IDENTITY FORMATION IN SHERMAN ALEXIE'S *THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO FISTFIGHT IN HEAVEN*, *FLIGHT* AND *THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN*

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Abstract

JOYE PALMER
Identity Formation in Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (*under the direction of DR. MARK WEST*)*

Poet, author, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie contributes an authentic voice to the problematic identity of America's first natives marginalized as outsiders. Alexie writes about this experience from an insider point of view as a Spokane-Coeur d'Alene tribal member who grew up on the Spokane Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Alexie was born in 1966 with hydrocephaly that required brain surgery when he was six months old. Statistically, this type of surgery comes with high risks of death or mental impairment. Alexie survived the operation, but suffered from epileptic seizures, disfigurement and required repeated medical treatment throughout his early years. Remarkably, he survived his physical and mental challenges in the harsh environment of reservation existence, and thrived intellectually and academically. A prolific and award winning author, Alexie has been called one of the most important writers in postmodern American literature.

Initially recognized for his poetry, Alexie emerged as a salient observer of the psychological impact of poverty, violence and substance abuse on generations of Native Americans within the genre of realism fiction. It is the intention of this thesis to examine the polemics of Native American identity formation in a collection of short stories published in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (*1993*)*, and two young adult novels, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian of a Part-time Indian* and *Flight (*2007*).* Alexie's observations from his early formative years project on to the

young male protagonists in these three works, and deconstructs disingenuous portrayals of indigenous people with humor and penetrating irony.

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Chapter One: Introduction

WE BURIED LILLIAN Alexie on July 6, 2015. We'd thought about burying her on the Fourth of July, but the funeral expenses would have doubled and tripled because of the holiday. Yes, saying good-bye to a Native American woman would have cost us more on Independence Day.

Sherman Alexie, *You Don't Have to Say You Love M*e

After the publication of his first poetry collection, *The Business of Fancydancing* in 1992, Sherman Alexie described the rhythm of iambic pentameter to his mother as "the ba-bump, ba-bump sound of the heartbeat, of the deer running through the green pine forest, of the eagle singing its way through the sky" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love M*e xviii) to which she replied "don't pull that Indian shaman crap on me" (xvii). His mother would have preferred Alexie to be a doctor rather than a poet, fiction writer, filmmaker and performance artist.

Alexie was born on October 7, 1966, three years before American Indian writer Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer for *House of Dawn*. Alexie's family lived on the Wellpinit Reservation outside of Seattle, Washington, situated on 156,000 acres. Alexie's birth was complicated by a diagnosis of hydrocephaly and a grim prognosis of possible death or severe mental retardation. Stubborn and contrary like his mother, Alexie proved more resilient than a potentially terminal medical diagnosis and brain surgery at six-months old. Alexie overcame his early physical and mental handicaps to become a critically acclaimed American writer, winning the Western Literature Association's Distinguished Achievement Award and the National Book Award for young adult

literature in 2007. This thesis examines the psychological impact of intergenerational trauma and the struggle to unify fragmented identities informed by the narrative voices of young adult Indian males in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*."

Alexie suffered as a young child from alienation and isolation as a result of the hydrocephaly and brain surgery that left him with an enlarged head. His physical abnormalities made him a frequent target of ridicule from other reservation children, some of whom called him "The Globe" (2 Grassian). Additionally, he was afflicted with poor eyesight and had to wear large government issued horned-rimmed glasses. Equally challenging, Alexie frequently wet the bed, possibly from the effects of drugs prescribed to treat epileptic seizures he experienced until he was seven years old. Alexie recalls in his memoir, "I was a kindergartner on phenobarbital" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* 7). The effects of the phenobarbital affected sleeping irregularities caused him to "begin dreaming immediately upon falling asleep, a condition called shortened REM latency" (7). The sleep disturbance contributed to a fixation on images of death that he reflected on in his recent memoir, "I have always been haunted by nightmares. By ghosts, real or imagined" (7).

