

“The Reservation of My Mind”: Changes in Sherman Alexie’s Post 9/11 Literature

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Sherman Alexie is a complicated author to write about and to discuss for a multitude of reasons. He is a living poet and author who is active on social media, accomplished in several art forms, political, and at times polarizing. A member of the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene tribe, Alexie was raised on the Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, and now resides in Seattle, Washington. He is a Native American author who, at times, alternately embraces and rejects the idea of what a writer’s ethnicity means in terms of opportunity and responsibility. Often, these views are in opposition to one another. His works, while not directly autobiographical, feature details from his very public life history, sometimes making obvious connections between himself and his characters, seemingly begging readers to connect the dots. While small biographical details are not the focus of this research, they do help to support ideas of how larger autobiographical themes translate into his literature, particularly how the events surrounding September 11th, 2001 affected Alexie’s writing.

In an Atlantic interview with Joe Fassler, dated October 2013, Alexie spoke about the single line of poetry that not only inspired him to become a poet, but in fact, seems to be a guiding force in all of his creative endeavors. The line, the opening of “Elegy for the Forgotten Oldsmobile,” a poem by Paiute Indian Adrian C. Louis that Alexie was exposed to in 1987 in a poetry workshop at Washington State University. The line reads: “Oh, Uncle Adrian, I’m in the reservation of my mind” (Alexie 2013). According to the author, the experience changed his life “If I hadn’t found this poem, I don’t think I ever would have found my way as a writer” (Alexie 2013). And while this kind of apocryphal

moment occurs for any number of creative students, it was especially potent for Alexie. “It was that earth-shaking. I was a reservation Indian. I had no options. Being a writer wasn’t anywhere near the menu. So, it wasn’t a lightning bolt—it was an atomic bomb” (Alexie 2013). For him

The line captured that sense of being tribal, being from a reservation—and the fact that you could never leave. I was the first person in my family ever to go to college, leaving the reservation, leaving my tribe, feeling excited about going but also feeling like I’d betrayed the tribe. And knowing that no matter where I ended up, or what I did, I would always be there. Some large part of me would always be there, on the reservation (Alexie 2013).

These realizations spurred Alexie not only to write about his experiences, and use them, as well as the writing process, to move beyond his own mental Reservation, but to view both the physical and mental space as a prison from which he could, and should encourage other Indians to escape. This personal crusade has presented itself throughout Alexie’s career expressing itself in ways that range from frustration, guilt, and finally freedom as his characters learn to not only navigate urban life outside of the Reservation’s literal and figurative borders, but learn to do so without sacrificing what Alexie portrays as the fundamental parts of Native American culture.

The September 11th terrorist attacks had a profound effect on Alexie. For him, the attacks were more than a terrifying assault on American soil - they were a cause to reconsider tribalism and the ways in which humans relate to one another: “To me, 9/11 was the end game for tribalism,” Alexie is quoted saying in a 2005 interview with Åse Nygren (Alexie 2005,153). The author sees tribalism and fundamentalism as the

precipitating factor in not only the attacks themselves, but the Middle East conflict as well (Alexie 2005, 153). This philosophical shift away from sectarianism can be described as a change from what Alexie considers a “fundamental” worldview to what Nygren refers to “evocations of love” for his fellow man (Alexie 2005, 152). This autobiographical shift translates into Alexie’s work as well and can be traced from his pre-9/11 work to his post 9/11.

Two short story collections, 1993’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and 2003’s *Ten Little Indians*, best illustrate this change in the author as it is reflected in his work. The shift is expressed in two distinct ways; first, the transition of Alexie’s characters away from the physical space of the reservation, and second, a departure from the mental Reservation space (the Reservation of the mind) expressed by a profound change in the way in which his characters begin to expand and interact with a multicultural society without diminishing their Indian identity. This sets a model for intercultural relations in an increasingly polycultural society as well as illustrating the change. As Alexie notes, the Indian Reservation was invented as prison; it was an act of war (Alexie 2013). It is powerful that the terror attacks of September 11th, another act of war, act as the precipitating factor for Alexie’s symbolic release of his characters from their bonds.

Section 1

Pre-9/11 – The “Rez” Work

It can be tempting, when discussing Sherman Alexie's earlier writing, to use the term Indian-centric. While this is certainly the case, it is not a characteristic that has changed since the September 11 terrorist attacks on American soil. He is still very much a Native American author whose characters are Native American and continue to experience the world through that particular lens. What is different in his work since 9/11 is the mental and geographic move away from the Indian reservation and out into the world at large. A fairer way to assess these earlier works would be to consider them the result of what Alexie calls a "fundamental" worldview (Alexie 2005, 157). Most often focused on reservation life, and the inequities that space exemplifies, as well as the pain "inherited" from generations of suffering, these stories and poems are insular, separating the characters from possible connections with the world at large and continuing to promulgate the otherness inherent in ethnic literature (Alexie 2005, 157).

The reason that Alexie's earlier works are so focused on the Reservation harkens back to his realization that the Reservation, as a physical location as well as a mental prison, is harmful to the indigenous population. He has called the creation of Indian Reservations an expression of colonialism, and history supports this claim (Alexie 2013). It is no secret that as long as European settlers have had interest in the Americas, the continent's native inhabitants have been subjected to unfair treatment and policy in colonial pursuit of their lands.

The first legislated act to remove Native American tribes from their homelands was the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which displaced tribes located east of the Mississippi river, relocating them to the west where land was less settled and less desirable (Sandefur 37). The few tribes that remained were condensed into small portions

of the land they had previously controlled (Sandefur 37). This dislocation of native populations and the subsequent creation of reservations in which to keep them, resulted almost immediately in the creation of what Gary Sandefur refers to as an “underclass area” (Sandefur 37). Not only were Reservations placed on undesirable land that was poor in natural resources, but they were also located far from utilities that formed the basis for urban centers (Sandefur 39). This left Indians impoverished and dependent on social welfare programs devised by the United States government.

This usurpation of land, self-determination, and ability to function as a working society, can be classified as an act of war by an occupying force, a wrong that Alexie attempts to remedy after the terrorist attacks. He does this by encouraging Indians to leave the Reservation as soon as possible (Alexie 2013, 166). In his 1993 best seller, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Alexie begins to portray the Reservation as a toxic space, underscoring his point with a graphic depiction of the 19th century Native American genocide at the hands of the U.S. government. A mass killing that, according to the author, is startlingly similar to the Jewish Holocaust. This is a move that Alexie admits is political. By calling the two genocides by the same name he is acknowledging that “yes, I want what happened here to receive the same sort of sacred respect that what happened in Germany does. I want our dead to be honored” (Alexie 2013, 166).

His poetry and stories reflect this desire, sometimes even drawing direct parallels to underscore his point. “The Trial of Thomas Builds-The-Fire” is an exemplar of this. In it, Thomas, a compulsive storyteller, is tried for supposed crimes committed in 1858. In his defense, Thomas, who has not spoken in twenty years, begins telling stories of real war crimes against Indians by the U.S. According to Nancy Peterson, “The term war

crime echoes with the momentousness of the Nuremberg Trials” and the story of 800 horses that were stolen and then slaughtered by Colonel George Write in 1856, that follows shares imagery that is hauntingly similar to the Holocaust (68). Narrating the story as a horse that survived the bloody massacre, Thomas says:

Somehow I was lucky enough to be spared while hundreds of my brothers and sisters fell together. It was a nightmare to witness. They were rounded into a corral and then lassoed, one by one, and dragged out to be shot in the head. This lasted for hours, and all that dark night mothers cried for their dead children. The next day, the survivors were rounded into a single mass and slaughtered by continuous rifle fire. (Alexie “Trial” 97)

Not only is the story based on an actual historical event, it serves two additional functions as well: first as a metaphor for the genocidal actions against Native Americans and secondly as a direct parallel between what Alexie refers to as the “American Holocaust” and the Jewish one. “Two discourses come together here as Thomas finds a way to narrate Native genocide through Holocaust echoes in order to command the attention of the court” (Peterson 68). Here, Alexie is relying both on the social legitimacy of the Holocaust to bolster his claim as well as nodding to another displaced people who have suffered so much. This borrowing of victimhood authenticity marks the beginning of the groundwork for his later writing in which he focuses more on a wider range of

underprivileged groups: “I talk about poor people; I talk about disadvantaged people, and that sort of covers everything I need to cover” (Wilson 67).

