works against these notions of the white guy-ethnic sidekick films. In *Smoke Signals*, both of the main characters are Indian and none of the white people in the film have any clear idea about Indian culture, but the Indians know the white world well. One of the more significant scenes occurs on the bus when Thomas and one of the travelers, a gymnast, are talking about how she couldn't go the 1980 Olympics because of the boycott. She is trying to share her loss with the Indian people sitting next her; she attempts to find commonality, much as Dunbar does with Kicking Bird.

Victor quickly denies her the opportunity to salve the conscience of the white audience by reminding her that she was simply an alternate and wouldn't have gotten to go to the Olympics anyway.

The Lone Ranger and *Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Smoke Signals* are remarkable works for the fact that they constantly deny a mainstream audience identification with earlier stereotypes unless the audience participates in mocking these preconceived notions of Indians and the way their stories are generally told by Hollywood. The resistance to stories of the mixed-up mixed-blood searching for roots and of the white savior narrating the action of the text is bold, especially when these works have received so much national attention. Thomas and Victor are not searching for the mythic American identity. In fact, they are reclaiming the past, their past, not that of the nineteenth-century technicolor epic form. They do not overtly stand against the imperial United States, and they do not make bold political statements. Yet, the subtlety of Alexie's collection of short stories and of his screenplay acts as cinematic warfare forcing a largely white audience to readjust its own American identity.

V: *I hope you two got your vaccinations: Driving Out
the Stereotypes*

In Chapter I, I discussed the forced migration and parceling of tribes to designated areas as a means of containing Indian peoples. The boundaries established by the United States government lead to the symbolic motion and migration of characters in Native American literature. They leave and return or never leave their reservations, always in a struggle to stay in motion, often confusing this movement with personal growth and freedom. In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Smoke Signals*, Alexie uses familiar imagery to describe the personal journeys of his character. The trip to Phoenix, the Indian car, and the Wild West setting all contribute to Alexie's shifting and transcending political boundaries.

In his poem "Collect Calls," Alexie writes "We're never in the same location for more than a moment. Movement is the soundtrack of my life" (72). This constant motion protects the characters in the poem from being traced and found. The fear and defiance of the act of moving off the reservation keep American Indian characters free from an invisible but present government control. As characters in Alexie's and other native

writers' novels are constantly reminded of the governmental influence, in the form of commodities and CDIB cards, their only freedom is to come and go off of the reservation as they please.

In the short story "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Thomas and Victor are traveling by plane in order to retrieve Arnold Joseph's ashes and his truck. Alexie writes much of traveling on Amtrak and planes, even flying to the moon, using terms such as gravity, inertia, and distance. The significance of the road trip is testing the boundaries that Victor and Thomas have created. "Imagining the Reservation," another of Alexie's stories, ties in to how the physical trip is also a mental one off of the reservation. Alexie creates his own equation: "Survival=Anger x Imagination" (150). Thomas as imagination and Victor as anger leave promise and hope at the end of the story that transcendence of imposed boundaries is possible. Later in the story Alexie writes directly to Adrian Louis:

Imagination is the politics of dreams; imagination turns every word into a bottle rocket. Adrian, imagine every day is Independence Day and save us from traveling the river changed; save us from hitchhiking the long road home. (152)

The "long road home" is the literal and mental route to breaking free from the reservation. Other native authors discuss at length this kind of mental traveling. Anishinaabe author Jim Northrup has written a book entitled *Walking the Rez Road*, which tackles similar themes to Alexie. The rez-idents of both authors' stories deal with the static and dynamic lives their reservation communities have to offer.

Smoke Signals begins with the disc jockey's morning greeting: "Let's go to Lester Falls Apart in the KREZ traffic van, broken down near the crossroads. So, Lester, how's the traffic out there this fine morning?" (32). Lester is shown atop the van surveying miles and miles. He replies, "A couple of cars drove by earlier. Kimmy and James were in the green car. Looked like they were arguing. Ain't no traffic, really" (33). The desolation and lack of motion, even from the traffic report van at the crossroads, reflect the stasis of Victor's and Thomas' lives. This scene is similar to the closing scene of *Thunderheart* because of the wide-open reservation spaces and the crossroads near the highway, but Alexie presents a much more humorous approach to describe the isolation of the reservation. This sense of

humor is significant because it does not give the same grim reservation story that is often told.

This humor of reservation isolation again appears when Velma and Lucy give Victor and Thomas a ride to the bus stop in their car that can only drive in reverse. On the reservation, this is legal and accepted, but beyond the borders, they would be subject to traffic laws that would hinder their ability to travel. Lester, Velma, and Lucy are mechanically trapped on the reservation, yet somewhat in control of their situations, while Thomas and Victor must submit to being passengers in a bus driven by a surly man who watches their every move in the rearview mirror. Their surrender is apparent when they must give up their seats to the cowboys and sit at the back of the bus.

When Victor and Thomas travel back from Arnold's trailer in Phoenix, they possess their own mode of survival and their own ability to transcend borders. Indian cars are important to in much Native literature. In fact, the line "reservation of the mind" comes from Adrian Louis's poem entitled "Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile." The idea of leaving the reservation and expressing personal identity comes from cars. For example, in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Lipsha

Morrissey discovers the identity of his parents, and not long after, he drives back to his reservation from Canada, having helped his father escape the authorities. What is important about this is that Lipsha drives home in the car that his half-brother bought with his dead mother's insurance money. Lipsha takes what is rightfully his, and the car comforts Lipsha and secures his place in the Chippewa community. Like his mother June in the novel, he is re-born and aware. In the last paragraph of the book, Lipsha says, "But the truth is we live on dry land. I got inside. The morning was clear. A good road led on. So there was nothing to do but cross the water and bring her home" (367). Lipsha's path is bright and unobstructed, and he will be able to bring a part of his mother back to the reservation himself. Most importantly, Lipsha returns a "real" person. In Alexie's short story and film, Victor has much the same experience as Lipsha, although in the film this point is made more clearly since Victor must come to terms with his father and bring him home.

Although Indian cars are often used as positive symbols in literature, they are often notorious as being pieces of junk that are lucky to be on the road. In *Powwow Highway*, Philbert buys his car, or the "war pony,"

by trading a bag of weed and a bottle of whiskey. Jim Northrup's poem "rez car" describes this vehicle as "louder than a 747" and "multicolored" and says that "none of the tires are brothers" (36). But the most important thing he says is the following: "I turn the key, it starts./I push the brake, it stops./What else is a car/supposed to do?" (36). Musician Keith Secola wrote a song entitled "NDN Kar" which explains that the only thing holding his car together is a bumper sticker, which reads "Indian Power."¹ Although Secola's song is popular, Indian cars will forever be immortalized in 49 songs, such as "One-Eyed Ford," or by their hoods' use as drums.

The stories and jokes about Indian cars never cease, but their place in Native literature is invaluable. They represent for Indians the freedom to shorten distances physically and mentally. Victor's trip brought him closer to his father and to Thomas. When home, Victor has the power of travel and reconciliation, which are the same thing.

¹ For those of you who aren't familiar with my vehicle, I invite you to inspect it in order to get a better idea of what this kind of car is. A brief description: It's not from this decade. There is a prominent dent. The front fender is about to fall off. One headlight works. The back break light is cracked. Paint is peeling from hail damage. I can only unlock one of my doors, which is the one that I have to roll down the window in order to open the door. And I only worry when the "check engine" light goes off. My friend Maya gave me a bumper sticker that said "Official Indian Car" but my car ate it.

The destination to which Victor and Thomas have to travel in order to bring Arnold home is also important because of the western setting of so many films with Indians. They go to Arizona, much as Buddy and Philbert must go to New Mexico, not only in order to reclaim family members, but to revisit the familiar Hollywood setting to resist the standard Western venue of the defeat of their tribes. Buddy and Philbert and Victor and Thomas both encounter trouble with the local authorities. Buddy and Philbert's story, however, is very much a version of the Wild West shoot-out, while Victor and Thomas escape false accusations and are truly heroes, whether in the boundaries of law or not. Buddy and Philbert's victory has to be completely opposed to the federal government, the BIA, and the police, but Victor and Thomas experience an internal victory that is not so clearly political, but certainly subverts an audience's expectations of an Indian-done-wrong-again scenario.

Victor's battle in the Wild West is complex and internal with no physical violence. He must accept the truth and the magic of his father. This struggle climaxes when he finds an old family photograph in his father's wallet with the word "Home" written on the back.

Arnold Joseph physically left the reservation, but he never left the reservation of his mind. Victor has no amazing epiphany, but he does come to an understanding of his father.

In the short story "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock," Victor narrates the story of what he remembers of his father and how his father came to leave. He says,

On a reservation, Indian men who abandon their children are treated worse than white fathers who do the same thing. It's because white men have been doing that forever and Indian men have just learned how. That's how assimilation can work. (34)

When Suzy reveals to Victor the guilt that Arnold carried, Victor realizes that his father left the reservation to escape the physical site of his grief and suffering. The hatred that Victor carries for his father diminishes as he slowly mourns and forgives the deeds of his father. Victor re-evaluates his earlier assumptions about why his father left. It isn't because of direct colonization, but because of Arnold's need to grieve.

VI: *We was framed:* The Conclusion

The above line from Thomas in the film is more loaded with meaning than I'm sure Alexie intended. In the celluloid frame, Indians have never had a fair number of favorable representations. I suppose that any film which doesn't portray Indians as blood-thirsty nameless, faceless, tribeless enemies is good, but I think that the overwhelmingly romantic and sentimental images of Indians can be equally damaging. Alexie's stories and screenplays do border on the fantastic, but not to attribute to Indians any special mystic powers. Instead, they artistically challenge the historically established physical and mental boundaries placed on Indian peoples whether by the federal government, the academy, Hollywood, or their own tribes.