Alexie navigated his alienation by retreating into books. In *Understanding Sherman Alexie*, Daniel Grassian notes that "Alexie found refuge in books and in school, reading every book in the Wellpinit library by the time he was twelve" (2). The young Alexie grew creatively and developed an intellectual curiosity, as a result of his doctors' prescribed reading therapy to stimulate his brain. Ironically, the descendent of tribal storytellers, Alexie's writing was also influenced by a love of American literary writers

as diverse as Walt Whitman and Raymond Carver. Alexie comments that he does not "recall the moment I officially became a storyteller – a talented liar" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* 9).

Alexie's first short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* written in 1973, garnered the distinction of finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. The film *Smoke Signals* (1998) was based on "This is What It Means to Say Phoenix," a short story in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. *Smoke Signals*, distinguished as the first completely indigenously produced film (Alexie wrote the screenplay and Cheyenne/Arapaho film director and producer Chris Eyre directed), won several indigenous movie awards, including the American Indian Movie Award, in addition to claiming the Audience Award at the Sundance Festival and the London Film Festival.

The publication of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* brought Alexie national attention. Shortly before the film *Smoke Signals* was released, Alexie was invited to participate in "A Dialogue on Race with President Bill Clinton" (xxi Berglund). The next year, 1994, Alexie married Diane Tomhave (Hidatsa, Ho-Chunk and Potawatomi) and moved to Seattle where he continued to receive critical accolades for his short story and poetry collections. In 2003 on the Oprah Winfrey show, Alexie was presented with "reissued medals of honor his grandfather earned while fighting in World War II" (xxi). In April 2007, Alexie published the young adult novel *Flight,* and seven months later in September 2007, he published *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* that won the 2007 National Book Award and the 2008 American Indian Youth Literature award (xxi-xxii).

Alexie crafted *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*'s three main characters based on himself and his friends on the Spokane reservation. Victor, cynical and despondent, reveals the repressed anger and rage that influenced Alexie's personal and literary development. Thomas-Builds-the-Fire, the story teller with bad eyesight and large glasses, picked on and beaten up, reflects Alexie's early physical abnormalities and subsequent isolation from his childhood peers. Junior acts as the affable omniscient observer until he goes away to college and engages in an interracial relationship. These three characters provide the prototype for the main characters in the 2007 young adult novels *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. In *Flight,* Zits portrays a disturbed orphan of an absentee Native American father and his deceased American mother of Irish descent. Alexie shows the beginning of Zits's identity as a victim of the urban foster system who later turns to violent anti-social behavior. In *Diary*, Junior mirrors Alexie's identity formation as an indigenous male confined geographically by the salmon-rich river and the inability to break into white society. Junior's character possesses a stability that Zits lacks. However, both characters must expand internally and externally to find their identity, transgressing the boundaries of child/adult and Indian/white cultures.

The psychological definition of identity includes terms such as product and processes shaped by cultural influences. Acceptance of or resistance to societal conventions construct and express a projection of self. In comparison, subjectivity is used as a sociological reference that "individuals must situate ourselves in relations to power—how we are "subjected" to/by the forces of economics, law, societal convention, the circumstances of history, and the physical world generally. Subjectivity is part of the

process that “naturalizes” these relations and our place within them” (https://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/ideas/subjectivity.html).

“Identity crisis” is a term first coined by Eric Erikson a former professor of Human Development at Harvard University and author of *Child and Society,* that helps to lay a foundation for an analysis of the effects of the psychological impact of adolescent trauma. In order to map adolescent identity formation, Erikson refers to a person as a process rather than an organism to examine how identity forms in an effort to establish and maintain “homeostasis” (34). His theories are explicated with a case history of a young boy who suffers from epileptic seizures, precipitated by a “’psychic stimulus’” (26).