While eminently dark, the story features Alexie’s trademark humor. The premise is incongruous, almost postmodern in the way that it upends what the justice system is believed to stand for, and Thomas, a sweet and quirky recurring character from other Alexie short stories, is a dubious hero or villain. By speaking the collective truth of his culture through inherited stories, Thomas makes the Bureau of Indian Affairs as well as the Federal Government uneasy. As he narrates the tale as the horse who survived and fought back, “he saw that the Indians in the courtroom sat up straight, combed their braids gracefully, smiled with Indian abandon” (“Trial” 98, 99). By explicitly connecting not only the lasting effects of American aggression on native peoples as a whole, but also presenting the tribe as one living unit through the use of body language, Alexie unites the tribe as a persecuted group and the U.S. government as the other or alien entity. After his second story about Qualchan, a warrior who agrees to peacefully surrender to the same Colonel Wright in order to save his father and instead is met with chains and hung, Eve Ford, the very postmaster Thomas had been accused of holding hostage “made a sudden leap of faith across the room toward Thomas,” and yells “We are all listening, Thomas... We hear you” (99). This moment can be understood as what Craig Womack calls an important “literary aspect of sovereignty”—“a tribal voice” that conveys “a people’s idea of themselves” as a nation (Womack 14). Thomas is able to unite and excite the Indians in the courtroom in a way that is threatening to the status quo. This change in perspective is not only powerful to the Indians present in the courtroom, but to readers as well by undermining attempts to “whitewash” or rewrite history (Peterson 64).

Alexie is not the first Native American writer to assert truth through literature and subvert American mythology of the “settlement” of the nation (Peterson 64). The character Thomas is considered dangerous because his stories are contrary to the American mythology and threaten to ignite a previously defeated and controlled population. When he asks the judge if it is “real justice or the idea of justice,” that the court is dispensing, the judge flies into a rage and ends Thomas’s testimony. The figurative is given literal power in this story and echoes the real world implications that stereotypes that have been perpetuated by the government have on Native peoples. That Thomas is aware of this difference between truth and perception is most dangerous. He has the power to unite and raise the tribe up in protest of the genocide. Because of this, he is sent with other minorities to “a new kind of reservation, barrio, ghetto, logging-town, tin shack” (“Trial” 104). He is still in the reservation mindset – able to be relocated once again by the government because he is an inconvenience; however, this time, he will not be silenced. “Thomas closed his eyes and told this [his] story (“Trial” 103).

The removal of Thomas from one kind of reservation to another is symbolic of not only the way American institutions attempt to silence a minority group by relegating them to camps, ghettos, and reservations, but also the systemic silencing of cultural pride and identity. This could be considered the precursor to the more encompassing worldview that Alexie later adopts.

“The Trial of Thomas Builds-The-Fire” serves as a history, explaining the formation of the Reservation, while focusing on an unlikely figure who begins to unite his tribe against government injustice. While this story explores the propensity of the U.S. government to relocate minority groups that impede the American mythology, other

stories focus on individual battles between reservation life and culture and modern, western culture. In the namesake story, “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,” a story that is connected to two others within the collection, the main character fights a multi-pronged battle between his tribal/reservation heritage and his life in the city. “Too hot to sleep,” he walks down to the 7-11 “for a Creamsicle and the company of a graveyard-shift cashier” (“The Lone Ranger” 181). While he identifies with the clerk (“My arches still ache from my year at the 7-11”) his intentions are not benign (“The Lone Ranger” 181). In a complicated reenactment of government – tribal relations, the narrator flips the power dynamic by using shared knowledge of the job and its risks. Instead of the white cashier, it is the Native American customer who is in control of the interaction.

By flipping the paradigm by controlling the terms and tenor of the transaction, Alexie allows the narrator a modicum of revenge for inherited hurts. Ironically, it is the exact points of shared experience that allow him to control the moment. A commonality that presumably would result in empathy and unification, instead, is leveraged against the white cashier.

“Can I help you?” the 7-11 clerk asked me loudly, searching for a response that would reassure him...

“Just getting a Creamsicle,” I said after a long interval...I grabbed my Creamsicle and walked back to the counter slowly, scanned the aisles for effect...

“Pretty hot out tonight?” he asked, that old rhetorical weather bullshit question designed to put both of us at ease.

“Hot enough to make you go crazy,” I said and smiled. He swallowed hard like a white man does in those situations. I looked him over. Same old green, red, and white 7-11 jacket and thick glasses. But he wasn’t ugly, just misplaced and marked by loneliness. If he wasn’t working there that night, he’d be home alone, flipping through channels and wishing he could afford HBO or Showtime.

“Will this be all?” he asked me, in that company effort to make me do some impulse shopping. Like adding a clause onto a treaty. *We’ll take Washington and Oregon and you get six pine trees and a brand-new Chrysler Cordoba.* I knew how to make and break promises.

“No,” I said and paused. “Give me a Cherry Slushie, too.”

“What size?” he asked, relieved.

“Large,” I said, and he turned his back to make the drink. He realized his mistake but it was too late. He stiffened, ready for the gunshot or the blow behind the ear. When it didn’t come, he turned back to me.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “What size did you say?”

“Small,” I said and changed the story. (“The Lone Ranger” 183-84)

The Indian and white relationships portrayed in the story are antagonistic and are presented, under the presumption of the title, as a dysfunctional play on the pop culture phenomenon of cowboys and Indians. Alexie takes this a step further by employing the idea of an iconic buddy pairing such as the Lone Ranger and Tonto locked into the most intimate of battles in perpetuity. This does little to raise hopes for a cultural

reconciliation. And although the imagery of the pair of opposites cannot become untangled, the cultural identities that they represent can. According to John Newton, author of “Sherman Alexie’s Autoethnography,” it is “the queasy intimacy of the transcultural play of recognitions that make this discourse possible... The combatants are bound together by shared experience and a shared image-repertoire: as if they had grown up watching the same movies, their common array of stereotypes keeps alive their ritualized conflict” (422). And indeed, they have. In an interview, Alexie acknowledges playing cowboys and Indians as a child with only the “unpopular kids” cast as Indians (Newton 422). It is this kind of cultural and systemic damage that underpins the binary image Alexie plays on. Narrating the story from an acutely aware Native American point-of-view, Alexie, for a moment, wrests the power from the white hero and endows the brown side-kick.

While rewriting the “buddy relation as a fistfight does not in itself undo the hegemonic work of the invader’s mythology,” it does illustrate a wish that it were so, yet while this skirmish may be won, it does little to change the history of the war (Newton 423). However, this cannot be accomplished nor the narrative re-written by merely inverting political or social binaries. Newton continues: “By virtue of his experience quite literally in the other’s shoes (“My arches still ache from my year at the Seattle 7-11”), the narrator in Alexie’s story is able to think himself into the place of the white interpreter of indigeneity” (423). By attempting to appear as a break from the stereotype, he simultaneously exploits that very image. The narrative swerves¹ the moment where

¹ My use of “swerve” borrows from the use of Harold Bloom’s theory of artistic creation as interpreted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in which a minority writer creates a space for themselves by mis(or re-) interpreting older works.

this awareness disrupts the balance of what Newton calls a “ritualized conflict,” which “obliges the clerk to confront in the same moment both the stereotype itself and his antagonist’s nonidentity with it (423). The result is a hiccup – a double take – in which the feedback loop of colonial antagonism is interrupted by a flash of uncertainty, long enough perhaps for a different outcome to be plotted” (Newton 423). This allows not only the narrator, but the reader to envision a scenario without or beyond institutionalized racism or stereotypes.

Alexie uses classic, binary interactions as a recurring theme that he utilizes throughout the story and is exemplified in the relationships between the narrator and his ex-girlfriend as well as between the narrator and a white BIA officer’s son in a basketball matchup. In the terms of binaries, these relationships cannot be equitable because of the narrator’s insistence upon them as such. His ex-girlfriend is an elementary school teacher, a representative of one of the most effective tools for Native indoctrination, something the narrator cannot let go. He continually reimagines their relationship in terms of racial opposites (“She was a missionary’s wife and I was a minor war chief”), an alliance that results in an apocalyptic war between the indigenous population and the colonial invaders (“The Lone Ranger” 187). This apocalypse can be viewed as an individual devastation, the loss of his individuality to the combined couple, but more importantly, as a loss of or even a defeat of his tribal identity. The narrator is painfully aware of his heritage, so much so that he is unable to function in a relationship outside of the reservation – a cultural crippling of sorts: “When I got back to the reservation, my

family wasn't surprised to see me. They'd been expecting me since the day I left for Seattle" ("The Lone Ranger" 187).