Chapter 3

"I fill my pockets with those reservation blues":

Survival Songs in *Reservation Blues*

Dvorak attended the tribal dances, listened to the music and even paid for a snake oil treatment; he consumed the hyperrealities that he believed were tribal, authentic, real and representational. A franchised composer at the turn of the last century, he was inspired and imagined a national music; meanwhile, most tribal cultures were enslaved on reservations. The tribal people he encountered were on the boundaries. Modern immigrants were surrounded by 'native immigrants' that summer in a small town; their stories are narrative wisps in the national tenure on savagism and civilization.

--Gerald Vizenor, *Narrative Chance*

Dvorak's attempt to create an American national music, "New World Symphony," was largely based on this influence of native peoples. As Vizenor recounts Dvorak's encounters with the local natives of Spillville, Ohio, he uses the word "consumed," and this is vital when examining Indian influences on music and the music industry as a whole. From "Indian Love Call" to "Kawliga" to "Halfbreed" to "Indian Outlaw," Indian music and stories are continually misappropriated and manipulated to appeal to a mainstream American audience. What is considered Indian is rarely, if ever, Indian. The songs mentioned above are more closely related to the

fabricated "Indian" music in movies which signal when the Indians are about to raid a nearby community of white settlers.

Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* creates a new way of experiencing Indian music which focuses on a more positive aspect of making Indian music but also can threaten an audience but not in the traditional Hollywood drums and war whoops. The novel has been hailed by some critics in reviews as hilarious, painful, and real, while Leslie Marmon Silko makes a bold gesture comparing Alexie's Wellpinit reservation to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Other critics like Gloria Bird and Philip Patrick, however, are not so enthusiastic; Patrick complains about the absence of a deep discussion of music while Bird contends that Alexie's work perpetuates the marginalization of Indian peoples by presenting what she considers a "gross representation" that "preys upon a variety of native cultures" ("Exaggeration" 48-49). She attacks everything from what she perceives as the overuse of the words "ya-hey" and "ennit" and the focus of the novel, which she accuses of omitting "the core of native community," and existing "solely in the marginal realm of its characters who are all misfits: social and cultural anomalies" (49). Her critique is well-structured and

supported by various cultural theorists; however, there is no discussion of why Alexie chooses blues music, why he attacks the popular music industry, and how these elements operate in the novel, dispelling what Bird sees as the "exaggeration of despair" among the characters.

Critiques like Bird's are important because they offer different views of how to read Alexie's work, but the despair present in the book serves as a medium for Alexie to openly attack the misrepresentation of Indian peoples in the music industry. He is able to tell an entertaining story by conjuring a "new" blues landscape, by emphasizing the connections between storytelling and music, by providing a story of hope amidst the tragic stories of musicians, and by making fun of what a mainstream American audience consumes as authentically "Indian."

Alexie uses the blues as a medium to raise his characters above simple labels such as "misfits." Albert Murray writes on the nature of blues music:

There are those who regard blues music as a statement of rejection because to them it represents the very opposite of heroism. To many it represents the anguished outcry of the victim, displaying his or her wounds and saying

that it is all a lowdown dirty shame. . .
.which removes blues music from the realm of
ritual and art and makes it a form of
psychological therapy. . . . Blues music is
neither negative nor sentimental. It
counterstates the torch singer's sob story,
sometimes as if with the snap of two fingers!
What the blues-idiom movement reflects is a
disposition to encounter obstacle after
obstacle as a matter of course. . . which is
precisely what epic heroism is based on. (254)

Based on Murray's explanation of the blues, it would seem
erroneous to believe that the band in *Reservation Blues*,
Coyote Springs, is composed of nothing more than
marginalized misfits. Instead, these characters should
be seen as exhibiting certain traits of heroism because
of their ability to survive constant adversity. When the
band makes the deal to go to New York to make a record,
one member, Thomas, realizes the stakes:

We have to come back as heroes. They won't
let us back on this reservation if we ain't
heroes. Unless we're rock stars. We already
left once, and all the Spokanes hate us for it.
. . . What if we screw up in New York and

every Indian everywhere hates us? What if they
won't let us on any reservation in the country?

(214)

Here Alexie establishes the connection between the blues, the significance of landscape, and the band Coyote Springs. Thomas is not so much concerned with carrying a positive image for Indian peoples; he worries about banishment for separating himself from his homeland. Even though Thomas is an outcast from his tribe, he has never failed or erred so badly that he feared losing his home. In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie works to establish the strong connection between American Indian literature and music and to discuss how the demise of the band is not a tragedy but in keeping with the characteristics of the "epic heroism" in blues music.

Alexie's choice to use the blues was deliberate. The beginning of the blues genre of music has inspired contemporary rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and country music artists. Those that visit Big Mom, a leader in the Spokane community, on the Wellpinit Reservation include Hank Williams, who was greatly influenced by the blues musicians in Alabama and Mississippi, and Jimi Hendrix, who acknowledged his debt to Robert Johnson, whose music had been re-released in the 1960's. The most important

visit that Big Mom receives is from Robert Johnson himself.

Robert Johnson, often considered the most important figure in the history of blues, seeks redemption for having sold his soul to the devil. He carries with him a story that is readily accepted by members of the blues community. It is often discussed in the blues community that Johnson sold his soul "presumably at the stroke of midnight at the crossroads of two highways, in exchange for speed and agility on guitar" (Davis 129). Johnson is the Faust of the Delta blues. Frances Davis notes that Johnson's figure only helped to reinforce notions of his satanic qualities: "he had a cataract in one eye; he often played with his back turned to other musicians, which some of them took as proof that he had something to hide. . .; and he favored unusual guitar tunings. . . ." (129). Davis also talks about how these associations with the devil were applied to Johnson and his music and to other musicians of the day as well. Peetie Wheatstraw, who was also known as "The Devil's Son-in-Law" or "The High Sheriff of Hell," used themes of the occult in his work, but Davis describes him as being more upbeat than Johnson, "a ghetto bon vivant" (129-130).

Johnson's real life serious and sometimes frightening demeanor contribute to the development and significance of his role in *Reservation Blues*. The connection of Robert Johnson's demonic reputation and Indians is not strange, since Indian peoples from the beginning of colonization have been considered agents of the devil (much like the guitar) and have been thought to possess qualities that make them less spiritual and, therefore, inferior. The combination of Johnson's ominous presence and subsequent release from the devil provide hope at the end of the novel. The novel doesn't end on a happy note, but rather on a note of survival.

The novel begins with Thomas Builds-the-Fire giving Robert Johnson a ride. Johnson has faked his death in 1938 in order to escape the Devil. He finds himself on the Wellpinit Reservation to consult with Big Mom, the woman in his dreams, about how to heal himself. With Johnson's symbolic appearance, the reservation becomes the birthplace of the blues: "Then Thomas saw the guitar, Robert Johnson's guitar, lying on the floor of the van. Thomas picked it up, strummed the strings, felt a small pain in the palms of his hands, and heard the first sad note of the reservation blues" (9).

It might seem odd for Johnson to appear on a reservation to restore his soul since his roots are in the Mississippi Delta. But the reservation is the most important place for Johnson to visit. Alexie's choice to describe Indian life by using the blues is appropriate. Surrounding the blues is a strong sense of place and culture originating from the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas. Joy Harjo, whose jazz and blues band, Poetic Justice, recently released their first album, writes in the jacket cover for their CD,

These musics are our respective tribal musics, from Muscogee, Northern Plains, Hopi to Navajo; reggae, a music born of the indomitable spirit of a tribal people in a colonized land; jazz, a music born of the need to sing by African peoples in this country, a revolutionary movement of predominately African peoples influenced by Europe and southern tribes; and rock and the blues, musics cradled in the south that speak of our need to move with heart and soul through this land, the spiral of life.

(Internet)

Harjo understands the African tribal influences involved with the blues, but more importantly, that its sense of

place doesn't wholly come from Africa or the south, that the blues were here before their musical debut. In an author's note to her poem about accomplished jazz saxophonist Jim Pepper (Muscogee/Kaw) "The Place the Musician Became a Bear," Harjo notes that "when the African people were brought for slavery, they were brought to the traditional lands of Muscogee peoples. Of course, there was interaction between Africans and Muscogees" (*The Woman Who Fell* 52). She asserts that it is natural for Indian peoples to be attracted to jazz and blues since they were so influential in its conception. This is not to suggest that Muscogee and Spokane Indians share the same cultures, but that Alexie, like Harjo, recognizes the important connection between Indian peoples and African-American blues musicians. Harjo also reiterates the earlier quote from Murray that the blues are about moving from one adversity to the next, "the spiral of life," whether that spiral leads to happiness or sadness.

Alexie's interest in the blues first appears in his collection of stories *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, particularly the story "Because My Father Always Said He Was the Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrix Play 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock." He

writes, "I figure music must be the most important thing there is. Music turned my father into a reservation philosopher. Music had been powerful medicine" (29). Alexie acknowledges the importance that music holds in his life and in life on the reservation. Later in the story, he explains his fascination with Robert Johnson: "The first time I heard Robert Johnson sing I knew he understood 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" (35). Victor as narrator of the story implies the connections and ongoing influences from one generation to another, between him and his father, between Johnson and Hendrix, and among Alexie and "Adrian, Joy, Leslie, Simon, and all those Native writers whose words and music have made mine possible" (viii). These writers understand that the blues are not exclusive to the southern United States or to one ethnic group, but the blues are integral to any culture or group that wishes to survive adversity.

