# Revealing the Erosion of Identity through Class Stratification: The Elusiveness of Sherman Alexie's "Authentic Indian"

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ABSTRACT

This discussion contends that Sherman Alexie's work assembles an intricately woven class system in which white society and Indians are situated. Within his system, characters (Indian and white) move in and out of class groups looking for the "authentic Indian." Conflict created by movement within this class structure reflects Alexie's perception of the turmoil over real "Indianness" or Indian identity. Alexie's Indians, identity elusive, drift in and out of class groups. Class groups Alexie builds resemble in part those of the United States with a focus on socio-economic factors—education, wealth, income, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. These factors act as levers moving individuals in and out of status groups. Because several factors typically impact a person, class levers push Alexie's characters in different directions at the same time. What distinguishes Alexie's class system from the American one is the search for Indianness. Identity elusive, characters are unsure of where they belong. Often, Alexie's Indians seem to belong nowhere, not even to themselves. Chapter 1 of this discussion looks at Alexie's class system as a whole and its impact on Indian identity. Chapter 2 considers religion and spirituality as levers moving Alexie's characters toward Indianness, defined in this stratum by a shared feeling of hopelessness and damnation. Conversely Chapter 3 argues that sex and sexuality are the levers with the potential to move the Indian closer to his authentic self, an embattled identity, but a hopeful one nonetheless. This discussion attempts to deconstruct Alexie's class system, not just to expose the elusiveness of Native American identity, but also to find the author's real Indian--on and off the reservation.

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## Introduction: The Fictional Class System of Sherman Alexie

In short stories, novels, poetry, and film, Sherman Alexie offers his characterizations of contemporary Native Americans. Some scholars applaud his work for exposing the catastrophic effects of colonialism oppressing Indians to the present day. Others see Alexie's characterizations as oppressive and self-serving—charging that a focus on the negative aspects of Native American life stereotypes Indians so as to bolster the writer's notoriety. This discussion contends that Alexie's work assembles an intricately woven class system in which white society and Indians are situated. Within his system, characters (Indian and white) move in and out of class groups looking for the "authentic Indian." Conflict created by movement within this class structure reflects Alexie's perception of the turmoil over real "Indianness" or Indian identity. Alexie's Indians, identity elusive, drift in and out of class groups. Class groups Alexie builds resemble in part those of the United States with a focus on socio-economic factors—education, wealth, income, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. These factors act as levers moving individuals in and out of status groups. Because several factors typically impact a person, class levers push Alexie's characters in different directions at the same time. What distinguishes Alexie's class system from the American one is the search for Indianness. Identity elusive, characters are unsure of where they belong. A parallel question in Alexie's class system is which groups are the higher ranking or more prestigious groups. Even if Indianness is found is it worth preserving? Is elevation in the ranks based upon a closer connection to Indianness or a greater detachment therefrom? These questions are continuously raised by Alexie and often (but not always) left

unsettled. As a result there is never a clear path for his characters to follow when looking for happiness, prosperity, and their essential Indianness. Often, Alexie's Indians seem to belong nowhere, not even to themselves. Chapter 1 of this discussion looks at Alexie's class system as a whole and its impact on Indian identity. Chapter 2 considers religion and spirituality as levers moving Alexie's characters toward Indianness, defined in this stratum by a shared feeling of hopelessness and damnation. Conversely Chapter 3 argues that sex and sexuality are the levers with the potential to move the Indian closer to his authentic self, an embattled identity, but a hopeful one nonetheless. This discussion attempts to deconstruct Alexie's class system, not just to expose the elusiveness of Native American identity, but also to find the author's real Indian--on and off the reservation.

Any attempts to deconstruct Alexie's class system must also examine the writer's characterization of those in power, white society. It should be clarified that for purposes of this discussion, "white society" are: (1) those that identify themselves as *both Caucasian and superior* to Native Americans; (2) those who are *treated as Caucasian and placed in a position of privilege* in society; (3) the American government; or (4) anyone who does not identify themselves as Native American and oppresses Indians because they are Indians. Just as this discussion focusses on "the authentic Indian" as realized in Alexie's fictional class system, the definition of "white society" is that which emerges in his same class system. This definition is on Alexie's terms as situated in his text. Placement of other minority groups in Alexie's class system really depends on the last definition, anyone who oppresses Indians because they are Indians. If an African-American oppresses an Indian because he is an Indian, then that oppressor would fit into the "white society" of this discussion. Alexie argues that ethnic groups fit into either the

class of the oppressed or oppressor depending on the situation. For example in *Indian Killer* the Indian protagonist John Smith tells his African-American friends Paul and Paul Too that if he killed black men, society wouldn't care; he would only gain attention from the media if he killed white men (IK 308). John sees these African-American men as devalued in white society based upon their ethnicity just as he is oppressed because he is Indian. Alexie situates these three men in a marginalized group. Conversely, in *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Alexie includes a scene in "The Sin Eaters" in which Jonah Lot, a 12 year-old Coeur d'Alene boy, describes his captors. They are American soldiers of various ethnicities, including Native American: "With rifles raised, the soldiers advanced on us. I saw four white faces, two black faces, and a face that looked like mine" (*TI* 82). White society in this scene is the American government and membership is based upon loyalty to the group in power rather than one's ethnicity. The white, African-American, and Indian soldiers are all members of white society in this scene.

While Alexie's focus is on the contemporary marginalized class, his writing includes vignettes of historical references—real and surreal--through which he further characterizes white society. His digressions from the main storyline mark his take on historical accounts of colonialism and reflect his outrage over the inequities of American governance. Alexie argues that prejudice in America is part of its foundational and modern identities. Over time hate has dismantled his characters leaving their identity potentially irretrievable. Examining class stratification through Alexie's historical lens enables evaluation of his charge that a legacy of hate originating with European contact survives to erode and potentially eradicate Indianness today.

## Chapter 1: Class Stratification Within and Beyond Alexie's Text

### Introduction: Native American Identity as Capital and Catalyst for Class Stratification

Who is the "authentic Indian?" Who writes authentic Native American literature? Why are these questions even relevant when considering class stratification? Chapter 1 looks at Sherman Alexie's class system and the role that identity plays therein. That is, the class system Alexie builds resembles in part the class system of the United States with a focus on socio-economic factors—education, wealth, and income. Beyond this, however, Alexie adds other status groups into his class structure that focus on Native American identity. The issue raised in Alexie's class system is which groups are the higher ranking or more prestigious groups. Is elevation in the ranks based upon a closer connection to Indianness or a greater detachment therefrom? Alexie begins with the primary stratification--white society is the class in power and Native Americans are the marginalized group. Then Alexie fractures these groups again with identity as the breaking point. His class system includes white characters who attempt to "take Indianness" for themselves--such as a white professor specializing in Native American literature and a white couple teaching their adopted child about his Indian culture. Many of his Native American characters are not only unsuccessful in their efforts to assimilate into white society they are ostracized on the reservation for attempting to leave their tribe. Through this interplay, Alexie questions the efforts of the oppressors and the marginalized to assimilate into the class groups of one another. Alexie's class system hinges on the identification of the authentic Indian. Accordingly his stories raise a barrage of questions about Indianness: Is Indianness primal, preserved at the core of

every Indian despite colonialism or class placement? If so what qualities of Indianness are primal? Are these primal or essential elements of Indianness retrievable in modern society? Where does the primal identity of Native Americans fit in assimilated class groups? Alexie makes the point that these questions are not fodder for intellectual debate. The violent assault upon Indians and their land during colonialism ignites an anger and anguish that continues with the conflict over Indianness in modern society. ***This discussion contends that through his constructed class system, Sherman Alexie exposes the war over Indian identity—a lethal assault originating with colonialism and threatening the survival of Native Americans today.***

In addition to a discussion of class in the text, Chapter 1 looks at how Alexie's class structure moves beyond the page and into the literary analysis of his work. Literary scholarship is divided as to whether or not Alexie's work qualifies as "authentic" Native American literature. Again, the debate hinges on identity. For some literary critics, authenticity as Indian literature is a function of the ethnic background of the writer. Alexie is a "full-blooded" Spokane Indian. However some critics contend that his work is not "real" Native American literature. In Alexie's case, authenticity moves beyond genetics. Some critics assess authenticity as a function of the text's stance on assimilation of Native Americans. Here too, scholars are divided as to whether or not assimilation bolsters or dilutes authenticity. Because the definition of authentic Indian literature remains unsettled, the placement of Alexie and his texts in a particular literary group is also elusive. In this light Alexie's status groups attempt to define his characters, his text, and the writer himself.

The complex class structure presented in Alexie's texts (and beyond) is nonetheless in alignment with modern working class studies. In "What's New about New Working-Class Studies," John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon describe changes in the study of the working-class in the early 1990s, first through the emergence of multicultural studies in higher education: "Attention also expanded beyond the traditional categories of race, gender and ethnicity to encompass globalization, postcolonial studies, border studies and other variations" (Russo et al. 4). Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, written in the early 1990s describes oppressed Native Americans living on the Spokane Reservation. In short stories contained therein, such as "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" and "Distances," the delineating point of oppression is colonialism and Indians in the 1990s still suffer from the residual effect of European contact. Russo and Linkon point out that new working-class studies (i.e. 1990s forward) see class and geography as essential to one another (8). Without question, life on the Spokane Reservation as painted by Alexie is a distinguishing part of Indian identity. This aligns with Russo and Linkon's argument: "Much of the interesting and innovative work in the field examines how class works in particular places and times" (13). Native Americans' ancestral connection to land is destroyed and re-assigned through colonialism and ultimately by the United States government. The disconnection of Native Americans from their land and imprisonment on reservations begins the breakdown of Indians into social groups beyond the tribe. The perpetuation of stratification from this point is orchestrated by continued injustices targeted at Native Americans via American law. From colonialism to modern time, with each assault on the Indian and his land, stratification progresses supporting the colonial goals for Native

Americans to either assimilate or disappear. As stratification progresses the recurring question emerges—who or what is the authentic Indian in contemporary society? Is the true Indian a function of how closely identity aligns with pre-European contact? Is the real Indian in part the white man? Or has the real Indian, assimilated or not, disappeared?

In *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (*LRTFH*), Sherman Alexie paints a compelling picture of Native Americans as a working-class on the Spokane Reservation. Story by story, Alexie deconstructs class stratification and reveals multiple forces intersecting to form social groups far more complex than Indians versus white society. "Class happens" in stories such as "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" and "Distances" through the interplay of history, geography, and the law. Alexie's working-class is a tribe shattered into social groups orbiting the Spokane Reservation constantly manipulated by colonialism and American law. Alexie's Indians hate white society and covet white society. His Indians who strive for sovereignty see white society as the enemy and even Indians as enemy. Some simply seek peace on the reservation, but are confronted by despair instead. Alexie's Indians wishing for a better life off of the reservation face failure abroad and fear excommunication at home. The common denominator of the intra-cultural class groups is "Indianness"—the identity of the authentic Indian in contemporary society. Stratification transpires as Indianness comes to mean different things for different people.

Alexie's focus of identity in class stratification is not a case of first impression in American literature. In *Class and the Making of American Literature: Created Unequal*, Andrew Lawson aligns with economist E. Thompson's recognition that class is based upon shared identity and common opponents (8). While shared identity defines a

particular class, "antagonistic social relations" reveal the points of division between particular class groups (Lawson 8). Historically, Native American class stratification begins with the basic division between Indians and white society with colonialism as the primary point of antagonism and the battle for American land as the ultimate quest for power. At this level, class division is easily defined as is the currency (land) used to achieve upward mobility. However, in presenting the conflicting needs and wants of his characters, Alexie exposes another level of class stratification beyond the traditional division between white society and Native Americans. In Alexie's stories, Indians on and off the reservation are divided by their sense of identity. For some, attaining an absolute return to the traditional Indian is the goal. Others see assimilation into white society as a means to power. Within these two extremes are those claiming tradition and assimilation in some combination. These diverse interpretations of the "authentic Indian" create multiple class groups. In addition thereto, real estate as a source of mobility is supplemented by authenticity as currency. While tangible currency can theoretically be captured with finality and discord resolved, an abstract currency has the potential to create perpetual stratification without hope of reunification. Alexie depicts a variety of characters holding themselves out as the authentic Indian. This struggle to live out one's own version of Indianness not only causes his characters intertribal class stratification, but it also creates confusion, pain, fear, and despair within each group that often overshadows the original white oppressor. One of the most provocative accounts of the connection of the Indian to his home and tribe as his identity is Alexie's *Indian Killer* in which John Smith and supporting cast are homeless in a multitude of ways. Ultimately,

Alexie makes the argument that the only piece of the authentic Indian left is rage and outrage at the injustices perpetrated upon Native Americans by white society.

The contemporary dimension of Native American identity as capital and catalyst for class stratification is not only limited to Alexie's stories. The author makes clear through characters such as Marie Polatkin in *Indian Killer* that his work is under scrutiny as authentic Indian literature. In the literary analysis of Alexie, a parallel universe of class transpires. That is, Alexie's reservation realism incites literary critics who stake personal claims in the "authentic Indian" and status groups emerge. Literary critics who advocate their ideology of nationalism exclude from their status groups critics who accept assimilation as an element of Indianness. Some critics view Alexie's working-class as cosmopolitan (rather than nationalistic) seeking a balance between tradition and assimilation. Some critics see him as a sellout to the business of bookselling; some see him as furthering the stereotypes of white society; and some see him as a pioneer revealing a social group marginalized by heritage and assimilation. Status is achieved in the world of literary criticism via authenticity. Authenticity is capital and even that is in dispute. Who is the authentic Indian? Who writes authentic Native American literature? This discussion further explores these questions through the lens of two stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*--"This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" (hereinafter referred to as "Phoenix, Arizona") and "Distances" as well as through Alexie's 1996 novel, *Indian Killer*. "Phoenix, Arizona" is reservation realism reflective of most stories in the collection. "Distances" is a departure from this format, a dream-like narrative devoid of Alexie's usual cast of characters. Both stories are set in contemporary time but "Distances" is surreal. *Indian Killer* is set in contemporary time

but the physical setting of Seattle is equally shared with the protagonist's state of mind--a blurring of psychosis and rationality so much so that it becomes difficult to discern the two settings. *Indian Killer* and both short stories paint complex class stratifications beyond the primary division of white society versus Native Americans and look at Indianness from opposing viewpoints. Moreover, the literary analysis of these stories eventuates into a parallel universe of status groups. Class happens in Alexie's stories and class happens in the analysis of Alexie's stories.

## Preliminary Matter: Historical and Anthropological Evolution of Native American Identity and Class in America

In "What's New about New Working-Class Studies," John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon describe changes in the study of the working-class in the early 1990s, first through the emergence of multicultural studies in higher education: "Attention also expanded beyond the traditional categories of race, gender and ethnicity to encompass globalization, postcolonial studies, border studies and other variations" (Russo et al. 4). Sherman Alexie's class system begins at the point of European contact and evolves from the time of colonialism in America to modern times (the early 1990s and thereafter) when his stories are written. Colonialism provides the first fracture in Alexie's America—white society dominates and oppresses Indians. Geography is at work in Alexie's class system and his description of Indianness. His primary characters are connected to the Spokane Indian tribe, the Spokane Reservation, and the urban setting of Spokane, Washington. With this, the idea that Indianness is primal, a part of the individual's essence irrespective of circumstances, emerges in Alexie's writing.

Anthropologically, the geographical identity of the Spokane Indians is described by Robert Ruby and John Brown in *The Spokane Indians: Children of the Son, Expanded*

*Edition*. Citing Robert Butler's *Contributions to the Prehistory of the Columbia Plateau*, Ruby and Brown describe the ancient lands of the Spokane Indians: "An ancient lake once stretched from western Idaho into eastern Washington; around its rim, some sixty-six hundred years ago, a scattering of Indians had settled" (qtd. in Ruby and Brown 3). Adding to this description is Lynn Pankonin, Tribal Historian for the Spokane Tribe who confirms that the identity of the Spokane Indians and the River are inextricable: "The Spokane River and upper reaches of the Columbia River have long been home to the first people of this land . . . The watercourses of these two rivers have been the lifeblood of the Spokanes for millennia" (qtd. in Ruby and Brown xix). In fact, prior to European contact, the river provides an abundance of salmon for consumption by the Indians as well as ample plants, roots and berries to fortify their diet. Deer, elk and moose are plentiful along the river and are used extensively for food, clothing, and shelter (qtd. in Ruby and Brown xix). Arguably, these anthropological and historical descriptions of the Spokane Indians and their land merge the land/water and the Indian to describe Native American identity.

The geographic identity of the Spokane Indians, salmon fishers sustained by land and river, is forever altered with colonialism. Pankonin reports that the first to find promise along the river are the fur traders and missionaries. The offerings of the river ultimately attract settlers who occupy the aboriginal land and, over time, the new government furthers this takeover with force: "As more outsiders filled the lands of the Spokanes, more discord was sown. The U.S. military was called to dispossess the Indians from their homelands and confine them to reservations that were only fractions of their ancestral lands" (Pankonin qtd. in Ruby and Brown xix). In his ethnography *The Spokan*

*Indians*, anthropologist John Alan Ross reports that the arrival of Europeans caused, "deculturation and a concomitant disruption of the indigenous medical and nutritional profile, in which people's health deteriorated and their population declined, not only from pandemics, but also the loss of traditional root fields and reduced salmon runs. Various psychological and physiological problems were exacerbated by access to alcohol" (46-47). From an anthropological vantage point, colonialism works to systematically destroy the land and lives of Native Americans. The introduction of alcohol by settlers during this time further erodes the Indians' ability to defend themselves from invasion. Anthropologically it appears that the confiscation of Indian real estate forever alters if not destroys Native America as it exists prior to colonialism. If this is true then how does the confiscation of land impact Indianness?

Historically, on the heels of European contact, the Spokane Reservation is created by Executive Order of 1881 and "allotments on the reservation were assigned to each enrolled member of the tribe beginning in 1906" (Pankonin qtd. in Ruby and Brown xix-xx). The rest and remainder of the land is available for white settlers. Native Americans are forced to stay on their allotted land absent the express permission from the government (Pankonin qtd. in Ruby and Brown xix-xx). The Executive Order of 1881 effectively works to imprison the Spokane Indians on a limited area of their ancestral land and assigns to them the status of something between governmental dependents at best, prisoners at worst. Ruby and Brown point to further legal manipulation of geographical identity from reservation to white society. The 1960s brings the United States' "Relocation Program" encouraging the assimilation of Native Americans: "Sometimes whole families have gone to cities for training and for jobs, both of which

could not be found on the Spokane Reservation. Beside the pull of employment on the outside, the rather limited economic opportunities on the reservation, aggravated by fragmented heirships to its land, have tended to deter Spokanes from returning" (310). The geographic identity of the Spokane Indians is redefined again and again via American law. Indians lose the abundance of their ancestral lands and are detained on small reservations assigned by the government. This imprisonment forever sours the idea of reservations as the sacred home of Native Americans. Once Indians are sequestered in this manner, they are then directed to move off of the reservation into white society who has taken their land and livelihood. Irrespective of the path taken in staying or leaving the reservation, success is unlikely--poverty is a part of reservation life; rejection awaits Indians off the reservation. In 1980, Congress enacts regulations ("acquisition rules") enabling the Bureau of Indian Affairs to acquire land into trust for Indian tribes so that Native Americans can reacquire their ancestral lands (Scrivner at 605). In his 2003 Symposium, "The Role of Jurisdiction in the Quest for Sovereignty: Acquiring Land Into Trust for Indian Tribes," Larry Scrivner, BIA Acting Director discusses the jurisdiction of the BIA as an agent for the United States Department of the Interior to acquire land into trust for Indian tribes (37 New Eng. L. Rev. 603, Summary). The irony of Scrivner's explanation is noteworthy: "Prior to 1980, no real standard existed for taking land into trust; nor was there a great need to take land into trust, since Indian tribes did not have any money to acquire land . . . Not all Indian tribes have the resources with which to buy land and place it into trust " (605). From ancestral lands in abundance to imprisonment on the reservation to pressure to abandon their homes and traditions to invitations to reacquire (with strings attached) their own land, colonialism and American law

constantly disrupts the geographic identity of the Spokane Indians. The extent to which the alteration of geographic identity impacts Indianness is at play in Sherman Alexie's construction of class on and off the reservation.

## "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona": Alexie's Merger of Man and Land as Indian

In "Phoenix, Arizona" and "Distances," Alexie's characterizations reflect the merger of land and man as part of Native American identity. Throughout these stories, Alexie embeds land into the identity of his Spokane Indians so much so that as Indian land is dismantled and taken, so too is Indian identity. Protagonists in "Phoenix, Arizona," Victor and Thomas, live on the Spokane Reservation. After retrieving the ashes of Victor's father, they each decide to distribute them at the Spokane Falls (Alexie 74). Thomas the traditionalist in the story believes that upon distributing the ashes at the Falls, Victor's father will "rise like a salmon" rather than a phoenix in reference to the once primary commodity of the Spokane Indians (Alexie 74). In "Distances" the dream-like tale includes an unnamed narrator who lives on a reservation. Although the setting is not specifically identified as the Spokane Reservation, salmon is named three times in the six-page story (Alexie 108-9). The ancestral Indians in the story, "The Others" return to the reservation "carrying salmon" (108). The narrator speaks of his love, Tremble Dancer: "She gave birth, salmon flopped from her, salmon growing larger" (109). In both "Phoenix, Arizona" and "Distances" the setting is the reservation and the Indians' connection to the water and salmon is primary. Although at first glance it appears that identification with the land unites Alexie's Spokane Indians, his class system reveals intra-tribal discord.

