RECLAMATION OF INDIAN HISTORICAL ICONS
AND
INDIAN IDENTITY

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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University
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TITLE: Reclamation of Indian Historical Icons and Indian Identity.

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NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 108
ABSTRACT

Reclamation of Indian Historical Icons and Indian Identity studies how aboriginal artists—playwrights, filmmakers, and authors—use their art to take back appropriated Indian historical icons from their place in the colonizers' imperialist history, and to create representations of Indians that counteract the stereotypical ones created by the colonizers. Sherman Alexie and Monique Mojica work in a number of different genres, and their methods of text production are different, but both make extensive use of popular culture to expose the falseness of the colonizers' representations of Native Americans. Monique Mojica's plays act to reclaim Pocahontas, Sacajawea, and other female icons from imperialist history. She dismantles the "good Indian", exposing the way this stereotype was constructed and what role it serves in imperialist ideology. The film Smoke Signals (1998), directed by Chris Eyre and written by Sherman Alexie, dismantles the stereotypes created by the dominant culture through the visual media. Sherman Alexie's most recent short story collection works to create contemporary representations of Native Americans and explores the problems of identity. In examining how these texts deconstruct the colonizers' representations of Indians, the mechanisms of knowledge construction are exposed. This type of awareness is especially important for a citizen in the "Information Age".
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Sylvia Bowerbank, for her time, and her tough and constructive supervision. I cannot imagine finishing this project under anyone else. I would also like to thank my committee, Drs. Lorraine York and Helen Ostovich, for their help and their patience. Finally, I must extend thanks to Branko, Saveta, and Aleksandar Jović for their unwavering support through endless long nights.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Reclaiming Aboriginal Representation

In their take-over of North America, the Europeans invaded and colonized the land of the aboriginal populations; they also did their best to colonize the minds of the indigenous peoples. Through various pop cultural media—such as literature, art, and film—the colonizers endeavoured to create “Indians” through representations that best served to reinforce their Capitalist/Imperialist ideologies. In 1982, Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. said,

The realities of Indian existence have become so misunderstood and distorted to this point that when a real Indian stands up and speaks the truth at any given moment, he or she is not only unlikely to be believed, but will probably be publicly contradicted and “corrected” by the citation of some non-Indian and totally inaccurate “expert”. (Churchill 190)

How can Native peoples defeat the static stereotypes designed to exclude the possibility of cultural change/evolution, and to erase them from a living present and future by relegating them to some never-to-be-returned past? They must use the same media outlets used to create the stereotypes and Imperial myths. Many aboriginal artists—especially authors and filmmakers—are creating texts that work to counteract the centuries of social stereotyping and subordinate cultural positioning. To
decolonize native identity they must first reclaim for themselves historical figures who have been turned into icons of the colonizers' mythology; these include figures like Pocahontas, Sacajawea, and other "good Indians". Second, they must extinguish the generic "Indian" stereotypes that have turned Indians into caricatures and denied them humanity. Finally, they must produce their own contemporary image, which reflects the various whos and whats of the present Indian reality. Through the use of comedy, parody, and satire, and by frustrating a mainstream audience's expectations of generic conventions, aboriginal artists manage to counter Euramerican constructions of the Indian. Monique Mojica (actor, playwright, producer) and Sherman Alexie (author, screenwriter, director, producer) are two such Indian artists who are producing texts that are effecting change. Their different production styles (Mojica is more collaborative, Alexie is more independent), and their different perspectives (Mojica is a woman and a mixed-blood, Alexie is a full-blood man) demonstrate the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and strategies amongst Native Americans and Native American artists. However, what both have in common is their heavy use of popular culture.

As a teacher, it is important for me to teach my students how to think about the messages they receive through the mass media in the
"Information Age". My aim is to show how the mass media constructs meaning and identity, and to make my students always wonder "why?" Using texts that heavily reference pop culture provides students with a very good entry point into the material. Pop culture is familiar. However, in examining how the artists use and deconstruct pop culture the students can see how meaning is constructed and how the constructed meanings may not be accurate or adequate.

Monique Mojica is a half-Kuna-Rappahannock, half-Jewish woman from New York, who lives and primarily works in Canada. She is one of the founders of Toronto-based NEPA—Native Earth Performing Arts, Inc.—a company that helps to create as well mount Native Theatre productions. What is especially interesting about Mojica’s work with NEPA is the collective nature of text-production. While theatre and film are intrinsically collaborative media due to the way they are created, it is unusual to see so many playwrights credited for one play. Many of the early productions were credited to Monique Mojica and three or four additional playwrights. Her professional life and the works she produces seem to be influenced by her mixed-blood experience and perspective. The works I have chosen to examine by Monique Mojica carry out the first step in taking back Native Identity: the taking back of historical icons. In *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots,* and *Birdwoman and the*
Suffragettes, she works to give a voice back to women whose voices have been lost to the colonizers' "history". She twists the conventionally accepted histories of these "Indian Princesses" to illustrate how they have been constructed to serve and promote an imperialist agenda. Mojica effectively reclaims, or "reappropriates", appropriated Native icons of North American culture so that they can no longer be used as tools of the colonizers. The theatre is an especially effective way to highlight the performative/constructed nature of identity; the audience suspends disbelief to enter the "theatre world" as it is created before them, while knowing the whole time that what they are witnessing is a performance. Another of the theatre's major strengths is the audience/performer interaction. In *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, the play opens with a direct address to the audience; the audience watches the "Miss North American Indian Beauty Pageant" onstage as the main contestant walks among them, asking questions and tossing corn nuts. The audience is always, to some degree, a part of any performance and participates in the theatrical construction. This does not happen with film or television. The drawback of theatre is that it only reaches a limited audience. The size of the audience depends on how many people see the performance, how long the show runs, and how many different companies buy the rights to mount the show in different places. What is interesting about
NEPA is that it tours its productions around reservations first to gain Indian audience feedback. Then, once the plays have been work-shopped to satisfaction, they are mounted in the theatres. The written text can be studied, but the full effect of the performance is lost. For this reason, film and television are the most effective tools for taking back Native identity by challenging the skewed representations created by non-Natives.

The North American colonizing culture's most powerful tool in the creation of "the Indian" was, and is, the visual media. Film and television have created a generic "Indian" that comes in several basic models that can be easily inserted, as required, into white cultural productions. According to D.W. Griffith's papers, the Indians were the only group who could be portrayed as "heavies" without inviting the political wrath of the cultural establishment, and King Vidor noted that this was because although many minorities and ethnic groups had "lobbies" in Hollywood to protect their movie image, no one spoke for the Indians (O'Connor 36). Ward Churchill, in his book Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians, identifies three major categories of stereotyping that these "Indian" images fall into:

1) The American Indian as a creature of another time [i.e. extinct, those who remain are no longer "real Indians"]
2) Native cultures defined by eurocentric values [i.e. the native as the original environmentalist/conservationist, the "Noble Savage"]

3) 'Seen one Indian, seen 'em all', or the "generic Indian" [i.e. all Indians live in tepees, wear feathered war bonnets, say "How", etc.](Churchill 231).

These stereotypes act to dehumanize Native Americans, so that in the context of the great white narrative of triumph, conquest and freedom (paradoxical, to say the least), the Native American cannot be expected to, nor should expect to, define or participate—they can only be ciphers within the dominant discourse. The insidious endless repetition of these static images on film and television acts like brainwashing. For the colonizing population it reinforces the cultural position of entitlement and rectitude. Even though the Native American population knows that these images are false and "not me", for many, their constant repetition must inevitably have a negative, exhausting effect on the psyche, since it places the Native American in a situation of perpetual resistance, or surrender. In addition to having to constantly resist false assumptions—and prejudices and attitudes raised by those assumptions—when dealing with non-natives, each time a false image appears a resistance, a recoiling, occurs within the soul. The only way for this static cinematic
image of the “Indian” to change is through films made from a Native American perspective.

In the early nineties, Ted Jojola said, “a bona fide Native director or producer [needs to break] into the ranks of Hollywood [to] challenge the conventional credos of the industry from within” (Jojola 21). This wish was answered with the film *Smoke Signals* (1998). This film effectively works to smash the cinematic stereotypes created by Hollywood. *Smoke Signals* was developed at the Native initiative workshop at Robert Redford’s Sundance Film Festival. Author Sherman Alexie wrote the screenplay and Chris Eyre directed. This mainstream (although not quite Hollywood) venue has in the 1990's developed within the larger event a regular program devoted to Native American work; some Native American producers praise the initiative, while others criticize it for the implicit ghettoisation of their work (Ginsburg 32). This concern is very important. However, as Chris Eyre has pointed out, most of the Native projects end up crossing over into other competition categories. Success at the festival is a launching pad for Hollywood distribution and mainstream dissemination.

The final step in identity reclamation is taking control of the image of contemporary Indians to create representations that are reflective of the present reality and diversity amongst and within aboriginal
communities. Sherman Alexie almost exclusively deals with the urban setting in his latest short story collection, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000). Alexie has come under fire from certain Native scholars and critics for allegedly not representing Indian society in a positive light. Fellow Spokane Gloria Bird (a university professor) has accused Alexie of exploiting his people's problems for his own gain, because he has become so famous in the mainstream. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has said that his early works "reflect little or no defence of treaty-protected reservation land bases as homelands to the indigenes, nor do they suggest a responsibility of art as an ethical endeavour or the artist as responsible social critic" (Cook-Lynn 126). Alexie continuously defends himself against such accusations saying he is an artist, not a propagandist. However, it is also clear that his works have changed over time. In *The Toughest Indian* collection, there are no drunken Indians, nor any Indians who are drinking. And, despite the urban settings, the reservation is presented as the best place to be to maintain spiritual balance and socio-cultural identity. How much of this stems from his personal development (getting sober, moving to Seattle and living there for the past seven years), and how much stems from paying attention to the kinds of criticisms he is receiving is unknown; but it is clear that he does pay attention to the opinion of other Indians. Although Alexie's self-promoting behaviour—his web site is highly
professional and carries detailed information on all of his appearances, interviews, and past, present, and future projects—is often criticized as personal ambition and a leaving behind of tribal values, he also makes it clear that his purpose is to ensure that a Native voice and perspective is heard and attended to in the mainstream. As a multi-media, multi-genre artist, Alexie explains, "we who work with words [today] are [dealing with this ultra-quick, ultra-fast culture]. My involvement in as many aspects of the culture as possible is a way to survive as an artist—and to stay relevant and present. It’s our job as artists to respond to the world...to engage" (Miller, B).
CHAPTER TWO

Monique Mojica and the Rescue/Reclamation of Female Native Icons from “American History”

"Alas for our dear lady,
   English climate did not suit her—
She never saw Virginia again,
   she met her end at Gravesend...
And so here ends the legend
   of the Princess Pocahontas—
Fa la la la lay, fa la la la la LELF—
   if you want anymore, make it up yourself!" (Princess 31)

"Captured again!
Frozen! Cast in bronze,
   this hollow form with my name—
      Tsakakawea!" (Birdwoman 83)

Monique Mojica’s (Kuna-Rappahannock/Jewish) plays, Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots and Birdwoman and the Suffragettes: A Story of Sacajawea (1991), both published in one volume, work to reclaim appropriated female Indian “icons” from their imprisonment in the United States’ patriarchal and imperialist “history”. Gerald Vizenor said, "we are all invented as Indians...and we are stuck in coins and words like artifacts" (Owens 5). Mojica brings those written words and artefacts to life, literally, through her physical and oral performances, giving them a voice. The satiric and parodic nature of her scripts exposes the history for what it is—an invented foreign mythology. The structures of her plays work to defy
traditionally Western styles of narrative structure, and thus Western thought, and to affirm Native cultures and perspectives. This allows the characters to move beyond the harmful effects of those constructions and begin to heal.

In Princess Pocahontas, the play follows two Contemporary Native women, #1 and #2, as they go "on a journey to recover the history of [their] grandmothers as a tool toward [their] own healing" (Mojica 14). The first is a Native North American; the second is a "Chilean-born modern woman who carries her history of resistance from the survival of the Andean women, to the "Amanda" guerilleras to her own story as a refugee" (15). Although these two women are from different continents and different nations, their shared journey indicates solidarity amongst Indigenous peoples and a shared history and experience of oppression under invasion. The women undergo various "transformations" where famous and faceless women of the past speak through them in their various guises.

Explaining the structure of the play, Mojica writes, "there are thirteen transformations, one for each moon in the lunar year. These transformations can sometimes be very sudden or they can linger and evolve gradually. There are four sections where there is a transfiguration of three women entities who are one...13 moon, 4 directions; it is not a
linear structure but it is the form and the basis from which these stories must be told" (16). The fact that the transformations occur for each moon of the lunar year indicates that this is a woman's play, reinforcing the matriarchal as opposed to the patriarchal perspective, because women's menstrual cycles coincide with the moon's cycles. The four directions, in a pan-Indian sense, indicate the commonality of experience amongst all the Indigenous nations on the two continents of the "New" world. Pan-Indianism is a political and spiritual movement that incorporates the beliefs of many different aboriginal nations—those beliefs that can be shared—and is meant to create unity among the different Indian nations, to promote strong family relationships and to promote pride for Indian identity and culture in individuals. It is largely made up of non-federally recognized Indians (essentially urban and mixed-blood Indians with less than ¼ of any single tribe's blood) (Native Net). The transformations are initiated by the character "Princess-Buttered-on-Both-Sides" who is described in the notes as "one of the many faces of the Trickster, Coyote. She is a contestant in the Miss North American Indian Beauty Pageant and she is stuck in the talent segment" (14). As James Sákéj Youngblood Henderson explains:

Aboriginal traditions are taught through the paradoxical force in nature known as the "trickster". The Mikmaq refer to him as Klooscap or badger, the Anishinabe call the force Nanabush, among the Cree
the force is known as wisakedjak or coyote or crow...In aboriginal thought, these sounds present the forces of transformation or changing person. Lessons are learned from trickster actions and transformations that encourage interpretations and awakening. (Henderson 73)

The trickster figure idea of "transformation" is the axis upon which the whole play turns. Even the set, costume, and props are supposed to function under the theme of transformation; objects and set pieces appear to be one thing but become something else; they can be turned inside-out to reveal another reality (Princess 17). The trickster introduces the transformational and revisionist action for the purpose of deconstructing and exposing the ridiculous and false nature of the Imperialist constructions, then initiating a positive rebirth in Native female selfhood. For this reason, when characters are going through their transformations, we not only see first-hand the elusiveness of identity through the changes and mutations, but also see that the aboriginal trickster is alive and well and continues to have a role in aboriginal society. Only when the old iconic images of the Indian Princess/Squaw are destroyed can a more likely truth emerge and a stronger, re-visioned world and identity emerge.
During transformation three, "Invocation", the women attempt to commune with the dead spirits of their Native sisters. The first woman spirit to assert herself through Contemporary Woman #1 is the vilified Malinche:

Contemporary Woman #1:

Pocahontas.
The women who birthed the Métis.
(surprise) Coyote?
The women of the Puna
Ocarina music, on tape.
Malinche... Malinche? MALINCHE!!

Contemporary Woman #2:

Puta! Chingada! Cabrona! India de mierda!
Hija de tu mala madre. Maldita Malinche!