Native music is usually thought to be traditional songs using vocables that are important to the tribe. No doubt this kind of music is significant, but rarely are Indians associated with music outside of this realm. According to Bryan Burton:

Functions served by music in Native American cultures included: (1) religious ceremonies (2) healing ceremonies (3) work songs (4) game songs (5) songs to bring success in war, hunting, agriculture (6) 'honoring' songs to recognize worthy individuals, including veterans (7) courting songs (8) storytelling and (9) social songs and dances. (22)

This description is taken from a textbook to teach college students about Native American music and dancing. Burton's description is simplistic, but that is understandable since this text is largely written for a non-Indian reader. Many of his categories overlap, and the book doesn't mention any contemporary involvement of Indian peoples in the music industry. Again Indians are confined to the past, as they are with films, in order to secure authenticity. New Age music sections and the Native American music section at Borders flourish with the flute stylings of Carlos Nakai and countless powwow tapes, but beyond this, one would be hard-pressed to find anything that did not break traditional stereotypes and motifs of what is considered Indian music. There are very few offerings of 49 music, which is sung at a party after the powwow has ended. Many of these songs

integrate traditional vocables and are largely sung in English. A good example of this is "John Wayne's Teeth," made popular by the film *Smoke Signals*.

Very little attention has been paid to Native recording artists outside of the traditional arena. In the 1960s, there was a low-budget film called *Injun Fender*, which is about an Indian rock star who kills his white fans with his guitar. The message that this film sends out is that once Indians join a part of mainstream culture, once they have broken out of what is appropriate and authentic, then they are no longer sane and productive. Instead, they are guitar-wielding homicidal maniacs. What is seldom noted is that Indian artists such as Jim Pepper, Redbone, Elvin Bishop, Robbie Robertson, Keith Secola, and Buffy St. Marie have made significant contributions to the world of music: but their cds are not found in the Native American section, or in many other sections for that matter. There are only occasional exceptions, such as the band Indigenous has recently been accepted by large blues audiences and has made an appearance on the nationally syndicated "Conan O'Brien Show." Oklahoma City bands such as the Blackhawk Blues Band, Tom Ware and Blues Nation, and Calvin and The Blue Cats have gained notoriety in the

southwest region for their Indian interpretations of blues music.

What is popular in the world of music, and what Alexie critiques in *Reservation Blues*, is the fact that in the music industry Indianness is very popular and sells records for white recording artists. Elvis Presley has played singing Indians in two films, *Flaming Star* and *Stay Away, Joe*. Indians such as Ira Hayes, Cherokee Bill, and the entire Cherokee Nation have been immortalized in popular songs. In addition, Cher and Jim Morrison have done much to appropriate Indianness in their songs. In more contemporary terms, Rage Against the Machine devotes an entire music video to the "Free Leonard Peltier" campaign. Indian musicians are not as sought after as the idea of "the Indian" is.

Philip Deloria points out possibly the worst perpetrators of this quest for Indianness in the music industry--the Indian Dead, a group of Grateful Dead fans who are "a postmodern phenomenon, a bricolage whirl of color, style, fashionable rebellion, and flyaway meaning" but who also have "embarked on an antimodern quest for authentic truth" (182). Deloria also contends:

Notions such as these have guided the actions of Tea Party Indians, fraternalists, Camp Fire

Girls, hobbyists, and Deadheads alike. And yet, Indian play was hardly clear-cut, for if Indianness was critical to American identities, it necessarily went hand in hand with the dispossession and conquest of actual Indian people. (182)

Most Indian play is seen as harmless by the general American public. Children still dress as Indians for Halloween, and the men's movements (oddly anti-hegemonic groups full of hegemonic people) beat drums and chests in the wilderness, sounding their barbaric yawps.

As Betty and Veronica tell Coyote Springs about their disappointment with reservation life, Chess exclaims, "What did you New Agers expect? You think magic is so easy to explain? You come running to reservations, to all these places you've decided are sacred. Jeez, don't you know every place is sacred?" (184). This fascination with "Indian" land is ever present in film depictions and tourist attractions. Chess later explains, "You want your sacred land in warm places with pretty views. You want the sacred places to be near malls and 7-Elevens, too" (184). Indian land and culture are often exploited in order to provide a place of healing for New Agers. *Conde Nast* once rated Santa Fe as

the most popular travel destination in the world (chili pepper lights and all); every time my Australian roommate became upset, she ran to Tahlequah because she decided it was more spiritual than Norman.

All the land under our feet is sacred, even the land under 7-Elevens. But convenience stores don't provide for the New Age movement the same dramatic backdrop apparently required for spirituality. This contradiction inherent in Indian play is certainly obvious in the music industry and, as Deloria asserts, can be very much connected to the loss of Indian lands.

The need for economic gain at the expense of Indians is made clear in *Reservation Blues*. In the novel, Coyote Springs does not get the recording contract, but Betty and Veronica, the two young women that had befriended the band early in the novel, do. Clearly, their names are taken from the Archie comics, which are all about middle class white teenagers. The music producer Sheridan, who is named after a notorious cavalry general, tells them,

. . .there's been an upswing in the economic popularity of Indians lately. I mean, there's a lot of demographics and audience surveys and that other scientific shit. . . . We were thinking we needed a more reliable kind of

Indian. . . . I mean, who needs another white-girl folk group? (272)

Indianness is commodified and exploited, with Betty and Veronica acting only as pawns for the record producers. The need to play Indian is, as Deloria says, for economic purposes. Misrepresentation is closely related to loss of land. The kind of greed and exploitation concerned with the taking of Indian lands exists now in every facet of the marketplace.

This blues landscape is established early in the novel: "Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses. . ." (7). In this case, the blues are timeless, going deeper than Thomas realizes. In one of B.B. King's most popular songs "Why I Sing the Blues," King as the narrator of struggles imagines himself as having lived through slavery as well as certain projects launched by urban development. In his song, the blues are timeless. Alexie employs similar storytelling devices in *Reservation Blues*, establishing the same kind of connections to the past that are very rooted in the reservation environment. He refers often to the

cavalry's mass slaughter of Spokane horses and these horses that had been taught to sing now only scream as ghosts.

The reservation as setting for the blues music makes the connections to history and land as well. After Robert Johnson attempts to play music again,

Then the music stopped. The reservation exhaled. Those blues created memories for the Spokanes, but they refused to claim them.

Those blues lit up a new road, but the Spokanes pulled out their old maps. Those blues churned up generations of anger and pain: car wrecks, suicides, murders. Those blues were ancient, aboriginal, indigenous. (174)

Alexie presents Johnson entering the reservation to foreshadow Coyote Springs' untimely demise and to assist the band's rise to fame (since it is his guitar that gives Victor the power to become a first-rate musician). When Victor makes the deal with the devil by accepting the power of the guitar, and when the band makes the record deal with Sheridan and Wright, the audience understands the nature of quick success means sacrifice and loss. Coyote Springs enjoys a little of the success

but it is when they trust their fate to the record company that their fall begins.

This kind of commodification of Indian products is not new. In *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, Greg Sarris writes an article on the commodification of Pomo baskets and how this affected the tribe:

Pomo women suddenly found they could earn money, albeit a scant amount, for their work, and for the first time baskets were produced not for utilitarian, social, and sacred purposes but for outside income--white man money. . . .this displacement [of the basket's historical testimony] not only maintains a separation of the spectator from the world of history out of which the baskets were created but also precipitates a closed cycle of presentation and discussion about the basketry itself. (53-4)

This is not to imply that Indians have to remain traditional in order to maintain their identity, but this is an example of how with the intervention of capitalism that what was once a necessary component to a culture becomes overused and reduces the content to product. Coyote Springs try to make music for money, and when they

realize that their music is no longer theirs, the band falls apart. They do not go out like Jimi Hendrix or Janis Joplin; they go home. When Cavalry Records' Phil Sheridan and George Wright (descendants of two Army officers responsible for the slaughter of herds of Spokane horses in the latter half of the nineteenth century) check into the prospect of signing Coyote Springs for a record deal, they write a letter to the head of the company discussing the appearance of the group members, describing Chess and Checkers as possessing an "exotic animalistic woman thing," and Junior as being "very ethnically handsome," while noting that "Thomas has a big nose, and Victor has many scars" (190). Their detailed description of the band members recalls the title of Sarris's chapter on the Pomo baskets--"a culture under glass." It also recalls the demonic descriptions of Johnson, which no doubt boosted his popularity. Sheridan and Wright ignore the band's talent and merely want them as exhibits, a fate shared by the rock and country stars that visit Big Mom for guidance. The band is something to be looked at and admired physically, but not appreciated for their music.

Although rock and blues aren't indigenous to the Spokane or Flathead cultures, like baskets are to the

Pomos, in much the same way the songs that they write are separated from their purpose. As Coyote Springs gain more popularity and get their second gig at the Tipi Pole Tavern, they

created a tribal music that scared and excited the white people in the audience. . . . The audience reached for Coyote Springs with brown and white hands that begged for more music, hope, and joy. Coyote Springs felt powerful, fell in love with the power, and courted it.

(80)

They have a purpose and a place with no reward other than giving people an opportunity to experience a range of emotions. They have a certain amount of freedom to express their Indian identities as Chess and Checkers sing "way ya hi yo" and the other band members also contribute to this tribal blues music.

Alexie describes the character Thomas Builds-the-Fire as a self-appointed storyteller for the Spokanes, but unfortunately, "he had always shared his stories with a passive audience and complained that nobody actively listened"; however, "Thomas still wrote most of the lyrics, but the whole band shaped the songs" (213). Thomas envisions Coyote Springs as a vehicle for his

storytelling, but the record companies are worried that their records won't sell if they are too "Indian," an attitude which explains Cavalry's acceptance of Betty and Veronica as an "Indian" singing group; for a mainstream audience, they are safe because they are only playing Indian. Coyote Springs also worries about being too Indian. When they are trying to decide on a name for the band, Thomas suggests "Coyote Springs," to which Junior responds: "That's too damn Indian. It's always Coyote this, Coyote that. I'm sick of Coyote" (44-45). Being afraid of being "too damn Indian" causes problems for Junior later in the novel when Coyote the trickster steals Junior's work truck and he loses his job. Then he agrees to the band's name.