The idea that Indians cannot thrive outside of the reservation is echoed time and again throughout the collection. "There's an old Indian poet who said that Indians can reside in the city, but they can never live there" ("The Lone Ranger" 187). By this, Alexie seems to be insisting upon the very binary that he intends to revise; however, despite the idea that Indians can only thrive within tribal boundaries, Alexie refuses to idealize reservation life. In the collection's opening story, "Every Little Hurricane," he explores the self-inflicted damage members of the same tribe wreak on one another through an extended weather metaphor. The story begins: "Although it was winter, the nearest ocean four hundred miles away, and the Tribal Weatherman asleep because of boredom, a hurricane dropped from the sky in 1976 and fell so hard on the Spokane Indian Reservation that it knocked Victor from bed and his latest nightmare" ("Every Little" 1). Gordon E. Slethaug, author of "Hurricanes and Fires: Chaotics in Sherman Alexie's 'Smoke Signals' and 'The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,'" approaches this story as a study of order out of chaos, echoing the Native American notion of a tribe being more than the sum of its parts/members. "A hurricane is itself a commonly cited chaotic phenomenon for it consists of elements that come spontaneously to form complex systems in which the whole is unexpectedly and unpredictably greater than the sum of its parts...Add sunlight and wind to water vapor and it organizes itself into a hurricane" (Slethaug 132).

A perfect storm, born of the alignment of perfect conditions, creates powerful meteorological chaos. It, much like the moving parts in the story, can be traced back to

the contributing elements. Just as certain atmospheric elements combine in a particular way to create a weather phenomenon, so too have certain social conditions aligned on the reservation to mimic or perhaps feed off of the mysterious mid-winter weather anomaly. The collective toll of poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and generations of suffering and systemic racism that has colored Victor's understanding of the world, violently combines with the celebration of a New Year in which none of the characters can hope for better lives. In this way, Slethaug sees the storm as "little more than a mirror reflection of the chaotic nightmare that envelops Victor's house this particular New Year's Eve" (132). The weather disturbance can also be seen as a metaphorical precipitating factor for the aberrant human behavior. Here, a mass hysteria descends rather than a methodical, weather condition, the height of which mimics a true meteorological bacchanalia.

During that night, his aunt Nezzzy broke her arm when an unidentified Indian woman

pushed her down the stairs. Eugene Boyd broke a door playing indoor basketball.

Lester

FallsApart passed out on top of a stove and somebody turned the burners on high.

James

Many Horses sat in the corner and told so many bad jokes that three or four

Indians threw

him out the door into the snow. 'How do you get one hundred Indians to yell *Oh,*

shit?' James Many Horses asked as he sat in a drift on the front lawn. 'Say

Bingo,' James Many Horses answered himself when nobody from the party would.

James didn't spend very much time alone in the snow. Soon Seymour and Lester were there, too. Seymour was thrown out because he kept flirting with all the women.

Lester was there to cool off his burns. Soon everybody from the party was out on the lawn, dancing in the snow, fucking in the snow, fighting in the snow. ("Every Little" 10)

During this turmoil, Victor's parents are sound asleep, drunk, at their own New Year's party. As Victor searches for them he is assaulted with negative memories and cruel realities of his life on the reservation. Memory of Christmases with his father's tears instead of gifts, dreams of a bountiful restaurant that morph into nightmares where the food is scarce and buckets of water pour from the ceiling, and the way that alcohol affects Victor's father, changing his posture from a "question mark" to an "exclamation point," threaten to impede the little boy's progress as he is affected by the same madness that has claimed his family and friends ("Every Little" 6). When he finally reaches his destination, he feels safe, but only after he checks the human atmospheric conditions, "Victor licked his index finger and raised it in the air to test the wind. Velocity. Direction. Sleep approaching... There was a downshift of emotion, tension seemed to wane" ("Every Little" 10). Despite his parent's drunken stupor, they are the eye of the dueling hurricanes, the calm hiding place where Junior can weather the converging storms.

Despite the feverish emotions that wrenched them apart the night before, the story ends on a note of unification that aptly sums the cohesive tribal identity. It also presents the Indians as victims rather than perpetrators, as if the event was an attack from outside forces rather than an implosion of internal pressures: “But it was over. Victor closed his eyes, fell asleep. It was over. The hurricane that fell out of the sky in 1976 left before sunrise, and all the Indians, the eternal survivors, gathered to count their losses” (“Every Little”¹¹). Interestingly, Alexie presents a duality where Indians cannot continue to exist on the Reservation in its current incarnation in a way that is healthy, and yet, when viewed in conjunction with “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,” cannot exist outside of the tribal community or in urban settings. These factors combine to illustrate a group trapped in an eternal hell from which the author can see no escape. Here his work rests on a precipice – an edge where Alexie, and by extension tribal communities, must find a way to change the conditions of Reservation life or leap, away from communal Reservation living, into the larger world community. This frustration changes only with the author’s own mental shift that occurs after the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Postmodern, tribal, and reservation-centric, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* is full of Alexie’s trademark dark humor and unflinching dedication to tribal truth that is representative of his early works. These works plumb topics relevant to reservation living that are often biographical while comingling the past and present in ways that are not only postmodern, but simultaneously harken back to an instinctive timelessness where all things are now if only the character, the reader, or even the author knew how to grasp it. Yet, Alexie has never subscribed to what he refers to as the “corn

pollen and eagle feather school” of writing, which perpetuates mythical native stereotypes and fails to address indigenous realities such as poverty and alcoholism. While authors such as Leslie Marmon Silko have successfully intertwined such themes, most notably in her major novel *Ceremony*, Alexie appears to spare them but a glance, a strategy that has earned him the scorn of more traditional Native American writers such as Gloria Bird, who see his writing as abusive to his heritage, an accusation that Alexie readily accepts, going so far as to refute that his writing shares anything with the medium, saying “my writing has nothing to do with oral tradition, because I typed it” (Bellante 14). However, it is nearly impossible to discuss narratives like “The Trial of Thomas Builds-The-Fire” without a discussion about the power of the oral tradition. It is difficult to reconcile literature about a people so rooted in tradition and so bound by looming stereotypes as Native Americans in the twenty-first century without considering the oral traditions that made Alexie’s literature possible. Although Alexie’s storytelling originates on a keyboard to be consumed silently by lone readers, his early characters exist on the reservation, a communal, if dysfunctional, space where storytelling is central to preserving history. It is a rebellious irony that Alexie embodies here, expanding the traditional art of storytelling to a non-traditional audience of modern readers while simultaneously refuting ties to the very medium he describes. His characters are storytellers, Alexie is telling a story, and yet to distinguish himself and his move away from the Reservation, he disowns the art that he practices. His characters, like the author, seem to be haunted by tribal tradition, and stand on the precipice of the mental boundary that holds them back.

As Jennifer Landino notes “Despite the fact that more than two-thirds of American Indians live in urban areas, many readers and scholars of American Indian literature continue to associate Indigenous peoples with natural environments rather than urban ones” (36). This is a problem as it not only stigmatizes native peoples and perpetuates a stereotype, but it also reinforces the idea of a mental reservation – the “reservation of the mind,” an internalized boundary that often prevents growth in the Indigenous community. The trope of the old Indian in a headdress shedding a single tear for the destruction of the environment, or image of Indigenous peoples as somehow trapped in prehistory is both damaging and unrealistic in modern times. According to Landino, quoting historian Donald Fixico, “the relocation years of the 1950s and 1960s saw ‘as many as one hundred thousand’ Indian citizens make their homes in the city, and several generations have ‘survived’ urban life since then” (36). As more Native Americans establish careers and enter the middle class, the images of the Indian tied to the land and forever frozen in a mythologized, pastoral existence become more inaccurate. The realization that he could write about Indian life as he experienced it, the “fry bread and fried bologna” day-to-day reality, is what sparked Alexie’s interest in writing (Purdy 13). And while he rejects stereotypical Native American literature, he is insistent upon the connection between his tribal history and his writing: “I’m a colonized man...we are a colonized people. This *is* South Africa here...the United States *is* a colony, and I’m always going to write like one who is colonized and that’s with a lot of anger (Burnham 8). Because the United States has given so little recognition to the atrocities perpetrated upon the nation’s first peoples, Alexie resorts to connections with

the African apartheid and the Jewish Holocaust in order for the level of violence to be understood.