In “This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona” and “Distances,” the impact of colonialism and the taking of Spokane land results in impoverished and oppressed Indians on and off of the reservation: In “Phoenix, Arizona,” Victor and his mother live in poverty on the reservation (59). Thomas lives in an HUD house on the reservation (73). In Arizona, the trailer where Victor’s father lives contains nothing of value, and a bank account has his life savings of three hundred dollars (Alexie 68, 70). In “Distances” the narrator’s traditional life sharply contrasts with contemporary life. The narrator lives on the reservation in his tipi and complains of frigid nights (Alexie 106). The Tribal Council prohibits material luxuries as “white man artifact, as sin” (Alexie 109). Twice in the story, the narrator dreams about television then wakes up crying (Alexie 106, 108). Alexie’s characters reflect the inherited damage caused by the geographical manipulation of colonialism. They are left in poverty and remain relegated to a limited area of land far from the abundance and prosperity enjoyed by their ancestors and now white society. Yet even with access to innovations that might make reservation life easier, the Tribal Council prohibits Indians from using white society’s commodities. It does not appear that all of the Indians on the reservation are pleased with that edict. With this Alexie demonstrates the conflict between those who maintain traditional Indian values and others who wish to assimilate to some degree into white society. Alexie never resolves the issue in “Phoenix, Arizona” or “Distances” so the hierarchy of status groups within the tribe remains unclear.

In “Phoenix, Arizona,” Sherman Alexie’s characters live on the Spokane reservation but there is tension “at home.” The protagonist, Victor, loses his job at the Bureau of Indian Affairs and learns that his father died in his trailer in Phoenix, Arizona.

When Victor was a child his father walked off of the reservation, presumably to seek a better life, and never returned (Alexie 59). Although attempting to assimilate into white society, his father still dies in isolation: "Victor's father had lain in that trailer for a week in hundred-degree temperatures before anyone found him. And the only reason anyone found him was because of the smell (Alexie 68). As an adult on the reservation, Victor is unemployed, with no money to retrieve the ashes. His mother has no money: "Who does have money on a reservation, except the cigarette and fireworks salespeople?" (Alexie 59). Victor asks the Tribal Council for money but all they give him is one hundred dollars (Alexie 60). Here, Alexie inserts traditional class variables—poverty of Native Americans in contrast to the wealth of the dominant white class group. On or off the reservation Alexie's characters in "Phoenix, Arizona" do not achieve financial prosperity. Victor is disenfranchised with his Indian identity and sees his Indianness as a state of oppression rather than tradition.

In contrast to Victor, the disenfranchised Indian on the reservation, there is Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the traditionalist on the reservation. Thomas Builds-the-Fire in "Phoenix, Arizona" identifies himself through the traditional aboriginal role of storyteller--"a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to"--and recognizes he lives amongst tribesmen who are disenfranchised with Native American tradition (Alexie 61). Victor beat up Thomas when they were fifteen years old—for no reason other than Victor was drunk (Alexie 65). While Victor does not reflect the traditional Native American character, Thomas sees the aboriginal art of storytelling as his identity and destiny: "We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination . . . My father, he died on Okinawa in World War II, died fighting for this country, which had tried to

kill him for years . . . I have only my stories which came to me before I even had the words to speak . . . They are all I have. It's all I can do"(Alexie 72-3). Thomas represents the traditional identity of Native Americans. His native self is all that he has and his traditions are a part of him. However, the sanctity of the traditional self is tarnished as Thomas acknowledges that his father was killed as a warrior for America rather than his tribe. His father gave his life to protect a country that took his land. In terms of class, the conflict of white society versus Indian is evident. However, with "Phoenix, Arizona," Alexie depicts class stratification beyond white society versus the tribe. Thomas and Victor demonstrate that intra-cultural discord is in play. Thomas is an outcast on the reservation. Indians within the tribe such as Victor reject Thomas and his aboriginal identity. Thomas holds on to his traditional identity as his destiny, essential to his existence. Victor sees Native American traditions as pointless amidst the poverty on the reservation. Being Indian to Victor means being poor and oppressed on or off the reservation. In terms of the importance of traditionalism in establishing Indianness, "Phoenix, Arizona" leaves the issue unsettled. However, it is clear that traditionalism is a cause of class stratification in Alexie's class system. Thomas, Alexie's traditional protagonist, is not successful on the reservation. However, the Indian who shuns tradition is equally unsuccessful. Victor lives in poverty and despair. Despite the help given to him, Victor acknowledges that he and his friends will continue to reject Thomas (Alexie 74). Victor realizes his disconnection from his traditional Indianness: "Victor was ashamed of himself. Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community? The only real thing he shared with anybody was a bottle and broken dreams" (Alexie 74). Victor abandons traditional values and resigns himself to his place on the reservation.

Victor looks beyond the reservation into white society where he is also rejected. Thomas does not wish to assimilate into white society. Thomas embraces traditional values and resigns himself to his place on the reservation. With these characters Alexie expands the scope of the oppressors. Indians on the reservation oppress Thomas more so than white society. White society oppresses Victor, but his despair and resignation furthers his state of oppression.

In "'Y'all Need to Play Songs for your People': (P)Reservation Versus Assimilation and the Politics of White-Indian Encounter in Sherman Alexie's Fiction," James Keegan sees social identity and division in "Phoenix, Arizona" emerging through the Indians' choices of tradition or assimilation: "In this story, Alexie very deftly raises some of the complex issues related to the interplay of cultural assimilation and cultural preservation" (Keegan 118). Victor is presented, "a portrait of the standard disillusioned or (disallusioned) reservation Indian: stuck with poverty, getting drunk and beating up on other Indians (in this case, Thomas), and generally trying to avoid thinking about his own situation—in short, robbed of a mythic center" (Keegan 115-116). His foil character is Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the traditional storyteller, who has "become outcast on the reservation because he insists on maintaining the narrative heart of cultural identity"(Keegan 116). As the two men choose either embrace their traditional identity or reject it, status groups emerge within the reservation. The hierarchy amongst intra-cultural groups in "Phoenix, Arizona" however remains unclear. Thomas is an outcast on the reservation but appears to find some personal solace in his traditional identity of storytelling. Victor appears to be more socialized on the reservation, but is his social ideology of drunkenness and despair more desirable?

In the struggle between assimilation and preservation, Alexie's story suggests the impossibility of returning to traditional life: "As divided doppelgangers, Victor and Thomas represent the fundamental psychic split of the modern American Indian: the reservation maintains a nominal preserve against assimilation and yet the 'bread and circuses' (or more correctly, the alcohol and fireworks) of assimilation serve to undermine any preservational possibilities that the preserve might claim to offer" (Keegan 118-119). Hence, Thomas who attempts to embrace the traditions of mythical storytelling is a social outcast on the reservation. The art of storytelling requires a captive audience that Thomas lacks (Keegan 119). However, assimilation isn't a clear answer either, as Alexie describes Victor and Thomas struggling to fit into white society as well. When they meet the gymnast on the airplane and engage in conversation, Kathy says that she is the "'first alternate on the 1980 Olympic team,' [and] begins to complain about how the team was 'screwed' by the government's decision to boycott the Olympics'" (Keegan 119 citing Alexie 67). When Thomas attempts to compare this injustice to that of Native Americans, the atmosphere becomes uncomfortable: "the incongruity of the comparison has been too great to evoke a humorous response and has taken the previously light conversation into a too deeply serious vein. The encounter has not been unpleasant and yet the ultimate connection—the connection of shared plight—seems to have been refused" (Keegan 119). The underlying message in this exchange on the airplane is that Indians and white society are not a shared humanity but are a set of separate and distinct social groups with Native Americans the inferior class. Justice is only for white society, not for Indians.

Keegan argues that Alexie's story presents the reservation, as "a means and a threat to Indian survival, with the challenge lying in the Indians' attempt to connect with the economic (and political) possibility without sacrificing identity" (120). However, beyond white society, Alexie attributes oppression on the reservation to the Indians: "This desire for survival leads Alexie to scalding critiques of America's treatment of Indians, but he also assigns considerable responsibility to Indians who are complicitous in their own genocide because they refuse their communal responsibilities" (Keegan 120). Alexie asks white society to offer opportunities for Indians, and he calls for Indians on the reservation to support their traditional identity (Keegan 120). Despite this call to action, Alexie's stories do not provide a means for Indians to successfully support traditional identity and at the same time accept opportunities in white society. In fact, "Phoenix, Arizona" and "Distances" seem to suggest that this call to action is impossible in the confines of Alexie's class structure. In "Phoenix, Arizona" class is a result first of geography manipulated by American law—specifically, the characters' relegation and resignation to the Spokane reservation as an oppressed group at the hands of the dominant white class. Then, additional class stratification transpires within the minority group. Alexie's stories depict the traditionalists at odds with the disenfranchised--The aboriginal Indian clings to a life no longer viable in modern times. The disenfranchised Indian rejects tradition and anticipates failure in assimilation into white society.

**"Distances": Alexie's Class System Encompasses the Living and the Dead**

"This Is What It Means To Say Phoenix, Arizona" is representative of the "reservation realism" present in most of the stories in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (Alexie, "Introduction," xviii). However, "Distances" is a departure

from Alexie's impoverished characters struggling through life on the Spokane Reservation. Although surreal in presentation, "Distances" is rooted in history—specifically, the Ghost Dance Movement and Wounded Knee Massacre of the late nineteenth century. During this time, class division is clear—white society dominates and decimates Native Americans. In creating a dreamlike alternative history in which white society is eliminated, Alexie suggests that the result is a power shift as deadly to Native Americans as the original enemy. "Distances" begins with an actual epitaph from Wovoka, the Paiute Indian and religious leader historically known for his "Ghost Dance" in reaction to colonialism. Wovoka calls for all Indians to participate in the dance for the return of the "Great Spirit" (qtd. in Alexie 104). The Great Spirit in turn will resurrect dead Indians and move all to a location high in the mountains where they cannot be hurt by white society (Wovoka qtd. in Alexie 104). Beyond this redemption of Native Americans, a flood will drown white society so that Indians alone can inhabit the earth (Wovoka qtd. in Alexie 104). Wovoka cautions any Indians who don't believe in his message--any who will not dance, will also be destroyed-- "Some of them will be turned into wood and burned in fire" (qtd. in Alexie 104). Historically as the Ghost Dance Movement is a reaction to the assaults on Native Americans, it inadvertently causes one of the most horrific slaughtering of Indians--the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Historically, the Ghost Dance Movement is not successful. Indians do not destroy white society. Sherman Alexie's "Distances" however is a dreamlike departure from history--the Ghost Dance works and white society is destroyed. In "Uchronic Dreams: Working Class Memory and Possible Worlds," Alessandro Portelli coins "Uchronia" as, "that amazing theme in which the author imagines what would have happened if a certain

historical event had not taken place . . . the stories often emphasize not how history went, but how it would, or should have gone, focusing on possibility rather than actuality" (Portelli 46). Although Portelli is applying Uchronia to the imagined defeat of the fascist regime in Italy in the mid-1940s and rise of communism (Portelli 46), his definition can be applied to "Distances." In "Distances" Alexie creates a sort of uchronic dream—the Ghost Dance has come to fruition. Although Portelli's focus is Italy, he contemplates the application of his Uchronia to Native Americans as "the same frame of mind that inspired the Pueblo myth which attributes the creation of white men to Indian black magic . . . if the group had power to generate the evil powers it also has power to eliminate them: 'if Indian magic created white people, an Indian ceremony will control them'" (Paola Ludovici qtd. in Portelli 53). In Alexie's story, however, the dream now realized isn't what the Indians anticipated in their dance. Whites are eliminated and a new dominant group, the Tribal Council, emerges to dominate and destroy Indians. The Indians who seek benefits of assimilation are destroyed by their own community. Alexie's argument in this surreal story is that there is no going back to ancestral times due to Native Americans' exposure to white society over the last 500 years. Moreover, power struggles in the Native American experience are not limited to the primary battle with white society. Tribal values create intra-cultural tension with the potential to be every bit as destructive as colonialism.

In "The Ghost Dance and the Politics of Exclusion in Sherman Alexie's 'Distances,'" Tom Farrington identifies Alexie's story as a reaction to a moment of historical significance to Native Americans: "Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee massacre have stirred writers to write: an indigenous aesthetic (the dance) expressing a

revolutionary political message is censured, misinterpreted, and violently suppressed by colonial forces, ultimately blamed for a horrendous and unjustifiable massacre of its participants and surrounding community" (Farrington 522). As Farrington suggests, this historical point in time forms the basis of Alexie's story and explains in part the irreparable division between white society and Native Americans. Sherman Alexie's "Distances" is a dreamlike picture of progressive class stratification stemming from the primary class division of white society versus Indian. As Indians seek to destroy white society, the enemy becomes blurred, and the placement of power convoluted.

"Distances" is set in modern day on the reservation, but is devoid of the usual cast of characters (such as Victor and Thomas) present in the other stories. The narrator is never identified lending to the story's dreamlike setting. The narrator has no idea what exactly has happened to cause the absolute devastation of the neighboring city but, "maybe it was because the Ghost Dance finally worked" (Alexie 104). The narrator participates in the burning of another house as "The Tribal Council has ruled that anything to do with the whites has to be destroyed" (Alexie 105). With white society eliminated in the city, the Tribal Council directs its activity against Indians previously in contact with white society and new social groups emerge-- "Urbans are the city Indians who survived and made their way out to the reservation after it all fell apart. There must have been over a hundred when they first arrived, but most of them have died since" (Alexie 105). Due to the overwhelming (and unnamed) sickness of the Urbans, Tribal Council orders: "Skins, Indians who lived on the reservation when it happened, can never marry Urbans" (Alexie 106). The Tribal Council further designates "the bodies of the 'old people' as evil and should be burned upon their death and rumors are that their

relatives may be killed and burned as well" (Alexie 106). This decision to burn Indians stems from a new code of tribal law that attempts to distinguish true "Skins" from assimilated "Urbans." The final group mentioned in the story is the "Others." They appear to be deceased, ancestral Indians—warriors, savages, who come to reclaim their land. However white society now gone, they assault Urbans such as Tremble Dancer (Alexie 108-109).

In Alexie's uchronia, the Ghost Dance works in that white society is eliminated. However a power struggle still ensues as the Ghost Dance also resurrects dead Indians who return to destroy modern Indians on the reservation. History now modified, the legacy of the tribe is also altered to a state of conflict. Alexie suggests that elimination of white society post European contact cannot resurrect Native Americans as they were—united in peace. Moreover, while the injustices of American law are destroyed in this new history, a power shift emerges in which tribal law creates its assault on Native Americans. The Tribal Council has decided that assimilation is an embodiment of the original enemy, "it's a white man's disease in their blood. It's a wristwatch that has fallen between their ribs, slowing, stopping" (Alexie 107). White society now eliminated, tribal law targets Indians who have integrated innovations of white society into their lives by items such as televisions, radios, and watches, "A white man artifact, a sin," the chairman said, put the watch in his pouch" (Alexie 109). It appears that the narrator desires some of the innovations of white society as he secretly keeps a radio from one of the houses he burns and twice in the story he makes a point of stating, "Last night I dreamed about television. I woke up crying" (Alexie. 106, 108).

In addition to innovations of white society, relationships between Skins and Urbans are strictly prohibited in "Distances." The narrator is in love with an Urban, "Tremble Dancer" (Alexie 105). The narrator clarifies that she is not sick, but describes her in a state of physical deterioration: "but she does have burns and scars all over her legs. When she dances around the fire at night, she shakes from the pain" (Alexie 105). Farrington argues that the survival of the watch and transistor radio represents the "impossibility of extracting a pre-contact indigenous existence from contemporary cross-cultural indigenous experience" (528-29). So too the story of Tremble Dancer is one of multi-cultural relationships, affairs of the heart, that cannot be abolished by tribal law: "Turning back to the text, one might consider the love that persists between the narrator and 'Tremble Dancer' the story's representative 'Urban,' as a force of nature that cannot be contained, despite the strict rulings of the Tribal Council against cross-cultural relationships" (Farrington 530). In the rewriting of history and the destruction of white society, new status groups emerge. Indians seek an absolute aboriginal identity and destroy Indians who they believe are tainted in any way by white society. "Distances" is a story of social tensions on and off the reservation far more complex than white versus Indian. The Tribal Council is a dominant group over both Skins and Urbans. Although the Council wants to attain sovereignty on the reservation, there is evidence that at least some of the Skins desire some assimilation. The insistence on sovereignty on the reservation and the embracing of the exclusionary Ghost Dance has resurrected ancestors who may ultimately destroy the modern day traditionalists--Skins, and Urbans alike.

Farrington concurs that "Distances" is an identification of social groups in conflict beyond Indians versus white society: "This apparent withdrawal from the

collection's [*The Long Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*] featured community and 'reservation realist' aesthetic affords Alexie the critical distance to examine the exclusionary principles that underlay the formation of American Indian communities, and the value of these principles for the individual members" (Farrington 521). In fact, through Alexie's representation of the Tribal Council, it is clear that sovereignty has been narrowed to a particular intra-tribal belief, absolute and unyielding in ideology. Farrington argues that in "Distances" the Ghost Dance isn't one of hope: "Far from uniting Indians, this apocalypse has rendered unbridgeable the gaps (being another of the title's 'distances') between reservation and urban Indians, a division now fully activated at a cellular level, causing the atrophy and death of those with the 'sickness' brought on by living off the reservation" (528). Farrington points out that the distinction between those who live on the Reservation "Skins" and those who live off "Urbans" dissolves the Ghost Dance as a unifying force into a "simple and unremitting distillation of the original ghost Dance message: belong or begone" (Farrington 528). Farrington cites an interview of Sherman Alexie in which the author comments on the debate between sovereignty/nationalism and assimilation:

> Indians are celebrated for questioning the dominant power structure, the white power structure. But we're not very good at questioning our own power systems . . . It is not just about figuring out my own identity and figuring out who I am, but figuring out Indians' place in the world and the way Indians treat each other, the good and bad of us . . . I think all too often Indian art only seeks to celebrate Indians, to validate Indians, rather than presenting us in more complex ways. (Alexie qtd. in Farrington 538)

In the social groups created in Alexie's stories, power struggles ensue beyond the primary historical conflict of white society versus Indians. Although history does not record the elimination of the dominant group by Native Americans, Alexie suggests that tribal sovereignty creates its own power structure every bit as destructive. Tribal law and values seek to define the authentic Indian. So too, the assimilated Indian seeks to impose his own definition of the real self. Assimilation acknowledges a shared history with white society; sovereignty looks to exclude that shared history. Authenticity is capital—sovereignty's currency is the traditional Indian, assimilation values the Indian beyond his ethnicity. Laying claim to the authentic Indian creates numerous conclusions as to identity and true "Indianness." With multiple definitions of Indianness, class stratification eventuates and the unity of the tribe grounded in the land fractures and shatters. The new history of Native Americans includes the power struggle with white society but sovereignty and assimilation create new social groups aligned by identity rather than land rights. Who will prove to be the dominant force in the intertribal struggle for power? Only time will tell.

### *Indian Killer*: Indianness or Insanity?

In his 1996 novel, *Indian Killer*, Sherman Alexie precedes his story with a quote by Alex Kuo: "We are what/We have lost." This quote foreshadows the thesis of Alexie's thriller in which an unidentified individual coined "Indian Killer" is brutalizing and murdering white victims in Seattle. John Smith the protagonist is a Native American abducted at birth by white men and adopted in the black market by an affluent white family who love John and make every effort to support his ethnicity. John's placement into his adopted class group is literal as the helicopter removes him from his

impoverished reservation and finally descends, lowering the baby to his new place in the world: “Five acres of green, green grass. A large house. Swimming pool. A man and woman waving energetically. Home” (*IK* 7). Alexie describes Daniel and Olivia smith as “both white and handsome” (*IK* 7). Olivia Smith, described by Alexie more than once as a “white woman” rather than by name alone, takes the baby and immediately opens her blouse to breastfeed him, but the baby “discovers it is empty” (*IK* 7-8). With this the reader glimpses an inadequacy in this relationship from Alexie’s purview. John will grow up missing a natural part of himself—his Indianness. In losing his Indian culture the Kuo quote is a foreshadowing of John’s life in white society—he is an Indian who has lost himself in the earliest moments of his life.

*Indian Killer* opens at the Indian Health Service hospital in the late 1960s with John’s birth and abduction (*IK* 3). John’s placement into white society is unlawful and his coming of age therein is marked with struggles over his identity. The narrator describes John’s birth by his single Indian mother and tells how later in life John: “imagines his birth, his mother is sometimes Navajo. Other times she is Lakota. Often, she is from the same tribe as the last Indian woman he has seen on television” (*I K* 4). Olivia researches Native American culture as the “adoption agency” would not disclose his family background other than his mother was fourteen years old when John was born (*IK* 12). Daniel and Olivia have him baptized by Father Duncan “the only Indian Jesuit in the Pacific Northwest” (*IK* 13). In John’s upbringing, both parents try to expose John to his Indian culture (*IK* 20). Alexie is clear that Daniel and Olivia are not bad people. They love John and use their best efforts to facilitate his connection with his Native

American ethnicity. Despite their best efforts, John's ability to attain a sense of peace with his identity is never achieved.