In the novel, before they make a deal with Cavalry Records, the Sub Pop record company, responsible for the much hyped Seattle grunge scene, sends the band a rejection letter that Thomas compares to a commodity can: "U.S.D.A. PORK. SORRY WE ARE UNABLE TO USE THIS. JUST ADD WATER. WE DON'T LISTEN TO UNSOLICITED DEMOS. POWDERED MILK. THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST. HEAT AND SERVE" (187). Thomas's interpretation of the letter suggests that record companies desire to commodify the band's music, turning their songs into something more

palatable, watered down, and white. Implying that the music industry, even the cutting edge companies like Sub Pop, wants to change the band suggests that the separation between purpose and mass production, as in the case of the Pomo baskets, occurs for financial profit and is the main cause for Coyote Springs' downfall.

During the band's first and only recording session, the center of the band's demise is Victor's guitar, which becomes quite contrary in the Cavalry Records studio. Because of its association with the Devil, the guitar could be interpreted as the source of evil, but it is merely a vehicle for the evil to express its intentions. The guitar provides Victor with incredible talent but self-destructs when the success of the band is depending on it the most as in Faust's story. In her review of the *Reservation Blues*, Leslie Marmon Silko notices that "there is an ambivalence throughout toward the guitar, toward a talent or gift that consumes individuals and calls them away from their community" (858). Instead of reading the guitar as being completely evil, it is more appropriate to read the guitar as being a source of talent that has an ambivalent nature, that can destroy when put under pressure. Like the mass production of the Pomo baskets, which creates a loss of meaning, Victor's

talent loses meaning when making music under artificial conditions. They are not performing the blues because they have to, but because they are chasing dreams of fame and fortune. Certainly, the irony here is that Alexie has book deals with major publishing houses and movie deals with Miramax, but this does not hinder him from critiquing the very system of corporate commodification that uses his Indianness.

Alexie has his characters constantly making fun of ironies of popular culture, such as Hollywood's static representations of Indians, as when Victor comments: "You sound like we're in some god damn reservation coming-of-age movie. Who the fuck do you think we are? Billy Jack? Who's writing your dialogue?" (211). Also, Alexie reverses the standards of Hollywood by presenting two contemporary white people, Sheridan and Wright, who are based on nineteenth-century historical figures who do not change. After meeting the band, Wright

saw their Indian faces. He saw the faces of millions of Indians, beaten, scarred by smallpox and frostbite, split open by bayonets and bullets. He looked at his own white hands and saw the blood stains there. (244)

Wright has not changed from the violent, angry cavalry officer that he once was. Alexie does not allow Wright and Sheridan to have a change of heart and make apologies for what their ancestors did. They simply continue their family traditions of exploiting and dispossessing Indians. Just as Indians in Hollywood films are rarely represented as anything other than two-dimensional characters from the nineteenth century, Sheridan and Wright are not represented as being any more complex than their historical predecessors.

Sheridan and Wright's desire for profit causes the band's dreams of success to crumble. While Sheridan and Wright wait for the band to begin playing, Sheridan says, "They don't need to be good. They just need to make money" (223). Alexie sets the scene with Sheridan, Wright, and Armstrong safely positioned in a "control booth" discussing the money they could make based on the band's ethnic look while the band is safely encased behind glass. While the producers have the freedom to come and go, the band is stuck on the floor of the studio, on display, only to watch the guitar and any unity they have as a band self-destruct.

Post-colonial theorists have discussed at length how colonized subjects are fetishized and controlled.

According to Homi K. Bhabha:

I suggest that in order to conceive of the colonial subject as the effect of power that is productive--disciplinary and 'pleasurable'--one has to see the surveillance of colonial power as functioning in relation to the scopic drive. That is, the drive that represents the pleasure in seeing, which has the look as its object of desire, is related both to the myth of origins, the primal scene, and to the problematic of fetishism that locates the surveyed object within the 'imaginary' relation. (76)

Bhabha's discussion of the colonial power's fetishization of the colonized again recalls how the producers seek to fetishize the physical appearance of the band, but also to maintain physical control over them. Reservations and other forced groupings of Indians have always served as a way of maintaining surveillance. The continuing existence of reservations also helps the watchful eye of the government keep tabs on what the native populations are doing.

Just as Robert Johnson's career was cut short by his death at 27, Coyote Springs' short-lived success ends as the guitar goes wild in the studio and the band is thrown out. The rumors surrounding Johnson's deal with the devil are often discounted as a way of explaining his position as a remarkable musician whose influence was not fully appreciated until his early death. He was a man ahead of his time. Likewise, perhaps, Coyote Springs is a concept ahead of its time. In a very recent article in *The Nation*, Alexie claimed that making a film out of *Reservation Blues* is more difficult because he has to start at square one just as he did with *Smoke Signals*. He also believes Hollywood is not ready for the truth about Indians. A band of Indians, playing songs about Indians, might be too hard for a mainstream audience to handle, whether in the novel or on the screen.

After Junior kills himself because of the deal Victor makes with the devil, Victor lives in a drunken stupor on the reservation. As tragic as all the events surrounding the rise and fall of Coyote Springs may seem, Alexie doesn't necessarily see their failure to succeed in show business as terrible. To continue to align themselves with the record company might have proven devastating for all of them rather than just for Junior

and Victor. In the last paragraph of the book, Alexie writes:

In the blue van, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers sang together. They were alive; they'd keep living. They sang together with the shadow horses: we are alive, we'll keep living. Songs were waiting for them up there in the dark. Songs were waiting for them in the city.
(306)

Thomas, Chess, and Checkers have a future that might involve playing music; their song is survival. In keeping with "epic heroism" of the blues, the three of them live through adversity and continue. Much as the Robert Johnson character must fake his death and refuse to play music in order to find Big Mom so that he can be healed and make music again, Thomas, Chess, and Checkers become the embodiment of the blues. Their story is a song. Their future is hopeful as Big Mom looks on their new journey with approval: "Big Mom sat in her rocking chair, measuring time with her back and forth, back and forth, back and forth there on the Spokane Indian Reservation. She sang a protection song, so none of the Indians, not one, would forget who they are" (306). The "back and forth" motion represents the return to and

departure from the homelands of Indian peoples. The positive message at the end of the novel of Big Mom protecting and guiding the Spokanes and other Indians celebrates what the Indians have kept, not what they have lost.

Perhaps anticipating *Reservation Blues*' cinematic debut, Alexie worked with Jim Boyd (Colville) to make a soundtrack to accompany the poems, or rather blues songs, which begin each chapter in the novel. Jim Boyd composed the music while Alexie read the songs. "Small World" appears on *Honor the Earth*, a compilation cd which attempts to raise money for the preservation of the environment and Indian land. On the *Smoke Signals* soundtrack, Jim Boyd sings "Treaties," "Reservation Blues," and "Father and Farther" which are all on the *Reservation Blues* accompaniment tape. Alexie, with the help of Boyd, seeks to perform blues music which as Coyote Springs could not. The songs are the ones that the band plays in the novel. Despite what they are unable to accomplish, it seems as though Alexie is trying to make sure that his characters are not forgotten.

All of the poems at the beginning of each chapter focus on some aspect of life on the reservation. "Small World" captures the desolation and violence of

reservation life: "But it's a small world/ You don't have to pay attention/ It's the reservation" (245). The song is about the senseless deaths of an Indian boy and girl; no one outside the reservation cares. But the larger message of the song is that people should care because this kind of pain and suffering is everywhere. The lyric "It's a small world, getting smaller everyday" can be interpreted as referring to the Indian population but it also can be talking about how with the every increasing technology, the world is getting smaller and the experience of one people can be recognized by many more.

Other Indian writers understand this shrinking world. Leslie Marmon Silko, in "Big Bingo," gives an overview of what it is to be Indian or non-Indian at the "edge of the twenty-first century." She notes that since *House Made of Dawn's* publication, "the 'global economy' has brought changes; now a good deal of urban and suburban United States has begun to resemble one giant government reservation--clearcut, strip-mined, then abandoned not just by Peabody Coal and General Motors but by Wal-Mart too" (856). Silko goes on to indict the pursuit of the American Dream and asserts that "Indian writers are not 'writing from the margins' of U.S.

culture, they are writing from the center of the front page" (856). Indians understand how a capitalistic marketplace can affect the disenfranchised. As major corporations continue to dominate, many people do not have an opportunity to choose anything else. It is becoming a small world in terms of choice and access.

Silko also writes that "all over the world in rural communities, young people share similar dreams, stirred by the same images beamed in by satellite TV and by the same lyrics of rock and roll music" (857). Alexie is certainly influenced by mainstream music, but his manipulation of style and lyrics make his songs particular to Indian experience, and especially to reservation experience. Thomas remembers his mother singing to him: "Sometimes she sang traditional Spokane Indian songs. Other times, she sang Broadway show tunes or Catholic hymns, which were quite similar" (22). All the characters are influenced by mainstream and traditional music, which informs how they play and sing.