She curses and spits at MALINCHE, exits to instruments.
CONTEMPORARY WOMAN #1 receives each curse as a wound, she furiously hurl herself onto the heap of cloth downstage left and speaks as MALINCHE.

Malinche: They say it was me betrayed my people. It was they betrayed me!...You spit my name. My name is Malinali. Not Doña Marina, not Malinche, La Chingada! The fucked one!...You are are the child planted in me by Hernán Cortez who begins the bastard race...You deny me?...What is that they say about me? That I opened my legs to the whole conquering Spanish army? They were already here. I was a gift. Passed on...dragged out of the earth...Stolen! Bound! Caught! Trapped!...anything alive here is alive because I stayed alive! (22-25)

Malinche is vilified throughout South and Central America as a traitor to her people because she acted as a mistress, translator, and strategist to Hernán Cortez who, without her, could not have been successful. This is a convenient way for the patriarchal colonizers to redirect much of the
anger and blame from themselves onto the native Malinche. This helps to break down respect for women in societies where female deities were important, helping the colonizers to more effectively break down the society. Malinche points out that she was sold to Cortez as a slave girl. She also points out that in the so-called "bastard race", the original race survives. In this way, she has ensured that neither the total extermination, nor a complete conquest, of her people can take place, because as the two people mix a new one arises that has characteristics (physical and cultural) of both.

Pocahontas is the original "Indian Princess". Thanks to her, the Jamestown Colony is said to have survived. Indian women who entered Euramerican mythology for doing "good deeds" were generally labelled "Princesses": this placed the women within the matrix of Europe's hierarchical social constructions. Mojica takes the stereotypical images and uses them as the audience's entry point into the story, before destroying their credibility and bringing about a return to a pre-colonial period. Playwright Daniel David Moses says that using "stereotypical images is one of the strengths of the theatre, that when you have only an hour or two to get your story told, you often have to start with the vulgar, easily recognizable version of things and then do your best to try to shift
and enrich it” (Moses 39). The trickster begins by singing a satiric song to "Captain Whiteman":

Captain Whiteman, I would pledge my life to you
Captain Whiteman, I would defy my father too...
Oh Captain Whiteman, you're the cheese in my fondue.
Captain Whiteman for you, I will convert.
Captain Whiteman, all my pagan gods are dirt.
If I'm savage don't despise me,
'cause I'll let you civilize me.
Oh Captain Whiteman, I'm your buckskin clad dessert.
Although you may be hairy,
I love you so-oo,
You're the cutest guy I'll ever see.
You smell a little funny,
But don't you worry, honey,
come live with me in my tee pee.
Captain Whiteman, I'm a little Indian maid,
Captain Whiteman, with a long ebony braid.
Please don't let my dark complexion
Inhibit your affection.
Be my muffin, I'll be your marmalade...
Way ya hey yo. (Princess 26-27)

This song mocks the supposed love Pocahontas had for Captain John Smith. It also mocks the supposed irresistible attraction Indian girls and women in general were said to have for white men: In 1709, John Lawson declared that, “those Indian girls that have conversed with the English and other Europeans, never care for the conversation of their own countrymen afterwards...white traders find these girls very serviceable to them” (Bird, S.E. 80). When Princess-Buttered-on-Both-Sides says that he is the “cutest guy” she’ll ever see, although he is so “hairy” and smells “a
little funny", she ridicules the European notion that Europeans are the most physically attractive people and that all "others" must have European characteristics to be considered as such. When Pocahontas asks him not to let her "dark complexion inhibit [his] affection", Mojica is taking back Pocahontas' image, which has been actively "whitewashed" in most Euramerican versions, to make her seem more European. After this song the trickster explains that she has many names. The audience is aware that it is Pocahontas, but the song casts a different light on the legends of her relationship with the white people and also introduces some of the names that may not be known to the audience. "I have many names. My first name was Matoaka. Some people call me Lady Rebecca, but everyone know the little Indian Princess Pocahontas, who saved the life of Captain John Smith" (27).

As S. Elizabeth Bird points out, none of these stories of Pocahontas and John Smith may ever have happened. Some people say it is more likely that John Smith may have raped Pocahontas, but as S. Elizabeth Bird points out, "the revisionist interpretation of Smith as a rapist [of the pre-teen Pocahontas] may or may not be true—it is essentially just another piece of (counter) mythmaking" (Bird, S.E., "Intro" 2). This play reveals the functions and mechanisms of myth-making and the purpose of counter-mythmaking. It provides an alternative performance for aboriginal
women; different, self-created roles which finally allow them to speak. Someone could say that since it is only counter-mythmaking, what right do these aboriginal women have to put their words in the mouth of these historical icons? Are they not just doing the same thing that the colonizers have been doing for years? The answer is yes, and no. Obviously, dead women cannot speak for themselves. The point is, other aboriginal women are the inheritors of those women's experiences. They are the inheritors of the ideas placed onto the representations of those female icons; the inheritors of the burden of imperial discourse that those women were forced to bear. For this reason, the Indian women of today have the license to reappropriate those appropriated icons and to "free them" from Imperial discourse, because in "freeing" those women, they can begin the process of freeing themselves.

The first of the play's transfigurations occurs after this with the different voices of Storybook Pocahontas and Lady Rebecca mingling and/or singing along with an English troubadour their history, to the tune of "Bingo". Different versions and perspectives on the story come out. However, the final word belongs to Matoaka. This transfiguration seems to suggest that the constructed identities of storybook Pocahontas and Lady Rebecca speaking together, destroy the authority of those respective
versions and leave only the child before contact. Matoaka runs around and is free and happy amongst her people.

The final scene contains the final of the four transfigurations. There seems to be a circle of contemporary woman "word warriors" who are speaking and writing on their own terms. Contemporary Woman #1 says:

Take a good look—I don’t want to be mistaken for a crowd of native women. I am one. And I do not represent all native women. I am one. And since it can get kind of lonely here, I’ve brought some friends, sisters, guerrilleras—the women—"Word Warriors," to help. (Princess 59)

The use of the term "word warriors" reflects the idea that the best way to fight the oppression and attempted erasure of Native peoples is by speaking the truth from a Native perspective. In this way, trickster has finally led the audience to a new birth of female aboriginal power. It may be a personal comment by Monique Mojica in relation to native texts, as it shows that as one voice, there is not the power as in many voices. The characters begin to quote various native women who are involved in producing texts meant to counteract the dominant discourse. It shows that women, together as multiple faced deities/women of shared experience/comrades in arms, can fight back and create a future and personal identity which is higher, better, and stronger.

The new American dollar coin bears a representation of Sacajawea with her infant on her back. This manifests Sacajawea’s ultimate
importance to the United States. She is the woman who “opened the West” to American conquest. Imperialism’s goal is, ultimately, to gain new resources and to create new markets. Placing Sacajawea on a coin reinforces the position the colonizers of North America hold Native Americans in—that of commodities and quaint symbols to represent their nation in the mind of tourists. This is exposed in Birdwoman and the Suffragettes, as the suffragettes decide to raise money for a bronze statue of Sacajawea by selling “Sacajawea buttons and Sacajawea spoons...!” (Mojica, Birdwoman 68). The US Senate’s website explaining who Sacajawea was and what she did of importance to US history is very revealing in its “factual” telling of events, and will be commented on further in the remainder of the chapter.

*Birdwoman and the Suffragettes: A Story of Sacajawea* is a radio drama that was first produced in 1991 for a CBC Radio Drama series. As Ric Knowles explains, as a radio drama it “[works] continuously with an oral tradition [to give a] deliberately destabilizing voice to [Sacajawea]. [It] is an encounter between history as writing (which de Certeau characterizes as a conquering of both distance and time that functions to construct, colonize, and control various kinds of otherness) and the voice of history (as Sacajawea “sounds her voice”). An orality that...serves as a destabilizing assertion of alterity” (Knowles 148). In this way, Mojica allows
Sacajawea to deny her "honoured position" as a "good Indian" in white history by letting her "speak for herself" about her experiences on the expedition, her opinions of the suffragettes' doings, and her identity as Mojica believes she saw it and wants it to be seen.

The play's scenes are juxtapositions of different perspectives from different historical times. The perspectives belong to the suffragettes who wish to build a statue to Sacajawea in 1905; Sacajawea's descendants and fellow tribe members on the Wind River Reserve in 1926; Lewis and Clark; Sacajawea during her travels, and Sacajawea's ghost responding to the suffragettes. What Mojica accomplishes through these juxtapositions is to expose the politics and mechanisms of myth-making, Lewis and Clark's condescending attitude towards Sacajawea, and shows Sacajawea as meaning something different to her people.

The play opens with the "Suffragette's Theme Song/March", which outlines all of the various place names in America that contain Sacajawea's name. It is described as sounding like "a kid's T.V. show; Mr. Rogers, or Howdy Doody with heavy flavour of Gilbert and Sullivan and the sound of marching feet" (Mojica, *Birdwoman* 67). This anachronistic song suggests both the importance of the suffragette's efforts to ensure Sacajawea's place in pop culture, as well as the cartoonish way they
have constructed her for their purposes. It also serves a satiric purpose, making the suffragettes' actions and opinions concerning Sacajawea silly.

The suffragettes, in need of a heroine from American history to prove women were just as important to the building of the nation and therefore deserve equality, "discover" Sacajawea:

"I screamed, 'I have found my heroine!'...I then hunted up every fact I could find about Sacajawea. Out of a few dry bones I created Sacajawea and made her a living entity. For months I dug and scraped for accurate information about this wonderful Indian maid." (76)

The white people have created the Sacajawea they need to serve their ideological purposes. Also, they "write" Sacajawea to fit their preferred stereotypes of Indian identity. One of the suffragettes has written a romanticized historical novel where she writes,

Sacajawea. Modest princess of the Shoshones, heroine of the great expedition, stood with her babe in arms and smiled upon them from the shore. So had she stood in the Rocky Mountains pointing out the gates. So had she followed the great rivers, navigating the continent. Sacajawea's hair was neatly braided, her nose was fine and straight, and her skin pure copper like a statue in some Florentine gallery. Madonna of her race, she had led the way to a new time. To the hands of this girl, not yet eighteen, had been entrusted the key that unlocked the road to Asia...Across North America, a Shoshone princess touched hands with Jefferson, opening her country" (68).

Here any details that may be unpleasant to a delicate female sensibility have been removed. She is a "princess", not a slave. Therefore, her "touching hands with Jefferson" to "open her country" is legitimized; Indian royalty worked with the "Great White Father[s]" (71) to ensure white
people could take over their land, since the intelligent royalty knew that superior civilization was in their best interest. Instead of being the third "wife" of a Canadian low-life, she carries her babe like a "Madonna" of her race; sent from God, perhaps? Her features are made more European, her skin colour is likened to ancient European bronze sculptures to make its colouring acceptable. These are all hallmarks of the "prevailing view [that] the princess was...gentle, noble, non-threateningly erotic virtually a white Christian, yet different, because she was tied to the native soil of America" (Bird, S.E., "SD" 80).

This scene is followed by a monologue by Sacajawea on the plains, among the grass, speaking of the time when her name was Pohenaif—"Grass woman"—until she was taken as a slave and became known as Tsakakawea—"Birdwoman". The scene is full of longing and sadness. It emphasizes her lack of control in determining her life's course and her identity. She was taken from her people and enslaved by another tribe, her name was changed, and that same name would later be changed again, mispronounced by the whites. Clark would later call her "Janey" for convenience, and in her elder years, her tribe would call her Porivo, or "Chief Woman".

Lewis and Clark differ from the suffragettes, in that they are shown to conveniently think of Sacajawea, at first, in terms of the "squaw"
construction; the Squaw was debased, immoral, a sexual convenience
[who] lived a squalid life of servile toil, mistreated by her men (Francis 121-22). This exposes the way the whites use whichever of their stereotyped constructions best works to support their actions in the "New World". It also reveals how the imperialist constructions change according to ideological need. Even the US Government talks of Sacajawea running to tell her "owner" something she has overheard the Shoshone saying, instead of calling him her husband. In need of a translator who speaks Shoshone, Lewis suggests Charbonneau:

(shrewdly) why hire yet another interpreter when Charbonneau has three Snake wives of the Shoshone, am I correct?
Clark: Good God! You're not proposing that we bring three women with us?
Lewis: No, of course not. Only one. The bright-eyed one, I think, with the red-painted part in her hair.
Clark: But she is big with child!!
Lewis: Yes, but so big, in fact, that she is sure to give birth before we continue. I don't foresee her being any trouble. They're not like our women, you know; if she had enough to eat and a few trinkets to wear I believe she would be content anywhere.
Clark: I do see your point; and seeing as the squaw is a wife of Charbonneau, she won't be expecting to be paid. (Bird 72)

The crafty Europeans felt no compunction about taking a woman with a nursing baby on a long and dangerous expedition; they used her as a "white flag" of peace for the expedition, which was as much a military expedition as a scientific...because no war party was ever accompanied
by a woman and infant, the response of the Native Americans was curiosity not aggression" (US Gov).

Later in Clark's journals, Sacajawea becomes the driving force behind their success. One of the most famous stories of the expedition relates how “with her infant son bound to her back, she single-handedly rescued Captain Clark's journals from the Missouri whitewater when their boat nearly capsized. If she had not, much of the record of the first year of the expedition would have been lost to history" (US Gov). This story reinforces a number of stereotypes: that of the fearless Indian, that of the physically tough and agile Indian, and that of Indians acting without forethought. It also gives a sort of weight and importance to the journals of Clark; these journals were almost lost to the great white narrative, these journals were worth risking the life of her infant to save. Mojica deliberately puts this scene into the play without ever mentioning the journal. Sacajawea speaks of struggling to get onto safe ground with her screaming infant, of being saved by her friend Ben York, the "black whiteman", and Charbonneau shivering like a dog (Birdwoman 74). There is no mention of any journal. In Mojica's version, if Sacajawea did happen to instinctively grab the book while in the water, she does not think it important enough to mention; the details she remembers as important all centre on trying to get to safety with her baby.
At a tea party the women discuss the expedition in terms of a white colonizing perspective—“Wilderness! All of it wilderness, wild and savage!” (75). Then Sacajawea and her trip are discussed in a way that reveals more about the psychology of the suffragette than Sacajawea or Indians:

Suffragette #2: Oh how exhilarating! Imagine! Oh how I’ve always wanted to be like a wild Indian—an Indian maiden dancing naked in the wilderness to the light of the bonfire!...Imagine the excitement, the romance of trekking across the untamed, untouched, VIRGIN territory with those two handsome captains!! She must have been terribly in love with one of them... (I think it must have been Clark with that red hair.)