Prior to therapy, the boy was hospitalized for convulsions following his grandmother’s death five days earlier. The child reacted somatically when confronted with images of death. It was also noted that the child was a “hitter,” and unable to control his temper. Erikson considered the psychological impact of generational trauma passed down from the boy’s parents and grandparents of Jewish heritage. Erickson commented that violence was collectively remembered and embedded psychologically in the child’s ancestors as “fugitives from ghettos and pogroms” (30). In Erikson’s analysis individuals may experience dysfunction that is both physiological and psychological.

Alexie’s father was a Coeur d’Alene Indian and his mother was a descendent of the Spokane tribe, located in the northwest United States. Alexie describes the Spokanes as ‘a Salmon people’.” (*You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me* 1). Colonialism was not limited to the geographical relocation of indigenous people to reservations. Tribal survival was always trumped by the bottom line of expanding economic interests. Like

the Cherokee Indians that were forcefully removed from their land on the east coast in the Trail of Tears march to the interior and the broken treaties of the Sioux when gold was found in the Black Hills of the Dakotas, the Grand Coulee Dam eliminated a livelihood and tradition from the Spokane Indians. Alexie notes in his most recent memoir: "We were devastated by the Grand Coulee Dam. It took 7,000 miles of salmon spawning beds from the interior Indians in Washington, Idaho and Montana" (141).

The result of transgenerational trauma in identity is a cultural fatalism that culminates in despair, violence and rampant alcoholism on the reservation and in the Native American urban diaspora. Alexie writes, "My name is Sherman Alexie and I was born from loss and loss and loss and loss and loss and loss and loss…And loss" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* 141). Deprivation is embedded in the thematic and character development in the main characters of the three narratives discussed here. The questioning of ethnic identity occurs concurrently with the questioning of adolescent identity in Alexie's writing. Nancy J. Peterson comments in "The Poetics of Sherman Alexie's The Summer of Black Widows," that "Alexie launched his career by voicing reservation realities often filtered through speakers who are young Indian men-poised on the verge of despair but longing for something more" (qtd. In Sherman Alexie: A Collection of Critical Essays, Berglund 134). Berglund adds that "Alexie's formative experiences as a child reared in the midst of alcoholism in the harsh economic realities of rural reservation life are focal points in his early fiction and poetry" (xi).

Alexie's physical abnormalities that affected his childhood identity were further challenged by the effects of deprivation and hopelessness within his reservation culture: "Poverty was our spirit animal" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* 9). In addition to

poverty and alcoholism, a normalization of violence influenced iterative identity formation throughout his work. Erikson asserts that psychological damage is "psycho and somatic, psycho-and social, and interpersonal" (23). Alexie remembers his obsessive behavior as a child: "for Christmas in 1976, when I was ten, I received a plastic Guns of Navarone battle play set with Allied and Nazi soldiers, cannon, tanks, and planes. I added my own Indian and U.S. Calvary toy soldiers and manically played war for twenty-two hours straight" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* 7). His mania and preoccupation with violence was normalized behavior on the reservation. The often autobiographical nature of Alexie's writing is informed by the memory of personal violation:

> As an adult, I can look back at the violence on my reservation and logically trace it back to the horrific degradations, sexual and otherwise, committed against my tribe by generations of white American priests, nuns, soldiers, teachers, missionaries, and government officials (13).

Alexie's adolescent characters tend to be preoccupied with daily survival informed by a heightened sense of desperation. However, Grassian asserts that Alexie prefers to decentralize identity from the perspective of violence and genocide "because to do so would severely damage American national identity and pride" (8). The outcomes of Alexie's problematic birth and early childhood complicated by the difficult conditions of the reservation environment produced both an insecurity and resiliency influential in his adolescent development represented in his fictional characters. Erikson observes that "combining such separate concepts as psyche and soma, individual and group we retain at least the semantic assumption that the mind is a 'thing' separate from the body, and a society a 'thing' outside of the individual" (23). Alexie used wit and humor as a coping

mechanism for survival and a displacement of the pain and suffering he experienced as a child bullied by other children, "You can't run as fast or throw a punch if you're laughing…Humor is self-defense on the rez" (*You Don't Have To Say You Love Me* 2).