It is no wonder, though, that Alexie chose Jim Boyd to help him with the music. Boyd is Colville, a tribe closely related to the Spokanes and Coeur D'Alene, the tribes that Alexie belongs to. which is closely related to the northwest tribes that Alexie belongs to. In 1989,

Boyd released his album *Reservation Bound*, a title with two meanings, whether one is stuck on the reservation or headed back home to the reservation. The cover has Boyd sitting on railroad tracks either waiting for the train or wishing it would come. Certainly, this album had to have influenced Alexie especially the songs "Red Blues," "Colville Reservation Bound," and "Indian Boy Country Song." Being "reservation bound" captures the essence of how Alexie and Adrian Louis describe the "reservation of the mind." Whether or not one is physically tied to the reservation, one who comes from a reservation is always tied to the landscape of the mind.

The use of the blues conveys the ambivalence of the pain of suffering and the joy of survival. When Johnson begins to play music again, the reservation exhales and remembers. Likewise, for Coyote Springs, the blues are cathartic and provide for them a way of expressing their culture. To say the blues is not indigenous to their culture is to deny Indians their place in history and in the contemporary world. It is also to deny their influence on American culture as they so often are forgotten and replaced. The "New World Symphony" is not as important as the "Old World Blues."

Chapter 4

"Indians do not live in cities, they only reside there":

Capitivity and the Urban Wilderness in *Indian Killer*

Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* has been described as a detective novel and a suspense thriller; however, these classifications are too simplistic. Alexie's novel does not set out to pose and solve a mystery, at least not in the conventional manner of detective novels. His novel reveals the injustices forced upon Native peoples, particularly as they journey through a modern cityscape. As the Puritans who landed on the east coast of the North American coast saw the wilderness as being symbolic of evil forces that were to try their souls, Alexie plays with this concept as his Native characters deal with the perils of modern identities. Urbanity is the wilderness; the machine is not in the garden so much as the garden has become the machine.

All the characters in the novel must attempt to solve their own mysteries in relation to the particular landscapes of their tribal and social identities, and it is John Smith, adopted as an infant by a white family with no knowledge of his tribal heritage, who seems the most lost. John Smith is the focus of the novel, and

readers follow his struggle to find his place in tribal and other settings. Smith is born on a reservation, and all he knows of his birth is that his mother was fourteen years old when she had him. All other evidence was kept concealed from him and his adoptive parents. He often dreams of an imaginary reservation that he has created in his mind. He has never been to a reservation but the one in his mind is probably a closer representation than the ones he is exposed to in popular culture.

Another character, Marie Polatkin, grew up on a reservation and grapples with being an outcast from her reservation because of her ambitions. Marie's cousin, Reggie Polatkin, must deal with issues about his abusive white father, who attempts to brainwash him and force him from his tribal culture and land. Detective novelist Jack Wilson creates his identity as an Indian based on Euro-American notions of Indianness. The most intriguing character, "Indian Killer," is never identified as Indian or white. These characters' intertwined stories reflect urban captivity and confusion.

Although *Indian Killer* is about John Smith's quest to solve the mystery of his identity, Alexie uses several devices to convey that this mystery is also about landscape that is central to Indian and American

mainstream cultures. One such device, which follows a long tradition in terms of Native American literature in English is what I call the "reverse captivity narrative." Since European settlers began coming to North America, they have written of their experiences with the indigenous populations. Many of these accounts contain documentations of their captures. Among the most famous of these are *The Captivity of Mary Rowlandson* and the several travel journals of Captain John Smith. At the turn of the twentieth century, Native writers like Gertrude Simmons Bonnin and Charles Eastman related their captivity experiences as young children forced into boarding schools and missions. Likewise, Alexie, at the turn of the twenty-first century, is writing about a similar form of captivity of young Indian people before the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978.

Alexie's story is not about his experiences as much as it is about his generation; it is a story about Indians who are raised among whites with little or no understanding of their culture or their tribe. Like the white missionaries that Bonnin and Eastman had to endure, the adoptive parents of John Smith do not intend to harm their child; in fact, they are portrayed as sympathetic despite their naivete in raising a non-white child and

giving him a horribly ironic name. To understand *Indian Killer*, one must examine the urban wilderness that Alexie creates, the history of the reverse captivity narrative, John Smith's capture and quest for identity, and the similar captivity stories of the other characters. Also, readers must examine why the Indian Killer is never identified.

The lonely urban landscapes that Alexie creates are not uncommon to Indian peoples. Diana Meyers Bahr reports "although urban Indians constitute more than 50 percent of the North American native population, Indians in the city are often considered the invisible minority" (6). Poet Carroll Arnett, who Alexie refers to in *Reservation Blues*, writes that "Indians do not live in cities, they only reside there" (). This is not to suggest that Indians only belong in nature, but rather to express that the current urban environment is a Euro-American construction. Urban identity for Indians is really nothing new to native peoples or native authors. This sense of loss and invisibility comes from the termination and relocation projects launched in the 1950s to stop federal funding for tribes and to assimilate Indians.

Vine Deloria refers to the "Relocation Act" of 1956 as one of the most "disastrous" policies ever initiated. He writes, "It began as a policy of the Eisenhower administration as a means of getting Indians off the reservation and into the city slums where they could fade away" (Custer 157). Many Indians returned to the reservations; however, even now, Indians are forced economically to leave reservations or other rural lands in order to make a living.

Many Indian authors have responded to the urban experience. Momaday's protagonist Abel finds himself lost in Los Angeles, but does not reconcile his issues of identity until he is back on his home ground. Greg Sarris's *Grand Avenue* offers a more contemporary view of Indians coping with urbanization in Los Angeles. Most of the characters go there for no other reason than work. nila northSun writes in her poem "up & out" about her family moving off the reservation to the city to find jobs: "the city had jobs but it also/ had high rent food high medical/ high entertainment high gas/ we made better money but it/ got sucked up" (Velie 291). At the end of the poem she writes, "god how I hated living on the reservation/ but now/ it doesn't look so bad" (292). This awkward positioning of Indians between homelands and

the need for jobs for survival is best summed up in Simon Ortiz's poem "Final Solution: Jobs, Leaving," which tells about how as a child he lamented his father having to leave the Acoma Pueblo for work: "Surrounded by the United States,/ we had come to need money" (318). Encroaching ranches, mining enterprises, and other economic ventures forced, and still does force, Indians to take places in an ever-expanding marketplace that only seems to destroy and spoil their tribal lands and their identification with these lands. When in the city, they are held captive by bills and other financial obligations, but there is also the lifestyle. northSun writes of how the money gets eaten up by "lunches in cute places/ by drinking in quaint bars" (291). Randy RedRoad's film *highhorse* also makes an interesting commentary on Indians and blacks living in New York City. Often the characters stare up at seemingly never-ending stretches of skyscrapers. It seems that the Indians and African-Americans only see one another, and the only white people who see them are the police and two tourists who want to take an old Indian's picture. Alexie plays with this concept of urban invisibility under constant surveillance. The characters in *Indian Killer* are in the

city for various reasons, but one theme is central to all the characters, their captivity.

Throughout the novel, Alexie builds his urban wilderness. From the beginning of the novel he clearly establishes imagery that evokes feelings of despair about Seattle's cityscape. John is working on "the last skyscraper in Seattle" (24), and later in the novel, he wonders "what would happen to him after the construction was complete" (103). The city exacerbates John's agony about his identity and his future. As he works on the skyscraper, John fears plummeting despite using the safety precautions his co-workers take: "John was attached to the building by a safety harness, but he knew that white men made the harnesses. It would only save white men" (76). The cityscape itself is unreliable and any connection to the structures for John, or for Indians in general insofar as he represents them, means death. The cityscape itself is described in terms of destruction and depression. Alexie describes the Seattle's early settlers' taste in developing land:

The Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians had missed the monotonously flat landscapes of their own countries, and wanted their new country to remind them of home. Since the first days of

their colonization of the Americas, European immigrants had strived to make the New World look exactly like the Old. . . . All John knew was that everything in this country had been changed, mutated. (73)

This city is a site of war, a national monument to colonization. To John, cities represent European victory to John and like the safety harnesses were not built for Indians. John looks at the city as a waste of space, and he thinks of the building he works on as being "pointless" (103). Before John jumps off the skyscraper to his death, he thinks that the world around him is seemingly busy but that the city is representative of death: "John knew that every building in Seattle contained the bones of fallen workers. Every building was a tomb" (405). John knows that his search for identity in the city is futile because of what it represents.

At the end of the novel, the setting is a reservation cemetery. The Indian Killer is resurrecting dead Indians everywhere, and they dance. This last scene is a modern interpretation of Wovoka's dreams of the Ghost Dance that makes all the white people disappear. The last line of the novel, "The tree grows heavy with

owls," lends an apocalyptic feel (420). Owls, for most Indians, mean death. But the end is not for the Indians; it is for the whites. In the woods, the natural world, it is apparent that the urban wilderness doesn't necessarily signal death only for the Indians, but the cities are the tombs of the whites.

Only on another plane of existence can John achieve peace, whether in death or dreams. The only place he felt at home was in the imaginary reservation of his daydreams. John's reservation of the mind is a happy place with a loving family, and "it's a good life, not like all the white people believe reservation life to be" (43). There are the stereotypical things like powwows and commodities, but they are not portrayed in an unpleasant manner. The reservation is not the third world that media make of Pine Ridge--it is a place of warm memories, memories that John feels have been robbed. John's time in the city away from this reservation, a center for family and happiness, is a time of captivity.

Captivity stories have roots deep in the American consciousness. The fact the captivity narrative established one of the first real genres of American literature. This genre begins with *The Captivity of Mary Rowlandson* in 1682. The form became popular because of

the settlers' deep religious convictions as they struggled against the evil unknown of the New World.