Suffragette #3: Well, the wheels of progress do turn. How fortunate for her people that the wilderness has been tamed and civilized—they’re all Americans, now, and maybe we can teach them something about true equality. (75-76)

The statement by #2 reflects the habit of Europe to reflect its repressed sexual desires onto the “other”. Hence knowledge that Sacajawea and her fellow savage maids probably dance naked at moonlit bonfires and might even do so in the presence of two white captains, is actually an expression of #2’s desire to remove her restrictive clothing and (perhaps) have a ménage-à-trois with two handsome captains. The statement of #3 is proof that white feminism often neglects the needs of “other” women and retains hierarchical ways of thinking and relating to “others” that reflect white privilege.
The scenes of the Wind River Reserve reveal different stories of Sacajawea. To the whites, she only exists because of her contributions to the Lewis and Clark expedition. Her grandchildren and other elders sit around a fire, drinking tea and discussing her. They laugh at the spoons they have been given that supposedly depict Sacajawea. They speak of the various children she had after Jean-Baptiste. Then, they discuss her comparative worth to them as opposed to the whites.

Granny #2: “Well, we Shoshones never thought too much of her taking those white men over the mountains to the big waters. It was never important to us. It made her important to the white people, though. So they gave her a medal and some papers to prove that she was worth something” (77).

This shows that history and the importance of events in history depends on the people telling it.

Grandpa #2: “As near as I can remember, when I first saw my grandmother, Porivo, or Sacajawea,. She was still active, smart, and often took part in the councilis." She was very much respected in spiritual ways, too. from her travels among the nations of the plains, “my grandmother introduced the sacred Sun Dance among this tribe...I am today leader of that sacred ceremony because we did not have Sun Dance among the Shoshone before that.” (80)

This indicates that on Sacajawea’s travels with Lewis and Clark, she interacted with other tribes and participated in Native culture and religion. She introduced a new sacred ceremony to her people after her travels. Also, the Sun Dance is a popular ceremony in the Pan-Indian
movement. Thus, Mojica again seems to assert the idea of many nations united to fight European socio-cultural hegemony.

Granny #3: "when it came time to make the treaty that made this reservation, Sacajawea stood and she spoke up for us here, to make sure things went right or us." (81)

This shows that she was not really an Indian who was working wholeheartedly for the total conquest of her continent. She used her influence and did her best to politically negotiate for her people. Finally, Grandpa #1 expresses what Sacajawea's tribe think about her iconization by the whites:

"Personally, I would like to ask, what is all of this fuss about?" We remember our grandmother for who she was to us—
*Sounds of agreement.*
—not with medals, papers and monuments. "She is here on the hill in the cemetery. She can only be buried in one place." (81)

In the end, as the bronze statue is being unveiled, "Sacajawea" speaks about it and expresses her displeasure:

"Captured again!
Frozen! Cast in bronze,
this hollow form with my name—
 Tsakakawai!

Who are these strange sisters?
and what mountains are they climbing?
"Brave," they say—
"Squaw," they say—
"Madonna," they say?
(laughing)
C'est à dire, comme la vierge, Marie?
la vierge,
married both to Charbonneau and
Jerk Meat.

Who are these strange sisters?
If you remember me,
remember a child fighting to stay alive
remember a slave girl gambled away
remember a mother protecting her child
remember a wife defying the whip
remember an old woman who loved her people
remember I died at home on my land.

Now the Birdwoman’s name—
Tsakakawea
is caged in statues, paintings,
lakes and rivers
.... poems made of fog and lies.
.... Oh! (low laughter)
cannot contain the spirit
so, high above the clouds,
Hawk’s screech.
the Birdwoman beats her wings,
sounds her voice,
soars,
and is free. (83-84)

Here, “Sacajawea” expresses the idea that each time the dominant
culture makes a Sacajawea cultural production they are further
“trapping” her within their imperial narrative, from which she wishes to be
freed. Her speech is written like a poem, the clipped language quickly
runs through what is said about her, and what “she” wants said about her.
Through the play she has been able to sound her voice, and through this
she is free. The use of different languages in both Princess Pocahontas
and Birdwoman is again meant to show that whatever language the
women are using, their own or a colonizer’s, they can turn it to serve their
needs. It is also another strategy to support the idea of "many nations
one people", on the political plane. While they may "cage" her name in
statues, and the like, they cannot cage her spirit, which lives in other
Native women.

Mojica obviously intends this volume to be educational. She wishes
to build a new knowledge, a newly conscious audience, with her plays.
At the end of each play she provides bibliographies with
"Recommended" and "Not Recommended" reading lists. In this way, she
is ensuring that anyone who wishes to know more about the women or
the issues that concern aboriginal women during times of conquest
should—from an aboriginal perspective—look into, or avoid, certain works.
CHAPTER THREE

Where are the Indians? Sherman Alexie’s Re-vision of the “Indian” in the film Smoke Signals

You know Thomas, I don’t know what you’re talking about half the time. Why is that? I mean you just go on and on about nothing. Why can’t you have a normal conversation? You’re always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen Dances with Wolves? A hundred, two hundred? [Thomas ponders] Ah geez, you have seen it that many times, haven’t you? Don’t you even know how to be a real Indian? (Eyre)

The quote reveals a number of the objectives of Smoke Signals (1998). It emphatically denies Hollywood’s right to act as a voice for Indians by rejecting a “sympathetic”, Oscar-winning film like Dances With Wolves. It aims to expose the false stereotypes that dominate the hegemonic discourse, and have been largely constructed through television and Hollywood film representations. It aims to reclaim Native identity by showing “real Indians” living real lives, as opposed to what Gerald Vizenor has termed “the absolute fake” (Owens). It aims to finally showcase Indian reality from an Indian perspective.

In her article “Indian Film and Video Makers Rescue the Truth”, Beverly Singer wrote, “In 1998, modern film history was made with the national theatrical release of Smoke Signals” (Singer 251). Cineaste magazine wrote, “The ethnic group that has been featured more than
any other in the history of American films is finally beginning to speak in its own voice" (West). Both of these statements reflect the importance of Smoke Signals as a breakthrough film. It is the first mainstream film to be entirely created by Native Americans (West). It was written and co-produced by Sherman Alexie (Spokane/ Coeur D’Alene), directed by Chris Eyre (Cheyenne/Arapaho), and has Native American actors in all the main roles; this is a prime element in its success as a stereotype smasher. As Alexie says, the Indians are Indians and not "Italians with long hair" (West). The film was adapted from Alexie’s short story collection The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993). When it played at the Sundance Film Festival, it still carried the title “This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”, which was the title of the short story the screenplay was mainly based on. When Miramax picked up the movie for national distribution, the title was changed to Smoke Signals. Due to the stereotypical images this title conjures, an audience immediately expects a film about Indians, but must quickly realize that this film will not satisfy expectations for standard Hollywood Indian fare. This title change, however, was not chosen—nor imposed—by Miramax. Alexie is one of the most successful Native American writers in North America. He explains that he never wanted the movie to be named after the short story because "I love that title on the story, but it is not a cinematic title. There
is an inverse proportional relationship between the length of movie titles and the success of the film. Very few long title films do well because people forget the title" (West). This clearly reveals Alexie's position regarding the mainstream and his work. He wants his work to be successful in the mainstream, because he wants the Indian perspective to receive mainstream attention. This will make non-Indian audiences gain consciousness about the falseness of the representations created by non-Indian filmmakers, and it will give Indian audiences images that they can recognize. Also, a successful film brings financial success. Not only does financial success benefit him, it benefits the Native film industry, because it gives the big Hollywood studios faith that films made by Native Americans, containing a Native American perspective, can do well with a mainstream audience. This leads to a willingness to invest in Native films without imposing changes "for the good of the market" which would compromise the vision. Smoke Signals accomplishes its aims to reclaim Native identity in a number of ways. It has a plot that makes complex use of allegory and metaphor. It plays with the audience's expectations surrounding genre. And, it plays with the "categories of stereotyping", using humour and irony. Humour and irony are hallmarks of Sherman Alexie's work:
Alexie's essentially moral aims in writing poetry and fiction that is heavily infused with irony and satire, including his ethical reversal or extension of stereotypes in order to establish new valences of imaginative literary realism...true satirists are conscious of the frailty of human institutions and attempt through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodelling (Evans 51).

Not all critics read Alexie's humour and satire positively. Alexie has been targeted with some unfair accusations. His work—including the short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, which *Smoke Signals* is adapted from—is severely censured by certain Native American authors/scholars. Many of these critiques seem to stem from a misreading of Alexie. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in her essay “American Indian Intellectualism and the New Indian Story”, has said that Alexie’s works lack “tribal realism”; her friend, Gloria Bird (Spokane), says that “native cultures are used like props...sprinkled like bait are sage-smudging, stickgame, [and] sweet grass enough to titillate the curiosity of non-Indian readers” (Cook-Lynn 126). She also says that Alexie’s fiction “omits the core of native community and exists solely in the marginal realm of its characters who are all misfits: social and cultural anomalies. It is a partial portrait of a community wherein there is no evidence of Spokane culture or traditions, or anything uniquely Spokane” (Owens 75). To argue against the latter claim, all of the adults in the film—not just his grandmother—keep a watchful eye on the orphaned Thomas. This is very much confirmation
that a community exists; a community where children are considered the 
responsibility of all the adults. Second, the idea that Alexie is somehow 
catering to the "reservation tourist" by throwing in "smatterings" of Native 
culture is a misreading of his work. Alexie is subtle. What that is "uniquely 
Spokane" should he include? What constitutes "tribal realism"? It seems 
that this criticism stems from a lack of specific tribal ceremonies and 
detailed descriptions/explanations of cultural elements like "stickgame", 
"sweet grass", or "fancydancing". It is not necessary for cultural elements 
and traditions to be shown in some overt way to convey an existence of 
tribal community and ties. This would satisfy the "reservation tourist" much 
more than Alexie's subtle "smatterings" of culture ever could. Alexie 
believes things like ceremonies are sacred and not to be exposed to the 
general "tourist's eye"; he has stated in interviews, "People want us to be 
the K-mart of spirituality. I don't talk about religion" (Pabst). The seemingly 
unobtrusive insertions of native culture serve to create a sense of the 
everyday. When Arnold Joseph cuts his hair to mourn the deaths of 
Mattie and John Builds-the-Fire, it is stated matter-of-factly, and it is not 
revealed on-camera. It is merely what happens. When Victor and friends 
start to sing a song that mixes traditional vocables with English words ("Oh 
I took the ball to the hoop and what did I see? Oh I took the ball to the 
hoop and what did I see? General George Armstrong Custer was a-
guarding me, a-guarding me”) it does not strike the viewer as strange because of how naturally they break into their satiric song. Also, it is obvious that “Custer” signals something to this community that it does not signal to a non-Native audience. There can be no sense of “the exotic” in Alexie’s work, but there is very much a sense of a community with its own codes and conventions.

Alexie’s Indians are human beings and, thus, some are breakable while others are resilient. Louis Owens, who quotes extensively from Cook-Lynn and Gloria Bird, writes that “what is truly pathetic is the shell game in which writers posing as “real” Indians again and again give us new versions of the age-old euramerican invention called the Vanishing American: Indians who inhabit dysfunctional and vaguely defined tribal communities, drink themselves to death, abuse self and others within a matrix of dark humour, and save the colonizer the trouble of genocide (Owens 159). Gloria Bird has accused Alexie of exploiting and sensationalizing the problems of his community and culture for his own success, saying that he “prey[s] upon” his community in perpetuating damaging stereotypes, including that of the drunken/drinking Indian (Evans 51). That Alexie writes about “drunken Indians” in his work reveals that he recognizes a real problem within his community. According to Ward Churchill, “three-quarters of adult Native Americans suffer from
alcoholism or other forms of substance abuse" (Churchill, internet). The top causes of death among Native Americans, according to US-based Indian Health Services, are alcohol-related (i.e. liver disease, cardiovascular disease, accidental death) (Stevenson, internet). The position that Alexie is merely reinforcing stereotypes when he uses a drunk Indian character, just because whites have constructed stereotypes about “drunken Indians”, is too simplistic. By suggesting that his use of “drunken Indians” is wrong, these critics are advocating that they not be used. This, however, is creatively limiting. Writing which attempts to completely erase all white-held stereotypes, by consciously ignoring and leaving them out, is investing too much power in a white reading. Gloria Bird (who has written a paper on Alexie’s writing called “The Exaggeration of Despair”) claims that Alexie’s works and stereotypes offer “Indian readers plenty of anger but no ground upon which to make a cultural stand” (Owens 81). Perhaps such an argument could be made about the short story collection The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, where certain characters do indeed perform “vanishing” acts. However, Smoke Signals is clearly different from the literary work it is adapted from in a number of ways. It is in these differences that a defence can be found against the latter charge by Bird, proving that Alexie’s works act out a narrative of survival.
In Alexie's works there is a general pattern of recurring characters and situations. For example, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, prominently featured in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993) and Reservation Blues (1995), are the main characters in Smoke Signals (1998). In this way, the body of Alexie's work may be looked at together as a continuing narrative that is continuously evolving. As Evans says, his work "may be estimated most fairly in terms of its accretionary power, a salient feature of oral tradition" (Evans 48). In an interview with Cineaste, when asked about whether his vision of Indian society was less dark in Smoke Signals than Lone Ranger and Tonto, Alexie answered:

Definitely, if you chart the course of my book, my literary work, you're going to see that pattern. I always tease literary scholars who interview me, saying, "you know, you should use the title, 'Firewater World: the idea of recovery in Sherman Alexie's fiction and poetry', because that's really what's happened." When I first started writing I was still drinking, so Lone Ranger and Tonto and the first book of poems, The Business of Fancydancing, are really soaked in alcohol. As I've been in recovery over the years and stayed sober, you'll see the work gradually freeing itself of alcoholism and going much deeper, exploring the emotional, sociological, and psychological reasons for any kind of addiction or dysfunctions within the community. (West)

Alexie wrote his early works based on what he saw at the time; his perspective was a result of his experience. It is therefore dismissive and reductive for Bird and other Indian scholars to claim that Alexie is not writing "the truth" about Native communities, that his characters exist only in "the margins" and that they are "all misfits: social and cultural
anomalies". It is dismissive for these writers/scholars to suggest that Alexie's work is "an exaggeration of despair" and that it is not to be considered on the same level as "classics" of Indian literature such as *House Made of Dawn*, by Momaday, or *Ceremony*, by Silko. Dismissing the issues dealt with by Alexie as exaggerations and as belonging to marginal community misfits and anomalies pushes the people who are suffering from things such as alcoholism, and who may recognize something of their situation in Alexie's works, to the margins of the Native community. Dismissing Alexie and other "new Indian fiction" writers on the basis that their work is not what Indian writing "should be" creates narrow parameters of "legitimacy" in native writing. It is reductive to prescribe what kind of writing is "good" for Native literature (i.e. the "sweeping lyrical" *House Made of Dawn* or "dense with meaning" *Ceremony*) and what kind is "bad" (i.e. the "black humour" of Lone Ranger and Tonto), based on how the Euramerican mainstream may understand it. Leslie Marmon Silko reveals the importance of oral tradition when, in speaking of the Pueblo nation, she discusses how culture and history depend on oral narrative which "depend[s] on collective memory through successive generations" (Silko 8). She says that the people perceived the world and themselves within that world as being part of an "ancient, continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories...everything
became a story" (8-9). Communal storytelling was a self-correcting process where listeners were encouraged to speak up if they noted a discrepancy or missing detail and they were happy to listen to two or three different versions because what the people sought was a communal truth, not an absolute truth—"for them this truth lived somewhere within the web of differing version, disputes over minor points, and outright contradictions tangling with old feuds and village rivalries" (10). Because Alexie's works are so strongly influenced by oral traditions and his body of work needs to be read as a fairly cohesive running narrative, his work does offer something beyond "anger without solutions". Although Alexie is writing stories which will then be "stuck" in a text or film, he still retains the evolutionary power of oral tradition because of his repetition of characters and situations from work to work. This defies the dominant discourse that denigrates oral tradition in favour of written tradition by making the written tradition work as oral. In *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, Victor is a drunk and a weakling. In *Smoke Signals*, he has never touched a drop of alcohol. He is strong, as well as vulnerable. In the book, Thomas's stories are listened to reluctantly. His stories are socially and culturally reaffirming; people seek them out as balms against the hurts of their social circumstances. And yet, by the end of his "story" in *Lone Ranger and Tonto*, everybody has stopped listening to him. This is in
direct contrast to Smoke Signals where his stories start out ignored and rejected, but, by the end, are listened to and sought out. In the film, this is reflective of cultural resurgence and healing. The fact that characters in Alexie’s work change and evolve shows that identity too is a work in progress. If there are static, "stock" Indian characters in the dominant discourse, Alexie’s fiction shows that the stereotype can evolve. Identity is not fixed, and it is certainly not fixed within any one (or even series of) textual or filmic representation. The drunk does not have to remain a drunk. Just as the Victor character can remain Victor Joseph without staying a drunk and a weakling from work to work, so too can the real alcoholic change and improve his quality of life. Alexie’s work reflects his own improved quality of personal life as he has managed to stay sober. As Russ Spencer says, Alexie “may not be telling the whole truth about the American Indian but [he] is at least telling his own” (Spencer). His voice is only one of many voices that help to build the communal contemporary Indian metanarrative. The nature of “the truth” lies somewhere between the different accounts of Indian reality found in the different works by all the varied Native American writers. Alexie’s stories are meant to impart impressions of a truth. They are not meant to be the “definitive truth”, as no one work can be. This is why there can be no narrow model for “the acceptable Indian literary work”. Such a narrow model for what
constitutes the “tribal real” could only succeed in creating static new stereotypes with an “official stamp of approval”.