Young John's role model, Father Duncan, is another Indian character who Alexie defines through the struggle with identity. As a Jesuit Indian, he is a product of both his ethnicity and the colonizers who oppressed Native Americans in the conversion to Catholicism. When John was six, Father Duncan takes him to the Chapel of the North American Martyrs in Seattle filled with stained glass windows graphically depicting "Jesuits being martyred by Indians" (*IK* 13-14). Father Duncan describes the scenes as "beautiful" (*IK* 14). Father Duncan explains that the Indians wanted to eliminate all whites from America but were unsuccessful because the Indians "didn't have the heart for it" (*IK* 7-8). Father Duncan sees the murdering of white men as beautiful and Indians as lacking the killer instinct to eliminate the colonizers who threatened them. In the Chapel, Father Duncan confesses to his struggle with identity: "'John,' Duncan said after a long silence. 'You see these windows? You see all of this? It's what is happening inside me right now.'" (*IK* 12). Duncan admits his personal conflict with both his Indian identity and his service in the Catholic Church that once oppressed and slaughtered Native Americans. Duncan's assessment of the slaughter of the Jesuits depicted in the stained glass arguably reflects his feelings of rage against white society and himself for not having the heart to fight against assimilation. Despite his placement into white society as a member of the clergy, Duncan's sense of his Indian identity is a feeling that overpowers his assimilated self. Duncan is a member of the Catholic Church, the Jesuit Order, which is a respected group in white society. He is not content with his class placement that

excludes his Indian identity. Not only does he feel turmoil in his place in society, he contemplates the slaughter of members of his own class (Jesuits).

Father Duncan continues to mentor John until the boy is seven, "Then, with no warning or explanation, Duncan was gone" (IK 12-13). Duncan is forced into retirement for his unstable behavior and sent to a retreat in Arizona: "He walked into the desert one week after he arrived at the retreat and was never seen again" (*IK* 16). Young John's mentor has disappeared and so too is the only Indian relationship that the boy has in his childhood. Alexie's Duncan vanishes due to the burdens of his assimilation into white society. Has assimilation erased Indianness and thus caused the man to disappear? Is Alexie suggesting that an Indian cannot successfully assimilate due to his core Indianness? Is Duncan suffering from mental illness that is the real cause of his disappearance or does his struggle with his identity lead to the contamination of his mind? Duncan's characterization does not resolve the issue, but his ultimate fate suggests that assimilation was too great a burden for Father Duncan.

John is the only Indian at St. Francis Catholic School (*IK* 17). Although he assimilates into school life with white friends and girlfriends, his identity as Indian creates a barrier to complete acceptance by his peers (*IK* 17). His girlfriends' fathers ultimately break up the relationships because John is "that dark one" (*IK* 18). The teachers at school were "sympathetic" of John's ethnicity: "If John happened to be a little fragile, well, that was perfectly understandable, considering his people's history. All that alcoholism and poverty, the lack of God in their lives" (*IK* 19). John declines the opportunity to go to college. Having read in high school about Mohawk Indian steel workers who built skyscrapers, "He thought it was the Indian thing to do" (*IK* 22). John

chose this vocation attempting to identify with his Indianness. He attempts to take on the lifestyle of Indian so as to belong to that ethnic group. It is clear that he is not interested in assimilation as Father Duncan was: "When asked by white people, he said he was Sioux, because that was what they wanted him to be. When asked by Indian people, he said he was Navajo, because that was what he wanted to be" (*IK* 32). The question is whether his decision to connect with his Indian self will result in a happier life as compared to his mentor.

As John's story unfolds it is unclear whether his turmoil over identity incapacitates him or his growing mental incapacity exacerbates his struggle with identity. John knows that he is Native American but his inability to identify parents or tribe leaves him falling short as Indian. Despite this perceived inadequacy, John places himself in the marginalized group of all Indians and stands there in firm opposition to white society. Hate of white society is the only connection to his Indianness. Alexie's depiction of John as a young man centers on the dance of rational and irrational thoughts that blurs the character's mind. The reader learns that as a twenty-seven year old construction worker, John continues to hear voices (*IK* 23). These voices villainize white society. Alexie describes John's hatred of his white boss (who calls John "chief"), the foreman that sets off John's internal rage: "John was embarrassed. He felt the heat build up in his stomach, rise through his back, and fill his head. It started that way. The heat came first, followed by the music. A slow hum" (*IK* 24). John fantasizes about pushing the foreman off of the ledge of the skyscraper and is thrilled with the idea of the foreman begging for John's help—"'that's what will feed me,' thought John. 'Fear in blue eyes'" (*IK* 25). As John watches a white coworker swinging a hammer on the thirty-third floor of the skyscraper

where they work, Alexie expresses the innermost core of John's rage and "In that last frozen moment, in that brief instant before the hammer struck again its explosion of flame, John knew exactly what to do with his life. John needed to kill a white man" (IK 25). Ethnicity overrides other variables in class stratification—John hates the poor white man as much as the rich white man (IK 28-9). Poverty or wealth is inconsequential—John hates all whites. John recognizes that Indians are not just a marginalized group but are disappearing like Father Duncan: "Somehow, near the end of the twentieth century, Indians had become invisible, docile. John wanted to change that. He wanted to see fear in every pair of blue eyes" (IK 30). John has returned to the original class structure in early America—Indians versus white society. White society literally robbed John of his Indianness in his own life. Is John's attempt to connect with his essential Indianness the reason for his hatred of white society? Are the voices he hears his legacy or his insanity? Either way, Alexie is not merely telling the story of a delusional man. The author constantly balances his delusional thoughts with justifiable outrage. He is a desperate man struggling to save Indians before they disappear. Does Alexie share his character's desperation? Are Indians at a crucial moment in modern time where their very preservation hangs in the balance?

Alexie's foil character to John is Marie Polatkin, an Indian woman attending the University of Washington in Seattle (*IK* 32). She is a Native American student activist on campus, has a job at the homeless shelter in downtown Seattle, and volunteers her services as the "sandwich lady" feeding the homeless (predominantly Native Americans) in the city (*IK* 34, 146). Unlike John, Marie grew up on the Spokane reservation with her Indian family. Like John, she wants to be Indian and pushes back against white society.

Unlike John she channels her fight through rational and controlled activism. Ultimately, however, Alexie reveals that like John she holds an internal rage against white society that is an essential facet of her Indianness.

Through Marie, Alexie reveals a class system more complex than Indians versus white society. Moreover, beyond John, Marie, and his other characters, Alexie as narrator inserts his own descriptions of his Indian class structure. Marie is the University of Washington's activities coordinator for the Native American Students Alliance and is "definitely not a Christian" (*IK* 32). Marie grew up on the Spokane Reservation and recalls when the Spokane Indian Assembly of God held a book burning on the reservation" (*IK* 32). Alexie introduces her at a powwow she organized "to protest against the University's refusal to allow a powwow" (*IK* 33). Marie endured a public school education (where her nose was broken four times). She desired an education and knew that she would not stay on her reservation where her peers preferred to stay. With this Alexie's class system identifies the intra-tribal divide caused by the pursuit of education as opposed to the pursuit of Indianness, as was the case of Marie's peers:

> They could speak Spokane as fluently as many elders, but they could barely read English. They were intelligent and humorous, and never wanted to leave the reservation. They had chosen that life, and Marie both resented and envied them. Because she did not dance or sing traditionally, and because she could not speak Spokane, Marie was often thought of as being less than Indian. Her parents, who did speak Spokane, had refused to teach Marie because they felt it would be of no use to her in the world outside the reservation. Her mother, the speech therapist at the tribal

> school, and her father, the principal, knew their bright daughter belonged in that larger world. Instead of teaching her about Spokane culture, they bought her books by the pound at pawn shops, secondhand stores, and garage sales. She read those books and many others, studied hard at school, and endured constant bullying and taunting from many of her peers. (*IK* 33-4)

Marie uses education as a way off of the reservation, "Now she was so afraid the reservation would pull her back and drown her in its rivers" (*IK* 34). Despite this choice, it is clear that Marie wants to be an Indian woman in an assimilated society. Through Marie, Alexie reveals another layer in his class system -- Indians who are "as John was, as she was, outcasts from their tribes . . . Some had never lived on their reservations and had very little connection to their tribes" (*IK* 38). That being said, these "urban Indians" usually according to Marie "held closely to his or her birth tribe" something John could not hold on to (*IK* 38). Similar to the characters in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto's* "Phoenix Arizona" and "Distances," Indianness according to Marie is measured by the degree to which one assimilates into white society: "Indians were always placing one another on an identity spectrum, with the more traditional to the left and the less traditional to the right. Marie knew she belonged somewhere in the middle of that spectrum and that her happiness depended on placing more Indians to her right" (*IK* 39). As Marie suggests, whites are not the only enemies of the assimilated Indian, Marie must face alienation from more traditional Indians as well. And yet, her fate in an assimilated world is yet to be revealed. Alexie points out that Marie's cousin is Junior Polatkin--a character from two earlier publications of Alexie—*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight*

*in Heaven* and *Reservation Blues* (*IK* 57). Between the two stories, Junior returns to the reservation after attempting to go to college where he impregnates a white student. She and their child leave him. Ultimately, Junior commits suicide. Like Father Duncan, Junior Polatkin does not find happiness in an assimilated life. At the same time, tribal life does not appear to be a path for either character. Alexie himself weighs in as narrator in *Indian Killer* and attempts to further explain his class system in the "Indian world, there is not much social difference between a rich Indian and a poor one. Generally speaking, Indian is Indian" except for those who assimilate into white society either via marriage or by affluent careers, in which case they abandon their Indianness and "keep only white friends" (*IK* 179). Alexie explains that "generally Indians of different classes interact freely with one another. Most unemployed or working poor, some with good jobs and steady incomes, but all mixing together" (*IK* 179). According to Alexie the point of distinction is inter-tribal differences understood only by Indians—"tribal distinctions were much more important than economic ones. The rich and poor Spokanes may hang out together, but that doesn't necessarily mean the Spokanes are friendly with the Lakota or Navajo or any other tribe. The Sioux still distrust the Crow because they served as scouts for Custer. Hardly anybody likes the Pawnee" (*IK* 179). Whites who pretend to be Indian are "gently teased, ignored, plainly ridiculed, or beaten" (*IK* 179). John, Marie, and the narrator Alexie all contribute to the construction of a complex class system which is defined and redefined by one's ethnicity and proximity to white society.

In the backdrop of Marie and John's characterizations, Alexie presents another class group based upon more traditional economic factors --Indians living in poverty in downtown Seattle under the Alaskan Way Viaduct: "When he worked downtown, John

visited the homeless Indians who congregated beneath the Viaduct and those in Occidental Park in Pioneer Square. . . Usually, he just walked by those real Indians, who sat in groups of three or four, nodding their heads when John walked past" (*IK* 144). Alexie clarifies that the homeless are not all alcoholics and John "was saddened that so many Indians were homeless and had no simple reasons to offer for their condition" (*IK* 144). Marie delivers sandwiches to the homeless Indians placing them in two class groups-- disabled or mentally ill and Indians:

> For the mentally disturbed, Marie knew these sandwich visits might be the only dependable moment in their lives. She also knew she delivered the sandwiches for her own sanity. Something would crumble inside of her if she ever walked by a homeless person and pretended not to notice. Or simply didn't care. In a way, she believed that homeless people were treated as Indians had always been treated. Badly. The homeless were like an Indian tribe, nomadic and powerless, just filled with more than any tribe's share of crazy people and cripples. So, a homeless Indian belonged to two tribes, and was the lowest form of life in the city. The powerful white men of Seattle had created a law that made it illegal to sit on the sidewalk. That ordinance was crazier and much more evil than any homeless person. (*IK* 146)

John's placement in Alexie's class system is elusive. His ethnicity is Indian but he is urbanized via his abduction at birth. He has no knowledge of his biological parents so unlike the other Indians, he cannot go back to his reservation. In a sense he too is homeless. Moreover, his mental illness shared with the Indians in the Viaduct make him

lower than "the lowest form of life in the city"—he is disabled by virtue of his mental illness, he is Native American, but he has no idea which tribe he belongs to. In the story, John quits his job working on the skyscraper and Alexie continues to move his character along a fine line between sanity and insanity. John sees beyond the myths created by white society--his clarity as to the prosperity of white man at the expense of the Indian's identity is unbearable to John who contemplates "how myths told too often became lies, and how lies told too often became myths. He looked at the city's skyline, understanding the myth and lies of its construction, the myths and lies of its architects. John knew there was one white man who should die for all the lies that had been told to Indians. Understanding that, he set down his gear and walked away from the construction site without saying a word to anyone" (*IK* 132). Ultimately his anguish comes to a head and Alexie depicts his last day. At two o'clock in the morning on the "last day" John sings a song about "water and forgiveness" taught to him by Father Duncan (*IK* 303). John is at the donut shop with Paul and Paul Too who continue to serve as witnesses to his mental deterioration: "They had learned to let these episodes run their course. Sometimes, John would come back. Sometimes, he would fall further into his little world. There was nothing to do but watch" (*IK* 306). John is rubbing his face repeatedly on the counter "wanting to wipe the brown away" (*IK* 306). Alexie continues to depict the throws of John's mania realistically but with compassion. John states that if he killed the two black men, society wouldn't care; he would only gain attention from the media if he killed white men (IK 308). Alexie blends insanity with rationality so much so the reader continues to wonder whether John is insane or painfully aware of the world around him. Despite his violent outburst at two men John sees as friends, Alexie brings the reader

back to John's fragile self—"'I'm sorry,' said John. 'I can't help it. Any of it'" (IK 309). It is unclear whether John refers to his behavior or the injustices of white society.

Stuart Christie in "Renaissance Man: The Tribal 'Schizophrenic' in *Indian Killer* places Sherman Alexie firmly in the class group of traditionalists and criticizes the manipulation of mental illness as an act of prejudice against bi-culturalism. Christie accuses Alexie of making the case that "racial purity" is the only means to Indianness and a mentally healthy Indian:

> In *Indian Killer*, schizophrenia (or its loose figuration as schizophrenic text) is used to several different purposes: to criticize the legacy of Anglo European modernism within American Indian letters; to pathologize discourses of mixed-blood identity using a specifically postmodern figure (what I call the tribal schizophrenic); and to participate within a broader movement in American Indian writing and criticism that aestheticizes the clinical experience of mental illness as the postmodern effect of indisputably destructive and violent dislocations in the lives and cultures of contemporary American Indians. These uses and abuses of the tribal schizophrenic and the schizophrenic text in *Indian Killer* succeed in deconstructing the legacy of Anglo-European modernism and the rhetoric of renaissance, but only at a significant cost: Alexie's novel solidifies racial purity as the guarantor of authentic American Indian experience. (2)

Christie charges that traditional American Indian writers such as Alexie exploit schizophrenia as a means to blame white society for the evisceration of the Native American mind: "I use the word *tactic* because *Indian Killer* also participates in a broader

movement (on the part of American Indian writers and scholars alike) that conveniently subordinates an embodied experience, schizophrenia, to the instrumentality of metaphor" (3). Christie criticizes Alexie (who suffers from bipolar disorder) for minimizing the complexities of the physiology of schizophrenia, and is unimpressed with a novel which focusses on the struggles of bi-cultural Native Americans in white society: "The representation of John's mania, moreover, simply revisits the by-now tired theme of alienated mixed-bloods forced to wander forever between tribal and white cultures" (17). The incidence of class stratification that moves beyond Alexie's characters and extends to the writer and his work will be further discussed later in this Chapter.

Immediately after John's suicide, he rises, naked, over the body embedded in the pavement. John notices his "brown skin" and walks directly into the desert for his long walk. Even in death, identity is primary. The desert is "Dark now, the desert was a different place. Colder and safer" (*IK* 413). In this desert may reside his Indian parents who John now seeks to find together with his "real name" (*IK* 413). In the afterlife, membership is still important. Here in the desert, John continues to seek his identity. The reader is left wondering whether John will find his Indianness in the afterlife. Alexie leaves the question unanswered. ***Further exploration of Alexie's class system that extends into the after-life and his stratification of the saved from the damned are addressed in Chapter 2 of this discussion.***

As *Indian Killer* concludes, Alexie's class system comes full circle back to the original division of Indians versus white society. Alexie suggests that this original division and membership in the marginalized group ultimately unifies Indians. Although John is suspected of being the Indian Killer, Alexie never confirms or denies this

conclusion. Marie believes that John killed no one, "He got screwed at birth. He had no chance. I don't care how nice his white parents were. John was dead from the start . . . John Smith didn't kill anybody except himself. And if some Indian is killing white guys, then it's a credit to us that it took over five hundred years for it to happen . . . Indians are dancing now, and I don't think they're going to stop" (*IK* 417-18). Marie points out that the death of Indians took place with colonial contact and that an Indian is dead when he has to live in white society. She views the presence of the unidentified Indian Killer with optimism as a sign of the Native American movement away from apathy and resignation toward a reclaiming of culture and self. How Indians are fighting back (violence and murder) to Marie is less important than the possibility of hopeful engagement and a return to life. Unquestionably, the characters in *Indian Killer* are looking to fight. In the last chapter Alexie describes "the killer" in a wooden mask sitting on a grave surrounded by Indians: "A dozen Indians, then hundreds, and more, all learning the same song, the exact dance . . . with this mask, with this mystery, the killer can dance forever. The killer plans on dancing forever" (*IK* 419-20). With this, Alexie confirms that the fight will continue and that for the killer, the elimination of white man is the only way for Indians to survive. Alexie suggests through Marie, John, and the killer that outrage and internal rage over an unjust white society are the shared attributes of Native Americans. Rage is essentially Indianness felt by all Native American membership--traditional, assimilated, homeless, tribe-less, and even insane.

### *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Indian Killer*: Intersections of Class and Criticism

While class stratification is evident in Sherman Alexie's stories, power struggles and the formation of status groups also eventuate in the analysis of his writing. As Stuart

Christie demonstrates, scholarship that explores good writing turns into a discussion of what constitutes a good Indian. In *Native American Literatures: An Introduction*, Suzanne Lundquist includes "Who are the Major Critics in the Field, and What are Their Arguments?" summarizing the primary Native American literary criticism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Lundquist identifies one critical topic, sovereignty, through Indian scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. (Sioux). Sovereignty recognizes, "first, that their ancestors weren't 'barbaric, pagan, and uncivilized,' and second that 'tradition provides the critical constructive material upon which a community rebuilds itself' (Warrior 95)" (Lundquist 280). According to Deloria, tradition (not just in literature, but in life) is the means to the rejuvenation and prosperity of Native Americans. Deloria's exploration of sovereignty is not limited to a survey of Native American literature. Instead sovereignty moves beyond the analysis of literary characters and creates specific ideologies in terms of the authentic Indian writer as traditional. As in Native American literature, the primary power conflict of Indians (here the literary critics/writers) versus white society is present. Critics such as Gregory S. Jay prioritize representation of Native American authors to the same degree as "'whiteness' studies—studies of the works of white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, Eurocentric males" and where the study of groups rather than of the individual is the focus of classic liberal theory (Lundquist 281-82). Then, the same intra-cultural fight for the authentic Indian painted by Alexie in stories such as "Distances" and *Indian Killer* emerges in literary analysis. Literary critic and author Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is an advocate of representation through education but is highly critical of Native American literature (such as *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*) taught in universities: "they are taught in isolation, as

examples of marginalized voices, or because they maintain desired images of 'vanishing' Indians—drunks, misfits, socially misguided or morally corrupt humans" (qtd. in Lundquist 283). The ability to write about Native American life without sacrificing characters' Indianness is a matter of authenticity which highlights the intra-cultural tension between reservation and assimilation: "In current Native discourse authenticity is inextricably connected to sovereignty. There are two kinds of sovereignty being discussed in contemporary circles—one is land-based and nationalistic, the other is concerned with intellectual rights. Intellectual rights entertain ideas about who should possess, define, study or write about Native individuals and cultures" (Lundquist 286). According to Lundquist, literary critics who support sovereignty in literature believe that characters such as Victor sour the sanctity of tradition expressed by characters such as Thomas. Critics such as Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee) qualify that "such portraits not only represent just one side of Indian existence, but more unfortunately conform readily to Euramerican readers' expectations that the American Indians are doomed by firewater" (Owens qtd. in Lindquist 284). Owens fears that Indianness is lost in pursuit of balancing the interests of reader and subject matter, "That is, readers are amused and charmed, even threatened, by the behaviors of Erdrich's and Alexie's characters without understanding their underlying compassion and moral vision" (Lundquist 285). Accordingly status groups emerge amongst analysts of Native American literature. The source of division is authenticity and stratification ensues with multiple definitions of the real Indian.