Eric J. Sundquist asserts that

the colonial captivity narrative, such as Mary Rowlandson's, made its heroines and heroes representative of a larger community whose resolve was being tested by the satanic forces of the wilderness. . . . The captive's greatest risk was not death but rather the temptation to identify with the alien way of life and become a savage. (218-19)

As in earlier captivity narratives, Alexie conveys in *Indian Killer* how white and especially Indian characters not only fear one another, but they fear having to wholly integrate into each other's culture. They all seek to re-capture an authentic past that does not exist. The early captivity narratives such as Rowlandson's later served as justification to eradicate Indian cultures and to secure the frontiers, grabbing land and resources from Indian peoples. Alexie's novel ends with references to the Ghost Dance, which justifies the eradication of Western culture from North America.

Alexie is not the first to introduce ideas which privilege Indian cultures and reverse the captivity

narratives. At the turn of the twentieth century, Native authors began to employ the same techniques once popularized by their white predecessors. Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, a Yankton Sioux author, is probably the least read, yet the most interesting case of using the "reverse captivity" narrative, expressing to a largely white audience the alienation and suffering she had to endure as a child captive in the Carlisle Indian School. By the time she began publishing her works in 1901, the captivity narrative had merged with sentimental "women's" literature of the era, and it had lost much of the significance that it once carried. Although still widely read, the white captivity narratives ceased to reveal an aboriginal threat to Western society, considering that most lands and properties had already been seized from Indians. Bonnin cleverly brought the genre back but in a different form.

Her essays, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl," and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians," illustrate Bonnin's frustrations with the white world. Throughout her essays, she uses words like "confusion," "bedlam," and "frightened." Concerning her experiences as a child, she writes of having her hair cut: "Our mothers taught us that only

unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy" (54). After trying unsuccessfully to hide from having her hair cut, Bonnin remembers being "dragged out" and then "tied fast in a chair" (55). This violence-laden language clearly reveals the story of a child held in captivity, against her will.

Bonnin recounts several other horrors, such as being punished for speaking her tribal language, feeling alienated from her mother on a visit home, and being ridiculed at a collegiate oratory competition. Many of her essays expressing her experiences as a captive were published in *Harper's* and *The Atlantic Monthly* and were targeted specifically at white audiences. According to Dexter Fisher, "She had already become the darling of a small literary coterie in Boston whose members were enthusiastic about the autobiographical sketches, and short stories she had begun to place" in these prominent magazines (229). The key word that Fisher uses is "darling." Bonnin realized that she was a token in the white world. Her audiences were not responding as she wished to her essays, and although her white audience appeared to be sympathetic, they did not fully understand the harsh treatment that she received. Bonnin found herself in a difficult position; she had already become

an educated outcast from her family, so she could not simply return to the Yankton Reservation. She left her budding literary career to take up a career in activism for Indian rights, participating in such organizations as John Collier's American Indian Defense Association and the Indian Rights Association of Philadelphia. Bonnin understood that white audiences were not ready to appreciate fully the "reverse captivity" narratives, and her refusal to continue writing is significant because as the colonists feared becoming Indian, she wanted to resist the "temptation to identify with the alien way of life": to become white.

Theoretically, Alexie's novel resembles Bonnin's works. The Indian characters in *Indian Killer* are constantly forced into worlds that further their alienation. When they resist the white world, they are punished. Other contemporary writers, such as Louise Erdrich and Linda Hogan, have also expressed the harsh experiences of Indian children being forced into government and missionary schools. In Erdrich's *Tracks*, Nanapush works diligently to make sure that Lulu does not go to boarding school. In Hogan's *Mean Spirit*, one of the characters describes the government school as having a "single-file" mentality that the Indian children have a

hard time accepting. Alexie, however, is one of the first authors to bring attention to a largely white audience about the plight of Indian children in the late twentieth century.

Before the Indian Child Welfare Act, Indian children could be taken away from their families and given to non-Indian families, most of these being white. The government officials who assessed the living conditions of the Indian families were also mainly white. This kind of intrusion was based on non-Indian values and assumptions. Not many people in government agencies considered this treatment of Indian children as "captivity," but Indian leaders do. During the investigative hearings on the ICW in 1980, Frank Black Elk, Director of the Society of Native Peoples, eloquently made the connection:

I have been the victim of an oppressive system called the welfare state known as social services. I was captured and held hostage until my parents would conform, but my parents refused. . . . I was held in captivity for 11 years and seven months. . . . The foster homes and institutions where I was held in bondage attempted to brainwash my mind by various means

similar to control units within federal prisons which have the sole purpose of behavior modification. . . . The basics were cultural identity and traditional deprivation. . . . I was forced to believe that my culture was dead and nonexistent. . . . A point I'd like to make is that this genocidal act of separating Native children from their natural parents must no longer prevail if we are truly concerned with the welfare and mental health of our Native children. (154)

Black Elk's testimony about his childhood uses similar language to Bonnin's and Alexie's. Luckily, for Black Elk, his tribal elders worked hard to bring him home and reunite him with his parents. Later in his testimony, he tells of his happy return to tribal traditions and family ties. Alexie sets the scene of John Smith's capture by including details similar to those recounted by Black Elk and Bonnin.

Indian Killer opens with John's birth in an Indian hospital on an unidentified reservation. The opening chapter is written as though it is fantasy, but his departure from the reservation marks the symbolic journey of a captivity narrative. The helicopter that comes to

take John to his adoptive parents lands with a pilot and a gunman, an encounter that seems drastic considering that the adoption of a child does not usually involve armed surveillance. Alexie writes,

Suddenly this is a war. The jumpsuit man holds John close to his chest as the helicopter rises. The helicopter gunman locks and loads, strafes the reservation with explosive shells. . . . John is hungry and cries uselessly. He cannot be heard over the roar of the gun, the chopper. He cries anyway. (6)

This is a modern capture scene. Although Indian children were not generally taken away from their reservations with such force, Alexie is physically exaggerating the internal violence inherent in taking an Indian child out of his or her community. This image of John crying against a noisy backdrop with no one to hear his complaints mirrors images depicted in the captivity narratives, especially those of Bonnin and her futile attempts to communicate with the missionaries. She writes of her first encounter with the government school, "Many voices murmuring an unknown tongue made a bedlam within which I was securely tied. And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was

useless" (52). This bedlam is the first thing that John encounters; Alexie also describes John's cries as "useless." When faced with government intrusion, it seems that a child alone cannot overcome these kinds of acculturation forces; indeed, it takes the Native community to come together to stop this cruelty.

According to report done by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "The Native American family system has been and is subjected to enormous economic, social and cultural pressures," and the Native family structure is under attack due to ignorance of how extended family networks function (71). One of the conclusions of the report is that if the Native family structure had been left alone and "if this social structure were still intact, there would be no child neglect" (74). Frank Black Elk's story and Alexie's story of John Smith are not aberrations, but rather the norm in terms of how government involvement prior to the ICWA affected Indian families and tribal relations. As we can see in the works of Erdrich, it was common practice for the extended families to raise Indian children in the community. Marie Kashpaw, in *Love Medicine*, takes in June Morrissey and Lipsha Morrissey, and Erdrich writes that she has raises several other abandoned children as well.

Catherine Rainwater contends that "the idea that biological children are somehow superior or preferred over other children who belong in a nuclear family is a Western-European, not a Native American, concept" (418). But because it was not typical of government agencies to recognize a different worldview in terms of childcare, it is no surprise that stories like John Smith's are told.

The Indian Child Welfare Act was established to battle cultural ignorance, and "it dictates exclusive tribal jurisdiction over any child custody proceeding involving a child who resides on or is domiciled within the reservation" (Garner 49). Basically, no child can be placed with any other foster family without permission of the tribe, and there is an established order which tribes follow when placing a child, which is as follows: "1. Member of the child's extended family; 2. Other members of the child's tribe; 3. Other Indian families" (Garner 50). Also, at the age of eighteen, children have all legal rights to obtain any information they seek regarding their tribal affiliation and family ties.

In the early 1990s, there was a push for a grandfather clause which would let those children born before 1978 be privy to their personal records. In *Indian Killer*, Alexie illustrates what can happen to

those children who are not allowed access to this information. While most of the main characters in the novel suffer through one form of alienation or another, John Smith endures the most hardship coming to terms with his lack of identity. In an interview with Tomson Highway, Alexie says of the adoption of Indian children, "The social problems and dysfunctions of these Indians adopted out are tremendous. Their suicide rates are off the chart, their drug and alcohol abuse rates are off the chart" ("Spokane Words"). Accordingly, Alexie's novel reasserts the importance of giving a tribe autonomy over how its children are raised.

Adoption proceedings before 1978 were mostly clandestine. Bruce Davies states that the adoption of Indian children was rare before 1940. He writes, "Transracial adoptions began in the 1940's and reached a high point in the 1950's and 1960's, declining in the 1970's, when Indian and Black organizations began to attack the practice" (7). In *Indian Killer*, when the Smiths are given the option of adopting an Indian baby, the adoption agent tells them, "Now, ideally, we'd place this baby with Indian parents, right? But that just isn't going to happen. The best place for this baby is with a white family. This child will be saved a lot of

pain by growing up with a white family" (10). This agent is not atypical of adoption agencies in the 1960s, according to Davies. By the early nineteen-seventies, minority organizations contended that the needs of the children were not being considered; rather, the adoption agencies "were only responding to the needs of their white clientele" (Davies 7).

Since John is born in the late 1960s, he is unable to know his tribal affiliation. Alexie describes the birth mother: "John's mother is Navajo or Lakota. She is Apache or Seminole. She is Yakama or Spokane" (4).

Alexie is making the statement that what has happened to one tribe has happened to all tribes. All Indian tribes have been subject to having their children taken away.

John's personal quest for identity throughout the novel is laden with captivity imagery. John, as a twenty-seven year-old, is described as having long, black hair and as harboring a secret desire "to carry a pair of scissors and snip off those ponytails [of young white men] at every opportunity" (23). John's hatred of the white men with ponytails appears as a direct reference to the boarding school experiences of Bonnin and other children as they lamented having their hair cut and what a great dishonor it was to them.