*Smoke Signals*’ structure/genre is that of “road movie”/“buddy picture”. Alexie says that what is revolutionary and groundbreaking is having Indian characters as fully realized human beings and placing these protagonists within such a familiar literary and cinematic structure (West). In these films, there is generally a “strong buddy”, or hero, and a “sidekick” companion—often, a white “hero” and ethnic “sidekick”. Here, however, there is no “racial hierarchy” being played out. The protagonists are two Coeur d’Alene Indians, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Initially, it seems that Victor will play the clichéd role of “tough guy” with Thomas playing his support/fool, but those expectations are progressively crushed as the plot develops and both characters are revealed to be more complex than those stock roles allow. When the white girl in the hospital attempts to thank Victor and Thomas for saving her friend after the car crash, her attempt to find an appropriate analogy turns her to pop culture. She says:

“You guys are heroes. It’s like, you’re the Lone Ranger and Tonto.”

To which Thomas replies,

“It’s more like we’re Tonto and Tonto.” (Eyre)

This exchange is telling. When she turns to her white mythology for examples of heroes, she can only think of an example from a cheesy
television show (of course, she did not choose Batman and Robin, since there was no "Indian" in that pairing). Since Victor is the stronger of the two—the "leader"—she doubtless has placed him in the role of the Lone Ranger. Thomas's reply not only points out that they are both Indians, but undercuts the power-relation implicit in the comparison. Both are Tonto; therefore, both are the hero. "Heroes", not "sidekicks", saved the accident victims. Therefore, Tonto is no longer a "sidekick". The white girl and (white) audience must adjust their thinking to accommodate a new distribution of power.

*Smoke Signals* explores the dysfunctions of a family and is a journey of discovery and recovery. In the opening, a voice-over from Thomas is set against a house burning against the night sky. On the Fourth-of-July, to "celebrate white people's independence", his "parents had the biggest party in Coeur d'Alene tribal history. I mean, every Indian in the world was here." This type of exaggeration is typical of oral storytelling techniques. It also gives the impression of being an experience common to every Indian community. Then, while all slept, passed out in and around the house, "a fire broke out like General George Armstrong Custer, and swallowed up my mother and father...I don't remember that fire, I only have the stories. And in every one of those stories, I could fly" (Eyre). This establishes Thomas as the narrator/storyteller who is, somehow, somewhat magical. It also
emphasizes personal history as being part of communal history, created by many different voices/points-of-view. Also, this scene is subtly political. As all of the Indians lay sleeping, the fire creeps upon them like "Custer". This comments on the way that Custer often massacred unarmed people. It also shows, however, that despite "swallowing up" Thomas's mother and father, this Custer-fire did not manage to swallow up Thomas, or the Josephs, nor, it seems, any other Indian. This emphasizes Native American survival despite destruction and tragedy.

The account of the tragedy is followed by the same radio morning show that opened the film. The DJ remains the same, the reporter, Lester FallsApart, still sits at the crossroads in the broken down weather and traffic van, and there is not much to report on the roads. This scene is as amusing as the first one, emphasizing again the fairly constant nature of life on the rez. It also reveals the way life continues after tragedy and destruction. When Lester gossips about who on the rez was speeding and what couple drove by arguing during the traffic report it is a very "community" moment. This is still a place where everyone knows everyone else and is interested in their goings-on. Also, the community radio remains that—community radio. It is not corrupted by capitalist values that would never allow such relaxed, "irrelevant" use of airtime. Thus, the scene proves that a community exists and survives.
Arnold Joseph’s “vanishing” and its effects drive the story. The film's journey is basically initiated by his death and the need to pick up his ashes. Arnold abandons his family when Victor is twelve. Thomas explains that he had practiced “vanishing” for years. The representation of Arnold Joseph’s family life moves beyond the flat stereotype of “drunk Indian” and “dead-beat father”. For example, although Arnold drinks, he still holds a steady job. This destroys the stereotype of the drunken, lazy Indian. Also, Arnold and Arlene are generally “happy” drunks. However, Alexie reveals the effect on young Victor. When asked by his drunk father, “who’s your favourite Indian?” he answers, “nobody,” repeatedly and emphatically. Later, when Arlene and Arnold are passed out on their bed, she is awakened by the sound of Victor smashing bottles of beer. This is a rejection of who his parents become when they are drinking, and leads Arlene to say to Arnold, “we’re not doing this no more! You hear? No more!” (Eyre) Arlene stops drinking, and Victor “never touches a drop”, despite the commonly held pop-psychology belief that the children of alcoholics and abusers will inevitably repeat those patterns. When Arnold is drinking he can become violent; he smacks Victor for spilling his beer and knocks down Arlene in their final argument. It is the Fourth of July, again, when Arnold does leave. The symbolism of the Fourth of July runs throughout the movie and it is revealed near the end.
why it came to mean not only communal disaster for the Indians (i.e. celebration of the white nation's creation), but also personal disaster for Arnold and those connected with him.

Both Victor and Thomas drive Arnold to leave. He cannot deal with Victor, his son who does not have a "favourite Indian", and reproaches him for his alcoholism. He cannot deal with Thomas who is a reminder of his guilt. It is easier to "vanish". When it is revealed that Arnold, in fact, started the fatal fire, the plot's complexities become fully visible. It is true that without the arrival of whites, and men like Custer who are emblematic of white actions in the "new world", the decimation and disenfranchisement of the native population would never have occurred, nor would there be any alcoholism. However, on the day of "white people's Independence", it is Arnold who sets off the fireworks that destroy the lives of his friends and family. Therefore, the fire is a symbol of both the effects of "white people's independence" and nationhood, as well as the self-destructive behaviour many Native Americans engage in. Since Arnold's "vanishing" is something that he has performed on himself, through drinking and running away from his problems, the audience may see that he also has the agency to not "vanish". Choices reverberate both personally and communally. Just as both boys belong to Arnold's personal story, Arnold is a major influence on both of their lives. His actions
and decisions greatly shape who the boys are up to their arrival in Phoenix, Arizona to pick up his ashes.

There is sibling rivalry between the two that is also symbolic of the different choices they have made about who they will be and how they will cope; Victor is attempting to be the "warrior" and Thomas is attempting to be the "shaman". Victor constantly rejects Thomas's attempts at brotherhood and friendship. On Arnold's death, Thomas offers to help pay for Victor's journey to Phoenix if he can come along. Victor derisively tells him to leave him alone and "go find a woman!" The women in the film are developed only so far as they help the story of the male protagonists develop. However, Alexie has said that it is the men who are the most lost in Indian culture today, not the women, because the men have lost all of the roles they traditionally held, and "driving a garbage truck for the BIA" is not spiritually fulfilling like hunting for salmon (Spencer). It is not until Arlene gives her son advice, by allegorizing her ability to make the best fry bread in the world, that he relents. "I get a lot of help though. People are always saying, 'Arlene, there is too much flour'. Or, 'Arlene, it's too dry'. I get a lot of help. And, I watch that Julia Child all the time. She's good, but she probably gets a lot of help." (Eyre) This story is meant to provide Victor with guidance. He must admit that he cannot be completely self-sufficient all the time, and that he must be
willing to trust his fellow human beings to help him when he needs it. The Julia Child reference makes him laugh and he decides to accept Thomas's offer. This illustrates how humour provides an entry point into new ways of thinking. Another example of such humour is when Victor cannot leave until his mother has exacted a promise that he will come back. Victor laughingly promises, asking if she wants him to "sign a paper or something". Arlene slyly replies, "No, you know how Indians feel about signing papers". The irony of such a comment is more effective than a blatant diatribe against the political establishment would be. Alexie says "humour is the most effective political tool out there, because people will listen to anything if they're laughing...Humour is about questioning the status quo. That's all it is" (West).

When the boys are about to leave the boundaries of the reservation, the girls who gave them a lift ask them if they have their passports since they are entering a foreign country. Thomas is confused. He says, "but it's the United States." To which the girl laughs and says, "I know, that's as foreign as it gets. I hope you got all your vaccinations." This statement is funny and obviously political. The reservation, here, is a separate state, and Indians are not Americans, or US citizens. This comment shows that Indians have not given in to assimilation, nor are they treated in a way by the US government that would indicate that they
are citizens with full rights. Also, the rez is a place that is presented as a safe space. Once they leave the reservation, they are entering a "foreign country" which may contaminate them. When she says, "I hope you got your vaccinations," she is undercutting the United States' power as a "1st world" nation. Usually, it is the third world that is regarded as disease-ridden, and 1st world travellers are instructed to receive various vaccinations.

Despite what some of his critics say about Alexie's perpetuating damaging stereotypes, Smoke Signals, especially, works to defy the stereotype as a stereotype. What Alexie does when he uses a stereotypical figure is ease the (white) audience into feeling complacent. The stereotype carries with it expectations and a ready-made "knowledge" of how Indians live and what Indians are. Instead of feeling that they are witnessing something unfamiliar, the audience enters the film through these stereotypes; then, Alexie proceeds to defy expectations and break apart the flat nature of the stereotype by developing and revealing complex characters. Popular culture gives rise to these stereotypes. The influence of pop culture on Victor and Thomas is undeniable. As a child, we see Victor staring blankly at the television, absorbed in a "cowboys and Indians" battle, while his parents have a physical altercation. Later, at Suzy Song's trailer, Thomas says, "the only
thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV."

When Thomas and Victor are kids and Arnold has left, Thomas starts telling him that his father is never coming back because "when Indians go away, they don’t ever come back. Last of the Winnebagos, Last of the Mohicans..." (Eyre). The media have taught Thomas that Indians have been vanishing and will continue to vanish. On the "road trip" segment of the film journeying to Arizona, two important scenes occur on the bus which are meant to reveal both the effects of western pop culture's "absolute fake" on "real Indians" and to dismantle those constructions. The first occurs when a surly Victor attempts to school Thomas in being a "real Indian":

Victor: You know Thomas, I don’t know what you’re talking about half the time. Why is that? I mean you just go on and on about nothing. Why can’t you have a normal conversation? You’re always trying to sound like some damn medicine man or something. I mean, how many times have you seen Dances with Wolves? A hundred, two hundred? [Thomas ponders] ah geez, you have seen it that many times, haven’t you? Don’t you even know how to be a real Indian?

Thomas: I guess not.

V: Well, shit, no wonder. I guess I’ll just have to teach you then, enit?

[TThomas nods his head happily] First of all, quit grinning like an idiot. Indians ain’t supposed to smile like that—get stoic! [Thomas attempts a stoic expression] No! Like this. [Victor demonstrates perfect "Indian stare" with curled lip] you gotta look mean or people won’t respect you. White people will run all over you if you don’t look mean. You gotta look like a warrior! You gotta look like you just came back from catching a buffalo.

T: But our tribe never hunted buffalo, we were fisherman.

V: What?! You wanna look like you just came back from catching a
fish? This isn't Dances with Salmon you know? Thomas, you gotta look like a warrior!...Second, you gotta know how to use your hair...set it free, an Indian man ain't nothing without his hair. Finally, you gotta get rid of that suit Thomas, you just gotta. (Eyre)

Alexie has said that American popular culture recognizes only two major Native American profiles: the warrior and the shaman (West). In this scene it is clear that both Victor and Thomas are both (consciously and unconsciously) acting out these profiles. When Victor mocks Thomas's Dances with Wolves fetish and wannabe shamanism, asking the question "don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" the audience expects him to tell Thomas "something real". They expect him to deconstruct the "absolute fake". Instead, he begins instructing him in the Indian slot he has chosen for himself—the warrior. He says that Indians do not grin (they are, therefore, inhuman), and proceeds to demonstrate the proper "stoic" expression which could have come out of any of those "Indian photographs" taken by whites in the late 1800s to early 1900s. Alexie terms this the "stoic Indian mask, or ethnic stare" (Spencer). When he says Thomas must look like he has returned from killing a buffalo, he is thinking according to the construct that "all Indians are plains Indians". Thomas's protest that their tribe were fishermen is greeted with incredulity and derision. "You wanna look like you just came back from catching a fish?!! This isn't Dances with Salmon you know?" Here Alexie cleverly draws
attention to the fact that we are watching a film, and that Victor is also
stuck in an “Indian film”. The film is not Dances with Wolves, but what the
Victor character does not realize is that he is not yet “living” as a “real”
Indian. Victor then veers off into contemporary culture telling Thomas to
free his hair from braids because an “Indian man ain’t nothing without his
hair”, and to change out of his geeky suit. It is clear that for Victor, to be a
warrior in the present time requires a rock star look—t-shirt with clever
message and long flowing hair. Thomas emerges from the pit stop’s
restroom with a “Fry bread Power” t-shirt, loosened hair, and “stoic”
expression. The t-shirt is a reworking of the Superman logo, but also
emphasizes a feminine as opposed to a masculine power; fry bread is a
culturally affirming symbol of home and nourishment. As he walks towards
Thomas, Eyre uses the hackneyed cinematic shot of the “made-over”
hero/heroine approaching in slowed-motion to the surprised delight of
their mentor. This plot device is as old as can be but Eyre does not let us
get too comfortable with it. As Thomas approaches he drops the “stoic”
look for his usual grin and puts on his glasses.