While Christie classifies Alexie as a traditional writer, Lundquist labels Alexie's literature "cosmopolitan" another classification based on Native American writers who

explore assimilation in their texts. Relying on the principles of sovereignty and exclusion, "A nationalist believes that it is time for Native people to exclude any European or Euroamerican influence from a developing Native aesthetics" (Lundquist 291). Cosmopolitans, in contrast, "can translate between different bodies of knowledge" (Lundquist 292). Lundquist assigns capital to Alexie's version of Indianness in the postmodern era where "meaning begetting paradigms are based on multiplicity (cross-cultural and dialogic experiences with reality) rather than on dualities (us and them; male and female; black and white; good guys and bad guys; civilized and uncivilized constructions of reality)" (Lundquist 292). A cosmopolitan interpretation of the authentic Indian creates another status group or shared ideology to the exclusion of the nationalist perspective in literature and literary analysis. There is no consensus amongst scholars as to the value of Alexie's literature. Nonetheless the currency is Indianness and Alexie's admission into a status group of Native American writers is dependent upon that group's determination as to whether his writing reflects an "authentic" Indian experience.

Throughout *Indian Killer*, Alexie depicts the debate over what constitutes authentic Native American literature. He frames one status group in his class structure through Marie who identifies another type of Indian--"Wannabe Indian"—"a white man who wanted to be Indian, and Marie wanted to challenge Mather's role as the official dispenser of 'Indian Education' at the University" (*IK* 58). Marie realizes that her white professor Dr. Mather's reading list is not authentic Indian literature because it includes some level of contribution by a white author, publisher, or editor (*IK* 58-9). Mather counters "One would hope that we can all benefit from a close reading of the assigned texts, and recognize the validity of a Native American literature that is shaped by both

Indian and white hands" (*IK* 60-1). Marie names "real Indian" writers writing "real Indian books. Simon Ortiz, Roberta Whiteman, Luci Tapahonso . . . Elizabeth Woody, Ed Edmo . . . Jeanette Armstrong" (*IK* 67-8). Marie creates status groups of Native American writers based upon ethnicity. The authentic Indian writer is one who is a full-blooded Native American. Inclusion into Marie's prestigious group is dependent on the exclusion of white society from the literary process.

Through her perspective of class, Marie points to that element of identity which disqualifies Mather as being an authentic Native American scholar—he lacks the primal rage to enable him to create or teach authentic Native American literature. Where Mather appreciates Indian history as something of beauty, a real Indian (according to Marie) is outraged: "'If those dead Indians came back to life, they wouldn't crawl into a sweathouse with you. They wouldn't smoke the pipe with you. They wouldn't go to the movies and munch popcorn with you. They'd kill you. They'd gut you and eat your heart" (*IK* 314). Marie believes that a white author or scholar cannot speak to Indianness because rage cannot be learned and is only inherited. Indianness post European contact is not beautiful, it is violent, oppressive and an evisceration of the self as it was meant to be.

Jack Wilson is a secondary character in *Indian Killer* who adds to the debate over authentic Native American literature. A white man who was an orphan growing up in foster homes in Seattle, Jack wanted to be an Indian "for the communal lifestyle" (*IK* 157). Despite his blonde hair and blue eyes he comes up with a farfetched theory that he is in fact part Shilshomish and related to the shaman Red Fox who had the American name Joe Wilson (*IK* 158). Later he becomes a police officer who works homicide then retires due to an injury and writes murder novels featuring an Indian protagonist,

Aristotle Little Hawk (*IK* 157-162). Wilson hears about the "Indian Killer" who has scalped and murdered one and possibly two more including a young child and "wondered if a real Indian was capable of such violence. He knew about real Indians" (*IK* 178). Alexie explains that despite his fixation with the culture, "Wilson had never come to understand the social lives of Indians" (*IK* 179). In order to write his novel *Indian Killer*, Wilson eavesdrops on conversations of Indians or hangs out at an Indian bar where he talks to the patrons (*IK* 185, 231-2). When Wilson arrives at the bookstore for his book reading, he is being protested with signs stating: "ONLY INDIANS SHOULD TELL INDIAN STORIES" (*IK* 263). While the sign is seemingly straightforward, Alexie argues that identifying real Indians is not as simple.

## Conclusion

Class happens in stories such as "This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," "Distances," and *Indian Killer*. Alexie's working-class is a tribe shattered into social groups orbiting the Spokane Reservation constantly manipulated by colonialism, American law, and conflicting tribal values. Capital in this class arrangement is the authentic Indian. The question left unanswered by Alexie is who holds the capital—Thomas or Victor?--The outcast or the disenfranchised? Literary critics analyzing Alexie's stories exclude them as representative of authentic Indian literature, tolerate them as reflective of reservation realism, or celebrate their realistic portrayal of contemporary Native America. Perhaps this quest to write or analyze the authentic novel is yet another assault on Native Americans--Are writers and analysts attempting to reflect the authentic Indian or further imprison his modern day truth? In the perpetual class stratification resulting therefrom, will the authentic Indian emerge or disappear after all?

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## Chapter 2: Placement of "God" as Oppressor or Savior in Sherman Alexie's Status Groups

### Introduction: God as Savior or Supreme Colonizer in *Reservation Blues* and "The Theology of Cockroaches"

Because religion is a primary facet of both new American and Native American identities in the colonial era and beyond, it merits its own discussion in terms of class. This is not to imply that religion creates a separate class system in Sherman Alexie's texts. Rather, in texts such as *Reservation Blues* and poetry such as "The Theology of Cockroaches," Alexie weaves his religious status groups into the fabric of his class structure just as religious membership is seamlessly interwoven in the traditional American class system with other variables such as income and education. This chapter views Alexie's class system from a spiritual or religious lens and examines its impact on "Indianness" or the identity of his Indian characters. For purposes of this discussion (as in Chapter 1), class stratification refers to the way in which Alexie's characters are separated from one another, "arranged," and "placed" in his fictional society, on and off of the reservation. Class stratification based upon religion from a traditional historical perspective first divides Indians adhering to aboriginal practice from white missionaries seeking to convert "savages" to Christianity. Alexie adds additional layers to this traditional division between aboriginal spirituality and Christianity. That is, through his texts, Alexie's class system is not so much about the identification of Indians as aboriginal theologians or assimilated Christians, but instead focusses on the placement of God or the Higher Power with or against Native Americans. Is God an oppressor or

protector of the oppressed? Is the Higher Power with Indians or against them? Are Indians by virtue of ethnicity alone eternally damned? The result is Alexie's modern day Indian who has not just lost faith in God, but has lost faith in himself as Indian.

This discussion begins with the anthropological and legal evolution of Native American spirituality as a means to clarify the numerous references made by Alexie in constructing this stratum of his class system. The interference of the United States government with aboriginal spirituality sets the stage for the next part of this discussion. Here Alexie presents Indians that either abandon religion or feel displaced from the spiritual world. The discussion then looks at Alexie's Indian characters that try to hold on to religion despite their fear that Jesus Christ or a Higher Power is situated in white society to oppress Native Americans. The analysis concludes with Alexie's placement of self into his spiritual class system and the impact said placement has on his Indian identity. ***As in the first Chapter's discussion, this discussion contends that through his constructed class system, Sherman Alexie exposes the war over Indian identity. Chapter One argues that this battle over identity is in fact a lethal assault originating with colonialism and threatening the survival of Native Americans today. Chapter Two argues that through his class system, Alexie's characters define the theology of Indianness as recognition of inherited oppression, present day persecution, and eternal damnation.***

## Preliminary Matter: Legal and Anthropological Context for Alexie's Spiritual Class System

Throughout his writing, Sherman Alexie references the United States government's assault upon aboriginal spirituality and the impact of that assault on Indian identity. Stratification in Alexie's spiritual class system begins with white society's

attempts to colonize America and convert Indians to Christianity. In 2011, anthropologist John Alan Ross published his ethnography *The Spokan Indians* covering forty years (1968-2008) of his research on the Spokane Reservation. Ross defines aboriginal religion of the Spokane Indians as "supernatural animism, and thereby inextricably related to a person's ever present environmental interpretation and resounding behavior" (665). Accordingly, the Spokane Indians' aboriginal beliefs attribute a "soul" or higher power to inanimate objects, plants, animals, and natural phenomena. Magic plays a major part in aboriginal religion "since animism (snunx en'n'e –'to believe in') was based upon the ability to affect change through ritual, individual tutelary power, animate spirit hierarchy, *shamanism* . . . and even sorcery" (Ross 667). Ross notes that mythology is used to explain "and even verify the origins of the natural and supernatural environments, and the coming of animals, plants and later people" (665). Mythology also "explained and delineated moral prohibitions and why humans were required to behave in certain ways within the natural and human environment" (Ross 665). The Spokane elders recall this moral code as essential. Ross notes that, "Recordings of the late 19th century show impressions that the Indians were a highly Pius, ethical, and peaceful group" (51).

Ross reports that 1801 is the earliest recorded time of European contact in the Spokane territory (51). Ross's anthropological findings are clear that white colonials and missionaries irreparably harm Spokane theology: "well-meaning Christian missionaries dramatically and irrevocably devastated the once-receptive Spokan culture, which in turn had other long-term effects. Basically, the two-belief systems—Christianity and animism—were diametrically opposed" (60). As a result, missionaries seek a total conversion of the Spokane Indians to either Christian or Protestant faith. Ross notes that

conversion has a broad scope well beyond religion: “Even worse, for the Protestant to consider it a success, 'A total and external transformation conversion was deemed necessary, and the Anglo-Protestant approach demanded ultimately the obliteration of Indian culture in its entirety – language, religion, ceremonies, social patterns (Prucha 1988, 4:134)’" (Ross 61). Accordingly the impact of missionaries is felt in all parts of Spokane culture, and the identity of the Indians is annihilated in the name of religion.

Ross indicates that while the Indians are interested in “certain aspects of the white man’s material culture” they resist religious conversion. (66). The moral code of animism causes the Indians to question the behavior of the missionaries, “for example, in 1881, a Spokan chief complained of hypocrisy to Reverend George L. Deffenbaugh (which Coleman quoted): 'You put on long faces and worship God [.] Then turn around and steal, tell lies, drink whiskey, play cards, etc. - What good is your religion?' (1985:44)” (Ross 66-67). Despite the resistance to religious conversion, other aspects of cultural assimilation are achieved. The goal of missionaries is to contain and centralize the Spokane Indians, so as to better control them. Missionary activity therefore includes:

> . . . making the Indians dependent upon a market economy and urban centers for acquiring farm and household goods, which are based on a monetary system. This, along with prevailing antagonistic attitudes by whites, greatly limited the logistics and movements of the Spokane away from traditional areas of subsistence. As a result, numerous eastern Plateau polyadic relationships were disrupted. Other harmful long-term factors included ever-increasing encroachment of Anglo agribusiness, as well as tribalization, the reservation system, and the accompanying religious and

political factionalism. (Ross 67)

Accordingly, the concentration of Spokane Indians on a reservation is not a natural movement of the people over time into sacred spaces, but rather a forced corralling of "savages" so as to control and assimilate them into Western culture. Limiting their dwelling place also includes limiting their sacred land and; thus, their ability to fully practice aboriginal faith is never again attainable.

At the same time that John Alan Ross is recording his impressions of Spokane life on the reservation, Native American theology becomes the subject matter of federal legislation in the United States. Understanding the circumstances surrounding the enactment of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (AIRFA) offers a unique perspective of white America's perceptions of aboriginal theology. In "The Significance of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978," Robert Michaelson discusses the legislative background surrounding the enactment of the AIRFA. The legislation is unprecedented in that the United States government, for the first time in its history, enacts a law that specifically "respects" a particular religion (Michaelson 95). That is, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 is arguably prohibited by the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . ." (The Constitution of the United States, Amendment 1). The United States government specifically sought to codify protection of Native American Religion when all other religions (and presumably that of Native Americans) are protected under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution (Michaelson 93-94). Michaelson argues that the unique relationship of Native Americans with the United

States government necessitates the specialized protection of the AIFRA—

> (1) tribes need protection from arbitrary governmental activity in a way that groups which have less intimate relations with governmental agencies do not; and (2) the Federal Government has special trust or fiduciary responsibilities toward them. As "nations" Indian tribes have a greater degree of sovereignty over their own affairs than do any other ethnic or religious groups. This rationale was critical in the passage of the AIRFA. In stressing the importance of tribal identity and of the elements which undergird that identity, such as "traditional religions," AIRFA both assumes the existence of a trust responsibility and supports tribal sovereignty. (Michaelson 94)

Ironically, the trust or fiduciary relationship identified by Michaelson is predicated on historical mistreatment of Native Americans by the United States government. The Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968, which ultimately evolves into the AIFRA of 1978, is identified by Michaelson as a significant change in attitude of the United States: "The story of American public policy and practice toward the religions of Native Americans is a dreary one indeed; it is characterized by a persistent and extensive hostility which is unparalleled in the history of governmental relations with religious traditions in this country" (Michaelson 96). Prior to 1934, the author argues that the United States attempts to "wipe out Native American religions" (Michaelson 96). In 1934, through the Indian Reorganization Act, tribes were given "more explicit autonomy over their own affairs, including their own religious practices" (Michaelson 96). However, the IRA, written in the style of western civilization, "was primarily an attempt to bring Indian

tribal government into greater conformity with generally accepted notions of democratic self-government. This goal did not coincide easily with religiously based tribal practices" (Michaelson 96). The IRA is a foreshadowing of the legislative duplicity in the AIRFA. On its face the IRA appears to promote religious freedom of Native Americans, while in application it is a means to define that "freedom" in terms of Western culture.

In reality governmental attempts to mitigate the oppression of Native Americans via the AIRFA are at best well-intended but ineffective, and are at worst insincere and nothing more than a politically contrived façade. Michaelson's research shows that the actual application of the AIRFA was not successful: "Very few of the recommendations for administrative action in the Task Force *Report* have been implemented, and none of the proposals for legislation have been followed" (98). Michaelson concludes that the AIRFA has had no impact and is really "basically a toothless Congressional resolution" (98).

While the AIRFA recognizes a trust responsibility or fiduciary relationship between Native Americans and the United States government, a majority of the courts choose to ignore that intention (Michaelson 101). A primary reason for Native Americans' failures in court have to do with a lack of recognition of the judicial system (and of society) of "the inextricable linkages in preliterate cultures between religion and culture and between religion and land" (Michaelson 104). This linkage is in contrast to Western scholarship that separates religion from culture (Michaelson 105). Despite the enactment of the AIRFA, Native American culture and theology remain misunderstood by the government and society as a whole in the late 20th Century when the federal law was promulgated. Despite the AIRFA, aboriginal theology is truncated and diluted by

white society: “As a result tribal religions appear as museum pieces, static entities which have little or no relation to the world about them today” (Michaelson 107).

The legal and anthropological evolution of Spokane theology reveals the detrimental impact of colonialism on Native American spirituality and identity. The conclusion--that Indian identity is forever harmed with the government’s attempts at spiritual conversion--supports the conflict of Native American spirituality felt by Sherman Alexie’s fictional characters in *Reservation Blues* and “The Theology of Cockroaches.” As Alexie intimates, this conflict is far greater than that of Christianity versus aboriginal faith. Alexie’s class system struggles to find a place for the Indian in the spiritual world and questions whether faith is available for his characters. The ultimate question is the placement of the Higher Power as Supreme Oppressor or Savior of Native Americans and, once again, Alexie provides no definitive answers.

**Real and Surreal Oppressors in Alexie’s Class System**

Alexie’s 1995 novel *Reservation Blues* is a story of Indians such as Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin who live on the Spokane Reservation in modern day society. They and their families live in extreme poverty, are harmed directly and indirectly through alcoholism, and cannot overcome their hardships to find a better life. Perhaps a Higher Power will save them or they will save themselves if they have faith and lead a good life. Conversely, perhaps a white “God” has destined them to failure and eternal damnation no matter how great their faith or efforts. Victor Joseph, like other Indians on the Spokane Reservation, lives a life of poverty and alcoholism: “He hadn’t gained any weight in thirteen years, but the clothes were tattered and barely held to his body. His wardrobe made him an angry man” (*RB* 12). Poverty has left Victor angry and even violent against

other Indians: “Thomas was not surprised by Victor’s sudden violence. These little wars were intimate affairs for those who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adult at the Trading Post and stand in line for U.S.D.A. commodity food instead” (*RB* 14). For Alexie, Victor symbolizes the Indian man on the Spokane Reservation overwhelmed by poverty: “Indian men like Victor roamed from place to place, set fires, broke windows, and picked on the weaker members of the Tribe” (*RB* 14).

Alexie further portrays Victor’s impoverished class group through shared abandonment. Victor’s father leaves his family on the Spokane Reservation and relocates to Phoenix (*RB* 57). Through a nightmare sequence, Alexie reveals the day that young Victor was abandoned by his mother and stepfather Harold:

> *“You ain’t going anywhere with us. You can go any damn place you please, but I don’t want no Indian kid hanging around us no more*.” **Harold** slammed the trunk shut, and the force knocked Victor to the ground. By the time he had gotten to his feet, **Harold** was sitting in the driver’s seat, turning the ignition. The car whined and whined but would not start. “*Wait for me*,” Victor called and ran to the driver’s window. He pounded on the glass while **Harold** turned the key again. Victor ran into the house to find his suitcase. He ran from room to room. When he finally found it stuffed under a bed, he heard the car start outside. (*RB* 107)

Not only is Victor abandoned by his parents and stepfather, he is in a sense abandoned by the Catholic Church through his molestation by a priest when he was nine years old (*RB* 147-8). Catholicism is a religion imposed on Native Americans by white missionaries in the colonial era. Victor is described as an Indian who practices Catholicism as a child

and is harmed by a priest. Victor's legacy of aboriginal spirituality, tarnished by colonialism, is replaced with Catholicism that causes him harm. Not surprisingly, Victor's molestation leads him to reject his Catholicism, and he closes himself off to aboriginal spirituality as well. When Thomas offers Victor his eagle feathers as a means to protection, Victor curtly replies, "'I told you to get that thing away from me,' Victor said. 'I don't believe in that shit'" (*RB* 218). Likewise, Victor refuses to acknowledge Big Mom's "magic" and place as a spiritual leader: "'She's just an old woman,' Victor shouted. 'She ain't magic. And even if she was, she's a million miles away. What the fuck can she do? Everything is a million miles away. It's all lies, lies, lies. All the whites ever done was tell us lies'" (*RB* 230). With this outburst, it is evident that Victor's affiliation is atheism underscored by hopeless resignation. Victor sees faith as a façade. As a child, Victor looks to his family, his Church, and his tribe to protect him; but all abandon him. White society's religion is given to him as a child in the form of Catholicism promising to protect him, but he is molested instead. His aboriginal spirituality is traditionally understood to be magic and yet it is powerless to keep him safe. For Victor, aboriginal spirituality is a legacy that has abandoned him and is replaced by white theology that seeks to destroy him.

Junior Polatkin is Victor's closest friend. Junior has dreams of a better life: "He wanted a bigger house, clothes, shoes, and something more" (*RB* 18). Junior, unlike Victor, has a job on the reservation: "A job was hard to come by on the reservation, even harder to keep" (*RB* 13). Junior drives a water truck for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and is conscientious about his job despite pressure from his friend Victor: "'Let's knock off early and head for the tavern.' Junior ignored him . . . 'I've got work to do,' Junior said.

'I need to finish. It's my job.' Junior climbed into the water truck. Victor sighed deeply and climbed in, too. They'd had this same conversation for years'" (*RB* 20). Unlike Victor, Junior tries to be responsible and dreams of a better life. Like Victor, Junior is impacted by alcohol early in life, first through his parents' alcoholism. Junior tries to abstain from alcohol while he is young, but Victor's "friendship" unravels his restraint: "Junior never drank until the night of his high school graduation. He'd sworn never to drink because of his parents' boozing. Victor placed a beer gently in his hand, and Junior drained it without hesitation or question" (*RB* 57). Over and over Alexie demonstrates that while Junior may not be a man of faith in a spiritual being, he is a faithful and loyal friend to Victor: "It seems like Victor's always been there for me. After his real dad left and my dad died, we hung out a lot. We took turns being the dad, I guess. Sometimes all we had was each other" (*RB* 215). Junior does not place himself in aboriginal spiritual membership nor in Christian membership. However, he represents a group of the faithful in something unseen—a Higher Power, the support of friends—and hopes for a better life.