When John resolves to kill a white man to give some positive direction for his life, he contemplates killing a "white man responsible for everything that had gone wrong" (27). John wants to harm his tormentor, whom he perceives as being the tormentor of all Indian people. In his anger, he lashes out at a system that has stolen his identity. He considers the richest white man as his victim:

John knew that Bob or Dan must have sold his soul, that slaves worked in his factories. Thousands of children. No. Indians. Thousands of Indians chained together in basements, sweating over stupid board games that were thinly disguised imitations of Scrabble and Monopoly, cheap stuffed monkeys, and primitive computer games where all the illegal space aliens were blasted into pieces. (28)

John projects his feelings of captivity and loss upon an imaginary group of Indians being forced to work against their will for the gain of whites in an industrial setting. He perceives this fate as his own as he works for a construction company building the urban wilderness in which he is trapped. The image of "illegal space

aliens" being shot down also accompanies his fear of being an "other." Indians made to help create toys to teach children to kill a symbolic otherness is indeed a striking image and again compounds John's other interior captivity visions.

John tries throughout the novel to escape his world. After work one day, John becomes overwhelmed by the voices he thinks he hears. Alexie writes, "He wanted to run. He even started to run. But he stopped. He could not run. Everybody would notice. Everybody would know that he was thinking about killing white men" (30). His inclination to get away from downtown Seattle again suggest that of a man in captivity looking for any possible escape.

As John searches for avenues of freedom, Alexie interjects his own personal note: "White people no longer feared Indians. Somehow, near the end of the twentieth century, Indians had become invisible, docile" (30). John's horrible situation of having no real identity is a result of whites fearing Indians and so weakening the tribes by taking away their children and trying to make them white. Perhaps, as an interesting note, one main reason that the ICWA gained acceptance in Congress and was widely approved by the white population

was because at the end of the 1970s, Indians were no longer perceived as a threat to whites. Their sovereignty issues did not interfere with most government practices. Most Indian land was gone, and most of their children had been taught the tenets of Christianity and made to speak English. At the end of the 1990s, there has been a push among tribal governments to try to convince the federal government that they deserve many more privileges due sovereign nations. If they do gain more power, it will be interesting to see if they will be allowed the continued sovereignty over family courts. Suzanne Garner notes that "without adequate funding and a responsible monitoring system it [ICWA] may never fully reach its goal" (50). Although many Indian peoples support the ICWA and see it as a giant step in the way of tribal self-determination, there is the reality that ultimately it rests on the whim of federal policy.

John Smith's visions and daydreams may be considered by some as delusional, yet there is a ring of truth to them. His paranoia has 500-year-old roots. Contact with Europeans and Western values has generally been detrimental for Indians. His fear and shame of having been brought up in a white home is justified; however, Alexie does not make the Smiths out to be terrible or

racist people. Their confusion is sympathetic and sincere, but their ignorance still produces malicious effects. Similarly, the missionaries and "friends of the Indian" of the nineteenth century who set out to help Indians often passed damaging legislation such as the Dawes Act, which was meant to give Indians a sense of individualism, but only caused them to lose their land by more than half. The missionaries cut the children's hair and whipped them for speaking their tribal languages only to make the children feel worse about their condition. One of my favorite quotes is from a missionary to the Sioux, Stephen R. Riggs: "The gospel of soap was indeed a necessary adjunct and outgrowth of the Gospel of Salvation" (42). The Indians were considered unclean in more ways than one. Cultural ignorance such as this took prominence over the Indians' real needs, such as shelter, food, and medicines.

Throughout the novel, John continually weakens ties with his parents and tries to move closer to what he thinks he should do to reclaim his Indianness. Alexie describes John as being cinematic in appearance because he is tall and handsome. John, himself, tells white people that he is Sioux because that is what he thinks they want to hear because of the movies they have seen.

He tells Indians that he is Navajo because that is what he wants to be. This description is important in terms of white expectations of Indianness. Cinema has played an important role in how white audiences perceive Indians. Although Apaches have been featured in more films than any other tribe, Sioux have been portrayed time and again as beautiful and heroic. It is ironic that Navajos have worked as extras in more films than almost any other tribe because most westerns were filmed in the Southwest. They have played several tribes including Sioux, Comanches, and Cheyennes. Audiences are thinking they are watching one tribe of Indians when they are watching another. Fantasy passes for authenticity, so John's tribal identity is like a free-floating signifier for Hollywood Indianness.

Filming Indians became another way of capturing them. John does feel that he is frozen in a moment of film. Even Marie Polatkin, the central female character, flippantly asks John, "How long you been working on that Tonto face? You should try out for the movies" (36). This kind of response is understandable since his life began as an image of an Indian. When he is handed to his adoptive parents, someone takes their picture. Alexie describes the scene as "flash, flash. Click of the

shutter. Whir of advancing film. All of them wait for a photograph to form, for light to emerge from shadow, for an image to burn itself into paper" (8). How Indians are portrayed and frozen on film is an important subject for all Indian people. But understanding this image is important to John because it represents a moment of time in which his life changed drastically. He is caught on camera, and this for him is when his Indianness ended. John thinks of himself as a captured image.

What whites and Indians think is very important to John. John imitates other Indians he sees at powwows and on the streets. Yet, he does have a cinematic presence. When Wilson, the popular detective novelist, first sees John, he "was too shocked by John's obvious resemblance to his own hero, Aristotle Little Hawk, to be afraid. Wilson felt as if he'd brought Little Hawk to life through some kind of magic" (268). Wilson, who claims to be Indian, believes he has inherited special powers through what little Indian blood that he has, but he is not culturally Indian. Wilson is struck by John's similarity to his creation. Once again, John is compared to a fictional Indian, one who was probably created as an amalgamation of all the Hollywood Indians Wilson had seen. When they meet, John wants to touch Wilson to see

if he is real. It is in Wilson's presence, a charlatan's presence, is the only time throughout the novel that John feels like a real Indian instead of a frozen imaginary image.

John spends most of his life with his parents trying to understand what it means to be an Indian. His mother does research on different tribes, his room is decorated with Indian art, he listens to powwow music, and his parents take him to powwows and other Indian functions. Alexie makes the point that simply going through the motions and identifying with Indian things is not what Indian identity is about. Being an Indian is about being a member of the tribal community. Even if one is an outcast from his or her tribe, he or she still understands who he or she is. Alexie includes chapters in which John fantasizes about having a family on a reservation that endures poverty and hardship and yet still has a strong family bond. John Smith exhibits Alexie's notions of how not knowing tribal identity means a life of loneliness and isolation.

Dying is the only way John can escape from captivity. He ties Wilson to a beam at the top of the skyscraper that John has been helping to build. Before he captures Wilson, he knows that Wilson cannot be

trusted and that he is worse than the whites who seek to enslave Indians. John whispers to Wilson, "Let me, let us have our own pain" (411). At no other time in the novel has he been able to refer to himself as part of an Indian community. His acknowledgement of "our pain" is how John is now able to understand his sense of Indianness, which is largely based on suffering. At the end, John frees himself from his captivity by plunging to his death from the top of the building. But his death does not signal the end of his life or of his journey to find his identity. John's ghost stands over his dead body and pulls from his pocket the photograph of his white family and an article about Father Duncan and promptly puts them back into the "fallen man's" pocket (411). John is no longer an image of an Indian, no longer physically tied to what it means to look like an Indian. John's ghost does not desperately run to his next destination as John had as a captive in downtown Seattle--he walks.

John's death does not answer any questions for the reader, and it shouldn't. John's story raises questions about identity and community. Other characters in the novel struggle with their identity as well. Marie Polatkin knows she is a full-blooded Spokane, yet she

feels that her ambition to become more educated off the reservation makes her an outcast to her people. She laments the fact that she does not speak Spokane and that she cannot dance traditionally. As a student at the University of Washington, she feels isolated. Her experiences recall those of Albertine Johnson from *Love Medicine*. Both are young women seeking education, distant from their tribes, and estranged from their families. Marie's story is not dissimilar from the school experiences of Bonnin who found that she could not excel in college without having to endure being called names like "squaw" and feeling different from her mother. Bonnin writes that her mother "had never gone inside a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write. Even nature seemed to have no place for me" (69). Like Bonnin, Marie is caught in an awkward juxtaposition of traditional tribal roles and urban academia. Marie participates in her urban Indian community as best as she can by providing food for homeless Indians and in her collegiate Indian community by protesting school policies and a pseudo-intellectual professor who uses his very scant knowledge of Native American issues to propel his own agenda. Despite

Marie's strength, she is also a captive of the university.

Marie's role in the novel is based loosely upon Alexie's own experiences as a Spokane who sought education off the reservation. Alexie tells Tomson Highway of his childhood: "All those qualities made me an ugly duckling on the reservation--ambitious, competitive and individualistic--these are not necessarily good things to be when you're part of a tribe. I was into books. I always loved reading" ("Spokane Words"). Alexie and Marie are similar in their desire to educate themselves. Alexie admits that his parents taught him to learn English as well as he could because that would be "his best weapon" ("Spokane Words"). Marie recalls how her parents would buy her books and encouraged her not to learn Spokane, but English. Marie sees herself as an oddity on the reservation, or as Alexie puts it, "an ugly duckling."

Marie struggles as an English major at the University of Washington, still trying to hold on to her Indian identity. She fights for Indian issues, always trying to elude the captivity that the city holds for Indians. Alexie describes her as "negotiating the campus's maze of buildings and paths for years" (84).