Like Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie left the reservation to attend a white high school in hopes of going to college. Alexie underwent an identity shift as he acclimated to white society and thrived academically and in sports. He was accepted to Gonzaga University, a Jesuit school in Spokane, but due to the progression of his own alcoholism and inability to adapt, he dropped out. Alexie then moved to Seattle and following a robbery at knifepoint, got sober and reenrolled at Washington State University. Alexie credits Alex Kuo, his first creative writing teacher who introduced him to his first Native poetry, "Songs from the Earth on Turtle's Back" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* 3), with initiating his writing career. With typical irony, Alexie recently commented that his writing is always about leaving the reservation as he had to leave to find his true identity.

Alexie distinguished his early collections of poetry and short stories with a resistance to the Native American stereotype: "The corn-pollen, four directions, eagle-feathered school of Native literature" (Grassian 7). In light of statistics that suggest "60% of Native Americans live in cities, half of Native Americans are unemployed, male life expectancy is 44; female 47" and have remained "unchanged for the last 30 years" (Grassian 9), Alexie finds himself "caught between mainstream American life and reservation life," as a member of Generation X, he is compelled to "write about Indians in a dominantly televised world" (11). His intention is to reclaim Native American identity with accounts of the quotidian, "I want my literature to concern the daily lives of

Indians" (8). Consequently, he does not write his prose and fiction in an effort to expose, exploit or sensationalize his identity as an indigenous person. His intent is to acknowledge the truth about the past so that an authentic narrative may inform adolescent identity formation within the Native American community. Alexie states "if people start dealing with Indian culture and Indian peoples truthfully in this country, we have to start dealing with the genocide that happened here" (8). His narratives challenge the fatuous characterizations of indigenous people formed during colonialism and pop cultural misrepresentations in film and literature with substantive complex individuals.

One of the most destructive and lingering effects of transgenerational trauma is the fear of disappearing into white culture. In *You Don't Have To Say You Love Me*, Alexie describes the real life event that inspired the short story "Every Little Hurricane" in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*: "Our mother drove us to Chewelah, Washington, the small white town north of the reservation where she was born…In her most desperate and lonesome moments, my mother often returned like a salmon to her place of birth" (17). Alexie notes the fear of white people taking them from their families passed on to his generation from his parents as he recalls a childhood fantasy, "I thought about being rescued by white people. But I was more afraid of any white people than I was of my Indian mother" (18). Even into the late 20th century, political and religious leaders kidnapped Indian children and forced them to relocate in Indian reform schools. Alexie's mother "knew that Indian children were often taken from their families for the flimsiest reasons- Split up, separated… sent to foster homes…in potential danger" (19). Although Alexie came of age in a time that those policies were less overt, the trauma his

parents and their ancestors endured impacted him psychologically. This insecurity helped to shape the adolescent Native American characters in Alexie's work.

Alexie deconstructs how indigenous cultures were scripted by white authors in early American literature and Hollywood westerns by re-scripting the reality of Indians living in the present. Scott Andrews critiques that "Alexie favors a more independent and critical attitude that "shows us there are no easy answers" (33 qtd. in Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco). Alexie seems to make the appeal that Indian identity, like the country they inhabited first, is in the process of evolving. Joseph Coulombe writes that "Alexie does not 'simplify complexities or ignore conflict,' but simultaneously tries to validate and question 'the individual's desire to bridge cultural and personal difference'" (33 qtd. in Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco).

In Nygren's interview with Alexie that was published under the title of "A World of Story-Smoke: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," Alexie explains that in the beginning "My writing was very personal and autobiographical. I was simply finding who I was and who I wanted to be" (152). Ase Nygren appropriately assesses that "in Alexie's early fiction the reservation is a geographical space of borders and confinement changes its ontology and becomes a mental and emotional territory" (151). Alexie insists on acceptance as a writer without the marginalization of a label: "I guess the problem is not that I'm labeled as a Native American writer, but that writers like John Updike and Jonathan Franzen aren't labeled as White American writers" (153).