Victor, Junior, and the traditionalist Thomas Builds-the-Fire form a band called Coyote Springs in an effort to attain a better life and maybe even fame. The image of Coyote Springs practicing in a condemned building on the Spokane Reservation immediately suggests inherent obstacles that the band will face because of their Indian status. Not only does poverty serve as a backdrop for the band, alcoholism plays an immediate role in their efforts. Although they begin their first performance sober, Victor and Junior cannot resist their surroundings and "drank all the free booze offered" (*RB* 55). A week after Coyote Springs returns to the Spokane Reservation, having lost their

chance at a record deal, Junior commits suicide by climbing the water tower on the reservation and shooting himself with a stolen rifle (*RB* 247). Arguably, no matter how faithful or loyal Junior is, irrespective of his work ethic, he is destined to fail. One can argue that Victor chooses the destructive path that ultimately destroys him and Junior. An equally valid counterargument is that any effort made by Victor or Junior is pointless because for Alexie's Indians—irrespective of aboriginal, Christian, or atheist membership—there is no hope. At the end of the story, after Junior's death, Victor tries to give up alcohol and finds the courage to look for a job. (*RB* 290-2). The Tribal Council Chairman crumbles up Victor's resume and throws him out of his office. (*RB* 292). Humiliated and defeated again, Victor picks up his crumbled resume, steals five dollars, and buys a six-pack of beer at the Trading Post and, "That little explosion of the beer can opening sounded exactly like a smaller, slower version of the explosion that Junior's rifle made on the water tower" (*RB* 293). For these characters on the Spokane Reservation it seems that failure is their destiny and no amount of magic or prayer can prevent their ultimate demise. Alexie's class system includes Victor and Junior who either select atheism and reject religion, or feel rejected by any Higher Power that may exist. As Indians abandoning religion or abandoned by religion, they are clearly members of an oppressed group, but the identity of the oppressor is blurred—white society who places Indians in poverty? Indians who choose lives of resignation? A Higher Power who destines Native Americans to lives of failure? In *Reservation Blues,* Alexie does not answer these questions--or does he? Alexie's class system includes characters such as Junior and Victor who clearly fail in life. Other characters such as Thomas and Chess move forward hopefully but Alexie leaves their story unfinished in lieu of a happy

ending. Arguably, Indianness for Alexie is a realization that if a Higher Power exists--it is most likely a Supreme White Colonizer rather than a Savior for all humankind.

### The Faithful and Fearful Indians in Alexie's Status Groups

In contrast to the class group of Spokane Indians—such as Victor and Junior--who live without faith or feel abandoned by faith, Alexie offers a group who identify themselves as religious or faithful. The theology of these characters may be aboriginal or Christian but their Indianness is shaken by white society's influence on their spirituality. Through characters such as Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Chess Warm Water in *Reservation Blues*, religious affiliation includes a choice between Christianity and aboriginal spirituality but does not end there. Thomas represents the aboriginal practitioner while Chess has assimilated to Catholicism. Thomas lives as a traditional Indian faithful to his aboriginal spirituality. However, white society has limited his ability to practice traditional spirituality and relegated him to a reservation that is plagued by poverty and oppression. His tribe is no longer one spiritual community of Indians but includes membership of various theologies. Chess who lives on the Flathead Reservation regards herself as a faithful Catholic. However the fact that Christian and Catholic missionaries used religion as a way to oppress Indians creates an underlying question about whether their behavior was condoned by Chess's "Savior" Jesus Christ. Despite their different spiritual practices, Thomas and Chess share a fear as Indians that a higher being will not deliver them from oppression on earth and eternal damnation.

Chess and Thomas choose faith and self-reliance even though they face great hardships similar to Victor and Junior. Since Chess and Thomas make better choices, such as abstinence from alcohol and faith in some higher being, their choices may be

enough to overcome their legacy of oppression. In fact because of these choices, their lives do show promise for a better future. It is also possible that no matter what choices they make or how earnest their prayers, they are destined to fail on earth (as did Victor and Junior) and will be rejected by a White Sovereign in the afterlife. The life of Thomas Builds-the-Fire is every bit as oppressive and isolating as that of Victor Joseph and Junior Polatkin. All three men live in Wellpinit--the only town on the Spokane Reservation (*RB* 3). Thomas, like Victor and Junior, is "marked by loneliness" due to his role as "the misfit storyteller of the Spokane Tribe" (*RB* 4, 5). As the misfit storyteller, Thomas has grown up bullied by his own tribesmen: "Victor and Junior knocked Thomas over, pressed his face into the wet cement, and left a permanent impression in the sidewalk. The doctors at Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane removed the cement from his skin, but the scars remained on his face" (*RB* 13-14). Arguably, Thomas has even more of a reason to become bitter and violent as his own tribe isolates him. Instead he chooses tolerance and forgiveness and for this reason is able to maintain a sort of friendship with Victor and Junior: "After Victor's father died, Thomas had flown with Victor to Phoenix to help pick up the ashes. Some people said that Thomas even paid for Victor's airplane tickets. Thomas just did things that made no sense at all" (*RB* 17). Thomas' identity as Indian storyteller solidifies his embodiment of traditionalism. Likewise, Thomas' religion is rooted in his identity as Spokane Indian and he connects himself to the traditional practices and moral code of his ancestry: "Traditional Spokanes believe in rules of conduct that aren't collected into any book and have been forgotten by most of the tribe. For thousands of years, the Spokanes feasted, danced, conducted conversations, and courted each other in certain ways. Most Indians don't follow those rules anymore, but

Thomas made the attempt" (*RB* 4-5). Because of his tolerance, Thomas is able to join with Victor and Junior to form the band Coyote Springs—a chance at a future, a paycheck, and maybe even success. But even with this chance, Thomas is mindful of his moral code and responsibility to his ancestry:

> "You know," Thomas said between songs. "I hope we don't make it." "Make what?" Junior asked. "Make it big. Have a hit song and all that," Thomas said. "Why the hell not?" Victor asked. "I don't know. Maybe we don't deserve it. Maybe we should have something better in mind. Maybe something bad is going to happen to us if we don't have something better on our minds." (*RB* 72)

Although Thomas hopes for success, he is not willing to place fame before his traditional values.

In addition to being isolated within his tribe, Thomas faces abandonment issues (like Victor and Junior) at home. His mother Susan died of cancer when Thomas was ten years old and his father Samuel "had been drunk since the day after his wife's wake" (*RB* 22). Samuel is alive in *Reservation Blues*, "just staggering around the reservation, usually covered in piss and shit" (*RB* 57). Although Thomas is tolerant, his pain from the abandonment and isolation in his life is evident:

> He just wanted his tears to be individual, not tribal. Those tribal tears collected and fermented in huge BIA barrels . . . Thomas wanted his tears to be selfish and fresh. "Hello," he said to the night sky. He wanted to say the first word of a prayer or a joke. A prayer and a joke often sound alike on the reservation. "Help," he said to the ground (*RB* 100-1)

Alexie's characterization of Thomas' religion is aboriginal and very human. He is first a man in pain and secondly an Indian trying to connect to the spiritual world for help and comfort. He does not pray formally or ceremonially, but he reaches out for help in a humble, quiet way. There is a feeling that he is not entirely certain that his prayers are heard. While he asks the ground for help, he realizes that he may not find help on his reservation: "Thomas listened closely, but the other Spokanes slowly stretched their arms and legs, walked outside, and would not speak about any of it. They buried all of their pain and anger deep inside, and it festered, then blossomed, and the bloom grew quickly" (*RB* 175). Thomas sees these blooms of pain and anger overpowering his father, Victor, and Junior. Thomas laments as these blooms of pain and anger blossom across his beloved reservation.

Chess Warm Water and Thomas meet coincidentally or by divine intervention, Alexie does not say which. Chess, a Flathead Indian, attends a Coyote Springs concert at the Tipi Pole Tavern, and her attraction to Thomas, the lead singer, is immediate (*RB* 55-6). Both are awkward and shy with one another, but quickly become friends. They discover that they share backgrounds of poverty and family hardship, but they are not lost to these circumstances. Chess and her sister Checkers live on the Flathead Reservation in a government home. Alexie points out that Chess' life on the Flathead Reservation is no different than Thomas' life on the Spokane Reservation: "Those government houses looked the same from reservation to reservation. The house on the Flathead Reservation looked like Simon's house on the Spokane Reservation" (*RB* 49). Despite her poor home, Chess cares for it with pride: "The kitchen sat in the center, while the living room, two bedrooms, and bathroom surrounded it. Nothing spectacular, but spotless by

reservation standards. A clean, clean house" (*RB* 65). It is Chess' dignity in the face of poverty that attracts Thomas to her: "He took a sip of his coffee and never even noticed it was cold. How do you fall in love with a woman who grew up without electricity and running water, who grew up in such poverty that other poor Indians called her family poor?" (*RB* 67). While Thomas, Chess, and Checkers fall into a class group impacted by poverty, they live with a moral code and faithfulness that brings a sense of dignity to their dismal membership.

Like Thomas (and Victor and Junior), Chess and her sister Checkers have also faced abandonment: Living alone, Chess and Checkers always leave the lights on in their home—at night or when they are not home: "'We leave them on,' Chess said. 'Just in case.' 'In case of what?' Thomas asked in his mind but remained silent. 'Our parents are gone,' Checkers said" (*RB* 62). When Chess and Checkers see Thomas' father Samuel in a drunken stupor, they recall their own father and his abuse of alcohol: "Checkers also saw her father in Samuel's face, in Thomas's eyes. She saw that warrior desperation and the need to be superhuman in the poverty of a reservation. She hated all of it" (*RB* 114). Although living on different reservations, Thomas and Chess share poverty, alcoholism, and abandonment as common aspects to their upbringing. However, despite poverty and alcoholism in their homes, Chess and Thomas do not drink. Chess asks this question of Thomas when they first meet: "'Really?' Chess asked Thomas again to make sure. Maybe she had snagged the only sober storyteller in the world. 'You mean, you've never drank. Not even when you were little?' 'No,' Thomas said. 'I read books'" (*RB* 75). Thomas learns that while he chooses to abstain from alcohol on the Spokane Reservation, Chess and Checkers also abstain from alcohol on the Flathead Reservation: "'Did you

ever drink?' Thomas asked Chess after he came back inside the house. His father still snored on the table. 'No.' 'Not ever?' 'Neither of us ever drank,' Chess said. 'We were afraid of it,' Checkers said. 'Even when we wanted to drink, we were too scared, enit?'" (*RB* 114). Instead of sitting in bars on the reservation, Chess and Checkers find comfort attending their church, helping with communion, and serving as the church choir (*RB* 106). Fearful of succumbing to alcoholism like their family members, Chess and Thomas abstain. Thomas chooses his aboriginal practices over alcohol; Chess chooses her Catholic church. Ultimately Chess and Thomas decide to leave their respective reservations and move together to the City of Spokane: "Spokane, a mostly white city, sat on the banks of the Spokane River. Spokane the city was named after the Tribe that had been forcibly removed from the river" (*RB* 258). As the name suggests, the oppression Thomas and Chess carry because of their Native American status will follow them to Spokane. However, Chess has a job as a telephone operator and will support them while Thomas looks for work. They plan to be married and have "lots of brown babies" (*RB* 284). The ending is hopeful, but unmistakably marked by fear: "'I'm scared,' Chess said to Thomas. 'Chess,' he said, 'we're all scared'" (*RB* 305).

Chess and Thomas live a spiritual life in different ways--Chess practices Catholicism, while Thomas is of a traditional aboriginal faith. Both question aspects of their religion, but both clearly have faith, and through it the capacity to love instead of hate: "'God created all of this. I mean, how can you look at all of this, all this life, and not believe in God? . . . Do you think everything is accidental?' 'No,' Thomas said, looked at his hands, at the reservation as it rushed by. He loved so much. He loved the way a honey bee circled a flower. Simple stuff, to be sure, but what magic" (*RB* 167). Religion for

Chess and Thomas on the reservation is not simple and not certain. The colonists and missionaries sought to convert and/or destroy the Indians in the name of religion. Alexie presents this contradiction through Thomas' struggle with Christianity: "All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted 'Jesus Christ' as they ran swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you're trying to sleep, when you're praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter?" (*RB* 167). Chess provides an answer to the contradiction of Christianity through the idea of free will: "'Don't you understand that God didn't kill any of us?' Chess asked. 'Jesus didn't kill any of us.' 'But they allowed it to happen, enit?' 'They didn't allow it to happen. It just happened. Those soldiers made the choice. The government made the choice. That's free will, Thomas. We all get to make the choice. But that don't mean we all choose good'" (*RB* 168). Despite Chess' rebuttal, Thomas exposes the uncertainty of faith for Native Americans: "'How can you go to a church that killed so many Indians?' Thomas asked. 'The church does have a lot to atone for,' Chess said. 'When's that going to happen.' 'At the tipi flap to heaven, I guess.' 'I don't know if I can wait that long. Besides, how do we know they're going to pay for it? Maybe we got it all backwards and you get into heaven because of hate'" (*RB* 166). For Alexie, class stratification on the basis of religion moves beyond placement of Indians with aboriginal practice or Christianity. In Alexie's class system there are various spiritual groups--those who abandon faith, are abandoned by faith, faithful traditionalists, and devout Christians. However, all of these members by virtue of shared Indianness fear that a Higher Power, if one exists, is their ultimate and eternal Oppressor. In Alexie's class system, it is less important to establish a hierarchy between Jesus Christ or The Great Spirit as it is to be

sure that God is not the Supreme White Colonist who seeks to consume and destroy Native Americans. Alexie does not have all of the answers, nor do his characters. All they can do, on or off the reservation, with or without religion, is live their lives and wait.

**Placement of "God" in Alexie's Class System—"The Theology of Cockroaches"**

In "Freed From What and for What? The Differing Liberation Theologies of Grant Tinker and Sherman Alexie," Rebecca Huskey argues that the poem "The Theology of Cockroaches" exemplifies the tension of Native American theology as depicted by Alexie (Huskey 413). The setting in Alexie's poem is not the typical setting of the Indian reservation, but instead is a "tension-filled domestic scene" in which a cockroach has been spotted in the four-bedroom home of the narrator and his wife (Huskey 413). This is not Alexie's typical impoverished and unemployed class of Indians living on the reservation. This is not the typical broken home with characters impacted by abandonment. Alexie's Indian characters in this poem are a married couple who are both employed and own a respectable home off of the reservation in modern-day suburban America. And yet, this couple arguably identify with the same spiritual tension of Victor, Junior, Chess, and Thomas in *Reservation Blues*. Huskey contends that the tension of the poem is created by Alexie's comparison of the cockroach to "fire, Moses, the burning bush and Christopher Columbus, things and people of power, and of potential devastation" (Huskey 413). This comparison has multiple implications. Fire is a destructive force on earth or a means to warmth and nourishment. Christians view fire as symbols of both fury and salvation. Those condemned for eternity will experience the fires of hell. However, fire is associated with the Holy Spirit, and God appears to Moses in the Old Testament's Book of Exodus as a burning bush. Moses is chosen by God to

deliver the Israelites from captivity. Christopher Columbus is the explorer who discovers America, the land of the Native Americans. In arriving in North America, Columbus begins the colonization of the land and the persecution of the Indians. Alexie's cockroach may be a source of devastation or salvation—the Indian couple in "The Theology of Cockroaches" cannot be certain which force has entered their home.

The direct storyline of the poem is that the narrator and his wife fear that a cockroach has infiltrated their home, but the possibility that the insect is near them incites the couple's larger inherent fears. Self-validation is important to Alexie's narrator, who amidst the cockroach discovery, feels compelled to explain that he and his wife are respectable, established members of society. It is important to the narrator to explain that while he grew up in poverty, "he has never been so poor that roaches were a significant concern" (Huskey 413). Neither the cockroaches nor poverty ever define him or oppress him: "I've never been that poor, never/woke to a wall filled with cockroaches spelling out my name, never/stepped into a dark room and heard/ the cockroaches baying at the moon" ("Theology of Cockroaches" lines 21-25). The narrator takes a moment to point out that he and his wife Diane, "we are homeowners" ("Theology" lines 28). He also wants to establish that his home is significant in size and amenities: "Diane saw the cockroach/in the bathroom, one of four bathrooms/in this large house . . ." ("Theology" lines 26-28). At the time the cockroach is discovered, the narrator and his wife have escaped poverty and have created a home for themselves in white society. The narrator is proud of their accomplishments, which should not be tainted by the presence of a cockroach in their respectable home.

The visceral fear of Indian characters such as Thomas and Chess is evident in the narrator in "The Theology of Cockroaches." The narrator's fear surfaces and escalates at "Impossible. /Impossible. Impossible. /Impossible. Impossible. /Impossible. The impossible cockroach/is not alone, I think cockroaches/are never alone, never hermits, never/the last one on the ship, never/the one who dies alone. ("Theology" lines 42-49). Choosing the word "impossible" as the first association with the insect, Alexie conveys the narrator's fear that the cockroach is more than a single insect on his bathroom floor. It is a destructive force that is potentially immortal or perpetual in nature. The narrator fears that the cockroach is impossible to destroy. The narrator says that Christopher Columbus is a cockroach and wants to believe that "Surely there would never again be a Columbus-like onslaught" (Huskey 414). Like Victor, Junior, Thomas, and Chess in *Reservation Blues*, the narrator's fear is bigger than the white man who has historically oppressed him. The greater fear is that God is really a vile creature that rewards hate and grants salvation to white society but not to the Indians. Given the potential immortal nature of the cockroach, the narrator speculates, ". . . it/could have been God, God, God/. . . God, /I ask Diane, how many humans have seen/God in person, truly seen God/take shape and form, how many?" ("Theology" lines 73-85). The narrator questions what God really is--Is God peaceful like a hummingbird? Or is God exclusive and destructive like Columbus? Huskey identifies this search for the identity of the cockroach:

> Could something potentially good, like god, come from a refuse-dwelling, coprophagic thing like a roach, or like Columbus? Can the awful come disguised as the good, or the good disguised as the awful? Alexie does not deny the existence of God in this poem, but emphasizes God's opacity.

> God clouds one's sight, God unsettles, God introduces the *unheimlich* into the home . . . Above all, this is clear: whatever God's nature may be, God humbles us and keeps us asking questions. (Huskey 414)

For Alexie's characters in "The Theology of Cockroaches" God may or may not take care of them, may or may not protect them, and may or may not save them. Class status that is defined by poverty or wealth is secondary to ethnicity that impacts every one of Alexie's characters in terms of theology and faithfulness. Irrespective of religious membership or a denouncement thereof, regardless of lives lived in faith or resignation, Alexie suggests that Indianness is defined in part by a fear that happiness on earth and salvation thereafter is inaccessible to Native Americans.

Alexie highlights his characters' fear in their effort to have faith. Alexie asks questions of aboriginal and Christian theology that he does not answer--If God sends the missionaries and Columbus, who sends the Indians? Who advocates for the Indians? Are the Indians the vile cockroaches to be eliminated? It is not clear what is present in the cockroach: "At first glance the individuals in 'The Theology of Cockroaches' seem to want liberation from the intruding roach. But they are not sure that they were even invaded at all" (Huskey 415). While the roach may not be real, Alexie demonstrates that his characters' fears are very real, their past is real, and whether or not God is their God is in question. Fear and uncertainty is very much a part of Alexie's depiction of Native American theology on and off the reservation. Both "The Theology of Cockroaches" and *Reservation Blues* end with Alexie's characters in fearful search for their salvation or their demise. The poem ends with the couple, on their knees in the bathroom, searching for the cockroach. The narrator concludes that: ". . . We are searching/for the cockroach

that might have been/a cockroach, or nothing at all." ("Theology" lines 93-6). Compare the couple's frantic search to Junior's nightmare in which he frantically searches for the white soldiers at the time of European contact: "He heard bugles. Cavalry bugles. 'From where?' A young Indian boy asked Junior. Junior whirled his horse, looked for the source of the bugle. Everywhere" (*RB* 143). Like the married couple in "The Theology of Cockroaches," Junior knows something vile is around him, and he and the Indian boy frantically search for the cavalry who are somewhere close by: "'Where are they?' The Indian men screamed as bullets cut them down. They fell, all of them, until only Junior remained . . . 'Drop your rifle!' The white voice shouted. 'Where are you?' Junior asked? . . . 'Where are you?' Junior asked again, and he heard only laughter. Then the attackers began to materialize. Soldiers. White men in blue uniforms" (*RB* 143). In the nightmare, Junior's unseen fears materialize into the white soldiers who have killed the Indians around him and now seek to destroy Junior. Junior's fear is inherited from the fears of his ancestors at the time of colonialism. It seems that Junior's enemy in his dream, in his ancestry, and in his life, is the white man. However, ultimately, Junior is destroyed at the hands of his good friend Victor. What is believed to be his ally is really his enemy. For Victor, Junior, Thomas, Chess and the married couple, good and evil blur, friend is foe. Alexie's depiction of religion is unraveled on and off the reservation for all status groups in his Native American class system.

## Conclusion: Turning Alexie's Class System Back on Alexie

Although *Reservation Blues* and "The Theology of Cockroaches" are written early in Alexie's career, his skepticism of religion is evident later in his life as well.