The companion scene occurs when they board the bus. Thomas
approaches to find two white men, one with a cowboy hat, sitting in their
seats. He politely tells them that those were his and Victor’s seats to which
the lazing white man looks him up and down and says, “You mean they
were your seats." Thomas is flustered, but Victor steps up from behind with his stoic look and says firmly, "No. That’s not what he means. He means those are our seats." Usually, at these points in films, the audience expects the bully-in-the-wrong to give in to the hero-in-the-right. Or, they expect a physical altercation to ensue that will then throw the plot forward into some direction or other. Instead, the unconcerned white man refuses to move and says, "why don’t you and super Injun over there go find yourselves someplace else to have a powwow?" This prejudiced display of redneck ignorance and white privilege leads the boys to yield and Thomas to say, "Geez Victor, guess our warrior look doesn’t work all the time." This scene is meant to expose the falseness of Victor’s earlier construct how a "real Indian" needs to act to survive. However, the scene is not really one of defeat. Thomas, in dejection, begins to say, "the cowboys always win!", naming off various TV and movie cowboys to prove his point. "What about John Wayne? He was about the toughest cowboy of ‘em all, enit?" The thought of John Wayne brings a smile to Victor’s face, instead of the terror it should instil in an Indian heart:

Have you ever noticed in all those movies you never saw John Wayne’s teeth? I think there is something wrong when you don’t see a guy’s teeth. [Victor begins thumping a rhythm on his knee and starts to sing] John Wayne’s teeth, hey-ya, John Wayne’s teeth, hey-ya, hey-ya hey. John Wayne’s teeth, hey-ya, John Wayne’s teeth, hey-ya, hey-ya hey. Are they fake? Are they real? Are they plastic? Are they steel? Hey-ya, hey-ya hey. (Eyre)
This mocking song, explains Alexie, is “a combination of English lyrics and western musical rhythms along with Indian vocables and Indian traditional drums” (West). Victor sings the song very loudly in the bus and Thomas picks up on it and begins singing, too. The white passengers, including the redneck usurpers, all turn around to see what is going on and shift about uncomfortably. John Wayne, Louis Owens explains, was an almost unreal figure to him as a boy because he was always there, “riding across his life”; he was the actor who in real life interviews in Playboy justified the extermination of Indians. To the whites, however, his films provided them with answers to the uncomfortable dilemma of genocide. While the Indians threatened, he was there to “save them” from the savages. When they were no longer a threat, but quaint historical artifacts to be learned from for the purpose of “preserving their knowledge” as rightful American heritage, John Wayne was the one to be the “real American” as rugged and “fleet-footed” as any Indian, but better (Owens 109). How much iconic significance he has for Americans became clear to me when on a recent true-life television show a police officer remembered how he felt when the SWAT unit finally rescued him and other wounded officers, after a forty-five minute siege. He said he felt just like he always felt at the end of a John Wayne movie, when John Wayne rides in to save the day. With
the singing of this satiric song, however, it is the Indians who win. Since the stereotype of the warrior has failed to give Victor a victory against the rednecks, he makes sure that the rednecks' stereotypes of the "cowboy-hero" will fail them, too. For all of John Wayne's films about vanishing Indians, and for all of his justifications that the greedy Indians were not sharing and needed to be exterminated, he is the one who is dead. He is dead, while Victor and Thomas are alive and laughing. His "icon" status is nothing sacred to them as they discuss and sing about the probability that John Wayne wore dentures.

The Suzy Song character is one of the important stereotype breakers. The treatment of Suzy Song, like the treatment of the other main Indian characters, acts to avoid cinematic clichés and stereotypes. Suzy is meant to be the "Indian princess" of the tale, but like the warrior and shaman models, Eyre proceeds to add dimension to the cut-out. She is obviously intelligent (a nurse/hospital administrator), successful, beautiful, and hospitable. She seems to be the prototypical "Indian maid-princess". However, she is shown to be a person who has made mistakes in life; this does not allow for a black or white evaluation of her character as "good princess" or "immoral squaw". When Arnold asks Suzy, "What's the worst thing you ever done [to another person]?" Suzy, reluctantly, admits to once stealing an old woman's purse at a powwow with a couple of
hundred dollars in it. Arnold, however, rejects this answer because it was "just" stealing. She then admits to sleeping with her best friend's boyfriend in college. Again in the film, material values are subordinated to social ones. Suzy, like Arnold, has "broken three hearts". When Suzy tells Victor about dancing with Arnold at the "Gathering of Nations" powwow, she says,

"There were mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sweethearts, and then there was me and your dad."
"And what were you two?"
"We kept each other's secrets." (Eyre)

This shows Suzy as a human being. She was neither mother, nor sister, nor sweetheart, which are usually the types of roles women are put into in films and literature. While these roles are all ones that women can fill, they are not the only roles. Suzy and Arnold's relations are not based on gender. They kept each other's secrets; meaning, they supported one another by providing intellectual companionship and spiritual understanding. Eyre also denies the audience the expected cinematic "romance". From the moment of Victor's and Thomas's arrival, hints of romantic chemistry surface between Victor and Suzy. However, no such romance develops. They leave Suzy without even saying goodbye. In this way, Smoke Signals destroys the static stereotype of the "pure and good" Indian maid-princess, and it destroys the conventional place that women
in films generally have—they are there to provide a romantic/sexual interest for the male protagonists.

Another stereotype that Alexie humorously defies is that of the "wise grandmother/elder", who is played by Monique Mojica. In the aftermath of the deadly Fourth-of-July house fire where Thomas's parents were killed, Arnold and Arlene Joseph (holding Victor) stand with Grandma Builds-the-Fire (holding Thomas), and stare at the smouldering ruins. She begins to speak:

"Arlene?"
"Yes?"
"Your son. His name is Victor..."
"Yes, it is."
"It's a good name. It means... he's gonna win."
"I don't know." (Eyre)

When Grandma Builds-the-Fire first begins to speak, the scene is set up so that the audience expects her to say something profound—something prophetic that will be resonate through the entire film. She is staring at a scene of devastation. She is speaking slowly and ponderously. Generally, in Hollywood films, the "Indians" can be expected to experience suffering or tragedy with stoicism and philosophy, but without much emotion—this lessens any guilt that may arise from massacring them. The audience's anticipation is built up twice during this speech and then deflated. The first climax seems to arrive when she says, "his name is, Victor," and then
pauses. However, all she says is, "it's a good name." Still, continues speaking and the expected "climactic truth" seems about to be revealed when she says, "it means." The slight pause is, again, the moment of suspense as the audience waits for the visionary grandmother to reveal a great destiny. However, all she says is, "he's gonna win." Grandma Builds-the-Fire has derived her wisdom and vision from the etymology of Victor's name and nothing more. Of course, nothing in *Smoke Signals* is flat. The complexities of the story are evident because, later, Victor will win. Her pronouncement to Arnold Joseph that he saved Thomas and, thus, "did a good thing", is another humorous bit of stating-the-obvious to undermine the "wise old woman" stereotype. Of course, later it becomes ironic when it is revealed that Arnold was responsible for the fire; his guilt may stem from being lauded as a hero when he was responsible for the tragedy. Is Alexie saying that elders are, in fact, not wise? No. Alexie is merely making the audience aware of their own pre-programmed expectations by revealing that there is more variety to the Indian community than the cookie-cutter figures found in the dominant discourse. Showing Grandma Builds-the-Fire in this way also makes her a human being. It shows that "Indians have feelings too". How do most people react to major disasters and tragedy in their lives? She is obviously someone who has endured a terrible shock. Perhaps her words are a
reflection of this confusion: she is talking for the sake of talking, not really knowing what she is saying. In such a deceptively simple and brief scene Alexie manages to destroy a stereotypical character and cinematic cliché while creating a character that is "real".

The grandmother and Thomas are closely linked in this film. In the scene where they are eating dinner, they face each other and look like mirror reflections: both have the same braids, the same thick-rimmed glasses, and the same large-toothed grin. In this way, Thomas is different than any other Indian "wise man" ever seen on film. He is young, and can almost be seen as a shaman-in-training. He is closely linked to and identified with a feminine influence. He is still attempting to learn, and find, his role in his community. He is still learning his job as storyteller. His constant repetition of stories can be seen as a trial-and-error method of finding the right words and the right stories; since, at times his stories seem completely out of place. However, as Thomas and Victor's journey continues, Thomas becomes more and more sure of himself, and more and more people are willing to listen to him. In the end, Thomas reunites with his grandmother, who asks, "Tell me what happened Thomas. Tell me what's going to happen" (Eyre). This suggests that there really is a visionary power in Thomas' storytelling. It is Thomas who has the last word in the film.
Victor also manages to finally shake off the oppressions of his past, and to move beyond the static constructions. When Victor finally discovers the truth about his father's abandonment, he begins to move beyond the stagnant life of resentment he had been living:

"Your dad talked about that fire every day. He cried about it. He wished he could have changed it. He wished he hadn't run away. But he went back into that burning house for you. He didn't mean to die here. He wanted to go back to you. He always planned on going back." (Eyre)

This information of Suzy's makes Victor enter the trailer to discover Arnold's wallet contained a family picture with the word "home" written on the back. This picture indicates not only what Victor and his mother meant to Arnold, but tells the audience that home is wherever one's family and loved ones are. Is this the expected Hollywood cliché? Perhaps it can be looked at as such, but it is necessary in the context of the story. This is an Indian film that is working to effect a positive vision for Indian audiences; all previously "sympathetic" Hollywood films provided an ideology of the "vanishing Indian". It also shows that "running away"—drinking, leaving, "vanishing"—was regretted by Arnold, that it did not help him, and that he would have chosen differently if he had not died. Victor cuts off his hair and this signals that real mourning has now been enabled and begun. However, clearly, there is more to "the ceremony" than the ceremony. There is more to the act than the physical deed that Victor
performs. There is a spiritual level that Victor does not attain until he confronts "his father". As he argues with Thomas, he almost crashes into a previous accident. A drunken white man tries to say that the accident was Victor's fault, that Victor hit him. Victor denies this and says, "you're drunk! Look what you did to your wife!" In confronting the drunken man for what he has done to his wife and the hurt he has caused, Victor is finally able to symbolically "have it out" with both his father and the white oppressor; the white man embodies both.

Victor and Thomas are taken into custody by "the sheriff". The white sheriff is the typical "good ol' boy" with an exaggerated southern accent and manner. As he proceeds to read the accusations made by the drunken "Mr. Cicero", which allege that Victor was drunk and assaulted him, it seems that the innocent boys are going to have to deal with the corruption of the white southern establishment—another tired-and-true cinematic plot device. Victor defends himself by saying, "I don't drink. I never had a drop of alcohol in my life officer." This puzzles the sheriff and he asks, "what kind of Injun are you exactly?" This question means one thing to the general white audience who cherish stereotypes about "drunken Indians". However, Victor takes the question as a straight one and refuses to take notice of any implications of the stereotype by immediately answering, "Coeur D'Alene. And Thomas is Coeur D'Alene,
too." The building tension in this scene is dispelled when the sheriff turns to Thomas for a statement, and the nervous Thomas blurts out, "we was framed." This insertion of a hackneyed line from popular cinema is hilarious, especially because it fits. The sheriff lets them know that the wife's statement reads that her husband is "a complete asshole", and they are cleared of all guilt. However, his curiosity and desire to completely "know" and figure out these "Injuns" continues. "I know what this is," he is says, throwing Victor the basketball, "but I'm mighty curious to know about this," he says and pulls out the can with the ashes. Victor puts on his stoic "Indian mask" and says, "that's my father." In this way, the boys are set free and Thomas proclaims, "your warrior look does work sometimes". In this moment, we see that Victor is a warrior. He has, to use cliché, "conquered his demons", and beaten the oppression of his father's abandonment and alcoholism, as well as the oppression of the whites. An Indian man is not a warrior because of his hair, as Victor thought earlier, but because he can rise above the obstacles in his life that attempt to make Indians "vanish". Victor puts his hands out to take his father's ashes: "Let me hold dad for a bit". This is an acceptance of past wrongs and forgiveness. Healing at last takes place.

Gloria Bird critiques Alexie's use of pop culture because she says that an Indian work that depends on readers' knowledge of popular
culture, including film, to be successful distorts, debases, and falsifies Indian culture and literature at the same time that it reinforces mainstream notions of Indian stereotypes (Evans 49). She means that by using so many pop cultural references to shape his work, he is somehow placing Native culture within a white framework. However, what he is doing is taking and changing that familiar framework. He is not merely conveying native culture through a “straight” use of western pop culture references and film conventions. He distorts those references and conventions for his own use. He raises expectations and then steps on them as he twists them for his own ends, exposing their general falsity.

Alexie believes pop culture is a cultural lingua franca, and among the five major influences of his life he includes “[his] father for his non-traditional Indian stories, [his] grandmother for her traditional Indian stories, and the Brady Bunch”; he says “I think a lot of Indian artists like to pretend that they’re not influenced by pop culture or western culture, but I am, and I’m happy to admit it” (West). It is impossible to exist in a vacuum; therefore the notion of a pure, “uncontaminated” culture is pure fantasy, since contact with other cultures (Native and European) inevitably introduces new ideas and experiences. Alexie uses what he likes from “western” pop culture and challenges and changes what he does not. A big part of Euramerican pop culture has been the “absolute fake” Indian.
This is why he uses the phrase “It’s a good day to die” twice in Smoke Signals. When Victor and friends are playing basketball in the high school gymnasium, one of them says, “Ya, some days it’s a good day to die, and some days, it’s a good day to play basketball.” The second time comes in a roadhouse when Thomas says “Some days it’s a good day to die, and some days it’s a good day to have breakfast” (Eyre). This last is especially humorous as it seems to say the Indians equate the magnitude of death with something as banal as eating breakfast, not that eating one’s breakfast is not important. It also suggests that, to the Indian, it is either/or. Alexie acknowledges this as a Little Big Man reference. “In every movie since then, it seems, the Indians always said that and I wanted to make fun of it. That notion has so little meaning in our lives that I wanted to make fun of it. It’s never, ever, ever, a good day to die. There’s always something better to do” (West).

The basketball scene also provides a comment on the generic nature of the “Indian”. In Hollywood films of the past any Indian would do as “background” while whites would play Indians that were important roles. This added to the erasure of Native nations’ cultural diversity in the dominant discourse. The actors in Smoke Signals are from many different tribes; they are mostly not Coeur D’Alene. However, in Smoke Signals, this is meant to reflect a vision of strength through unity between the many
different Native nations of the Americas (North and South), and even worldwide. The Native heroes of one nation can be heroes to every nation because of the common struggle against European domination:

Basketball player: Hey Victor, who do you think is the greatest Indian basketball player?
Victor: That's easy, Geronimo.
Basketball player: Geronimo?! He was Apache man! Those suckers are, like, three feet tall.
Victor: It's Geronimo! He would of dunked on your flat Indian ass, and then cut it off. (Eyre)

In this exchange Victor's friend brings to light the reality that there is much diversity amongst the Native nations, and makes the mythical Geronimo human by pointing out the physical characteristics of his nation that would have made playing basketball more difficult. Victor, who understands this, nevertheless insists that it would have been Geronimo. The film has managed to break a white audience's perception of Indians as one generic group, while at the same time confirming and affirming his legendary position as a warrior and hero that contemporary Indians can hold in common.