Alexie's protagonists defy a one-dimensional stock characterization with multifaceted identities representative of humanity. Grassian points out that "Alexie explains that one of his primary goals is to reach Indian children on the reservation,

whom he believes to be mainly influenced by white-dominated culture…I use pop culture like most poets use Latin" (6-7). Alexie presents a literary scaffolding to socially reconstruct Indian identity with reliable eyewitness accounts informed by the past and retold in the present. Scott Andrews critiques that "Alexie favors a more independent and critical attitude that "shows us there are no easy answers" (33 qtd. in Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco). Alexie seems to make the appeal that Indian identity, like the country they inhabited first, is in the process of evolving. Joseph Coulombe writes that "Alexie does not 'simplify complexities or ignore conflict,' but simultaneously tries to validate and question 'the individual's desire to bridge cultural and personal difference'" (33).

Alexie continues to reevaluate his identity and belief systems, unafraid of contradiction. Although he claims to be an atheist, he regards Jesuits as "rock stars of Christianity," and adds "I am heavily Catholic and Christina influenced" (40). Alexie strongly identifies as a recovering alcoholic and honestly acknowledges his "alcoholic & neglectful parents" in his writing even when doing so causes disappointment and attracts criticism from his Native American community (41). Alexie accepts the criticism from his own people and is relentless in calling out their hypocrisy: "Dear Indian tribes who disenroll members, you should be ashamed of your colonial and capitalistic bullshit" (Jarvis). Alexie's intention in these three narrative works is to reach young adolescent Native Americans and offer a fresh perspective of their identity. Alexie's youthful male Indian narrators and protagonists struggle to resist marginalization in order to redefine a multifaceted identity transgressive of internal and external constraints, and full of hope.

When I was four and weeping
For my father, gone
On another binge-drinking
Sabbatical, my mother tore
Me from my bed at 4 a.m.
On a December night
And pushed me outside
Onto the porch.
My mother opened the door and called me back inside
But I refused. I told her I would sleep
With the dogs. And I did.
Sherman Alexie, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*

Chapter Two: Fractured Self in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*

Sherman Alexie wrote his first short story collection at the urging of his publishers at Hanging Loose Press following positive critical reception of poetry collections *The Art of Fancydancing* and *I Would Steal Horses.* The abstract language of poetry provided the portal for Alexie to begin his writing career. Short stories and novels evolved from his exploration of self-informed by childhood trauma and a problematic hybrid of national and cultural identity. Alexie's inner conflict merged with a cultural tradition of storytelling, a keen intellect and a love for words that created a prolific body of work. Sarah Wyman asserts: "telling the story constitutes Alexie's constant battle," (Qtd. In Telling Identities 251). Native American writer Joy Harjo adds further, "How do you explain the survival of all of us who were never meant to survive?" (Qtd. In Telling Identities 251).

Alexie explores cultural identity in his short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (further referred to as *Tonto*) with three main characters: the angry Victor, mediator Thomas, and failed romantic, Junior. Alexie attests that the three are "an aspect of me…I call them the holy trinity of me" (Bellante 4). Transgenerational

trauma causes Victor to cynically internalize and compartmentalize anger and resentment: “Indians can easily survive the big stuff. Mass murder, loss of language and land rights. It’s the small things that hurt the most. The white waitress who wouldn’t take an order, Tonto, the Washington Redskins” (49). Victor’s abandonment by his father is the deepest wound he will have to heal in order to progress in his identity formation. Junior excels academically, and attends a white college where he becomes involved with a young white woman. The relationship fails after their interracial child is born, and although this foray into the white world is ultimately disillusioning, Junior becomes empowered with a heightened self-awareness that contributes to a stronger sense of identity. Thomas seeks to heal and restore identity in the role of a modern Indian shaman and storyteller with “an extreme need to tell the truth” that threatens the status quo of white superiority and makes him “[d]angerous” (93). Thomas’s visions of past glory and victories refresh the holy trinity’s collective memories, and like their spirit animal, the salmon, they move forward against external forces.