Section 2 – Post 9/11

Born of this insistent need, driven by history and culture, to express the pain of not only his tribe, but all Native tribes, Alexie's pre-9/11 work shows the beginnings of the connections he makes after the terrorist attacks. The groundwork for compassion is laid as, in search for reference, he connects similar genocidal events, similar suffering. Likewise, he sees a shared immigrant status between the groups as well, calling the indigenous people of the United States "the most immigrant group," and sees acculturation as process that he saw as "slowly changing" (Alexie 2005,157). My generation and the next generation – we are immigrants! I am an immigrant into the United States, and now my children are fully assimilated" (Alexie 2005, 157). Alexie acutely feels the loss of direction or place in American culture for Native Americans to find a niche. Perpetually trapped in the illusion of a bucolic past or broken stereotype, the modern Indian lacks a place in modern culture. "The most direct result is that we don't know what an American Indian identity is. There is no measure anymore. There is no way of knowing, except perhaps through our pain. And so we're lost. We're always wandering" (Alexie 2005,157). Once again comparing American Native displacement to Jewish Diaspora, Alexie uses the term "blood memory" to assert that neither group is able to be identified or even self-identify separate from "their pain" or the "constant oppression" that the two groups have suffered at the hands of invaders. In this void, wandering has become their identity, making them residents inside of, yet not a part of the United States (Alexie 2005, 157). This wandering, combined with an enculturated

need for group identity, can be seen as a precipitating factor in the more encompassing tenor of Alexie's later works. Because of this, Alexie's characters can be seen more as ambassadors than immigrants, bringing not only the idea of a more inclusive culture, but because of their self-identification through pain, a more empathetic one as well.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 precipitated, or perhaps accelerated a change in Alexie's work that Nygren calls a "shift in emphasis from angry protests to evocations of love and empathy" (151). Not only has the tone of his work changed, but so has his tribal-centric worldview. Instead of focusing on the reservation and issues of tribal identity within a colonized land, his attention is now concentrated on the myriad ways which individuals form tribal alliances based on factors other than heritage. This shift is one that is multi-faceted, and one that Alexie credits to the world changing events of September 2001:

9/11 was the endgame for tribalism. Ever since 9/11, I have worked hard to be very public about my multi-tribal identity. I think fundamentalism is the mistaken belief that one belongs to only one tribe... War is all about the idea of tribes and defending your country, so I've been trying to let go of the idea of basing my politics on the good of a small group. I've become less Indian-centric as years have gone on. After September 11th, I barely talk about it. I talk about poor people; I talk about disadvantaged people, and that sort of covers everything I need to cover. (qtd in Wilson, 67)

A large part of Alexie's new focus centers around a realization by the author that "pain is not a competition" and that it "is relative" (Alexie 2005, 156). In a way, the events catapulted the author's point of view to events in the world at large, shifting his focus to

what could be called a transcendent humanism: “I try not to measure other people’s pain. I mean, if I throw a rock randomly right now I’d hit someone whose life if worse than mine was...Nothing in my life can measure up to losing somebody in the World Trade towers. Everybody’s pain is important” (Alexie 2005, 156). This realization that everybody’s pain is important and, by extension that one’s suffering does not negate another’s, has allowed Alexie to reimagine the ways in which individuals are connected to one another. In his post 9/11 works he creates a space in which to explore the myriad ways in which humans relate to each other by alluding to common cultural concepts. In order to do this, Alexie’s characters leave the reservation behind and become citizens of a global culture, one that shares humor, pop culture, and literary elements in place of familial or tribal ties.

Especially representative of this concept is his 2003 short story collection, *Ten Little Indians*. In it, Alexie uses elements of popular culture, religion, and literature as common threads to link characters together in communities that fall outside of traditional tribal and familial connections, thus reimagining what it means to belong to a tribe in the post-modern era. The use of larger cultural concepts to unify the myriad other is immediately apparent in the titles Alexie employs for the collection as a whole as well as for the stories themselves.

The title *Ten Little Indians* harkens back to a racially offensive nursery rhyme by the same name penned in 1868 by Septimus Winner for American Minstrel shows, and was imitated just a year later by an English musician, Frank Green, who changed out “Injun” for “nigger,” translating “the inherent prejudice from one despised group of people to another” and laying framework for alloidentification (or identification with the

other) of these groups (O'Shaughnessey 213). The song delineates horrific deaths for each of the "Ten Little Injuns" until "there was one." "Such a description of the gradual disappearance of a dark-skinned people through their own carelessness or ignorance, coupled with the pleasant rhythm and gleeful ending, 'And then there were none,' can hardly be less than wish fulfillment" (O'Shaughnessey 213). Indeed, the catchy sing-song tune which accompanies the rhyme has insured its place in popular culture, somehow making the grotesque words sing-able. The rhyme was perpetuated through Agatha Christie's use of it as a title for a mystery novel in 1939 in which strangers summoned to a party are picked off one by one, meeting gruesome ends at the hand of their host for their supposed crimes. The continuing theme is that each of the ten little Indians deserved his death – that undesirable populations will conveniently disappear. Once again, by playing on an old trope, Alexie wrests control of the narrative from western culture to reclaim and refute western ideology.

This is not the first time Alexie has used the rhyme in his work; in fact, it is a carryover from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, linking the two texts and creating a trail of Alexie's progression from a Reservation-centric to a global worldview. Its first appearance is in "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore." "I'd like to think there were ten of them. But there were actually only four or five," Victor notes as he sees a group of Indian boys walk by (44). By wishing the number was ten, Victor, and by extension, Alexie exhibit the number as having particular meaning for them, suggesting that the rhyme and what it represents has been internalized by the indigenous community.

This theme carries into “The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor” when, during James Many Horses’ wedding, a drunken guest, thinking that he is at a funeral, begins to eulogize the groom:

I remember once when he and I were drinking at the Powwow Tavern when all of a sudden Lester Falls Apart comes running in and says that ten Indians just got killed in a car wreck on Ford Canyon Road. *Ten Skins?* I ask Lester, and he said, *Yeah, ten.* And then Jimmy starts up singing, One little, two little, three little Indians, four little, five little, six little Indians, seven little, eight little, nine little Indians, ten little Indian boys (“My Favorite Tumor” 161).

The insinuation, of course, is that Native American males will find a way to self-destruct and fulfill the rhyme. Additionally, it is the “implication that the Indian boys are dying off one after the other, that on the reservation this is the normal condition” that makes the wedding party “a little tense” (O’Shaughnessey 214). This idea builds from other themes in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and raises the question: if young men are dying on the Reservation and are not happy without living within a tribal community, where can they thrive? The contemporary parallel of the song to young African American men (*Ten Little Niggers*) is unavoidable and gains traction in not only “The Trial of Thomas Builds-The-Fire” as Thomas is taken away with other minorities to “a new kind of reservation, barrio, ghetto, logging-town, tin shack,” but in later collections as well. In “Flight Patterns,” from the collection *Ten Little Indians*, William tells his Ethiopian taxi driver that he’s “not jewel-on-the-forehead Indian,” but a “bows-and-arrows Indian” (Alexie “Trial” 104). The immigrant taxi driver, familiar with the rhyme responds: “‘Oh, you mean ten little, nine little, eight little Indians?’” to which

William replies “‘Yeah, sort of...I’m that kind of Indian, but much smarter,’” elucidating not only the pervasiveness of the damaging rhyme, but the perpetuation of such ideas beyond western culture (Alexie “Flight Patterns” 115).

In Alexie’s use of it as the title of this short story collection, Margaret O’Shaughnessey notes, there are only nine stories while the original promotions for the book promised eleven (220). When asked about the discrepancy in an interview, Alexie responded that “nine is a much funnier number than eleven” (O’Shaughnessey 220). His evasive answer leaves much room for interpretation. Initially, because of the inclusivity of the text, the title feels like an invitation to imagine the reader as the tenth Indian. It’s as if Alexie is saying “You belong.” However, the title can also be viewed as a refutation of the rhyme and the emergence of a stronger, yet malleable Indian identity, one that has left the worn-out rhyme along with the boundaries of the Reservation and is in the throes of becoming something more. The characters in these tales are not diminished or disappearing, as the worn-out rhyme suggests; instead they are creating new tribal identities while holding fast to values that are at the core of Indian-ness. The title is a simultaneous refutation of previously conceived notions as well as an invitation to a polycultural human tribe.