Her major opposition on the campus is Dr. Mather, her Native American literature teacher. His name is significant because Cotton Mather was so adamant about his hatred of Indians and tried to write his own captivity narrative. Marie critiques his reading list, especially since he's been teaching the same books for many years. The list is also full of books that white male editors have translated for Indian authors such as Black Elk, Lamé Deer, and Mary Crow Dog. It is important to note that these authors have been trapped and confined by the words of white editors; Black Elk, for example, eventually disavowed the translation done by Neihardt.

After she challenges Dr. Mather, he slams his door in her face, and she feels "a sudden urge to smash the glass, break down the door, pull down the building" (85). Her first initial impulse after being denied an audience to express her feelings causes her to want to destroy campus property, to tear down not only the physical walls of academia but the very racist boundaries that Dr. Mather establishes.

Marie, despite her frustrations, is able to hold on to her sanity and not fall prey to the city. She creates her own community of Indians on campus and in Seattle by working with the university Indian club and for a

homeless shelter. In fact, her apartment, which is not luxurious by any means, is described as "some tiny box of a reservation in the middle of a city" (90). She still has a sense of herself and homeland. That description may not seem like a compliment, but it is because it shows she still feels a connection to her home and without it, she would be as lost in the skyscraper/tombs as John is.

Marie's cousin, Reggie Polatkin, finds the same trouble in the world of academics, but his real source of suffering comes from his white father who desperately wants his son to be white. His father brainwashes him into believing that Indians are dirty, stupid drunks. His father beat him if he brought home bad report cards and tried to urge him to emphasize his white blood. Alexie describes him as the "mysterious urban Indian" (90) and says that "he'd buried his Indian identity so successfully that he'd become invisible" (94). Reggie is held captive and re-educated like Bonnin and becomes unrecognizable, not visibly, but mentally, as an Indian.

Reggie, as a university student, develops a close kinship with Dr. Mather, the white professor in Native American Studies who seems to fill a fatherly role for him. It is significant that Reggie chooses a white man

who wants to be Indian, the opposite of his father's behavior. But this relationship eventually sours as Dr. Mather takes on a role of hateful paternalism toward Reggie. Their falling out largely has to do with the fact that Mather has Spokane elders telling sacred stories on audiotapes. Reggie asks him to destroy the tapes and argues that it is not right to have those voices trapped on tape. Mather refuses to destroy them, and Reggie is so disappointed with his mentor's behavior, he leaves the university. Reggie is frustrated and lives in a world of anger and rage. He lashes out at other white men much as John wants to do. In fact, both target Jack Wilson as the white man most deserving of punishment.

Jack Wilson is a former police officer in Seattle who retires from the force to write detective novels with an Indian as his main character. In many ways, Wilson represents to the other characters a real problem in Indian communities: a white who can simply claim that he is Indian and thereby make his living off of Indians. In the interview with Highway, Alexie is asked if he resents a writer like Tony Hillerman, who is represented by Jack Wilson, and Alexie says, "Yes, I resent that he's made a career off Indians, and as far as I know, has not given

much back. I'm on the Board of Trustees of the American Indian College Fund--I haven't heard his name mentioned" ("Spokane Words"). Although not every Indian shares Alexie's views on Hillerman, to John Smith, Wilson is the one making Indian slaves work in the basement. To Marie, he is a fraud. To Reggie, he is a fool. When John tells Wilson to leave Indians alone, he is expressing his anger at a white world that will allow Wilson to be Indian, but will not allow him the same privilege. Wilson is able to trace a small amount of Indian blood in himself, but John cannot even know who his mother is.

Wilson uses his power as a popular writer to create an image of Indianness that he can use to his own personal benefit. At book signings in Seattle, he is surrounded by adoring fans, but when he goes to an Indian bar to connect with the local Indian population, he is made fun of and is out of his element. This difference in comfortable settings is important. Outside the bookstore, where he has a reading, Indians protest his books, but inside the bookstore, safe from the bad weather, are the white fans of his novels. When there is a confrontation at the Indian bar, where Wilson's presence is tolerated as long as he buys beers for people, Alexie writes that "Wilson knew he had crossed

some invisible boundary" (370). Reggie shames Wilson out of the bar, and Wilson is considered a joke. They do not protest his work but his intrusion in their very private realm.

When Wilson sees John Smith on the street late at night, he believes that his "power" has brought Aristotle Little Hawk to life. Wilson continues to write and justify his works despite the large number of Indian protesters to his work. However, Wilson is also trapped by his identity. As a child, he was abused and bounced around from foster home to foster home, clinging to a delusion that he was part Indian, a descendant of Red Fox, whom he describes as a crazy old man who lived in a shack and claimed to be a medicine man. Ironically, Red Fox was a white shaman who may or may not have been Indian and who has been severely denounced by Alexie, Ward Churchill, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn for appropriating Native culture for financial gains.

Wilson's punishment is being captured by his imaginary character Little Hawk as personified by John Smith and then watching his creation plunge to his death. But his period of captivity is brief. At the end of the novel, Wilson continues to write novels; one erroneously focuses on John Smith as the Indian Killer. The college

professor, Mather, has written a book about Reggie, pegging him as the Indian Killer. Both are rehashing the old captivity narratives of the earlier settlers. John and Reggie are trapped in the damaging and false words of books, books which Mather will probably teach.

Oppression continues as the two white men who exploit the suffering of Indians pose again as Indian experts.

Reggie is running from the law, and Marie is held for questioning about the Indian Killer while the cops try to lay blame on everyone she knows. The story continues; it does not end neatly.

The last chapter is devoted to the Indian Killer, who is never identified. The end of the novel may be disappointing for most readers who need to know who the villain is and want to see the criminal punished. But no other problems are solved in terms of identity throughout the novel, so why should this problem be different?

Slavoj Zizek contends that classical detective stories, like those created by Conan Doyle, present an array of suspects with everyone knowing that the culprit is among that group. When the detective reveals the real perpetrator, the rest of the group and the audience feels relief. The detective "guarantees precisely that we will be discharged of any guilt, that the guilt for the

realization of our desire will be 'externalized' in the scapegoat" (59). Rather than delve deeply into psychoanalytic interpretation, I prefer to focus on Zizek's idea of how the audience is involved and released at the end of detective novels. For Alexie, the identity of the Indian Killer must remain a mystery because the audience must remain implicated, and, must remain captive, by the severity of the message. An Indian or non-Indian reader can only take solace in Marie Polatkin's final words to the police, "I know that John Smith did not kill anyone but himself. And if some Indian is killing white guys, then it's a credit to us that took over five hundred years for it to happen. . . . Indians are dancing now, and I don't think they're going to stop" (418). The justice for an Indian reader might be that Wevoka's prophecy comes to life and the continent will be returned to the Indians. However, there is no scapegoat to relieve an audience. Alexie does not give his audience the satisfaction of feeling that Wilson and Mather will get what they deserve, that Reggie will be cleared, or that John Smith will find what he seeks.

The ending confirms the message that Indian identity is highly complex. Indian peoples must struggle against government policy, urban landscapes, white academia, and

everyday life in order to resist captivity and retain some semblance of their identity as Indians. The Indian characters in *Indian Killer* are held captive and have their voices muffled in the urban landscape. Alexie offers no simple solutions, and although the novel appears to be "American Indian Literature" or as a "Murder Mystery," the implications go far deeper than simple categories. The quest for identity in the context of captivity is the focus of the novel, and this should be a consideration for any audience trying to understand this work.

Conclusion

Not unlike Alexie's experience reading Bruchac's anthology, I remember taking my first class in American Indian literature as an undergraduate and being assigned to read Alan Velie's anthology. I came across poems by N. Scott Momaday and Joy Harjo and I was excited that I was reading literature that spoke to me on many levels. Up until that class, I had focused my work on Southern literature and the meaning of landscape. When I read that anthology, I had a whole new world opened to me. From that point on, I could not quit reading Indian literature. I tell this story not so much to win points with Dr. Velie, but to impress upon people how important the study of this literature is, especially to students with Indian heritage.

I believe that Alexie, as well as other authors, are highly aware of what meaning their stories carry with them. Alexie writes for a generation heavily influenced by popular culture and critiques this culture by showing the positive and negative effects on Indian peoples. He is an author that deserves more critical attention because his message is not strictly for Indian audiences. His appeal to a white audience might come largely from the fact that sometimes reading Indian literature is

fashionable, but he expects this and counters the expectations of a mainstream audience. There is no clear red devil/noble savage dichotomy, no tragic mixed-blood, no absolute despair, and no happy ending. His work rings true when he describes the problems of Indian life, but he does not look for white solutions to Indian problems, although his white characters often look for Indian solutions to white problems as is the case with Betty and Veronica and Jack Wilson.

Alexie is highly critical of mainstream and Indian cultures, but that does not mean that his humorous tone lessens his critique. Sometimes he uses biting humor and other times he uses silliness and absurdity. Both of these ways of expressing his points are necessary to understanding how difficult it is for mainstream audiences to comprehend fully what Indian life is like but it also encourages the mainstream audience to continue reading. This kind of encouragement is necessary if Indian literature is to grow as a field. Currently, I see that the potential for this field is great, and I hope that I can continue studying and specializing in this field. The concept of the "reservation of the mind" will always exist in some of Indian literature but this concept could be expanded to

other Indian homelands as well. Joy Harjo writes of traveling to the south where her Muscogee people are from. Jimmie Durham writes much of trying to save and eventually losing the Cherokee homelands, Echota and Tenasi, from the state of Georgia. Momaday writes about returning to Oklahoma as a child and as an adult to make connections with his Kiowa identity. As well, other authors try to negotiate the imposed colonial boundaries, whether physical or mental, that separate them from their ancestral homes. I believe that these concepts of how Indians travel to and from these homes are integral to understanding not only the imagined Indian experience, but also the real.

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