The individual identities that develop in Alexie’s stories emerge from fragments of identity informed by the past, malleable in the processes of the present, and perpetually subject to reshaping. Ron McFarland asserts “[p]art of what distinguishes the [characters] of Sherman Alexie is that they fall into neither of the two and most common stereotypes that whites have fabricated: Noble Savage and Barfly” (28). Alexie’s holy trinity resists false narratives as they bond as warriors broken by an environment of poverty, alcoholism and violence, but internally resilient.

Victor

Alexie's strongest narrative voice comes from Victor in first person for the majority of twenty-two short stories in the original publication of *Tonto* (two stories, "Flight" and "Junior Polatkin's Wild West Show" were added back in the 20th anniversary edition in 2005). Victor is introduced in "Every Little Hurricane" as a nine-year-old Indian child aroused from sleep in a HUD house on the Spokane reservation. The conflicted adolescent identity of Victor conveyed through the metaphorical hurricane that lands on the reservation the night of his parents' drunken New Year's Eve party reflects Alexie's personal struggles within familial relationships. An omniscient narrator that occurs intermittently in this chapter reports that the hurricane "dropped from the sky in 1976" and "fell so hard on the Spokane Reservation that it knocked Victor from bed and his latest nightmare" (*Tonto* 1). The perspective of a child communicates the vulnerability Alexie faced in his early life and reveals a glimpse at the trajectory of subsequent literal and metaphorical storms that characterizes Alexie's identity formation.

McFarland regards Victor as Alexie's most direct voice at different stages of identity portrayed in narrative vignettes. When a Bloomsbury interviewer asked if Victor was his fictional alter ego, Alexie responded:

> My editor and I were talking about my characters, and I told him I think I'm going to kill some of them off in my novel. And he said, 'Yeah, when it's all over we'll know which ones are you.' But then he added, 'Victor will be alive.' So I suppose that means something (4).

Victor serves as witness to the expression of rage in response to decades of transgenerational trauma that sometimes materializes as broken furniture and broken

noses: “Victor’s father yelled, his voice coming quickly with force. It shook the walls of the house accompanied by sounds of curses or wood breaking” (2). The instability of Victor’s family weakens the transition of adolescence into adulthood and further disorients identity formation.

In an interview with Erik Himmelsbach, Alexie explains the anger and violence that informs the character of Victor: “There’s a tremendous level of anger out there, and the anger in the Indian community has not really been talked about. There’s a huge open wound” (qtd. in Conversations with Sherman Alexie 33). Himmelsbach asserts that Alexie’s literary work contributes to a visualization of these wounds in “honest and humorous character studies of modern tribal life” (33). Victor’s identity emerges as the wounded Native American male seen in “snapshots of a culture that has long been ignored” (33) altered by various stages of grief, denial and acceptance. Dark humor expresses a sorrow and pain that is ultimately humanized and accepted as part of Victor’s cultural identity: “[h]e could see his uncles slugging each other with such force that they had to be in love” (*Tonto* 2).

The normalization of a culture of violence results in psychological trauma that transfers to identity formation in Victor. This is clearly seen in his reaction to his uncles fighting: “he squeezed his hands into fists and pressed his face tightly against the glass” (3). Alexie judges the passive adults who watch the violence and will not intervene as merely “Witnesses” (3). The effect over time results in a fatalistic acceptance:

> For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. Victor’s uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if

somebody was to die. One Indian killing another did not create a special storm.

This little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name. (3)

Daniel Grassian asserts: "Alexie criticizes the passive complacency of the onlookers" (57) and denounces their ineffectiveness in rescuing the child Victor who must process a normative culture of violence.