Alexie continues to use this strategy with the titles of the short stories as well. The title of the collection’s inaugural story, “The Search Engine,” is an allusion, of course, to the internet search tool. It also refers to the story’s protagonist, Corliss, who is herself a savvy search engine; going to great lengths to find the reclusive Native American poet Harlan Atwater in an effort to find acceptance herself. Possibly, the title is also a play on the words searching and ‘injun, which seems to fit with Alexie’s irreverent sense of

humor, a move that Jeff Berglund feels is an “obvious” attempt to show that Corliss will meet with “typical pitfalls created by stereotypical thinking” on her “search for authenticity,” rather than a clever pun (Berglund 252). While Corliss does not encounter these “typical pitfalls” on her journey she does have to fight to secure an education in her preferred field. These struggles serve as a reminder to the audience that while Indians have advanced, they have yet to attain parity in education and opportunity.

If in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* the characters are trapped, and unable to thrive on or off the Reservation, then in *Ten Little Indians*, Alexie sets them free from both the physical and emotional reservation space. In order to accomplish this, his characters must do three things: first, they must physically leave the Reservation space; second, they must leave the mental Reservation boundary, or the “Reservation of the mind” and third; they must make new alliances based on factors other than ancestry. In light of this criteria, the collection’s inaugural story, “The Search Engine,” serves as a manual for the entire book, following Corliss as she navigates these steps on a journey of self-discovery.

Because “The Search Engine” functions as a literary life quest, the story shadows Alexie’s own search for legitimacy as an Indian and a writer in this polycultural space. As Michael Wilson notes,

The most marked evolution in Alexie’s own conception of his writing may be his increasingly complex exploration of tribalism and identity, seemingly in some ways as a response to his experience of his own life moving into middle age as an “urban Indian” and in some ways as a response to national and world events. (66)

“The Search Engine” is especially representative of this claim, featuring extreme biographical similarities between Alexie and the story’s main character, Corliss. The text is crucial for understanding the collection as whole because it embodies the overarching themes of bonds based on factors other than tribal or familial identity, the search for an original life beyond the borders of the Reservation, and the notion that every human journey is “epic” (“Search Engine” 28). The biographical similarities between Alexie and Corliss are impossible to discount. Like Alexie, Corliss is a first generation college student at Washington State University. She too, experiences the same feelings of guilt and freedom that Alexie describes from the 2003 Atlantic article with Joe Fassler, and she also stumbles upon work by a Native American poet, in Corliss’s case Harlan Atwater. The title of the poetry collection that spurs her journey is *In the Reservation of My Mind*, echoing the very line of poetry that made Alexie become a writer. Through these similarities Corliss becomes the creative vehicle for Alexie to express the changes in his own philosophical worldview that occur post 9/11, while simultaneously attributing that change to the single line of poetry that became the guiding force for his, and by extension, Corliss’s, lives.

An ideal vessel, Corliss is a first generation college Spokane college student at Washington State University. She is young and thirsty to create “an original aboriginal life” based on literary ideals of fairness, and humanity (“Search Engine” 5). This fulfills the requirement that she leave the physical Reservation. One day, in search of a poem that she heard used as a pickup line, she stumbles on a collection of poems written by the purportedly Spokane author, Harlan Atwater. Corliss is astonished to find an Indian poet, particularly one from her own tribe, as her own family cannot comprehend her affinity

for poetry and language. Compelled to meet Atwater at all costs, Corliss takes a bus to Seattle, embarking on a modern-day spirit quest to find the one Indian who understands her. By seeking out Atwater, Corliss initially shows a reluctance to leave the mental reservation behind – she is still seeking approval from, what she believes is, a fellow tribe member.

While Corliss is almost painfully aware of Indigenous stereotypes, she remains confused about her identity – particularly in relation to her tribe. Her literary avocation marks her as different from her family and is a source of conflict between Corliss and them. In spite of her father and uncle's teasing, and her mother's bewilderment over her choice of major, she cannot help who she is: "What kind of Indian loses her mind over a book of poems? She was that kind of Indian, she was exactly that kind of Indian, and it was the only kind of Indian she knew how to be" ("Search Engine" 9). The male members of her family seem to be trapped in the nostalgic stereotype that Corliss has difficulty identifying with:

She loved her father and her uncles. She loved how they filled a room with their laughter and rank male bodies and endless nostalgia and quick tempers, but she also hated their individual fears and collective lack of ambition. They all worked blue-collar construction jobs, not because they loved the work or found it valuable or rewarding but because some teacher or guidance counselor once told them all they could work only blue-collar jobs. When they were young, some authority figure told them to pick up the wrench, and so the picked up the wrench and never once considered what would happen if they picked up a pencil or a book.

("Search Engine" 13)

It is in this dichotomy which Corliss is trapped: on one side, her family who cannot leave the physical or emotional reservation, and on the other, her desire to find her authentic self. Key to the collection's success is the malleability of the character's identity that relies on citizenship within multiple social subgroups. Corliss represents this fluidity of identity that is prevalent in much of the story collection. She is "simultaneously a 'poor kid' and a 'middle class Indian' and is immediately cast as something contingent, impure, and negotiable" (Landino 41). She learns early on how to 'benefit from positive ethnic stereotypes and not feel any guilt about it' (Search Engine 11). Because of this, Corliss is more than an Indigenous transplant to an urban space; she is a young woman who is acutely self-aware of both her transient status as well as the preconceived stereotypes that typical Americans have about her. Compared to the narrator from "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven," Corliss exemplifies the positive use of racial stereotypes to advance herself, whereas the earlier narrator uses negative ones to taunt an individual with whom he shares experience. Corliss is ready to engage with the world off of the Reservation, while the narrator is not.

Because Corliss does not feel as if she fully belongs in any world, she is especially susceptible to Harlan Atwater's work. When she stumbles upon his neglected book of poems in the library, it is a need for acceptance and understanding that propels her on her modern-day spirit quest to find the poet:

Long ago, as part of the passage into adulthood, young Indians used to wander into the wilderness in search of a vision, in search of meaning and definition. Who am I? Who am I supposed to be? Ancient questions answered by ancient ceremonies. Maybe Corliss couldn't climb a mountain and starve herself into self-

revealing hallucinations. Maybe she'd never find her spirit animal, her ethereal guide through the material world. Maybe she was only a confused indigenous woman negotiating her way through a colonial maze, but she was one Indian who had good credit and knew how to use her Visa card ("Search Engine" 27).

Although times and conditions have changed, Corliss embarks on a timeless search for identity and self. As Landino sees it, Corliss's journey to the city is also "search for identity – her own identity as an individual, her tribal identity as a Spokane Indian, and even a collective human identity is at its core" (41). Her name further supports this claim as Corliss is literally core-less; at this point, she is an incohesive amalgam of identities that she is unable to reconcile. The use of the spirit quest combined with the affable ignorance and lack of gumption exhibited by the male members of her family posit her as an emergent, contemporary Spokane warrior able to succeed in the modern-day society.

Echoing Alexie's thoughts on Indians as immigrants, Landino further suggests that Corliss is uniquely suited to be the perfect ambassador for Indians in urban spaces. Because she has an immigrant status as well as her communal, tribal roots, "Corliss brings with her a particular definition of the urban, which informs her encounters there" (Landino 42). In "Telling the Indian Urban: Representations in American Indian Fiction," Carol Miller explores two different understanding of "urbanity" and how that affects not only representations of Native Americans in literature, but how they use a particular definition to help define themselves in city settings. According to Miller, the western use of the word urban describes a "dense complex of human variety" which is "closer to Native Americans 'nature' than our word 'natural' (Miller 49). A city is a large amalgam

of diverse cultures, incomes, and ethnicities that not only coexist, but depend upon each other for survival. Miller describes the natural world as one experienced as an interconnected web or a network of living things living closely together; it is a diverse ecosystem of life that is dependent upon all members – a definition that is strikingly similar to that of a city (49). Additionally, tribal communities often value the good of the whole of that of the individual, a direct contrast to capitalistic, western society where individual achievement, even at the expense of others, is prized. This crush of interconnected civilization is historically normative in Indigenous culture. This too aligns with statements made by Alexie that “Indian identity is more regional than it is tribal,” which, although subtly, can open the conversation up to relationships based on goals and perceived similarities rather than blood or clan loyalty (Alexie 2005, 155). Drawn to connect with humans by inherited tribal custom, Alexie provides his twenty-first century Indians with the tools to connect to other humans on terms other than heritage. It is as if he is positing America’s indigenous population as a leader in the new polycultural society.