The ending of the movie is positive. Although politically, the making of the movie was a pan-Indian effort, the result reaffirms tribal values. Victor apologizes to Thomas for all of the "wrecks" he had got them into, and indirectly apologizes for his father's mistake. He gives Thomas half of the ashes, indicating that he accepts the relationship between himself
and Thomas, the connection Thomas had with Arnold, and the position that Thomas has chosen for himself. Both of the boys will release the ashes over the falls at Spokane, where, Thomas says, Arnold will "rise like a salmon". In this way, Thomas has finally succeeded in bringing Victor back to a spiritual connection with his father as well as the tribe. The scenes cut from Thomas, to Victor, to Suzy. Victor returns to his mother physically, as he promised, but also spiritually. He gives her Arnold’s ashes and we see that that emotional wound can finally find closure. Suzy Song approaches Arnold’s trailer and sets fire to it. As the trailer bursts into flames, it symbolizes the destruction of Arnold’s exile and all of the inability to cope with life that had caused his "vanishing"; this symbolizes that the new generation, Victor and Thomas, will be able to move into a better future, despite the past. Victor pours Arnold’s ashes into the falls and the waters of the Spokane falls and there is the implication that a purging, or washing away, of all the negativity of the past is occurring and a new future can begin. Both Victor and Arnold have returned to their spiritual "salmon" home.
CHAPTER FOUR

Indian Identity: Tensions and Mechanisms of Assimilation—Urban vs. Rez, Mixed-blood vs. Full-blood

"Grace knew how fractions worked; Indians were disappearing by halves." (Alexie, "Saint Junior", 162)

The theme of assimilation permeates Sherman Alexie's short story collection, The Toughest Indian in the World, exploring the tensions found in a society where it is a constantly looming threat and active force. Where one lives, what one does for a living, and who one sleeps with, all become politicized when Indians move away from "traditionally Indian" spheres of experience/modes of life; questions of racial, social, and cultural betrayal emerge. The majority of aboriginal peoples in North America live in urban areas. The anxiety is that when people leave the reservations, they are more likely to be assimilated into the colonizers' Euramerican culture and lose their Aboriginal identity. When an Indian leaves the reservation, they are no longer surrounded by their tribe and specific tribal culture. Instead, they are immersed in the colonizers' culture and are mostly surrounded by non-Natives. An Indian community within the urban setting will also be made up of Indians from other tribes. This often leads to "marrying out", whether that be with a non-Native or an Indian from a different tribe. This makes the maintenance of a specific
tribal identity much more difficult. The short stories interrogate the tensions between urban and reservation life, university education/training and traditional education/training, and "mixed" partnerships and Indian partnerships, as they relate to Indian identity. With so many different forces attacking Indian identity in an attempt to break down the society and ensure assimilation (or at least permanent political/social disarray), an important problem for the people attempting to define themselves on their own terms, in the face of erasure, is how to characterize the group. "What is an Indian?" (italics in original) is a question frequently asked in the final story "One Good Man", and is implicit in all the others. Although Alexie never reaches a definitive answer to the question "What is an Indian?", it is clear by the end of book what Alexie believes is necessary for cultural survival and happiness. He constructs "full-blood" marriages as the most satisfying, and shows that it is necessary to remain socially and physically connected to one's reservation (at least part of the time) to maintain one's identity as a "real" Indian and avoid being assimilated.

To investigate the importance of place to identity, Faye Lone-Knapp conducted a study among the Haudenosaunee by asking the open-ended question "How would you describe yourself? If I were to say Mr. ABC is... how would you finish that sentence?" (Lone-Knapp 635). Nearly all of the interviewees spoke of their respective reservations and
the boundaries or space it represented for them: the boundaries of the reservations meant more than a space to reside—reserves were a place to conduct ceremonies, social events, and to maintain cultural identity (636). This reflects the concern about tribal extinction; if a tribe loses its spiritual and cultural identity, is a "Pan-Indian" Indian identity just another feature of assimilation, or is it a strategy for cultural survivance? Mindy, an elder, noted that, "There are not really that many Native Americans left.... Most of them are moving off the reservation." Her view of the reservation was that it was the indicator of a viable native population—if you lived on one, you were more readily recognized as Native (638). She also commented on the low numbers of "full Native Americans," meaning that mixed blood children would be the result when [Indians] leave the reservation (638). These comments draw a direct correlation between Indians leaving reservations and the sense that "there are not really that many Native Americans left". It implies that when Indians leave they are assimilated into white culture and/or they marry partners of other races and produce mixed children who are not "fully" (authentically?) Indian. Is blood or environment more important to determining and maintaining Indianness? In *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Alexie deals almost exclusively with the "urban rez" setting and characters who battle or embrace erasure to various degrees.
In the stories “Class” and “Assimilation”, Alexie creates two highly successful Indian yuppie characters: a lawyer and an English major/Microsoft employee. These are “relatively new Indian character type[s]” (Evans 66). They are progressive in the sense that they show Indian people as being a part of the modern, contemporary world. This directly confutes the Eurocentric metanarrative which works to “contain” North American Indians by not “acknowledging a continuity between [the white] world and the Indian world... [attempting instead to fix] the Indian in time as if the only true Indian were a past one” (Steele 46). However, these characters are also tainted by the intimation of racial/cultural betrayal. While they are successful Indian members of the “modern” world, they are completely removed from any Indian socio-cultural context: they live in the cities with white partners, white co-workers, and white friends.

The idea of racial and cultural betrayal through sex is at the forefront of a number of the stories. In “Class”, Edgar Eagle Runner, the lawyer, has never had sex with an Indian woman. Instead, he always approaches the “tenth most attractive white woman” in the room because he “didn’t have enough looks, charm, intelligence, or money to approach anybody more attractive, and [he] didn’t have enough character to approach the less attractive...[he] only play[ed] ball with
[his] equals" (Alexie 38). This passage reveals Edgar's desire to align himself with white society, as well as his sense of personal inferiority. Upon his wedding it becomes clear who has schooled him to feel and act as he does:

Velma, my dark-skinned mother, was overjoyed by my choice of mate. She’d always wanted me to marry a white woman and beget half-breed children who would marry white people who would beget quarter-bloods, and so on and so on, until simple mathematics killed the Indian in us. (40)

This reflects the idea that “the Indian” in a person can be “bred out”, both genetically and socially. It also reveals how some Indians have internalized the desire to kill off their own race and become absorbed in “American” society. How to negotiate one’s Native American cultural identity and the omnipresent European American cultural identity is a primary dilemma for many of the characters as well as Alexie.

When Alexie was interviewed by Russ Spencer, he admitted to working the Indian angle for all its worth: “it’s a really crowded world out there, and everybody is clamoring for attention and you use what you’ve got...and what I’ve got that makes me original is that I’m a rez boy” (Spencer). The point is that Alexie is not really a “rez” boy anymore, but an “urban” man; he is a university-educated Seattleite with success in the mainstream literary world. His comment reflects on the lawyer Eagle Runner. Although Edgar is in many ways a cultural assimilationist (which
Alexie is not), he also trades on his "Indianness"—what "makes him original"—to get noticed and get ahead in the white world. Only since graduating university—and permanently leaving the reservation behind—has he grown his braids. He also calls himself Edgar "Eagle Runner", although his birth certificate still reads "Edgar Joseph". Even though he has left behind his ethnic community in a spatial/social/racial sense, he is turning himself into an "ethnic" object of curiosity, a fetishistic pleasure for the white women he seduces and the juries he presents before: "juries loved [his braids], judges hated [them]: perfect" (Alexie 38). The judge, who represents official power, is irritated because the braids do not seem serious enough for his courtroom. Also, they force him to treat as a colleague someone—an Indian—with whom power should not—according to the dictates of imperialist culture—be shared. In this way, Edgar gains a personal victory. And yet, Eagle Runner gives the whites the same thing that white popular culture has been giving since the days of the Wild West Shows—Indians that are "removed from any contexts that would threaten the imaginative security of consumers," and, like African-Americans, can be used as "fetishized images" to satisfy the "hunger for entertainment and disposable commodities" (Steele 46). Juries are safely entertained by him. They respond favourably to the braids because they conjure up images of "noble savages" who are upright and honest, as well as giving
the impression that the lawyer is somewhat of a rebel in the starchy
courtroom, and thus more of an everyman than other lawyers. In this way,
culturally, Edgar Eagle Runner is acting out a betrayal.

When Eagle Runner meets his future wife, the white architect Susan,
a very telling conversation takes place, which reveals what Edgar
represents to Susan, and the implications of Edgar's actions for his people:

"You're Indian," she said...
"Do you like that?"
"I like your hair," she said, touching the black braids that hung down
past my chest. I'd been growing the braids since I'd graduated from
law school.
"I'm Edgar Eagle Runner," I said, though my driver's license still read
Edgar Joseph. "Eagle Runner," she repeated, feeling the shape of my
name fill her mouth, then roll past her tongue, teeth, and lips. "Susan," I
said. "Eagle Runner," she whispered. "What kind of Indian are you?"
"Spokane"
"Never heard of it."
"We're a small tribe. Salmon people."
"The salmon are disappearing," she said.
"Yes," I said. "Yes, they are." Susan McDermott and I were married in a
small ceremony seven months later in St. Therese Catholic Church. (38-9)

This passage exposes Edgar's otherness in his chosen world, and his belief
in and contribution to "vanishing". A favourite new character-type in
white pop culture is the Indian "romantic hero". As Peter van Lent says in
his article "The Current Sexual Image of the Native American Male",
"native heroes all have glistening, coppery skin and long, raven-black
hair" (214). Susan's exoticising of Edgar is obvious from the way she
touches his hair and contemplates his name. When she says to him, “one day, many years ago, my heart walked into the snow and vanished. But then you found it and gave it heat” (Alexie 39), she sounds like she is reciting stock dialogue from an Indian romance novel. Edgar is obviously acting out a seduction as he asks the suggestive question, “Do you like that?”. He knows that she does, and encourages her by telling her his full name so that she can hear his “ethnic” last name. Her brother plays the requisite white man who does not understand or approve of the white woman’s decision to give herself over to a “savage”: “I can understand fucking him,’ her brother had said upon hearing the news of our engagement, ‘but why do you want to share a checking account?’ He was so practical” (39-40). This reveals that the brother acknowledges the appeal of the other as an object to satisfy sexual curiosity. However, he places Edgar in the “relic of the past”, or “shifty native”, category: a curiosity to be experienced as a sexual tourist, but not a partner who can have any part in building a viable future. Hence, the brother’s comments about “bank account[s]”.

Edgar is acting out the role of “vanishing American”. The salmon represent his tribe, and when Susan says that the salmon are disappearing, he agrees with her, and then marries her. It is in part because of this marriage between Susan and Edgar that the salmon are
disappearing—Edgar is contributing to that disappearance. In identifying Edgar's people with the salmon, Alexie makes explicit the connection between tribal survival and the survival of the environment that informs tribal identity. As the salmon of the Spokane river die out, so too does the survival of the Spokane tribe become more difficult. As Edgar marries a white woman, any child they conceive will not be a true "salmon". Even if the child retains Indian physical characteristics, or keeps a general (not tribally-specific) personal claim to "Indian" identity, it will not be the same fish. The fact that their first child dies after leaving the womb enforces the idea that Edgar is meant to be part of a dying culture—he cannot even produce a mixed-blood child. As S. Elizabeth Bird writes in "Savage Desires", these types of Indian characters "[are] structurally impotent. Constantly they represent a dying culture, even when not dying themselves, as they are loved by more powerful white women...they are not a threat" (Bird S.E. 75). His way of getting white women into bed also reinforces his status as a "vanishing" Indian. He would claim that he was "part Aztec" or "completely Aztec" because it "gave me some mystery, some ethnic weight...in any event, pretending to be an Aztec warrior was a lot more impressive than revealing I was just some bright kid who'd fought his way off the Spokane Indian reservation" (Alexie 40) also reinforces Edgar's turning himself in a fetishized figure, since in pretending
to be Aztec, a "vanished culture" of golden cities and rainforests, he is safely and attractively "contained", packaged for consumption.

For all of Edgar's accommodation of the dominant culture's metanarrative instructions on Native manhood and the native man's future prospects, he comes to realize that he derives no real contentment from living the [white] "American Dream". After realizing his wife has been faking her orgasms, he seeks out the company of his own people. However, his rich appearance makes him the target of an Indian street fighter's frustrations:

He took a few steps back, pointed at me. "I'm sick of little shits like you," he said. "Fucking urban Indians in your fancy fucking clothes. Fuck you. Fuck you." ... "I ever see you again... I'm going to dislocate your hips." I flinched... "Jesus," he said. "I don't know why I'm even talking to you. What are you going to do you fucking wimp... Why don't you just get in your BMW, that's what you drive, enit? Why don't you get in your fucking BMW and get out of here before I change my mind, before I pop out one of your eyes with a fucking spoon, all right?"... "Drive back to your fucking mansion on Mercer Island or Edmonds or whatever white fucking neighbourhood you live in. Drive back to your white wife. She's white, enit? Yeah, blond and blue-eyed, I bet. White, white... Go back to your mansion and read some fucking Teletubbies to your white fucking kids." (50-51)

Edgar decides to fight, to assert his inner warrior. He is knocked out, has his nose broken, and loses a braid to the street fighter, who takes it as a prize. The bartender chastises him: "All you Indian guys think you're Crazy Horse... Look at you. Do you think that's attractive? Is that who you want
to be?...Why'd you come here?" (55). He claims, "I wanted to be with my people" (55). The bartender rejects this:

"Your people?...Your people? We're not your people...Yeah, we're Indians. You, me, Junior. But we live in this world and you live in your world."
"I don't like my world."
"You pathetic bastard," she said, her eyes swelling with tears..."You sorry, sorry piece of shit. Do you know how much I want to live in your world? Do you know how much Junior wants to live in your world?" Of course I knew. For most of my life, I'd dreamed about the world where I currently resided. (55)

Edgar is thus thwarted in his attempt to reconnect to "his people". In her rejection of Edgar's sexual advance, the bartender manages to debunk the stereotype of the debased squaw who is a sexual convenience.

However, the rejection of Edgar as "one of us" occurs especially because he is obviously rich. What is most problematic in this final scene is the way that the "real Indians" seem to be those who are living in poverty and dreaming about a more affluent life. Once that dream is finally attained, one seems to lose one's authentic "Indianness": does one cease to belong because, to truly belong, one needs to be economically struggling? Both the street fighter and bartender are obviously living at least much of the time in the city: are they still "real" Indians, as opposed to "fucking urban Indians", because they are poverty-stricken in the city as well as they were on the reservation? When Edgar returns to his wife she asks where he went. "I was gone," he says, "But now I'm back" (56).
Stephen Evans writes that the force of assimilation wins again, but that the "surrender...is only a partial or qualified surrender, since [he] return[s] to the home [he has] chosen and made" (Evans 67). Does finding success in the city necessarily mean doing it at the cost of one's cultural and community ties to the reservation? This should not be the case, and how to bridge the cultural gap between having a good job and living on/off the rez needs to be addressed by leaders in the community and those who find success.