The abandonment by Victor's father further complicates identity formation. Grassian observes that "other little, personal hurricanes…wreaked havoc upon Victor" (57). Poverty shames and dehumanizes Victor's father, exemplified in his inability to buy Christmas presents, and a dissolution into weeping, "his tears could have frozen solid in the severe reservation winters and shattered when they hit the floor" (5). Fragments of his father's identity attach to Victor such as his father's defiance in "My Father Said He Was The Only Indian Who Saw Jimi Hendrik Play 'The Star Spangled Banner' at Woodstock" as he applies war paint and assaults a National Guardsmen, ironically at a Vietnam War peace protest. Here, Alexie strips away layers of sentimentality in the characterization of the noble savage and displays the soul wound of Victor's father that will continue to inflict pain onto Victor. Long after Victor's father rides away on a motorcycle, Victor continues to hear the sound of "guitars and motorcycles" (36), a residual reminder of suffering that contributes to perpetual anger. Victor's mother leads Victor away from the porch wrapped in a quilt with a new patch of fatherless child sewn onto his identity.

In "A Drug Called Tradition," Victor's identity locates within teen-age rebellion as he searches for independence. This chapter opens with the first appearance of Junior and Thomas-Builds-the-Fire with Junior asking Thomas, "How come your fridge is always fucking empty" (12). Here, the language of American pop culture expresses a

reverberation of the effects of post-colonialism with Thomas's announcement that his refrigerator "ain't empty no more" (12) due to a payment by the Washington Water Power for leasing rights on the Builds-a-Fire's land. Victor comes to the party with a "brand new drug" and Junior with a new car (13) in a modernist expression of resistance to societal rules. The trinity seek to embrace their past with the expediency of contemporary society's immediate gratification. They leave the party and go to Benjamin Lake on a vision quest, as Victor explains: "It'll be very fucking Indian. Spiritual shit, you know?" (14).

The vision quest, however accessed, is a tradition appropriated by Victor, Junior and Thomas in order to recapture their past and attach it to a contemporary native identity. Grassian asserts that the holy trinity, "motivated by a desire to reclaim their cultural traditions, believe to involve visions," (59) falls short in what he claims are merely "delusions of grandeur" (60). Michael Wilson agrees with Grassian in this "lost cause" narrative noting that "this idea of a glorious past" is complicated by immersion into "pop American culture" (63). Victor with "braids…beautiful…stealing a horse…riding by moonlight" is a delusion that valorizes him and reflects a subconscious desire for agency. Victor's escapism, although fantastical, reveals the loss that dislocates identity, particularly in the stolen horse's name, "*Flight…my name is Flight"* (15-16). The desire for a new name is metaphor for Victor's search for identity: "They all want their vision, to receive their true names, their adult names" (20). The maternal Big Mom provides the native sons with a tangible symbol in the gift of a drum that returns them to the reality of the present with an artifact of the past (60).

Victor's identity formation is partially formed by other pop culture symbols. His vision of the past is not only obscured by hallucinogenic drugs, but with celluloid misrepresentations set against 3D backdrops. James Cox maintains: "Hollywood visions of Native America almost exclusively perpetuate the dominant culture's version of history that keeps Native America on a predetermined, externally-defined historical trajectory that ends with a 'vanished race." (57) Basketball courts replace the ritualistic hunting grounds of the past. The rhythm of bouncing basketballs mimics drumbeats, and victories equated with baskets are not able to intervene in the destructive effects of alcoholism such as in the demise of a talented young basketball star in "The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn't Flash Red Anymore." The vanished rituals and parental neglect and abandonment complicate Victor's ongoing identity crisis.