Alexie complicates Corliss’s journey, however; by first introducing a homeless professor, with whom Corliss trades lunch for directions, a transaction that both parties deem “a safe and sane human interaction” (“Search Engine” 29). As they eat, Corliss asks the homeless man how he came to be in his current situation. He replies:

“I just fell out of love with the world...First of all, I am nuts. Diagnosed and prescribed. But there’s all sorts of nutcases making millions and billions of dollars in this country. That Ted Turner, for example is a crazy rat living in a gold-plated outhouse. But I got this particular kind of nuts, you know? I got a pathological

need for respect... I hated my job. I hated the kids. I hated my colleagues. I hated money. And I felt like none of them respected me, you know? I felt their disrespect growing all around me. I felt suffocated by their disrespect” (“Search Engine” 30 -31).

What the professor describes is more than a lack of respect. He expresses a longing for understanding and human connection. These feelings lead to a breakdown in the campus center where he screams over and over “I want some respect! I want some respect!” (“Search Engine” 31). This continues for days while passersby, students and faculty, ignore his frenzy. His shouting comes to an end only when one his students hugs him and whispers: “I respect you, Professor Williams, I respect you” (“The Search Engine”31). This moment of kindness becomes extraordinary because of the acute longing for human connection that the professor feels: “I started crying. Weeping. Those tears that start from your bowels and roar up through your stomach and heart and lungs and out of your mouth. Do you know the kind of tears of which I’m speaking?” Corliss responds “Yes, Yes, Of course I do,” gifting the professor as well as herself with a moment of human compassion and understanding (“The Search Engine” 31).

This interaction fulfills Alexie’s third mandate: to create alliances based on factors other than familial or tribal relations. Corliss recognizes the mad, homeless man as a kindred spirit: “Corliss could feel the heat from this man’s mania. It was familiar and warm,” and creates an alliance borne out of the human need to be respected as an individual, a need that extends beyond the borders of tribal or familial ties and serves as the final step on her journey for acceptance (“Search Engine” 31). Alexie extends the

web of alliances through Corliss's interactions with the homeless professor and the man's need to be recognized as a human.

Additionally, this interaction between the two comes to represent the largest tribe, humanity. The interaction between the two is "human" with him giving her directions and her buying and sharing lunch with him, at the most level of cultural playing fields, McDonalds. The reversal of an Indian girl being in the position to help a white man is not a shallow jab at stereotypes, but a call to rethink how humans relate to one another.

Alexie reinforces this idea with allusions to Homer's *Odyssey*. On the bus to Seattle, Corliss comes to realize that Odysseus was as foolish and ordinary a character as she, or anyone she had ever met. This leads to another theme from the text, the idea that every person matters, that greatness is a matter of presentation, rather than reality.

If one thought about it, and Corliss had often thought about it, the epic poem was foremost a powerful piece of military propaganda. Homer had transformed a lying colonial asshole into one of the most admired figures in human history. So, Corliss asked, what lessons could we learn from Homer? To be epic, one only needed to employ an epic biographer. Since Corliss was telling her own story, she decided it was an autobiographical epic. Hell, maybe she was Homer. Maybe she was Odysseus. Maybe everybody was a descendant of Homer and Odysseus. Maybe every human journey was epic ("Search Engine" 28).

Because she is able to take this step and extend the idea of an epic existence beyond literary heroes and beyond her own ethnicity, beyond her own journey, Corliss acts as an exemplar of polycultural thinking in Alexie's post 9/11 world. Perhaps more importantly,

by identifying with Homer, Corliss, and Alexie deliberately creates an ancestry outside of her own ethnicity: we are all descendants of Homer or Odysseus. This assertion is the most inclusive of the entire collection because with it, Alexie, an author most often categorized by his ethnicity, actively unites people across, ethnicity, avocation, space and time to the same western, literary, icon. We are all one, and we are all legends.

Literary allusions throughout the piece link Corliss emphatically with the literary tribe. References to the reclusive Emily Dickinson, Andrew Marvell, Shakespeare, and Auden frame the way in which she thinks. Poetry is the lens through which Corliss sees the world, and it makes it difficult for her to connect with her family and tribe. She identifies with Gerard Manley Hopkins, a poet and Jesuit priest, “precisely because he was a white man and a Jesuit priest” (“Search Engine” 14). Because of her love of poetry, Corliss is able to question Indian hatred of white men.

Maybe it wasn’t about whiteness or redness or any other color. Corliss wasn’t naïve. She knew racism, tribalism, and nationalism were encoded in human DNA, and we’d all save our own child from a burning building even if it meant a thousand strangers would die, and we’d all kill in defense of our wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, parents, and children. However, she also wanted to believe in human goodness and mortal grace. She was contradictory and young and confused and smart and unformed and ambitious. (“Search Engine” 14).

The use of physical geography plays a large role in removing Corliss from the guilt, her mental reservations, that prevents her from reaching beyond her comfort zone. The impetus of her journey is to find another Indian who understands her, giving legitimacy to the type of Indian that she is. The physical space of the city, and the crush

of humanity that it contains, act as an appropriate backdrop for Corliss's epiphany. Geographically, the new location jolts the young woman out of her comfort zone and the mingling of ethnic identities living in close relation helps to cement her human connectedness: "If human beings possessed endless possibilities, then cities contained exponential hopes" ("Search Engine" 27). It is interesting to note that all of Corliss's interactions are driven by perceived similarities. She feels connected to the homeless professor because of her own "approximate homelessness" and to Harlan Atwater because of what she believes is his own hybrid Indian/poet identity. The connection that she finds is deeper, however, because Harlan too is lost.

When Corliss finally tracks down Harlan Atwater, she is met with disappointment. Where she expects to find a reclusive literary genius, she is greeted with a curmudgeonly middle aged man who no longer identifies as a poet or an Indian. Harlan agrees to meet her at a nearby bookstore and tells her his story. He was a Spokane baby given up for adoption, a "lost bird" raised by a white couple ("Search Engine" 40). During his twenties, he wrote the poems as a way to connect to his lost heritage. "I started writing to feel like I belonged...To feel more Indian. And to grow up like an Indian is supposed to grow up, you know?" ("Search Engine" 41). Here, Atwater illustrates what Alexie refers to as a "dangerous nostalgia," embracing idea that the only way to be an Indian is to live up to the stereotype of what an Indian should be. Alexie specifically addresses this idea in his interview with Åse Nygren, saying "There is a certain tendency there (on the Reservation) of nostalgia as a disease" (Alexie 2005, 154). The notion of living up to negative stereotypes Alexie believes comes from "a nostalgia for purity: a time when we were all together and when our identity was sure, and when

our lives were better” (Alexie 2005, 154). This nostalgia, however, is one based in false stereotypes meaning that the current idea of what an Indian should be is itself an inaccurate stereotype.

Through his poetry, Harlan is able to connect superficially with the experience of being an urban Indian. After an open mike poetry night, he has a sexual encounter with a woman named Star Girl who sees Harlan as merely a stereotype – the tragic Indian loner. Disillusioned Harlan leaves and goes to an Indian bar where, for one night, he feels like an Indian.

He ran twenty-two blocks to Big Heart’s, the Indian bar on Aurora. He threw open the door and strode into the crowded bar like a warrior chief.

“I am a poet!” He screamed to the assembled Indians.

The drunken Indians, those broken men and women, let Harlan be their poet for the night. They let him perform his poems between jukebox songs. They listened and applauded. They hugged and kissed him. They told him his poems sounded exactly like Indian poems were supposed to sound. (“Search Engine” 47)

This feeling is short-lived, however; in the morning, Harlan awakens, hungover, in the alley surrounded by copies of his book that he had signed for the Indians in bar the night before. He discards the rest of his poetry as well as his hopes belonging.