In "Assimilation", Mary Lynn is another Indian who has never had sex with a fellow Indian. She is an English major with a high position at Microsoft. She married the white man who gave her her first orgasm, Jeremiah, and has four children. In Mary Lynn and Jeremiah's household, race is "a constant presence, a houseguest and permanent tenant who crept around all the rooms in their shared lives" (Alexie 14). When she facetiously tells her husband that they need to have another baby to finally know whether theirs is a white or an Indian family—Jeremiah coldly replies that it is "a family family". What this really reflects is Mary Lynn's need not to be consumed by white society and culture. Unlike Edgar, Mary Lynn is actively attempting to retain a viable Indian identity in her mixed marriage and urban abode. When she is lonely she puts on "Big Mom Singers's powwow CDs" and reads Dickinson, evidence of her
negotiations of identity between Indian and white culture. Unlike Edgar, it is she who is sexually bored with her white spouse. The security she initially found in his solid and stable "whiteness" is boring her; this suggests that there is an instability to "Indianness" which she feels will sexually stimulate her and thus revive her:

Yes, she was most certainly a Coeur D'Alene woman, passionately and dispassionately, who wanted to cheat on her white husband because he was white...she simply wanted to find the darkest Indian in Seattle—the man with the greatest amount of melanin—and get naked with him in a cheap motel room...Why exactly did she want to have sex with an Indian stranger?...If forced to admit the truth or some version of the truth, she'd testify she was about to go to bed with an Indian stranger because she wanted to know how it would feel...Why not practice a carnal form of affirmative action? By God, her infidelity was a political act! Rebellion, resistance, revolution! (3)

Is sex political? In this situation, without question. She wishes to cheat on her white husband with the darkest Indian in Seattle, because the darker the skin the less "diluted" the Indian's blood and the farther he is from white. She is looking for a sort of racial completeness that is absent in her marriage; sex has merely become a mechanical act for her without any spiritual element. Because her husband is white, he does not share in her experiences as an Indian, nor can he fully understand and participate with her in Indian culture. With an Indian partner, being Indian would be a normal everyday thing, but with a white partner it is always "an Indian thing". Relations between whites and Indians are not politically on terms
of equality. Whites have more economic and political power. Whites continue the attempt to assimilate Indians through their political policies towards Indians and through their control of mass media outlets and the creation of content. Therefore, it is not a mixed marriage between allies. The complications of history and contemporary political/social state of affairs cannot be discounted or ignored.

To highlight this, the language of war and politics is used throughout the story to describe the state of their marriage. Mary Lynn explains, "regarding love, marriage, and sex, both Shakespeare and Sitting Bull knew the only truth: treaties get broken" (1). Historically, it was the whites that were always breaking treaties. Here, Mary Lynn decides to employ that white method of getting what she wants. After completing her act of infidelity she wonders if she smells "like indigenous sex, and if a white man could recognize the scent of an enemy" (8). Here her husband is placed in the "cowboys and Indians" context, with Indians as the enemy. Since Mary Lynn's lover is an Indian, like herself, she must then be included in the "enemy camp". Yet, it was she who chose her marriage and life, because white men "had always been more dependable than the Indian men in her life" (5). Should she be regarded as a traitor--as someone who took the easy way out and abandoned her community instead of attempting to solve existing problems?
The things that bother her in her husband are his predictability and white privilege. When they are put on a waiting list at the new trendy eatery, Jeremiah explodes:

Mary Lynn had seen that kind of rage in white men before when their wishes and desires were ignored. At ball games, in parking lots, and especially in airports, white men demanded to receive the privileges whose very existence they denied...She thought: Oh Jeremiah! Oh, season ticket holder! O monthly parker! O, frequent flyer! (6)

Yet, for all of this annoyance with her husband for being a privileged white suburbanite, she too is obviously living in that world and partaking of the same privilege. As they wait for a table, she asks,

"Don't they know who I am?"
"I'm sure they know how you are. That's why we're on the wait list. Otherwise, we'd be heading for McDonald's or Denny's."
"Your kind of places."
"Dependable. The Big Mac you eat in Hong Kong or Des Moines tastes just like the Big Mac in Seattle."
"Sounds like colonialism to me."
"Colonialism ain't all bad." (9)

Jeremiah is a simple man who depends on colonialism to ensure that he is comfortable and safe wherever he goes in the world (hence, the dependability of the Big Mac), whereas Mary Lynn proves herself to depend on her affluence and hot-shot status to gain her entry into the trendiest eateries where only the select can gain entry. This, then, seems to be what Mary Lynn has striven for, what she has left the reservation for. She says she "had been very happy during her time [growing up on the
rez]. Therefore, there can be no excuse that the rez was an uninhabitable place that she was forced to leave to escape misery. The rez is a place where she could be happy. Mary Lynn is another example of "brain drain".

Her conduct during her act of infidelity exposes a number of troubling things about Mary Lynn. She completely objectifies the man she chooses to sleep with. "Don't you want to know my name?" he asked before she put her hand over his mouth. "Don't talk to me," she said. "Don't say one word. Just take me to the closest motel and fuck me" (3). She continues to refer to the man as "the Indian": "Mary Lynn made the Indian take off his clothes...she walked a slow tight circle around the Indian...The Indian smelled of old sweat and a shirt worn twice before washing" (4). This constant referring to the man as "the Indian" is objectifying. She does not allow him speak or to tell her his name. She is not really gaining any kind of reconnection with her Indianess by sleeping with "the Indian" because she is using this man for the sexual act alone; in essence, she is repeating what countless white women do in their encounter with "the other". Once she has achieved her act of "revolution", she will never see him again.

Although Mary Lynn does decidedly return to her husband, it is not really an embracing of assimilation. After all, when Mary Lynn's asserts
that Jeremiah has been hanging around Indians too long to be white, he retorts, "fucking an Indian doesn't make me an Indian" (10). We must see that the converse of this is "fucking a white guy doesn't make me white". Although there is always going to be some sort of racial tension between the couple, it is obvious that Mary Lynn will always be an Indian. First, she does not look white; therefore, she can always expect questions like "what are you?". Second, she does not want to be white; therefore, she cannot be completely lost and subsumed within the white culture. As will be discussed later in the chapter, it is the children whose future "identity" remains uncertain.

In the title story, "The Toughest Indian in the World", another reservation émigré leads a lonely life as a journalist. "I haven't lived on my reservation for twelve years. But I live in Spokane, which is only an hour's drive from the rez. Still, I hardly ever go home. I don't know why not" (27). He picks up an Indian hitchhiker who is a prize street fighter. The journalist is excited by what he "perceives as the fighter's mythic purity" (Spencer). He admires the Indian and excitedly, using "reservation English", says:

You would've been a warrior in the old days, enit? You would've been a killer. You would have stolen everybody's goddamn horses. That would've been you. You would've been it."... He didn't even look at me. "A killer," he said. "Sure." (30)
This type of sentiment echoes Mary Lynn's hope that the Indian she is cheating with is a "warrior with a history of knife fighting". The fighter is not excited or flattered by this kind of admiration. He is only trying to survive. He wants to be a lover, not a fighter. He coaxes the journalist into letting him have sex with him. The journalist allows him to because he wanted "him to save me" (32). In allowing this intimacy to occur, the journalist actually does feel like he has reconnected to his people and his own Indian identity. Unlike Edgar and Mary Lynn's failed attempts to regain a sense of racial belonging through sex with Indian partners, the journalist succeeds because he allows an intimacy free of any socially imposed restrictions/conditions. Edgar feels the bartender will want to have sex with him because he is rich and handsome, and he treats her like an object by clumsily pawing at her. Mary Lynn is richer, more beautiful, and orders the Indian stranger around, not even allowing him to speak. The journalist, however, lets himself be vulnerable. In the end, it is suggested that he is headed on some mythic journey back to his reservation—he leaves his car and belongings behind at the motel and walks to his reserve. Thus, his sexual encounter has allowed him to regain a connection with his people. "In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die" (34).
"Dear John Wayne" also turns around the usual view that an Indian woman, or man, sleeping with a white is betraying their race through a sexual capitulation: the image of a white person gaining a sexual upper hand over the other ethnicity. A white anthropologist comes to interview Etta Joseph as research for one of his papers on Indians and dance. His behaviour underscores "the dominant culture’s desire to impose a delimiting definition upon the Native American" (Owens 12). Whatever she says in the beginning he tries to put the stamp of "white interpretation" on. When she makes a joke he says, "Yes, very amusing. Irony, a hallmark of the contemporary indigenous American. Good, good" (Alexie 190). When he asks if he can call her "Etta", by her first name, she refuses and he says, "Oh, I see, okay. Formality. Yes, quite another hallmark of the indigenous. Ceremony and all. I understand. I'm honoured to be included" (190). These responses are both amusing and illuminating commentary on white anthropology. The anthropologist had come to treat her as an artefact of Native Americana, to define her within those familiar cultural parameters. He keeps attempting to make Etta answer the questions he came to ask but she refuses to play that game: "You have a lot to learn. You should listen more and talk less" (193). She abruptly turns the tables on him by beginning to tell a story she wants to tell, but he does not really want to hear—the story about her affair with
John Wayne. As discussed in the previous chapter, the importance of John Wayne in North American culture is immense. To Euramerica, he is the hero of their conquest narrative. To Native America he is a major representative figure of the colonizing enemy. In loving and losing her virginity to John Wayne while a young extra on the film The Searchers, Etta would seem to have capitulated to the ultimate enemy of her people. However, through her relationship with John Wayne, and her revealing of intimate knowledge of the man, which does not fit with his iconic identity, it is she who destabilizes the cultural hierarchy. Etta claims that he was in love with her, but could not leave his wife and sons. She says that he was actually afraid of horses. She says that he was a tender lover and a man who was sensitive and not at all macho as he was presented. She feminizes the great white icon of Anglo-machismo and says that he only played the alpha male because "my country needs me. They need me to be John Wayne" (205). The government needed such a construct to keep down coloured people and make white people believe in their own unconquerability. When Etta finishes her tale, she goes to celebrate a birthday party for her sons and will be surrounded by her entire family. Together they will celebrate. The white anthropologist, on the other hand, is left sitting alone in his car contemplating the interview tape and the story which has emotionally disturbed his soul and shaken his "faith".
“Inside, an old woman kneeled in a circle with her loved ones and led them in a prayer. Outside, a white man closed his eyes and prayed to the ghosts of John Wayne, Ethan Edwards, and Marion Morrison, that Holy Trinity” (208). He must wrestle with the implications of the story, and whether he wants to believe it or not, it has forced him to rethink his cultural identity and convictions for at least a little while.

The strongest, happiest marriage in the book belongs to the Indian couple in “Saint Junior”. Grace Atwater is Chinese Mohawk and Roman Fury is Spokane. They meet at college. However, unlike other Indians in the story who never return to the reservation after they complete college, Grace and Roman do. The important thing to realize about this choice is that it is made for no other reason than a desire to be home. They spend many years living all over Europe, Asia, and South America while Roman plays basketball in those leagues, not only because Roman wants to be a basketball player, but because Roman had “always felt like he didn’t belong anywhere, like he couldn’t belong to any one place or any series of places. Though his tribe had never been nomadic, he’d been born with the need to visit cities--every city!--where no Spokane Indian had ever been before” (159). However, after living in many of the world’s major metropoles and seeing many of the great monuments of civilization, Grace and Roman go home to the reservation. The
reservation is, finally, the place where they wish to be. This proves that the reservation is a place which people can consider as very liveable and desirable to be in, even after seeing the bright lights of Paris and bathing in the Mediterranean. They take their education back to the Spokane reserve and work there—Grace is a teacher at the Tribal School—instead of moving into an urban centre.

Married for eighteen years, Roman and Grace still love each other. At the end of the story they smile at each other and acknowledge, "this is a good life" (188). However, it is good because they work to make it good. Roman explains that "he loved her, of course, but better than that, he chose her, day after day. Choice: that was the thing. Other people claimed that you can’t choose who you love—it just happens!—but Grace and Roman knew that was a bunch of happy horseshit" (177-8). In this way, Alexie suggests that Mary Lynn and Jeremiah's assertion that one cannot choose whom one loves because it "just happens" is not the case. And, in the context of the short story collection it is clear that Grace and Roman’s choice to be together is the kind of choice that Indians should look to make. Alexie suggests that Indians, if they wish to maintain their own Indian identity as well as the future of their people, must consciously make, and work to maintain, choices which best serve the aim of Indian survival. Any other type of union suggests a degree of treason.
Unfortunately, this union is childless. Alexie highlights choices again, as Grace chooses not to have children because she feels she mothered enough at work where she had "loved one hundred and thirty-six Spokane Indian boys and girls" (162). Has Grace made the wrong choice? Is it her duty to procreate, regardless of personal feeling? She raises the important issue of falling population numbers and expresses her own misgivings about her choice:

She'd often wondered if she was doing everything she could to ensure the survival of the Spokanes, the Mohawks, of all Indian people. Maybe she should have given birth to a dozen indestructible Indian children, part-Mohawk, part-Spokane, and part-Kevlar. Most of her fellow Mohawks, and most members of every other tribe, were marrying white partners and conceiving fragile children. Grace knew how fractions worked, Indians were disappearing by halves. (162)

Grace suggests that mixed children are fragile because they are always straddling two different identities and being pulled back and forth by the different halves which wish to annihilate the other and come out supreme. Edgar Eagle Runner expresses the dilemma of identity for the mixed-blood when he wonders if his vanished-down-a-tequila bottle half-breed father was "drunk because he was Indian or because he was white or because he was both" (47). The idea that any full-blood children would also be "part-Kevlar"—an industrial material made by Dupont that deflects bullets—suggests that she would be birthing a little army.
Children who would be strong and able to withstand the societal "bullets" of hegemonic culture and political policy that are still being shot at Indians in an attempt to destroy them.

Although "The Sin Eaters" is probably the most frightening and oblique story in the collection, it is also the one that most forcefully provides support for Indians marrying Indians. It is set in a 1950's that never happened. However, like most science fiction, it is commenting on certain realities of Indians during those times, as well as the contemporary times Alexie is writing in. All the Indian children and some adults are forcibly taken from their families, reservations, and urban residences, and taken to government compounds in the deserts of the US. No one will give them answers; only hints are dropped. The soldiers are constantly repeating the orders to avoid spilling any Indian blood, to avoid "contamination". When initially questioned, the reader realizes that Jonah (the main character), and his parents have already been researched by the army:

"Joseph is a full-blood Coeur D'Alene, Sarah is a full-blood Spokane," the black soldier said to the white soldier. "The Coeur D'Alene and Spokane are both Interior Salish tribes, so there should be no problem of contamination with the child." (Alexie 84)

Evidently, if his parents had some other blood in them, Jonah may have been "contaminated". When the kidnapped Indians arrive at the
government compounds, they realize that they are being separated into a number of different buildings according to the amount of “Indian” in their blood. This could suggest that the mixed-blood children, who consider themselves Indian, are safer; that they are more likely to survive. But the reader never discovers what is done with those mixed-bloods and whites who were being raised as Indians. Therefore, it must be assumed that they have been brought away for some insidious reason as well, otherwise why create the expenditure? Jonah dreamed of this coming and when a soldier assures him that they do not mean to hurt them he says, "Yes, you do. You’re going to eat us. You’re going to drink our blood" (85). This is a strongly political comment. It is exposing the voracious nature of European imperialism, which is willing to destroy another culture or people, to devour them wholly, if it serves its interests.