Consider an interview of Sherman Alexie by Bill Moyer in 2013 in which he discusses the duplicity of Abraham Lincoln (Moyer Interview 2013). Alexie explains that in 1862, one year prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln issues another Proclamation—an Order causing the simultaneous public execution of 37 Native Americans by hanging. Alexie identifies a United States President associated with emancipation of African Americans as causing the murder of Native Americans, "And, you know, this idea of Lincoln as this great savior. Which is true. But in deifying him, it completely, completely whitewashes the fact that he was also a complete part of the colonization of Indians, a complete part of the wholesale slaughter of Indians" (Moyer Interview 2013). Alexie's classification of Abraham Lincoln as a false savior calls into question the author's spirituality:

> BILL MOYERS: What saved you spiritually? What saved you inwardly?
>
> SHERMAN ALEXIE: Storytelling.
>
> BILL MOYERS: How so?
>
> SHERMAN ALEXIE: The age-old stories, you know, sort of an actual sacred nostalgia. And keeping all the ghosts alive, keeping all the memories alive. If you tell a story well enough, everybody in it is right there. So nobody ever dies. (Moyer Interview 2013)

Listening to Alexie answer the question one can easily mistake him for Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Alexie believes in the magic of his ancestry and of his storytelling. Alexie gains peace from his storytelling. If a Higher Power cannot or will not give Indians eternal life, according to Alexie, than their stories may be able to fill this spiritual void. Thomas Builds-the-Fire is uncertain about his belief in a higher being, and so was Alexie at in the

early part of the 1990s, around the time that *Reservation Blues* was written. Reflecting on his 1993 publication of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* Alexie says: "One thing: I wrote this book in the middle of a decade-long effort to believe in God. So it's curious to see the uncynacal God hunger in that boy I was" (*LRTFH* xiv). Conversely in 2013, Alexie recognizes the duplicity of good and evil in religion and takes the position that God does not exist:

> SHERMAN ALEXIE: Because I question everything. Because even though I do believe in the sacred, I believe just as strongly in questioning what people think is sacred. Because we're humans and we make mistakes. So, you know, I do my best to point out our weaknesses. And people don't like that. And the weaknesses of our institutions and the weaknesses of our politicians and the weaknesses of our religions. Once again, 9/11, was the event for me. 9/11 turned all sorts of people into fundamentalists who weren't otherwise, on the left and the right, in the Christian worlds and in the Muslim worlds. And I refuse to participate.
>
> BILL MOYERS: So what do you mean by *Blasphemy*?
>
> SHERMAN ALEXIE: I don't believe in your God. And "your" means the royal "your."
>
> BILL MOYERS: Do you believe in your God?
>
> SHERMAN ALEXIE: No.
>
> BILL MOYERS: What do you believe in?
>
> SHERMAN ALEXIE: Stories. Stories are my God. (Moyer Interview 2013)

With this, placement of God in Alexie's class system remains unresolved because a Higher Power and all power in the author's class system is synonymous with the oppression of Indians. Abraham Lincoln causes the slaughter of Native Americans. In the name of a higher being, Muslim extremists kill thousands of Americans in the September 11th terrorist act in New York City. In the era of American colonialism, Christians destroy Indian society in the name of Jesus Christ. Through his characters, Sherman Alexie exposes the duplicity of "God" in his class system and the hypocrisy of religion in his life. Like his characters, Alexie doesn't have all of the answers. Native American spirituality on and off the reservation is a fistfight between fear and faith, and the ultimate winner remains undetermined.

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## Chapter 3: Sex and Sexuality--Levers Placing Self and Others in Alexie's Class System and Closer to the Authentic Indian

### Introduction: Sex and Sexuality in *The Toughest Indian in the World*

It is hard to ignore the presence of sex in every one of the nine short stories in Sherman Alexie's 2000 publication, *The Toughest Indian in the World*. Sex is stability, monogamy, infidelity, sexuality, homophobia, erotica, "safe and casual," genomics, eugenics, legacy and even (despite Alexie's tendency to be cynical) happiness and love. This last observation is noteworthy in terms of Alexie's survey of the authentic Indian. While earlier works cited thus far such as *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Indian Killer* tend to portray his Indian characters with a sense of hopelessness in a white world, the author is unmistakably hopeful in *Toughest Indian*. That is, while utilizing sex and sexuality as a means through which Indian and white characters place themselves into his class structure, the author adds new dimensions to his consideration of the authentic Indian. Sex and sexuality move Alexie's Indian characters closer to a better understanding of Indianness, even when at times authenticity transcends ethnicity. The authentic Indian is married, divorced, straight, gay, monogamous, invested in bi-cultural relationships or diametrically opposed to them. The authentic Indian moves beyond these status groups and labels as well. Alexie's class structure changes as the authentic Indian transcends ethnicity. Class stratification is not as binary as the reservation versus white society or a heterosexual versus homosexual lifestyle. Irrespective of where his Indian characters place themselves in *Toughest Indian*, Alexie portrays them as moving closer to their authentic Indianness.

Sex shows up in obvious places in *Toughest Indian*, such as a story about the marital discord between a white husband and his Indian wife. But it also appears in unexpected places, such as his story of a bank robbery and another story about a hitchhiker-prize fighter. To understand the inclusion of sex in each story, the question is not so much *what* it is as *why* it is. Why is sex a part of every story in Alexie's *Toughest Indian in the World*? How do characters use sex and sexuality to place themselves and others in Alexie's class system? How does sex work to bring characters closer to their Indianness? In "Indigenous Liaisons: Sex/Gender Variability, Indianness, and Intimacy in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*," Stephen Evans concludes: "Indeed, most stories in *Toughest Indian* are concerned with the difficulties characters encounter in negotiating tricky bordercrossings of race, sex, and gender as they seek to regain through intimacy a lost or diminished sense of Indianness" (Evans 187). ***As in the first two chapters, this chapter contends that through his constructed class system, Sherman Alexie exposes the war over Indian identity. Chapter One argues that this battle over identity is in fact a lethal assault originating with colonialism and threatening the survival of Native Americans today. Chapter Two argues that through his class system, Alexie's characters define the theology of Indianness as recognition of inherited oppression, present day persecution, and fear of eternal damnation. This chapter looks at sex and sexuality as levers placing Alexie's characters in his class system and closer to Indianness--an embattled identity--but a hopeful one nonetheless.***

**Sexuality as a Means to Placement in Alexie's Class System**

In "Sex and Salmon: Queer Identities in Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*," Lisa Tatonetti examines homosexuality in two of the collection's short

stories: “Toughest Indian in the World” and “Indian Country.” In “Toughest Indian in the World” Alexie explores the first homosexual experience of his assimilated Native American protagonist and in doing so the author “forwards what Two-Spirit author/activist Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee/African/Irish/Lenape/Lumbee) has termed the ‘Sovereign Erotic’ by using queerness as a potential foundation of Native cultural identification” (Tatonetti 202). The Indian narrator, living in an assimilated world, is intrigued with a Native American hitchhiker who he romanticizes as a real Indian warrior—the “toughest Indian in the world.” It becomes clear that the attraction moves beyond ethnicity. Although the narrator contends that this is his first homosexual experience, he is clearly physically attracted to the hitchhiker. To realize his real Indianness, the narrator initiates a seemingly inevitable sexual encounter with the hitchhiker. That is, in moving toward his Indian identity, the narrator in “Toughest Indian in the World” aligns with his sexual identity.

At the onset of “The Toughest Indian in the World,” Alexie’s class groups appear to be clearly delineated—Indians are the oppressed group in a white-dominated world. In this story, a Coeur d’Alene narrator picks up an Indian hitchhiker in honor of his Indian father who taught him that there is no hope for Indians in white society, but always picked up the hitchhikers who “refused to believe the salmon were gone” (*TI* 21). There is the suggestion here that the narrator’s father has a view of class stratification that clearly delineates Indians as the oppressed and defeated group. He has lost hope for Native Americans in contemporary society viewing them as no match for their powerful white oppressors. The narrator lives his life accordingly as a newspaper reporter with all-white co-workers who assign the undesirable work to him--the implication being he is

discriminated against because he is Native American—"I'm a features writer, and an Indian at that, so I get all the shit jobs" (*TI* 24-5). The narrator lives in Spokane and never visits his family on the reservation (*TI* 27). He hasn't dated in a while and his last girlfriend was a white reporter who put him to sleep during sex (*TI* 25). In his assimilated world, the narrator is unsatisfied.

The narrator picks up the hitchhiker and although he starts with a description of the Indian as having "Long, straggly hair . . . Missing a couple of teeth. A bad complexion that used to be much worse . . . Big, misshapen ears" he finishes with, "Even before he climbed into my car I could tell he was tough. He had some serious muscles that threatened to rip through his blue jeans and denim jacket" (*TI* 26). Despite his initial observation, the narrator finds physical appeal in the hitchhiker. The hitchhiker is a Lummi fighter who goes from reservation to reservation fighting for money (*TI* 26, 28). The hitchhiker talks about fighting a Flathead boy--"He was supposed to be the toughest Indian in the world"--who took a beating but remained standing (*TI* 29). When the hitchhiker realized he was going to have to kill his opponent to win, he simply sat down and threw the fight to save the boy (*TI* 29). The narrator is impressed with this character despite his tattered persona: "'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' . . . I was excited. I wanted the fighter to know how much I thought of him" (*TI* 30). But for the intrusion of white society, this would have been a respected warrior rather than a hitchhiker. The narrator previously appearing unsatisfied and lifeless comes alive through this hitchhiker who he regards as an authentic Indian warrior.

Before delving into the larger themes of Indian identity and assimilation, it is important to note that this scene with the hitchhiker is at its most basic level Alexie's offering of erotica. The precursor to this scene is the narrator's admission that sex with his white girlfriend is anything but erotic: "I would get so exhausted by the size of her erotic vocabulary that I would fall asleep before my orgasm, continue pumping away as if I were awake, and then regain consciousness with a sudden start when I finally did come, more out of reflex than passion" (Tatonetti 204-5, quoting *TI* 26). The next time the reader finds explicit text is when the hitchhiker is physically penetrating the narrator, "he just pumped into me," and the impromptu encounter is far more erotic than his previously described heterosexual experience (*TI* 32). Tatonetti points to Alexie's recognition of this story as erotica: "It's funny—it really brings up the homophobia in people. When a straight guy like me writes about a homoerotic experience in the first person with a narrator who is very similar to me—I could see people dying to ask me if it was autobiographical" (Tatonetti 203). It makes sense that in a collection of short stories where sex is a primary theme, Alexie would include sex as erotica. The title story in *Toughest Indian* does what erotica should do—ignites the reader's senses and even desire. With this desire is an intended discomfort in the unorthodox and spontaneous nature of the encounter, another attribute of erotica. It is at this point that Alexie moves narrator and reader into a larger space where stimulation is physical, sexual, and an awakening of identity. In the narrator's case, erotica is a lever that awakens and moves the narrator in closer proximity to Indianness.

Instead of dropping off the hitchhiker, the narrator asks him to share a motel room (*TI* 31). With this, class stratification moves from two class groups-- white society and

the reservation--into something multidimensional. That is, sexuality may be another stratum that Alexie's characters will navigate along in his constructed class system. The story has focused on the narrator's ethnicity up to this point and his dissatisfaction in white society as an assimilated Indian. Now, however, there is the suggestion that sexuality in addition to ethnicity is a means by which Alexie's character situates himself in this story. While it appears that this is the narrator's first homosexual experience, there is the feeling that his assimilation in white society may extend to his sexuality: "Once the condom is in place the fighter asks, 'Are you ready?' to which the narrator replies, 'I'm not gay'" (*TI* 32). As an Indian man in white society, Alexie has portrayed the narrator up to this point in the story as unsatisfied. His father's tradition of picking up hitchhikers is a sympathetic gesture that regards the traditional Indian as a lost persona. The hitchhiker represents the traditional Indian who travels from reservation to reservation struggling to make a living in the post-colonial world. The narrator realizes there is no life in white society that pleases him and there will be no life on the reservation that pleases him either. However by picking up the hitchhiker and then forming a sexual relationship with him in the motel room, the narrator shows that his search for self includes but is not limited to ethnicity. His authentic Indian self also must account for his identity on a sexual level. Tatonetti points to the narrator's search for his authentic self as being a blurring of ethnicity and sexuality:

> But while the narrator might deny a tie between his *sexual* identification and his actions, he acknowledges, on the other hand, a correlation between his desire for the fighter and his desire to reconnect with his ethnic heritage. He says, "I wanted him to save me. He didn't say anything. He

> just pumped into me for a few minutes, came with a loud sigh, and then pulled out. I quickly rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom. I locked the door behind me and stood in the dark. I smelled like salmon" (Tatonetti 208, quoting *TI* 32)

The reference to salmon suggests that through the sexual experience the narrator aligns with his Indianness. Tatonetti acknowledges that while the narrator may not have lived a gay lifestyle prior to the encounter with the hitchhiker, Alexie "intertwine[s] his character's search for indigeneity with a simultaneous exploration of queer desire" (Tatonetti 206). By his own admission after the sexual experience the narrator is "feeling stronger" (Tatonetti 208 quoting *TI* 33). The Indian hitchhiker represents the authentic Indian including authentic sexuality—"Perhaps he expresses an archetypal form of Indian masculinity; unfettered by negative heterosexist terminology, the boxer seems comfortable with his sexuality" (Evans 195). Perhaps the attraction is the boxer's ability to express his authentic self, which includes his sexuality. Perhaps the narrator's dissatisfaction is not only a function of living in an assimilated society in a white workplace. Assimilation could mean for the narrator the acceptance of heterosexuality when that is not an authentic representation of who he is. Arguably, labeling the narrator in this moment is unnecessary--perhaps this moment of erotica is the jolt that the narrator craves to awaken himself—physically and mentally—and once awakened, his sense of self is better recognized.

Whether the narrator is straight or gay, or someone else, Alexie's story blurs status groups in his class system as the idea of assimilation is reconsidered. Assimilation in this story is more than white versus Indian. Proximity from Indianness for the narrator

is his placement of self away from the reservation and arguably away from his sexuality as well. Tatonetti points out that contemporary Native American literary scholars such as Craig Womack, Deborah Miranda, and Quo-Li Driskill have explored the connection between the search for Indianness and sexuality (207). Tatonetti cites Driskill's theory of "erotic sovereignty" in which she explains that "healing our sexualities as First Nations people is braided with the legacy of historical trauma and the ongoing process of decolonization. Two-Spirits are integral to this struggle" (207). The idea of homophobia is not according to Tatonetti a part of the aboriginal history and identity—"these attitudes are part of the colonial project of erasure, which silences non-dominant histories such as, in this case, the fact that many indigenous cultures traditionally included multiple gender categories and alternate constructions of sexuality" (204). Tatonetti argues that the placement of self into a class group with the tribe or white society is complicated—or perhaps further authenticated-- by the simultaneous search for one's sexual self:

> . . . the legacies of racism, colonialism, sexism, and homophobia function as a palimpsest. Rather than situating such legacies as separate and separated issues, and thus putting queer Native people in the position of having to choose allegiances, Womack, Miranda, and Driskill argue for a more nuanced resistance to colonialism and for fully articulated understandings of queer Native realities. I suggest that Alexie's work is part of this project. (2007)

It is important to clarify that in overcoming homophobia in the story, the narrator isn't necessarily placing himself in homosexual or bisexual membership. Alexie's blurring of sexuality in this and other stories in *Toughest Indian* is a recognition that relationships in

his class system will not be defined within white society's parameters. As Evans notes, describing the experience as purely a homosexual one is "a limiting sex/gender term devised by nineteenth-century white European culture. In fact, the story is about male intimacy as a spiritual experience through which the narrator hopes to regain his sense of Indianness" (Evans 196). The exploration of sexuality and Indianness is utilized by Alexie's characters as a means of elevation of the whole self in his class system—the self in terms of ethnicity and beyond:

> . . . modern Indians, as reflected in Alexie's portraits in *Toughest Indian*, identify themselves and pursue relationships within a broad spectrum of sex/gender possibilities; because of this, their behavior resonates with (I avoid claiming that it approximates) some tribal attitudes toward sex/gender identities of the past that may be viewed today as other-than-heterosexual. The consensus of research is clear that historic Indian attitudes frequently attributed certain spiritual and/or ceremonial powers to these gendered persons; indeed, a high percentage of tribal cultures accorded them special status and value. (Evans 189)

When pursued in this manner, Indianness is a place of strength and magic seemingly lost in modern America: "One of Alexie's finest achievements in *Toughest Indian* is his nuancing of certain conflicted characters and relationships with vestigial elements of historic Indian attitudes toward multiple sexual and gendered identities, including their spirituality (more precisely for the characters, Indianness)" (Evans 189). Alexie's Indians liberated vis-a-vis their sexuality are able to step away from self-deprecating attitudes and view their Indian identity as something of value and strength consistent with the warriors

of their past. They are able to find spiritual strength as well rather than the threat of damnation thrust upon them with European contact.

In the narrator's search for Indianness his placement of self as an Indian and a sexual being function as a whole rather than as two separate attributes. Moreover, the ending of the story suggests that for the narrator aligning ethnicity and sexuality creates a harmony of self that is closer to the authentic Indian: "The fighter walked out the door, left it open, and walked away. I stood in the doorway and watched him continue his walk down the highway, past the city limits. I watched him rise from earth to sky and become a new constellation" (*TI* 33). The narrator sees the hitchhiker as the Indian warrior and a sexual being—a character who remains strong and holds onto the magic of his Indianness. Likewise the narrator metaphorically walks toward his own Indianness:

> Instead, I woke early the next morning, before sunrise, and went out into the world. I walked past my car. I stepped onto the pavement, still warm from the previous day's sun. I started walking. In bare feet, I traveled upriver toward the place where I was born and will someday die. At that moment, if you had broken open my heart you could have looked inside and seen the thin white skeletons of one thousand salmon. (*TI* 33-4)

The narrator is closer to his authentic Indian self because of the sexual encounter with the Lummi hitchhiker. He situates himself into a status group that harmoniously merges ethnicity and sexuality. Tatonetti explains: "the entire experience leaves him as the salmon embodied . . . here we see an indigenous man who is suddenly able to see beyond 'limited definitions in [his] imaginings of [him] self' because of his sexual experience"

(Tatonetti 209). Aligning himself with the Indian hitchhiker and permitting himself the sexual experience, the narrator achieves a sense of peace and hopefulness.

In "Indian Country" Alexie explores the struggle of an openly gay Indian, Sara Polatkin, and her white partner, Tracy Johnson, who try to assert their relationship despite the homophobia of the Indian world. In this story a white woman and an Indian woman are discriminated against by their Indian friend and family. Alexie's characters in this story navigate through class groups defined by ethnicity, sexuality, and theology. Specifically, Tracy is going to meet Sara's Indian parents who are devout Christians and disapprove of their daughter's lesbian relationship. The Indian narrator in this story is Low Man, Tracy's college friend who is infatuated with her despite or because of her sexuality. Tatonetti identifies Low Man as representing "the archetypal heterosexual male fantasy in which a man is at the center of a lesbian encounter" (209). While Low Man does appear to be the cliché in this story, Alexie uses him to narrate Sara's movement toward her Indianness, which through her sexuality, transcends ethnicity to reach a place of authenticity. Low Man's debate with Sara's father Sid Polatkin raises questions about assimilation and suggests that the self-professed real Indian may be more aligned with white society than initially meets the eye.

A focal point of the Alexie's story is the dinner (with Low Man in attendance) where Sara's parents, Sid and Estelle Polatkin, meet Tracy (*TI* 139). Sid and Estelle's Indianness is established at the onset. Everyone orders salmon dinners (*TI* 139). Sid is president of the Spokane Reservation VFW and his hair "is pulled back in a gray ponytail. So was Estelle's" (*TI* 140). Alexie describes their hard lives--Sid the alcoholic and Estelle who stopped drinking to support her husband—and then places them firmly in

religious membership—"Now they were Mormons" (*TI* 140). With this, Sid begins his interrogation of Low Man's religious views (a passive aggressive attack on his daughter and Tracy). Low Man, like Sid, believes in God, but unlike Sid, he is skeptical of the white man's Jesus Christ: "I don't think it matters what I think. . . I'm not a Christian. Let them have their Jesus" (*TI* 141). Sid Polatkin counters bringing sexuality into the debate, "Tell me, then, what do you think their Jesus would say about lesbian marriage?" (*TI* 141). As Tatonetti points out, Sid ignores the women at the table and expresses his attempt at male dominance by acknowledging only the other Indian man at the table, Low Man: "[Sid's] sexism, as evidenced in his insistent focus on Low Man to the exclusion of the three women at the table, is thereby wedded to the heterosexism and homophobia that underlies his conservative version of Christianity" (Tatonetti 211). Tracy tries to appeal to Sid's humanity rather than his theology—"Mr. Polatkin . . . I don't know you. But I love your daughter, and she tells me you're a good man, so I'm willing to give you a chance" (*TI* 141). The appeal is unsuccessful and the argument escalates. In the midst of it, Low Man is momentarily hopeful when Sara complains to Tracy—"You've been different ever since Low showed up. You're different with him" (*TI* 142-3). Amidst the chaos between the couple and the Polatkins, Low Man fantasizes briefly that Tracy secretly loves him: "Low Man wondered if that was true; he wondered what it meant; he knew what he wanted it to mean" (*TI* 143).

Between Sid pontificating about Jesus Christ and the sinfulness of homosexuality and Low Man's fleeting notion that he might "convert" Tracy to heterosexuality, Low Man admits—"No, Sid, you and me, we're just men. Simple, stupid men" (*TI* 143). Low Man sees himself an Indian man as not understanding sexuality and sees Sid as a

misguided Indian who follows the white man's Jesus Christ. As Tatonetti points out, "as a Coeur' d'Alene, Low Man is well aware of the historical irony of an Indian invoking Christianity as a disciplinary mechanism" (Tatonetti 212). Sid acknowledges that his protests over Sara's relationship are based upon Christianity and fear—"'Yes, yes, I'm simple.' Said Sid. 'I'm a man who is simply afraid of God. And next to God, we're all stupid. That much we can agree on" (*TI* 143). Sid suggests that as Indian men, they are stupid for accepting white society's religion which was the route to their oppression. His anger directed to Sara and Tracy is ultimately exposed as his fear for his daughter's salvation in a world in which she may already be damned because she is Indian. This realization humbles Sid and returns him to the dinner table asking everyone to do the same—"Because they all loved one another, in one form or another, in one direction or another, they agreed" (*TI* 143).