As he relates his story to Corliss, it becomes apparent that Harlan’s use of poetry to attempt to feel connected to his heritage is, ironically, the same medium that serves as a barrier between Corliss and hers. While not what Corliss is expecting, the pair are

connected by a shared disconnect from the tribe. This tragic and somewhat comic irony is poignant and a hallmark of Alexie's writing.

Because the expected alliance with Harlan Atwater fails, Corliss comes to view herself through lenses other than ethnicity. Alexie achieves this shift by using poetic and philosophical allusions combined with Spokane imagery to highlight the connection between Corliss and Atwater, marking their relationship as fellow misfits from the two subcultures, to form the heart of the story; the need to be understood and belong.

Continuing the theme of using popular cultural allusions as titles, is "Do Not Go Gentle." Referring to the Dylan Thomas poem, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," in which a son begs his dying father to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light," Alexie hints at the story to come (Thomas, 3). The well-read reader will instinctively know that death of some degree will play a role in the story, and the casual reader will have at least heard the title, bringing the readers to the text with a degree of preconceived notions. Alexie differs from the poem, however; in his spin on the father-child paradigm. While the Thomas poem features a son holding vigil for his dying father, in Alexie's "Do Not Go Gentle" it is the father fighting for his son who will not "go gentle" into the hands of "Mr. Grief." By using a common literary allusion, attributed to a white literary icon, and applying it to a story about a heritage that was once seen as the distinct other, Alexie is able to transcend cultural boundaries as well as play on the preconceived notions of the reader and transform a poem of grief into a story of hope and redemption. He mixes tribal ritual with ancient fertility imagery, pop culture, literary tradition, and Christian ideology.

In “Do Not Go Gentle,” Alexie illustrates the way humans are connected through five degrees of relationships beginning with that of a husband and wife and extending to the human condition as a whole, further positing his characters as ambassadors in an increasingly polycultural society. The main characters, unlike Corliss, are very comfortable with their heritage and embrace ideas like mystical feminine power: “she is magic like a grandmother,” mortality personified as “Mr. Grief,” and the use of hand drums (Alexie “Do Not Go” 96). Cultural allusions to poor Indians and powwows sit affably and comfortably alongside references like Muhammad Ali, creating a seamless polyculture in the space of a few pages, and accurately portraying the Generation X mindset. Popular Culture references such as Elvis and *2001: Space Odyssey* fit so neatly alongside the obvious Native American references that it is easy to forget that the text is ethnic in nature, a testament in itself to the post-modern space Alexie creates.

Additionally, this story showcases Alexie’s use of dark humor to assert important truths, a device that he employs often. “There’s nothing worse than earnest emotion,” he jokes in an interview with Nancy Peterson (Peterson 70). Here, he utilizes the most audacious humor in the collection, the use of “Chocolate Thunder” as a talisman to bring the babies back to health. Playing on pervading pornographic subculture stereotypes of black male endowment, Alexie changes a racially offensive sex toy into a phallic icon as a source of power and hope. By combining tribal healing magic with Christian ideology and pop culture references, Alexie’s story is a hybrid of identities – accurately reflecting the history of the author himself. Christian references such as “he was our little blue baby Jesus” suggest a cultural meshing based on past colonial enculturation methods. They name the baby “Abraham,” possibly referencing the biblical figure whose wife, Sarah,

was able to conceive only under miraculous conditions, just as it takes a cross-cultural miracle to save their own child. Combining this with clearly non-Christian methods such as tribal drums and songs as well as the use of a phallic icon to promote healing, suggests meshing of cultural identities, even within more traditional Indian families. The success of the ritual suggests that the combination of theologies is stronger than either one is singly and perhaps echoes a universal theme of a single humanity over tribalism. This integration is seamless, partly because it mirrors Alexie's own life. When asked to name the "five primary influences in" his life, Alexie replied: "my father, for his nontraditional Indian stories, my grandmother, for her traditional Indian stories, Stephen King, John Steinbeck, and *The Brady Bunch*...I'm the first practitioner of the Brady Bunch school of Native American literature" (Wilson 58).

And the Brady Bunch is important here, as it serves two distinct roles as a representation of popular culture and the pervasiveness of internalized western stereotypes within minority cultures. First, the show, a pop culture icon, serves as a cultural unifier, or currency. Any American (or beyond) with a television set has been exposed to the quirky, non-traditional, Brady family, making it a shared image in the national memory. Secondly, the show's pervasiveness perpetuates western cultural norms, even if in a slightly non-traditional manner, insinuating these norms across ethnic lines and blending them into a national identity. Here, Alexie uses the Brady Bunch, and other pop culture icons as cultural currency, or as common ground for different groups to come together.

Using humor to explore mortality does not serve to diminish the gravity of the topic, and the beautiful, daring hope exhibited by the narrator exemplifies the power of

the human spirit. This may be the most unifying text of the book as well, not because it brings together the parents on the ward, but because it explores the universal fears such as death and the loss of a child, while intertwining elements of so many subcultures into one story of hope; “Everything stuffed to the brim with ideas and love and hope and magic and dreams” (Alexie “Do Not Go” 101). Once again, occurring in an urban space with factors other than heritage as uniting forces, Alexie posits a theory of single humanity over individuality. He asserts the Native American notion of the good of the group over that of the individual. Also noteworthy is that it is an Indian who precipitates this connection, further exemplifying the author’s implicit belief that Indians are uniquely qualified as leaders in an increasingly post-tribal world.

Alexie continues his use of pop culture references throughout the collection as a shared medium through which characters with differing ethnic identities are able to explore larger themes such as racism and identity within the context of an increasingly polycultural society. This strategy is especially successful in the story “Flight Patterns,” one of the more overt post 9/11 stories in the collection. The title, particularly in the early years of the war on terror, is immediately reminiscent of the uneasy feelings associated with air travel and extreme violence. The story is a sophisticated confluence of references and meaning, and centers on William Loman, who shares his name with the character Willy Loman from the play, *Death of a Salesman*. According to author Jerome DeNuccio, Alexie’s Loman, who is in many ways “a spiritual and cultural simulacrum” who deals in “the purely theoretical,” seems to lack real direction or meaning in his life which also echoes the bland stage character (DeNuccio 286, Alexie “Flight Patterns” 106). While it is true that Willy seems lukewarm to his identity, it is important to address

this sort of lackadaisical approach to self-identification that allows him to push aside some painful truths about polyculturalism and race in twenty-first century America.

Alexie himself pokes fun of Willie's loose redefinition of tribal alliances, using the word repeatedly so that it begins to lose potency. Willie identifies himself as "an enrolled member of the Spokane Indian tribe," but, "he was also a fully recognized member of the notebook-computer tribe and the security-checkpoint tribe, and the rental-car tribe and the hotel-shuttle-bus tribe and the cell-phone-roaming-charge tribe" (Alexie "Flight Patterns" 109). Willy more comfortably identifies with popular western culture than his heritage. According to authors Richard Sax and Leon Lewis, Willy "very much lives in the present pop-culture world of North America, which seems more proximate to him than the traditions of his or any other subculture in the United States" (154). This is illustrated by pop-culture allusions throughout the story. Lyrics to popular songs punctuate each of William's thoughts and emotions as well as underscore the most compelling parts of his life. As he attempts to leave for his business trip, his wife sleepily attempts to waylay his departure, "Baby, baby, I'll make you strong," she sang, and it sounded like she was writing a Top 40 hit in the Brill Building, circa 1962" (Alexie "Flight Patterns" 106). As Willy continues to attempt to wriggle out the door, she invokes Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*, "Willy Loman, you must pay attention to me," once again indicating that Willy associates with more with an American Broadway reference and popular music than with any Native American ones ("Flight Patterns" 106). Additionally, nothing about Willy or his family, as described by Alexie, speaks to his heritage other than the color of his skin.