As the people are herded into their designated buildings, Jonah recognizes “Billy the Retard” from his reservation. Billy, also full blood, explains to Jonah:

"They’re going to take the tomorrow out of our bones."
"The tomorrow?” I asked.
“The tomorrow,” repeated Billy... “I dreamed it.” (98)

In a 1997 issue of Studies in American Indian Literature (SAIL), “Sherman Alexie...described a new novel in progress, to be entitled The Sin Eaters, as
[an intense tale where] 'scientists have discovered the cure for cancer involves the bone marrow of Indians'" (McFarland 154). This reveals what the never-stated purpose of the soldiers is. However, Billy's mistaking the word morrow for tomorrow is not really a mistake, since the government wishes to take the Indian bone marrow to ensure their own future. The final scene of the story is disturbing. The object seems to be to farm Indians so that they can harvest more bone marrow; Jonah, a child, is forced to have sex with a full-blood Indian woman (her fifth partner that day) because she is "fertile". For all of the disgust this scene raises, it also makes a statement about Indians marrying and procreating: there is something extremely powerful in the blood of a full-blood Indian which has the power to heal and to restore. This should not be considered only in some genetic (eugenic?) sense, but as metaphorical for the healing and restorative properties of being bound up in close ties with one's people and cultural community.

The politics of the "mixed family" is revealed with Mary Lynn's joke that she and her husband need to have one more child to see if their family is an Indian family or a white family. This joke must be seen as somewhat problematic, since she seems to be dividing her family into factions based on physical characteristics. However, the correlation between "looking" Indian and avoiding assimilation, as opposed to not
looking Indian and being assimilated, is made obvious through her children. Her daughter Antonya has long blond hair and had “never bothered to tell anyone she was Indian, mostly because nobody asked” (11), while her dark brothers are always invited out to the reservation for special events and weekends and sent more elaborate gifts. When it comes to mixed-bloods, then, it seems that, to the world at large—Indians and non-Indians—their “Indianness” is mostly a question of racial features. The betrayal of “race” seems to stem mostly from the assumption that the “Indian” will become absorbed into the culture of the white other, and thus lost. Hence, a further decrease in population occurs and the colonizers’ project of erasing the Natives from existence comes closer to succeeding. The mixed-children of these people are also, it is assumed, more easily assimilable, and thus will not be aligned with Native America. If children don’t “look like one”, then they are easier to assimilate. However, how children are raised cannot be discounted.

Throughout the stories in this collection there are Indians who are of mixed-blood, but are considered completely Indian by their Natives. Grace Atwater is half-Chinese. The carpenter Sweetwater in “One Good Man” had “Blue eyes! A half-breed who had never considered himself white, or been considered white by other Spokanes!” (211). For this reason, it is important that mixed-blood children not be rejected as Indian
merely because of their genetics because, ultimately, how one is raised and who one chooses to align one's self with is more important than one's physiognomy. This is proven in the comparative cases of the half-Indians Grace and Sweetwater when compared to someone like Edgar Eagle Runner.

Acceptance is the greatest plight of the mixed-blood who does not "look" Indian, but "feels" Indian. Debra Merskin, a Polish-Cherokee woman, writes:

I'm not sure what I look like; I just know I don't look like "one", at least according to cultural definitions of what constitutes "Indianness"...there is a sense of racial dishonesty associated with claims of Indianness. Certainly there are those individuals who hopped on the diversity bandwagon... Wanabees. This results, more than ever, in a cultural pressure to prove. I only know that I am what I am--proud. I ask for nothing from others. Nothing, that is, except acceptance (Merskin 281-3).

Her dilemma is understandable. Wanabee Indians have often been taken for "the real thing" by the dominant culture resulting in harmful and false notions about Native cultures being taken as "truths", and much money being made by exploiting Indian identity in this way. In attempting to take back Indian identity from its "imaginary" condition in popular culture so as to present Indians as they "really" are, from a Native perspective, Indians are naturally suspicious of and resistant to those who may not be sufficiently culturally aware and/or more than a little
assimilated into white culture, claiming "Indianness". Alexie closely explores these tensions in the final short story "One Good Man".

The main character of "One Good Man", who is full-blood Spokane, clashes with his university professor, who is a very long hyphenated mixture of aboriginal nations and other ethnicities:

What is an Indian?
That's what the professor wrote on the chalkboard three minutes into the first class of my freshman year at Washington State University...The professor’s name was Dr. Lawrence Crowell (don't forget the doctorate!) and he was, according to his vita, a Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian Indian from Hot Springs, Kentucky, or some such place. (224)

The narrator immediately feels contempt for this gray-eyed professor who is authoritatively demanding an answer to "what is an Indian?" That he is suspicious of the professor’s "Indianness" makes sense; can a person who has so many strains of "Indian" and "white" running through him, someone who belongs to so many different tribes (Native American and European), really understand or actively participate in any of them very fully? What tribe(s) is he actually enrolled in, does he follow the spiritual and social customs of any of them? When challenged on his assertion that he is fully Spokane, the narrator mocks the professor's long, hyphenated heritage and is ejected from the classroom until he can show the professor respect as "[his] elder" (225). The narrator's father comes to have it out with the professor and here Alexie actively illustrates the kind of tensions that exist
and the debates that are going on about who is a "real" Indian, and who has the right to speak for the Indians. Does a full-blood Indian who finished school but returned to the reservation, or a very mixed-blood Indian who lives off the reservation and is immersed in "university culture", have more right?

"Are you an Indian?"
"Are you?"
"Yes."
"So am I."
"I don't know," said my father. "Now, you may have some Indian blood. I can see a little bit of that aboriginal bone structure in your face, but you ain't Indian... You might be Native American but you sure as hell ain't Indian."
"Listen, I don't have to take this from you."...
"Are you an Indian?" my father asked again?
"I was at Alcatraz during the occupation."
"That was what, November '69?"
"Yeah, I was in charge of communications. How about you?"
"I took my wife and kids to the Pacific Ocean, just off Neah Bay. Most beautiful place in the world."
"What about Wounded Knee?" Crowell asked my father. "I was at Wounded Knee. Where were you?"
"I was teaching my son here how to ride his bike. Took forever. And when he finally did it, man, I cried like a baby, I was so proud."
"What kind of Indian are you? You weren't part of the revolution."
"I'm a man who keeps my promises." (227-9)

The father makes a distinction between "Indian" and being "Native American", using the term "Indian" in a way that suggests that he is an Indian because he lives on a reserve and lives the struggle, whereas the professor is a university-trained intellectual who does not really know what it means to be "Indian", except in some academic sense. The professor
was part of the "revolution", the "Red Power" movement of the late sixties and seventies. This is revolution on a political stage. The father, meanwhile, was teaching his kid to ride a bike, taking his family on vacations, and trying to be the kind of man who "keeps his promises". The father is attempting revolution on the "personal is political" stage by working to rebuild strong family ties within the reservation community, starting with his own. Following this, the professor can also be seen as an embodiment of the pan-Indian movement, while the father can be regarded as a representative figure of individual tribal identity, the "Salmon" identity of the Spokane. Which is the correct, or better way, to be a "real Indian"? It is very important for the survival and progress of aboriginal peoples that there be a strong political and social community amongst the different nations. Awareness and support of each other's issues and fights is necessary to for the kind of political and economic strength necessary to deal successfully with the colonizers' institutions. Power comes from numbers, and as the pan-Indian movement says, "many nations, one people". However, for any community to be strong, the families within that community need to be strong. If the families within a community are breaking apart or dying-out, then there can be no strength or renewal in the community. Therefore, Alexie ultimately indicates that it is necessary to be a participating member of an individual
tribe, involved in the religion and culture, to maintain a viable indigenous population.

For all of the narrator's suspicions and criticisms concerning his professor "Dr. Lawrence Crowell (don't forget the doctorate!)", he himself becomes a cultural betrayer by contributing to "brain drain":

I'd left the reservation when I was eighteen years old, leaving with the full intention of coming back after I'd finished college. I had never wanted to contribute to the brain drain, to be yet another of the best and brightest Indians to abandon his or her tribe to the Indian leaders who couldn't spell the word sovereignty. Yet no matter my idealistic notions, I have never again lived with my tribe. I left the reservation for the same reason a white kid leaves the cornfields of Iowa, or the coal mines of Pennsylvania, or the oil derricks of Texas: ambition. And I stayed away for the same reasons the white kids stayed away: more ambition...As an adult I am fully conscious of the reservation's weaknesses, its inherent limitations (geographical, social, economic, and spiritual), but as a child I believed the reservation to be an endless, magical place. (220-21)

The narrator has placed his ambitions for personal good before the good of the tribe. That the narrator's motives are the same as those of a white kid's does not excuse the act of abandonment; instead, it suggests betrayal because it indicates an embracing of the colonizing culture's values. As Alexie explains, in "Western civ...one man against the world is a good thing and admirable. But in a tribal sense, it's not. Being the only one is not a good thing. It's a bad thing" (Miller, B). Like most of the successful urban Indian characters in the book, the narrator has not used his ambition to gain power and status in the white world as a way of
gaining political leverage or cultural visibility for his people. This is the crux of the problem. Whether or not personal ambition is to be considered good or bad in a tribal sense, having successful people belong to one’s group is necessary for the group to have political clout and voice in the colonizers’ system. Sherman Alexie has said, “I can’t stand being limited. You’re growing up poor, on a reservation, Indian kid—who you are and what you’re supposed to be is pretty much predestined. There’s no group of people with more ideas placed on them than Indians—without having the economic-cultural power to combat it. We don’t get to define ourselves. That is always what I’ve been fighting against” (Miller, B). The problem comes when those who attain success and visibility do not use their influence to further the aims of the group.

What is undeniable is that with a growing population, and the limited physical space available on reservations, more Indians are going to become “urban”. Maintaining contact with one’s tribe’s reservation is necessary to maintain a strong social, religious, and cultural identity. However, living off the reservation should not exclude someone from being a “real Indian”. By presenting so many urban characters, and the problems of identity they wrestle with, Alexie has shown that those characters are, despite their flaws, Indians.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion: The Future Looks Promising

Undeniably, the counter-hegemonic efforts of Native artists—playwrights, actors, authors, and filmmakers—are having a positive effect. Have they managed to definitively create a new, authentic Indian identity? To answer the question, "What is an Indian?" No. Defining what it means to be Indian would be a harmful undertaking; such definition would make Indian identity static, and this is what the whole "white" construction of the Indian is meant to do. Instead of such "defining", Indian artists are continually "redefining", on their own terms, what it means to be an Indian in the contemporary world, and what it has meant in the past.

Monique Mojica's two-play volume *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* continues to be taught at various universities. It effectively manages to take back appropriated female icons by illustrating the performative and constructed nature of identity by allowing the lost icons to reclaim "their voice". Unfortunately, within the limits of this thesis, I could not investigate more fully the influence of Mojica's mixed-blood heritage on her plays, or the extent that Pan-Indianism figures in Mojica's personal and professional perspective. It would have been interesting to
do a comparative investigation of Mojica and Alexie’s handling of the theme of Pan-Indian versus Tribal identity. The question of who has the right to speak for “Indians” and how that right is acquired is currently an important and hotly debated issue in Indian studies.

As Elizabeth Cook-Lynn observes in her article “Intellectualism and the New Indian Story”, “Since the time thirty years ago when Native American studies began to define itself as a discipline, more Indian writing has been done than ever, more Indians have had their work published, [and] there are more public storytellers than we ever hoped for” (Cook-Lynn 136). However, she and a number of other scholars express dissatisfaction with most of the fiction being produced: “In too much of what passes for Native American Literature today you couldn’t find a significant idea with a ten-foot pole let alone find one that is life-affirming to the indigenes” (132). Although the huge success of an author like Alexie must inevitably raise questions and suspicions—what about his works makes them so popular with the Eurocentric mainstream’s readers and publishers?—one cannot dismiss a work for such a reason alone. Once a book is written and published, interpretation is handed over to the readership. The merits of an Indian artist’s work should not be evaluated based on its popularity with a non-Native audience and/or guesswork/anxiety as to why it may be popular within that cultural set. Instead, the
works must be examined, judged, and interpreted by Native American audiences based on what in the work they find to please, displease, instruct, entertain, or debate.

Comic book artists John Proudstar and Ryan Huna Smith, answered a need when they created the comic book *Tribal Force*. They did it because "native children [needed] contemporary heroes of their own. Children today have no contemporary heroes to identify with. All our role models are from the past" (Pewewardy 196-7). This need for a contemporary hero has been answered by *Smoke Signals*, as well. According to Alexie,

Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the character, has become a huge cultural character in the Indian world. I get photographs of Indian kids who dressed as him for Halloween. His lines in the movie have become pop-cultural phrases. In the Indian world, we just don't have that. Our heroes have always been guys with guns. And now, to have this cultural hero who is the androgynous little storytelling bookworm geek—I think that's wonderful. (Spencer)

Since the breakthrough of *Smoke Signals*, there has not really been another Native film to achieve its level of commercial success. However, more Indian films are being written, acted, directed and produced by Indians. Both Sherman Alexie and Chris Eyre have gone on to direct and produce new films. Alexie's directorial debut, *The Business of Fancydancing* has garnered numerous awards and is currently in limited theatrical release.
The director of Smoke Signals is also creating new films. Chris Eyre talks about Smoke Signals as a step forward in terms of representation, but that his new movie Skins goes "beyond [it]. Skins is to me the most Indian movie that's ever been made—it has language, it has religion, it as culture. Indian cinema is one of the last frontiers left" (Stepanek). The major problem is getting distribution deals; for now, Indians must still rely on being picked up by a Hollywood distributor after the film festival circuit. Journalist Robert Stepanek suggested that since the distribution challenge comes about because theatre ownership is controlled by so few hands (i.e. 80% of motion picture theatres in the UK are owned by American companies), would it be possible to have theatres on the reservations, given the kind of money generated on some of the casinos? Eyre responded that "there's been talk of that. [But] it takes a tribal nation to do it. I don't know how seriously they've entertained the idea. But it's a good idea". If this proposal is only a "good idea" at this point—one that has been entertained—it is not too preposterous to think that one day it may become a reality: especially when one looks to the particularly significant example of television and the strides made in that medium.

The Aboriginal People's Television Network, or APTN, is the world's first television network by, for, and about aboriginal peoples. Over twenty years in the making, it began broadcasting on September 1, 1999. In
2000, an initiative started in Vancouver is working towards the creation of a national aboriginal radio network in Canada. These are indicative of the resurgence of aboriginal cultures. Control of media outlets will ensure that aboriginal peoples will be able to see and hear representations of Indians that are positive and forward-looking. There is a socio-cultural renaissance occurring, which is the commencement of a optimistic, self-determining future.
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