Through the dinner scene it is revealed that Alexie's characters are not who they originally seem to be. The "real" Indian men, Sid Polatkin and Low Man, place themselves in alignment with their ethnicity but are exposed as fearful Indians submissive to the homophobia and religion of their white world—Low Man admits he has no sexual power over Tracy, "I want to take Tracy out of here. I want to take her back home with me. I want her to fall in love with me" (*TI* 147). Sid admits his power over Sara as her father is also gone—"And I'll take my daughter back home where she belongs" (*TI* 147). Low Man concludes—"These women don't belong to us. They live in whole separate worlds, man, don't you know that?" (*TI* 145). Sid is trying to assert power in his Indian family with his assimilated theology and through his Christian views rejects his daughter out of fear for his soul and hers. Tatonetti confirms that this assimilated view of sexuality

is present on the reservations of contemporary society—"While Sid's Christianity *is* a product of assimilation, Two-Spirit identity is not. But though such history might be undeniable, it holds little sway in the face of the homophobia that has come to characterize responses to non-dominant sex/gender categories in many Native communities" (Tatonetti 213). Class stratification in this story is within the Indian community—a place now altered by the influence of white society. Sara's parents have taken on the religious values of colonial America and so while they appear to be traditional Indians, they are still products of white society. Low Man who lives off of the reservation fantasizes about a relationship with Tracy and reflects the homophobia of the world he lives in. Sara's ability to express her real Indianness includes her sexuality. While she appears to generate strength in alignment with her authentic self, Alexie shows that she will feel oppression nonetheless based upon her sexuality on and off of the reservation.

The nontraditional Indian woman, Sara, in aligning with her sexuality, appears to be the more authentic Indian as compared to Sid and Low Man. When Low Man insults Sid at the end of dinner, Alexie points out that "Sid and Estelle might have left then, might never have returned to their daughter's life, but the salmon arrived at that moment" (*TI* 145). The salmon is a reminder to Sara of her cultural obligations and out of respect for her father asks Low Man to leave—"she said, understanding that Indian men wanted to win the world just as much as white men did. They just wanted it for different reasons"-- and gets Tracy to side with Sid and put Low Man out of the dinner party (*TI* 145). In giving Sid his false sense of power, Sara is establishing the real power in the group. Alexie reinforces this interpretation, "Sid chewed on his salmon. The great fish

was gone from the Spokane River. Disappeared" (*TI* 145). The strength of the women is symbolized by their gesture of taking one another's hands despite Sid's opposition—"Hand in hand they walked away" (*TI* 148). Sid then attempts to establish dominance over his daughter by striking her, "Sid slapped his daughter once, then again." (*TI* 148).When Sid tries to attack Tracy, she slaps him hard and "Surprised, defeated, Sid dropped to the floor beside Low" and Tracy goes after Sara. Sid returns to the arms of his Indian wife who has been quiet and submissive throughout the story, and cries in her arms" (*TI* 149). Sid is exposed as a man who has tried to live as an Indian but is not an authentic Indian. His excommunication of his daughter is based upon the homophobic religious views of white society which Sid adopts as part of his Indianness. Evans argues that *Toughest Indian* "has exciting pedagogical potential for countering emerging native homophobia and demonstrating, through its characters' searches for intimacy, a need for tolerance of persons who represent a broad spectrum of sex/gender viability" (205). Despite her Indian parents' attitudes, Sara's true self is attained through her sexuality when her ethnicity fails her. Although she is white, Tracy will let Sara express her Indianness more than her Indian parents. In Alexie's class system, class groups are redefined and realigned around sexuality as a means to the authentic Indian.

In addition to her analysis of "Toughest Indian in the World" and "Indian Country" I would supplement Tatonetti's discussion by including one more story from *Toughest Indian*—"South by Southwest"--in which Alexie also looks at sexuality as a means to class stratification and identity. Characters do not fit easily into class groups and do not clearly take on labels such as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Everything in the story is unconventional and not easily defined. In this story a white man

commences his "nonviolent killing spree" in an effort to find love. He finds "Salmon Boy" at the House of Pancakes who "believes in love" and the two explore intimacy and homosexuality. It is not clear whether these men are gay or straight, but to return to an initial observation in this analysis, to understand the inclusion of sex in each story, the question is not so much *what* it is as *why* it is. Whether the two men are gay, bisexual, heterosexual, or someone else, their partnership endures through the story and beyond anchored in their desire for companionship, intimacy (not sexual), and love. The white man is not looking for a connection to an Indian per se. The Indian is not looking for a relationship with a white man and there is no indication that this man is in search of his Indianness. Rather, both are simply alone in the world and looking for love. In this story status groups based upon ethnicity fade away and two unlikely companions literally force themselves into a relationship. Moreover the idea of binary status groups—homosexual or heterosexual—fracture beyond the traditional classifications and Alexie again places his characters into groups beyond those defined by white society. Like "Toughest Indian in the World" and "Indian Country," "South by Southwest" demonstrates Alexie's attempt to portray different status groups centered on sexuality and the simultaneous movement of his Indian characters toward their authentic Indianness, their authentic sexuality, and their authentic selves

From the onset of the story it is evident that "South by Southwest" will be a strange tale from beginning to end: "Seymour didn't want money—he wanted love—so he stole a pistol from the hot-plate old man living in the next apartment, then drove over to the International House of Pancakes, the one on Third, and ordered everybody to lie down on the floor" (*TI* 57). Seymour is a white man in Spokane, Washington looking for

love (*TI* 57). An Indian man raises his hand from the floor of the restaurant—"a fat Indian man raised his hand. He wore black sweatpants and a white T-shirt embossed with a photograph of Geronimo"—and volunteers to be the "somebody who will fall in love with me [Seymour] along the way" (*TI* 58-9). Immediately class groups are established by Alexie and simultaneously dis-established when the men in the first minutes of meeting discuss their sexuality: "I'll go with you, said the fat Indian. Are you gay? asked Seymour. I'm not gay. Are you gay? No, sir, I am not homosexual, said the fat Indian, but I do believe in love" (*TI* 59). Seymour and "Salmon Boy" are not mystical and their sexual disclaimers are believable. Sexuality is on their shared terms and gives these two strangers—a white man and an Indian man—common ground from the onset.

Seymour and Salmon Boy leave the restaurant together and shortly thereafter the absence of lust between these two men is obvious in their exchanges. Salmon boy asks "Do you think we should kiss now?" (*TI* 60). Seymour responds "It seems like the right time, don't it?" (*TI* 60). The kiss is not passionate but it facilitates the progression of their relationship nonetheless: "They kissed, keeping their tongues far away from each other, and then told each other secrets" (*TI* 60). They achieve a level of intimacy through the kiss, although Seymour indicates that he doesn't think he wants to kiss again and Salmon boy agrees but repeats, "I believe in love" (*TI* 62). The kiss enables them to open up to one another, sharing their personal feelings and life stories.

Inevitably their journey leads the men to a motel, and it is here again where the events are unusual but somehow befitting of these characters. The men are in bed together. Seymour is on his side presumably asleep and Salmon Boy is watching television:

Seymour, said Salmon Boy.

Yes, said Seymour.

I am the most lonely I have ever been.

I know.

Will you hold me close?

Yes, yes, I will.

Salmon Boy pushed himself into Seymour's arms. They both wore only their boxer shorts. Seymour's blue shorts contrasted with his pale skin while Salmon Boy's white boxers glowed in the dark.

I don't want to have sex, said Salmon Boy.

I don't either.

But how will we fall in love if we don't have sex?

I don't know.

They held each other tighter and tighter. They were afraid.

I am happy in your arms, said Seymour.

And I am happy in yours . . .

They held each other tighter and tighter. They were not aroused. They were warm and safe. (*TI* 69-70)

To say that this relationship is not a sexual one would be inaccurate. Clearly Alexie looks to establish a physical connection between the two men even though it is not defined by traditional terms such as lust, attraction, or intercourse: "The bonding between Seymour and Salmon Boy clearly is homosocial, and as their adventure to find love develops, it acquires a definite homoerotic texture" (Evans 197). The relationship

between the men does not involve intercourse but they both want physical contact. Through their physical contact, they develop intimacy and affection for one another.

Seymour has been married and divorced twice, so he is cognizant of a typical heterosexual relationship (*TI* 65). Salmon Boy's past is not clearly defined in terms of relationships, but his focus is on his memories of his parents. His parents had a healthy sexual relationship and his father was a good father (*TI* 61). Despite their cultural differences and the distinctions of their personal histories, the men find love with one another on shared terms. Accordingly, the ending is strange but makes sense at the same time. Seymour and Salmon Boy rob a McDonald's, because, "Seymour wanted to be kind and he wanted to be romantic. He wanted to be the Man Who Saved the Indian" (*TI* 74). Seymour wants to give Salmon Boy the type of adventure and romance that he has to offer. Alexie blesses their relationship leaving them hand-in-hand heading toward the horizon together: "They were men in love with the idea of being in love . . . Seymour took all the money his victims could spare, and then he took Salmon Boy's hand, and they ran outside into all the south and southwest that remained in the world" (*TI* 75). In Alexie's class structure, authenticity has transcended ethnicity and Seymour and Salmon Boy find their authentic selves through their construction of shared sexuality. Ethnicity is not the priority here, but Salmon Boy's Indianness in the care of Seymour (a white man) is clearly preserved as the two walk into their future together.

**Full-Bloods and Half-Bloods: Sex and Ethnicity in Alexie's Class System**

The theme of bicultural relationships opens Alexie's collection of short stories with "Assimilation," the story of Mary Lynn, a Coeur d'Alene Indian, who is disinterested sexually in her white professional husband, Jeremiah (*TI* 1). Jeremiah is a

chemical engineer; Mary Lynn works at Microsoft (*TI* 10-11). The couple lives in their five-bedroom home in Kirkland, just outside of Seattle so that Mary Lynn can walk to work (*TI* 15). Indian men in her life on the reservation have always disappointed her, while white male role models "rarely disappointed her, but they'd never surprised her either" (*TI* 5). Jeremiah is patient and kind with their four children although Mary Lynn notes that he, "often raged at strangers . . . white men demanded to receive the privileges whose very existence they denied" (*TI* 6). He cannot consummate a flirtation with a co-worker, proclaiming "his love for marriage, for the blessed union, for the legal document, the shared mortgage payments, and for their four children" (*TI* 8-9). While Jeremiah may not be someone who excites his wife, he is a stable and dependable spouse. Nevertheless, Mary Lynn has a sexual encounter with a Lummi Indian trying to find excitement, although the interlude is seedy and unsatisfying (*TI* 4-5). Although they are a professional couple assimilated into white society, their ethnic differences create tension in their relationship with one another.

Ethnic differences also create tension in Mary Lynn and Jeremiah as parents. While the couple appears devoted to their children, Mary Lynn secretly wonders if a child from the Lummi would look "more Indian than her half-blood sons and daughters" (*TI* 9). Physically the children reflect the ethnic differences of their parents—the two boys have dark features and closely resemble their mother while the two girls are fair completed and "look more white than the boys" (*TI* 12). Jeremiah secretly questions whether he as a white man favors his daughters because they look white (*TI* 12). Alexie offers the private thoughts of Mary Lynn and Jeremiah to demonstrate that their

bicultural marriage may cause each of them discontentment not acknowledged as a couple.

Race is regarded by the couple as "a destructive force they could fight against as a couple, as a family" (*TI* 14). Their shared values will overcome prejudice of the outside world. However in Alexie's class system, the oppressor still infiltrates the couple's home and hearts: "But race was also a constant presence, a house-guest and permanent tenant who crept around all the rooms in their shared lives, opening drawers, stealing utensils and small articles of clothing, changing the temperature" (*TI* 14). They kept race away from their home recognizing it as a destructive force but could not prevent that chipping away it does inside the home—the bothersome presence it maintains despite their best efforts. Jeremiah, an engineer, views race as beyond anyone's control: "If white people are the mad scientists who created race, thought Jeremiah, then we created race so we could enslave black people and kill Indians, and now race has become the Frankenstein monster that has grown beyond our control." (*TI* 14). His contemplation is a realization that prejudice takes hold of the couple partly from their own thoughts and feelings whether they like it or not. In a frustrated moment, Jeremiah distinguishes himself (and elevates himself) along bloodlines: "Jeremiah, Mary Lynn's stereotypical blond trophy husband of chilly, Nordic ancestry, crudely comments to her that 'fucking an Indian doesn't make me an Indian' (*TIW*, 10) a chemical engineer (ironically), he well understands the anxiety of some of Alexie's characters about blood quantum and dilution of Indian essence" (Evans 193-4). Acceptance may characterize this couple most of the time, but ethnicity at times divides them and highlights their anxieties with one another and with themselves.

In the final scene the couple is in the car together caught in a traffic jam on their way home from work (*TI* 16). Jerimiah leaves the car to walk the bridge and investigate the cause of the backup. Along the way, he witnesses the suicide of a white woman (the cause of the traffic backup) who jumped from the bridge (*TI* 18-19). Jerimiah is unsettled by the suicide: "'My wife,' said Jeremiah, strangely joyous. 'I'm never leaving her.' Ever the scientist and the mathematician, Jeremiah knew that his wife was a constant" (*TI* 19). While Jerimiah's encounter unfolds, Mary Lynn is back at the car and fears Jerimiah has been injured or killed investigating the backup: "He's dying, thought Mary Lynn, he's dead This is not what I wanted, she thought, this is not why I cheated on him, this is not what was supposed to happen (*TI* 18). Sex with the Indian stranger is not because she wants a divorce from Jerimiah. Sex with the stranger does not bring her closer to her Indianness. Through the random scare on the bridge, Jerimiah and Mary Lynn separately affirm their preference for stability. Mary Lynn tries to use sex with an Indian to find her real self and ends up realizing that she needs the stability of her assimilated relationship to be happy: "[Mary Lynn has] 'acquired a certain kind of status from pawning much of [her] essential Indian DNA . . . spiritual and racial reconnection through sexual intimacy proves little more than an empty fantasy" (Evans 194). Mary Lynn's true self is not a new self revealed through sex with an Indian but rather her true self already exists (magical or not) in her marriage to Jerimiah.

Bloodlines are not determinative of the authentic Indian in "Assimilation" but do account for the prejudice in the story that threatens the marital relationship between Mary Lynn and Jeremiah. The idea of bi-cultural relationships and bloodlines—"full-bloods" and "mixed-bloods"—is a theme often revisited in Alexie's writing and *Toughest Indian*

is no exception. His class system fractures over bloodlines, where Indians with white partners stand in opposition to Indians who abhor bi-cultural relationships. In "The Sin Eaters," Alexie takes the idea of bloodlines to the extreme, but his story is based upon actual events in which bloodlines are at the center of real life controversies. In Chapter 1 of this discussion, the short story "Distances" is examined as a surreal departure from the reservation realism of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. So too, midway through *Toughest Indian*, Alexie departs from his urban realism with "The Sin Eaters." "Distances" is based upon the Ghost Dance Movement and Wounded Knee Massacre of the late nineteenth century with Alexie providing alternative facts to play out the scenario through which Native Americans rather than white society become the group in power. The Native American leaders accept only "pure" Indians, excluding those who have *any contact* with white society. "The Sin Eaters" is based upon the era in the United States, 1940s to the beginning of the 21st Century, where the correlation between race and blood is the focus of aggressive scientific study. Like "Distances" Alexie creates an alternative outcome for the United States' involvement with eugenics and genomics. Like "Distances" Alexie builds his class system in which the people in power (this time white society via the US Government) have taken power too far and insist on the "pure" Indian—one who has only a Native American bloodline. Stratification is scientific based upon genetics. Sex in this story is again front and center, this time as a means to control Native Americans and to literally create an Indian that meets the specifications of white America. Clearly, Alexie's "The Sin Eaters" is a fictional story situated in a very real era of America in which Indians are distinguished and valued by bloodline and "ethnic purity."

In "Bleeding Over Species Lines: Writing Against Cartographies of the Human in Queer of Color Fiction" Megan LeMay examines "The Sin Eaters" in the historical context of "controversies over the DNA of the ancient skeleton known as the Kennewick Man (1996), the Human Genome Project's (HGP) public platform of rejecting biological race (2000), and ongoing bioethical debates around the practices of collecting blood and tissue samples from indigenous groups deemed reproductively isolated by global genographic programs" (6). The Human Genome Project (HGP) is a consolidated effort of private biotech companies, the Department of Energy and other United States agencies, as well as governmental agencies across the globe "to map the human genome. . . and then to determine the entire human DNA sequence (three billion base pairs per haploid [sperm or egg] genome)" (Dodson & Williamson 204). The Human Genome Diversity Project emerges as the debate over specimen pool unfolds. Notwithstanding the fact that all human genomes are primarily similar in nature, there are an estimated five million differences in sequence between any two haploid genomes and "Because these differences are responsible for predisposition to some diseases as well as normal variation . . . there was immediate interest in extending the genome project to collect and to sequence DNA samples from many different human groups" (Dodson & Williamson 205). Medical ethics advocates quickly pointed out that indigenous groups were identified in America as prime targets for the genome project and "Indigenous peoples felt they were being treated as examples of human fossils, from whom samples had to be collected before they died out" (Dodson & Williamson 205). As Dodson and Williamson further note, this project is set upon the already established relationship between Indians and the United States government where the former "were often dispossessed of land by

colonizers who used many tricks, but who also argued that this was 'for the common good'" (206). This mantra is likewise projected in "The Sin Eaters" throughout the story and is graphically presented when a physician working for the United States government examines his Indian captive, 11-year-old Jonah, and "soothes" the child with: "'Hush, hush, Jonah.' Said the male doctor as he pushed the needle deeper into my body, as Dr. Clancy pushed another needle deep into my other hip. 'You're doing a brave thing. You're saving the world'" (*TI* 115).

In 1996, archaeologists on an excavation in Kennewick, Washington find the remains of a skeleton that is believed to be approximately 9,000 years old. The remains are given to the Umatilla tribe pursuant to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, but the scientists sue for custody of the skeleton (LeMay 17). Tribal laws attribute identity to proximity to the land whereas the scientists sued for DNA testing to establish identity and were able to reclaim the remains because at that time the skeleton's indigenous ethnicity was inconclusive (LeMay 17). Incidentally, in 2015, the remains were returned to Indian custodians when advanced DNA testing found that "based on genetic comparisons that Kennewick Man shows continuity with Native North Americans over at least the last eight millennia" (Rasmussen et al 1). However, at the time of Alexie's writing of *Toughest Indian*, science trumps aboriginal law and white society takes possession of the Kennewick Man's remains.

I would add to LeMay's historical backdrop the landmark case of *Loving v. Virginia*. *Loving* is most commonly recognized for its abolishment of the criminalization of interracial marriage, but in this case the United States Supreme Court also brings to the forefront state laws which define and punish citizens based upon bloodlines. This 1967

Supreme Court case that began in Virginia courts in 1963 offers historical perspective as to the efforts of the United States to create a supreme race determined by bloodlines. The Court refers to a 1965 appellate case in the State of Virginia, *Naim v. Naim*, 197 Va. 80, 87 S.E.2d 749 in which the court found that "the State's legitimate purposes were to 'preserve the racial integrity of its citizens,' and to prevent the 'corruption of blood,' 'a mongrel breed of citizens,' and 'the obliteration of racial pride,' obviously an endorsement of the doctrine of White Supremacy'" *Loving*, 388 U.S. 7 citing *Naim* at 90, 87 S.E.2d at 756. Likewise, part of the Virginia statute under review in *Loving* defines "white persons" and "colored persons and Indians," pursuant to Section 20-54 of the Virginia Code:

> ***Intermarriage prohibited; meaning of term "white persons."*** -- It shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person in this State to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other admixture of blood than white and American Indian. For the purpose of this chapter, the term 'white person' shall apply only to such person as has no trace whatever of any blood other than Caucasian; but persons who have one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian and have no other non-Caucasic blood shall be deemed to be white persons. All laws heretofore passed and now in effect regarding the intermarriage of white and colored persons shall apply to marriages prohibited by this chapter.
>
> **Va.Code Ann. § 20-54 (1960 Repl. Vol.).**

The exception for persons with less than one-sixteenth "of the blood of the American Indian" is apparently accounted for, in the words of a tract

> issued by the Registrar of the State Bureau of Vital Statistics, by "the desire of all to recognize as an integral and honored part of the white race the descendants of John Rolfe and Pocahontas. . . ." Plecker, The New Family and Race Improvement,17 Va.Health Bull., Extra No. 12, at 25-26 (New Family Series No. 5, 1925), cited in *Wadlington*, The *Loving* Case: Virginia's Anti-Miscegenation Statute in Historical Perspective, 52 Va.L.Rev. 1189, 1202, n. 93 (1966). *Loving*, 388 U.S. at 5

While the Supreme Court in *Loving* ultimately concludes that these laws are discriminatory, the attitudes of American society are revealed as focusing on bloodlines to determine ethnicity and elevating those who are of a "pure race."