An interesting way in which Willy's ambiguous identity manifests is in the rituals he creates that come from a confluence of sources; "he was the bemused and slightly embarrassed owner of a twenty-first century mind. His intellect was a big comfy couch stuffed with sacred and profane trivia" ("Flight Patterns" 102). Rising to complete his morning exercises, Willy calls out to a complicated mix of authors, singers, historical figures and theological incarnations:

Other people find God in ornate ritual, but William called out to Geronimo, Jesus Christ, Saint Therese, Buddha, Allah, Billie Holiday, Simon Ortiz, Abe Lincoln, Bessie Smith, Howard Hughes, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joan of Arc, and Joan of Collins, John Woo, Wilma Mankiller and Karl and Groucho Marx while he pumped out fifty push-ups and fifty abdominal crunches. ("Flight Patterns" 104)

Ambiguous like his semi-refusal to connect with any one identity, Willie is a lazy philosopher, but a dedicated citizen of the 21st century. His collective ambiguity resonates with not only Native Americans like Willy who are balancing multiple identities but many Gen Xers as well. The X generation has come of age in an era of increasing inter-cultural overlap under the encompassing umbrella of pop-culture which serves as a common binding and replacing a unified cultural identity.

Willie's self-identification with western culture exists uncomfortably alongside racial bias, particularly as it pertains to profiling after the September 11th terrorist attacks. While he believes he lives in a purely polycultural society, and uses pop-culture like cultural currency, he is hesitant to address its failings. His own prejudice, which he shares with the reader, presents an individual who, in theory, understands that it is fundamentalism rather than any one sub-group that he fears: "William always scanned

the airports and airplanes for little brown guys who reeked of fundamentalism. That meant William was equally afraid of Osama bin Laden and Jerry Falwell wearing the last vestiges of a summer tan” (“Flight Patterns” 107 – 108). Because he himself is a “brown guy” he is able to understand “why people were afraid of him, a brown-skinned man with dark hair and eyes” (“Flight Patterns” 108). He is also pragmatically aware of the bias that existed pre-9/11 and continues “If Norwegian terrorists had exploded the World Trade Center, then blue-eyed blonds would be viewed with more suspicion. Or so he hoped” (“Flight Patterns” 108).

According to Steven Salaita, author of “Concocting Terrorism off the Reservation: Liberal Orientalism in Sherman Alexie’s Post-9/11 Fiction,” William

inscribes himself in a consciously multicultural space. His brownness signifies an affinity with American norms even as it relegates him to an unsavory taxonomy. The body of the terrorist preoccupies William more than the ideology of terrorism: Jerry Falwell’s fundamentalism is less threatening without a darkening of his skin... William is comforted by his assumption that American racial profiling is not punitive but practical. (It was brown people that hijacked the planes on 9/11 after all). (Salaita 29)

The addition of “or so he hoped” is a nod to the irony of a society that lumps an ancestor of the indigenous population in with terrorists, based on skin color, when William himself could point to acts of terrorism committed by “blue-eyed blonds” (“Flight Patterns 108”). Because he will not place blame on those who profile him “William immerses himself into a covenant that does not buttress white normativity but reinvents a multiethnic national identity predicated on non-Muslim citizenship” (Salaita 29). He

rejects Jerry Falwell's fundamentalism as well as those of Muslim extremists, which places him firmly in the middle, with the majority of American citizens. This middle ground ensures that his views are normative, therefore solidifying his identity over those of other brown-skinned populations.

This quasi-rejection of Indianness for a pop-cultural and politically normalized American identity posits William as a member of an idealized polyculture that accepts him, while rejecting others who look similar to him. The similarities he shares with the cab driver, Fekadu, an Ethiopian political refugee, unnerve William, causing him to question not only his identity, but his way of life. As they talk about family, and Fekadu tells William that he cannot go back home after his defection: the current regime would kill him for being a fighter for the old, and the old party would kill him for defecting. He will never see his family again and he does not know if his wife and children are alive. At the end of the story, when Fekadu drops William at the airport, he calls him "William American" and offers to pray for William's family as he does his own ("Flight Patterns" 123). William, realizing the privilege of family and safety that he has taken for granted, leaves his things right on the sidewalk and runs into the terminal and finally discards what others may think of him.

Let the porter think his bags were dangerous! Let a security guard x-ray the bags and find mysterious shapes! Let a bomb-squad cowboy explode the bags a precaution! Let an airport manager shut down the airport and search every possible traveler! Let the American skies be empty of everything with wings! Let the birds stop flying! Let the very air go still and cold! William didn't care (Flight Patterns 123).

Furthermore, William seems to realize that the discrimination that he has endured and accepted based on his similar skin coloring with a group that he felt deserved the scrutiny (little brown guys), is based in the same harmful racism that Native and African Americans have suffered since the country's inception ("Flight Patterns" 107). The chance encounter with Fekadu, who embodies the sum of William's own prejudices, forces him to reevaluate and release his own beliefs, which are still loosely tribal based. Additionally, Alexie makes this realization based in faith "Your stories," said William. "I want to believe you." "Then believe me," said Fekadu" ("Flight Patterns" 123).

Through William's transcendent taxi ride, Alexie once again illustrates internal change as a physical journey that results in a reevaluation of the ways in which his characters interact with society. Like Corliss, William is transmuted by an interaction, or alliance with a character, in this case Fekadu, who initially appears wholly different from the beliefs that William has about himself. This forced self-evaluation ousts him from his comfortable failure to deviate from the mean and causes a personal change. Willy has long left the physical reservation; however, he continues to reside in a mental reservation space because he refuses to identify with the social implications of that choice. Instead of transcending the Reservation, Willy simply trades the "bows and arrows" kind of tribe for the "briefcase and cell phone" one. Change does not occur until the last few lines of the story as he reaches the airport and calls home. When he tells his wife "I'm here," it is with the urgency of a man newly transformed.

Conclusion

Faith plays a pivotal role in each of these three stories from *Ten Little Indians*. It is the suspension of doubt, a moment of grace in which the main characters must *choose*

to believe in the person or instrument of change. Corliss decides to believe the homeless professor's story although, "she knew he might be lying to her about everything. He might be an illiterate heroin addict with a gift for gab" ("Search Engine" 31-32). The narrator in "Do Not Go Gentle" and his wife put their belief in "Chocolate Thunder" as magic, healing tool, and William chooses to believe Fekadu's stories (100). Alexie adds the mandate that his characters believe in another human, even or maybe especially when logically they should not. It is a leap of faith that makes the true polycultural reality that Alexie envisions possible – and that is exactly the vision that *Ten Little Indians* asserts.

Through the careful examination of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Ten Little Indians*, critical examples of Alexie's pre and post 9/11 fiction, we can discern a clear progression. While the characters from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, are trapped; forced to choose between a life on a toxic Reservation, or adrift as an immigrant in an urban culture, replaying old tropes in a new setting, in *Ten Little Indians*, Alexie releases characters from both the physical and mental reservation and are free to choose an enlightened path ("Trial" 104). By doing so, Alexie makes the implicit point there is a better way; one must only make the choice to accept it.

Alexie extends the theme of a unified culture throughout the two story collections in several ways. We can view the stories first and foremost as a body of works projected through the lens of a single line of poetry, ("Oh, Uncle Adrian, I'm in the reservation of my mind"). While the characters from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, are on the cusp of leaving the mental reservation but are unable to make the "leap of faith" necessary to leave, the ones from *Ten Little Indians* are in the process of becoming something more ("Trial" 99). Secondly, and perhaps much more effective, is Alexie's use

of pop culture and literary iconography in order to create a space in which characters are able to build new alliances based on connections that are shared on a national, or larger human scale, rather than on tribal or ethnic similarities. In this way, Alexie offers a shared media mythology rather than a flawed co-inherited history as cultural currency, a new lingua franca, to exchange ideas and build a polycultural society.

While what Alexie offers appears to be a radical new way to engage with one another through shared pop cultural history, it may be only that he articulates a phenomenon that is already known. Like-minded fan groups have bonded over shared love of media based icons for over forty years; groups of Trekkies, Twihards, Potterheads², and comic book collectors convene online and in real life. The members of such groups represent a diversity of age, gender, ethnicity, language and political affiliation, and are aligned based on the love of each fictional universe, nothing more. Alexie is able to exploit this idea into a larger, nationally shared ideology, extending it to the inner geek in all readers. What these groups and Alexie's characters have in common is a shared ability to choose to believe in the medium and in each other.

I swear that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this thesis. - SKP

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² Trekkies, Twihards, Potterheads refer respectively to the dedicated fans of the television and movie franchises Star Trek, The Twilight Saga book series by Stephanie Myers, and the Harry Potter book series by J.K. Rowling.

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