Although "The Sin Eaters" is fictional, Alexie is quick to place the story along a historical timeline. The story is set between the end of World War II, "after a man with blue eyes had dropped two symmetrical slices of the sun on Japan," and prior to the end of 1963, "before a handsome Catholic was assassinated in Dallas" (*TI* 76-7). It is no coincidence that the story overlaps the end of Hitler's reign. The abduction of Native Americans by the US Government in Alexie's story mirrors the horrors of the holocaust. The story is narrated by 12-year-old Jonah Lot an Indian living on the Spokane Reservation with his family, who clarifies that his story takes place "after the men with blue eyes had carried dark-eyed children into the ovens and made them ash" (*TI* 77). The irony of his statement is apparent when Jonah is carried away from his family by United States soldiers: "With rifles raised, the soldiers advanced on us. I saw four white faces, two black faces, and a face that looked like mine" (*TI* 82). Class lines are drawn here in the suggestion that acceptance by the group in power is the priority rather than one's

ethnicity. In this story, the government's priority is capturing Native Americans for scientific research. Indianness is defined by white society and is a function of bloodlines: "'Joseph is full-blood Coeur d'Alene, Sarah is full-blood Spokane,' the black soldier said to a white soldier. 'The Coeur d'Alene and Spokane are both Interior Salish tribes, so there should be no problem of contamination with the child [Jonah]'" (*TI* 84). When Joseph Lot tries to prevent his son's abduction, he is struck by the white soldier. This is the first of many times the mantra "no blood" is repeated by the government: "'Damn it,' said the soldier-who-looked-like-me. 'I told you. No blood.' Contamination" (*TI* 85). With this, blood is shown to be the currency in the government's placement of Indians. The priority is to avoid bloodshed and any contamination of the currency. The government's position is that bicultural Indians are not valued and are "contaminated" in the same manner that blood is contaminated in the real-life Virginia laws discussed in *Loving v. Loving*. Pursuant to these laws, individuals are identified and punished based upon multicultural bloodlines. In "The Sin Eaters" Alexie depicts punishment for multicultural bloodlines in the extreme.

Jonah ultimately arrives at an Air Force base where the Indian captives are segregated according to degrees of ethnicity: "The darkest Indians, the ones with black hair and brown skin, were herded into a red building, The Indians with brown hair and lighter eyes were herded into an orange building. The Indians with light hair and eyes, the Indians with white skin, were herded into a pale building" (*TI* 93-4). Jonah's head is shaved bald, he is stripped naked and led with the other captives for his initial examination: "At the third station, doctors and nurses huddled over our bodies and thrust tools and fingers into our ears, mouths, noses, vaginas, penises, and anuses. Sickly people

were led away, through another door, into what I was sure were the ovens" (*TI* 97). Jonah is dressed in a red jumpsuit and flown to a desert with other Indians dressed in the same red uniform. When he arrives at the desert, he expresses Alexie's fears over the future of Indianness in the hands of white America: "as I scanned the faces around me, I saw that we all had the same brown skin, long noses, strong jawlines, and large cheekbones. We could all have been siblings. We could all have been the same person" (*TI* 99). Through Jonah's observations, the author paints the possible outcome of creating Indianness scientifically by a white creator. Jonah compares himself in that scene to a "newborn" that has lost his sense of self and morphed into a creature redefined by the physical uniformity of his group (*TI* 99). This fictional version of white supremacy is juxtaposed by the real historical timeframe within which the story is written. "The Sin Eaters" is written in an era when laws did promote ethnic purity. *Loving v. Loving* is a landmark case of the same era in which the United States Supreme Court recognizes the prevalence of state laws that define and punish multicultural bloodlines as attempts to further white supremacy. *Loving*, 388 U.S. 7 citing *Naim* at 90, 87 S.E.2d at 756. While the Court strikes down these laws, Alexie argues via his fictional class structure that the attitudes against multicultural relationships are not necessarily repealed in modern society.

The American government as creator is solidified in the last scene of the story when Jonah is forced to have sexual intercourse with an Apache adult woman while the American soldiers stand on guard. As the two stand in front of the guards naked, Jonah asks the crying woman, "We're supposed to make love, have sex,' she said. 'Do you know what that means?' . . . 'They want me to get pregnant,' she said. 'I'm in my fertile time. I've already had sex with five men today. I don't know when they'll let me stop'"

(*TI* 119). The story ends with the two having intercourse and Alexie leaving the rest of their story untold, but then again, Jonah's individual story is now irrelevant. He has ceased to be a young Spokane boy on the reservation and is now a specimen for white America. Jonah's story embodies the fears within Alexie's class system of extreme stratification on the basis of ethnicity. It is a political demonstration by Alexie of the possibilities inherent in governmental fixation with bloodlines: rewriting Indian history, revoking indigenous birthright, creating the new Indian, and destroying Indianness--again.

**Sex, Intimacy, and Hope for the Authentic Indian**

As suggested at the onset of this discussion, and despite the dire political forecasting of "Sin Eaters," Alexie is uncharacteristically hopeful throughout *Toughest Indian* in his survey of the authentic Indian. This is not necessarily a reconsideration of his take on the real Indian presented in other works, but recognition of another layer of Indianness attained through the placement of self and others into Alexie's class system with sex and sexuality propelling that movement. If Alexie's voice resonates of anger, frustration, or resignation in other works, there is unmistakably the echo of pride in characterizing his real Indian in *Toughest Indian*. A real Indian is someone who feels pride in his ethnicity—not just in the warrior he never knew but in the Indian he is or hopes to become. This theme is solidified in Alexie's last story in *Toughest Indian*, "One Good Man." The narrator raises the question 16 times in his story: "*What is an Indian?*" The narrator left his reservation due to his "ambition" and stayed away due to "more ambition" (*TI* 221). He always meant to return, not wanting to be yet another Indian who takes his education off of the reservation to invest elsewhere: "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" (*TI* 220). He never returns to the reservation however, philosophical rather than bitter about its limitations-- "As an adult, I am fully conscious of the reservation's weaknesses, its inherent limitation (geographic, social, economic, and spiritual), but as a child I'd believed the reservation to be an endless, magical place" (*TI* 221). The reader is offered the reservation and the narrator's childhood home as a place of reflection while the narrator cares for his father at the end of his life. There is the feeling of waiting and self-reflection that accompanies the death of a parent: "Throughout much of the story, Atticus, the narrating son, raises the issue of identity—'*What is an Indian*?' (*TIW*, 218; italics in original)—that initiates an exploration that only he can properly understand based on both his return to the reservation and his relationship with his father" (Heldrich 37-8).

It should be noted that Philip Heldrich in his critical essay "Survival = Anger x Imagination": Sherman Alexie's Dark Humor" calls the narrator Atticus, apparently believing it to be his name in the story. I am uncertain that this conclusion is an accurate one, and choose to refer to him as the narrator as he is one of several narrators in *Toughest Indian* who remain unnamed by Alexie. There is only one reference in "One Good Man" where he is referred to as Atticus, the rest of the story he remains unnamed. In that scene his father calls him Atticus, but the narrator has just indicated that he is taking leave from his job as an English teacher to care for his dying father, "I think the Catholic teenagers of Spokane, Washington, can diagram sentences and misread *To Kill a Mockingbird* without me" (*TI* 223). His father then replies: "Are you sure about that,

Atticus?" (*TI* 223). I interpret this as banter between father and son and a literary reference to Atticus Finch, a primary character in *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Whether this is meant to draw some analogies between the narrator and the wise and ethical Finch are for another discussion. Most likely, this is just a quick comeback by the narrator's father to further demonstrate that he, like his son, is educated and well-read--and a way to make light of the gravity of his son's decision to stay with him. I choose to think that this narrator, like others in *Toughest Indian*, is unnamed to symbolize the elusiveness of his Indian identity and his ongoing contemplation of Indianness. In this story, like "The Sin Eaters" sex is about procreation, but here it is about legacy, especially the relationship between father and son, and creation of a real Indian on moral ground rather than along bloodlines. "One Good Man" suggests that a part of Indianness is about action rather than a state of being—it is about the act of raising children and their furtherance of that legacy as adults. As the question "*What is an Indian?*" is posed constantly throughout the story "[the narrator's] actions—in coming home to care for his father, returning to the reservation, recognizing his own legacy in the life of his father and deciding to carry it with him—give him some answers to his question" (Heldrich 39). In response to the question *"What is an Indian?"* asked over and over in "One Good Man," Alexie answers that Indians in modern society are a diversity of good people and their ethnicity is worthy of preservation.

"One Good Man" begins with the Indian narrator bringing his diabetic father home from the hospital. His father, who lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation just had his feet removed and has no more than six months to live (*TI* 209-11). So the setting is in two primary places in this story—on the reservation where the narrator returns home to

care for his dying father and in the recesses of the narrator's mind as he contemplates the question, "*What is an Indian?*" He finds answers in reflecting on his father's life and his own. Although the narrator explains that he has to lift his 65 year-old father out of the car and into a motorized vehicle, he is quick to qualify that his father was not always a weak man—"'Can you make it?' I asked. Of course he could. He was a man who used to teach ballroom dancing, back when he was young and strong and financing his communications education at the University of Washington" (*TI* 215). His father loved his mother, a librarian who died of a brain tumor ten years earlier (*TI* 215). The narrator loved her too—"I missed my mother like crazy. During all of my childhood bedtimes, she'd read me books (Whitman! Dickinson!) . . . *What is an Indian?* Is it a boy who can sing the body electric or a woman who could not stop for death?" (*TI* 218). The narrator asks how much of an Indian is a function of one's parental influence. In his life, his mother and father appear to be a positive influence.

Likewise, the narrator appears to be a good person and a good parent. Although choosing to live off of the reservation in an assimilated world, he recognizes his placement of self as an Indian man in the margins of privilege and opportunity. In reflecting on his life he constantly separates himself in terms of identity from white society. True to form with the other stories in *Toughest Indian*, sex and particularly sexual relationships serve as a primary lever of movement within the narrator's assimilated world. The narrator explains that when he was 18 years-old he had a job as a waiter in the restaurant where his father worked as the head chef. He points out that he lost his virginity to a white woman, a waitress 20 years older than him (*TI* 222). Later in the story his father mentions the waitress and the fact that the narrator had boasted of the

relationship with everyone in town, which is why she refused any further advances (*TI* 230). The narrator is divorced and trying to raise his son amicably with his ex-wife: "Paul was my son. He lived with his Lummi Indian mother in Seattle, exactly two hundred and seventy-nine miles from my house in Spokane. She'd remarried a white man who made a lot more money than I did. He was a consultant . . . one of those jobs that only white guys seem to get" (*TI* 216). He tries to be philosophical about his divorce and offers honest disclosure about his feelings: "Sure, my vocabulary was bitter (She'd chosen somebody over me!) but I was happy the white man, the stepfather, was able to provide my son with a better life than I would have on my high school English teacher's salary" (*TI* 216). With this, the narrator's feelings about his marriage and divorce overlap with his feelings about bi-cultural relationships:

> I'm not exactly racist. I like white people as a theory; I'm just not crazy about them in practice. But, all in all, ours was a good divorce. I still loved my ex-wife, without missing her or our marriage (I'm a liar), and spent every other weekend, all of the major holidays, and most of the minor ones, with the three of them in Seattle— all of us having decided to make it work, as the therapists had said. The nontraditional arrangement, this extended family, was strange when measured by white standards, but was very traditional by Indian standards. *What is an Indian?* Is it a child who can stroll unannounced through the front doors of seventeen different houses? (*TI* 217)

As in other stories in *Toughest Indian*, Alexie departs from the binary class groups defined by the colonization of America—here in divorce and custodial arrangements.

The idea of an ex-wife as enemy with the children of the marriage situated in the new home of one parent is identified by Alexie as being foreign to Indian culture. The narrator goes into his wife's home to spend time with Paul, rather than having Paul move from one parent's home to another to celebrate a holiday. The narrator still experiences the human feelings of pain and loss from the divorce, but his management of parenting after the divorce is Indian.

Despite the theme of Indianness transcending ethnicity in this story, Alexie does not ignore the idea that bloodlines are important to the narrator. This issue is explored through the narrator's recollection of his college experience with Dr. Lawrence Crowell. The narrator recalls the question *"What is an Indian?*" presented during his first class of his freshman year at Washington State University (*TI* 224). It is written out on the chalkboard by Dr. 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. '*What is an Indian?*' asked Dr. Crowell." (*TI* 224). Crowell targets the narrator who looks Native American with his long black hair and dark skin, and asks if he is Indian (*TI* 224). Both of the narrator's parents are full-blood Spokane and this adds tension to his exchange with Dr. Crowell who is from a multi-cultural background: "'What kind?' asked Dr. Crowell. 'Spokane.' 'And that's all you are?' 'Yeah.' 'Your mother is Spokane?' 'Full-blood.' 'And your father as well?' 'Full-blood.' 'Really? Isn't that rare for your tribe? I thought the Spokanes were very mixed'" (*TI* 224-5). The exchange marks a shift in that the person who seems to value "full-blood" lineage is Crowell, someone Alexie (and the narrator) clearly doesn't respect. The narrator is proud of his heritage but not in an exclusionary way (his son Paul, after all, is white). He is

condescending in his treatment of his professor suggesting a higher understanding of Indianness than that of Dr. Crowell who only focusses on ethnicity. This characterization is solidified when the narrator decides to bring his father to class to discuss Indianness with Dr. Crowell: *"What is an Indian?* Is it a son who brings his father to school as show-and-tell? 'Excuse me, sir,' Crowell said to my father as we both walked into the room. 'Are you in my class?' 'Sweetheart,' said my father. 'You're in my class now'" (*TI* 226). The narrator is raised by parents who are proud of their lineage but do not condemn multi-cultural heritage. He points out that his mother wouldn't have liked Dr. Crowell, "not because he was a white man who wanted to be Indian (God! When it came right down to it, Indian was the best thing to be!), but because he thought he was entitled to tell other Indians what it meant to be Indian" (*TI* 227). This reflection marks the interest in Alexie to move his characters into status groups that are more diverse than those traditionally defined by colonial America and even traditional Native America. Pure ethnicity is not always the determiner of authenticity and the exchange between the narrator's father and Crowell demonstrates this shift.

The narrator's father acknowledges that Crowell is part Indian, yet maintains: "But you ain't Indian. No. You might be a Native American but you sure as hell ain't Indian." (*TI* 228). Crowell tries to spar with the narrator's father showing that he is a man of action, advocating for Native American rights. Crowell boasts that he was at Alcatraz in November 1969 in charge of communications. The narrator's father boasts that he was on vacation with his wife and kids (*TI* 228). The reference here is the Indian occupation of Alcatraz from November 20, 1969 to June 11, 1971 serving as political protest against governmental relocation policies and for the "constitutional restoration of treaty rights,

the need to reclaim Native lands, the demand for control over the use of them, and the push to transform the reservation from a space under the paternalistic control of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to one of self-governance" (Fung 151). Normally Alexie's storyline would operate as a commentary on this contextual element and serve as a call for Native Americans to take action or criticism for those who stand still in resignation. Crowell tries to place himself in the status group of respected Indians based upon his advocacy of Native American rights. Instead value is placed with the Indian who passes up the opportunity to protest for time spent with his family: "'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 promises'" (*TI* 229). The narrator's father believes that advocating for Indians starts with supporting a man's family at home. Alexie's call to action is a call for responsible parenting on the reservation before revolution is taken on in white society.

By the end of the story, the narrator's father is dying; his kidneys and liver are failing (*TI* 229). At three o'clock in the morning the narrator races into his father's room to discover he has vomited and the narrator tends to him: "I undressed him and washed his naked body . . . I switched off the light, lay down beside him, and pulled the old quilt over us" (*TI* 230). A bond between father and son is portrayed with an intimacy only understandable to one who has witnessed a parent's death. Alexie uses the scene to demonstrate the circle of life and the value of legacy. His father loved and nurtured the narrator through his childhood and guided him into adulthood; the narrator now cares for his father as he faces the end of his life.

His father mentions that he isn't well-travelled, having never been to California or Mexico, and on a whim the two decide to drive to Mexico (*TI* 231-2). Perhaps they are running away from death or looking for a distraction from the inevitable. Alexie then depicts their adventure in his realistic way. The two are broken down on the side of the road and the electric wheelchair is broken as well (*TI* 237). As they wait for help, the narrator wishes he could thoroughly question his father before he dies: "I wanted to open up his dictionary and find the definitions for faith, hope, goodness, sadness, tomato, son, mother, husband, virginity, Jesus, wood, sacrifice, pain, foot, wife, thumb, hand, bread, and sex" (*TI* 237). The narrator seeks answers from his father, but provides one answer himself--"*What is an Indian?* I lifted my father and carried him across every border" (*TI* 238). At the end, the narrator's father does not answer his son's questions, but the lessons have already been learned. This story is about legacy which is not necessarily limited to bloodlines. The narrator cares for his father just as he was cared for as a child by his parents. This final scene between father and son is extremely intimate, their bond consummated in life and at the end of life. What is passed along is just as valuable as bloodline and even more so--Sherman Alexie closes *Toughest Indian* with his final take on Indianness. The authentic Indian celebrates his heritage and asserts his Indianness on his own terms. In this final story of *Toughest Indian*, Alexie writes of Indianness as a rite of passage, from father to son, from Indian to Indian. He does not call upon his authentic Indian to maintain pure bloodlines, but challenges him to be a modern day warrior on his own terms in his own way.

While utilizing sex and sexuality as a means through which Indian and white characters place themselves into his class structure, Sherman Alexie adds new

dimensions to his consideration of the authentic Indian. New class groups redefine ideas of assimilation and authenticity. Sex and sexuality lose conventional definitions, labels dissipate, and relationships transpire. As class membership opens to new possibilities, the authentic Indian emerges. For some Indian characters, assimilation into a white world is a necessary part of their Indianness. For others, they must overcome the oppression of white society and their tribe, the latter having inadvertently adopted tyrannical colonial attitudes in the name of being Indian. Through his constructed class system, Alexie argues that when Indians acknowledge their right to transcend ethnicity, real Indianness emerges. Amidst his orchestrated class stratification, Sherman Alexie exposes the war over Indian identity and offers an opportunity to make peace with one's Indianness. The battle over identity is a lethal assault originating with colonialism; but it can be combatted by realizing that Indianness is a balance between ethnicity and individuality. In this chapter, sex and sexuality serve as levers moving Alexie's characters closer to Indianness--an embattled identity--but a hopeful one nonetheless.

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## Conclusion: Alexie's Warriors in Contemporary America

Although Sherman Alexie is a contemporary writer, analysis of his work begs the question of whether the search for Indianness should take priority in an era where class stratification more commonly marginalizes ethnic groups such as Hispanics, Muslims, and African-Americans. Admittedly while his class groups in part resemble those of the United States with a focus on socio-economic factors—education, wealth, income, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality--Alexie's system as a whole is distinguished via his characters' search for Indianness. Alexie's fictional class system has historical roots in colonialism. European contact in new America is the original point of class stratification when white society begins its assault on Native Americans in the name of expansion. As colonial America evolves into the United States, Indianness dissolves into an assimilated world.

If the search for Indianness calls into question the relevance of this discussion, the characterization of the oppressor may work to broaden the scope of materiality. Just as Alexie's Indianness transcends ethnicity, his oppressor expands conventional notions of white society. This discussion argues that Alexie defines "white society" as: (1) those that identify themselves as *both Caucasian and superior* to Native Americans; (2) those who are *treated as Caucasian and placed in a position of privilege* in society; (3) the American government; or (4) anyone who does not identify themselves as Native American and oppresses Indians because they are Indians. By this definition, the oppressor is arguably anyone who oppresses another because of who they are. Alexie's oppressor is not just a supreme colonizer of the past but a force who continues to marginalize and conquer in the timeless quest for power. Arguably, the idea of erasure—

annihilating the identity of a marginalized group so as to weaken and overpower them—is a strategy of white society that endures today, and not just for Indians.

Alexie's strength is to show the unique plight of contemporary Native Americans in their assimilated world long after the goals of colonialism have been achieved. Alexie argues that while ethnicity often yields a dismal life for his modern day characters on and off of the reservation, Indianness if found is worth preserving. While ethnicity often prevents elevation in society, Indianness may nonetheless enable the elevation of self. Characters who achieve authenticity for a lifetime or even a moment find strength, pride, hope, and even magic that was previously missing in their lives. Realistically, authenticity may have no impact on class placement and stratification; nonetheless it minimizes the elusive identity of its members. They may not like where they are, but they know who they are. This proposition should not be interpreted as assigned universality to cultural oppression. Just as identity is individual, so is oppression. The struggles of Native Americans are unique, just as the struggles of Muslim-Americans are their own. However, if Alexie's Indianness transcends ethnicity, then the elevation of self is available to anyone, not just his toughest Indians. Authenticity does not end oppression, but it may be one facilitator of survival. As Sherman Alexie makes the case that authenticity transcends ethnicity, he in a sense offers Indianness to any embattled identity seeking the strength of its own personal warrior. His offering is a useful one in modern America where personal warriors face ample time on the battlefield. In his sometimes humorous, sometimes ominous way, Sherman Alexie makes the case that white society continues its attack on individuality and the mantra of colonial America still resonates today--Calling all personal warriors: assimilate or disappear.