The relationship between Victor and his father is further developed in "This is to What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," which was the basis for the screenplay Alexie wrote for *Smoke Signals*, the first completely indigenous film including actors and production team. The film won the Sundance Award in the late nineties and brought awareness to the problematic Native American identity. The film varies in plot details from the story, but retains the theme of identity formation. In both the story and the film, Victor, now a young adult flashes back on past images of his father as he learns that his father died in Phoenix, Arizona. Aided by Thomas, Victor proceeds on a geographical and psychological journey as he travels to retrieve his father's ashes. "Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community… [t]he only real thing he shared with anybody was a bottle and broken dreams" (74). Victor's broken relationship with his father begins to heal after he hears stories his father told film character, Suzy, of his pride

in his son's accomplishments on the basketball court. These recovered fragments of his father's identity help transform Victor's identity crisis as he gains a clearer understanding of his father's struggles and marks a turning point toward a more positive outcome in Victor's identity formation.

Equally important to adolescent development are the social institutions intended to provide a scaffolding in additional to familial support. In "Indian Education", Victor addresses the failed educational system on the reservation that most likely reflect Alexie's personal experience (Grassian 72). In the interview with Nygren, Alexie states, "Even though I was growing up on a reservation, and going to reservation schools, I had never really been shown Indian literature before" (151). Victor's successful completion of high school as valedictorian ends the chapter with Victor's hair grown long, symbolizing the completion of Indian manhood.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire

Thomas Builds-the-Fire is the storyteller of the holy trinity and the tribal outcast. In contrast to the cynical realism of Victor, Thomas sees hopeful visions. Within a community of outsiders confined culturally and geographically within the boundaries of the reservation, Thomas identifies as the outsiders' outsider. Alexie's infant hydrocephaly resulted in physical abnormalities, seizures and strange dreams brought about by phenobarbital and lithium. Alexie recounts in a 2006 radio interview with Lorena Allam, that he was "a junkie in diapers" (161). The identity of 'weirdo' resonates in the character of Thomas.

Thomas inhabits the dual identity of peacemaker and trickster. In "A Drug Called Tradition," Victor reluctantly includes Thomas since he is the host of a party, allegedly the "second-largest party in reservation history" (12). The decision to leave the party is an act of defiance shared by Thomas who spots Victor and Junior "standing by the side of the road" and they drive to Benjamin Lake to try a "brand new drug" (14). Accustomed to being the brunt of Victor's joke: "Shouldn't you be at your own party?" Thomas points out, "You guys know it ain't my party anyway…I just paid for it." (14). Thomas unifies the fragmented individual identities of the holy trinity by references to ritualism practices such as storytelling and accepts his isolation as a spiritual visionary and guide.

Stoicism, conditioned by repetitive trauma and suffering is reflected in Thomas' identity. With the same acuity of self-awareness that he perceives the world outside him, Thomas sees beyond the present in a prescient understanding of what binds the interdependent identities of the holy trinity. Wyman notes Alexie's intention in the creation of Thomas:

> I want the world to smell like story-smoke, my story-smoke! Therefore, in that sense I'm like Thomas [Builds the Fire]. Thomas is really obsessed about making sure that people hear him, but his world-view is tiny in terms of his audience. My world-view was small in the beginning too. Now, it has expanded (250).

Of the three main characters, Thomas' transparency reveals deeper insights into the identity formation of each part of the holy trinity. In an interview with John Purdy, Alexie remarks that Evan Adams, the actor who plays Thomas in *Smoke Signals* most closely resembles the literary character, "It's pretty funny, Thomas is Thomas…He's taken him away from me, He's so convincing, so real, so Thomasy" (37). In an interview with West, Alexie comments that *Smoke Signals* director Chris Eyre "credibly renders Thomas as an engaging cross between a mama's boy and a traditional seer, a sometimes nerd in funny glasses who is no one's sidekick" (28). Indeed, it is the oddity of Thomas's personality that empowers his otherworldly identity, "Thomas Builds-the-Fire could fly" (Tonto 70). The reality that Thomas jumped "off the roof of the tribal school" and broke his arm is incidental to the tribal display of courage and shaman-like momentary suspension, "Everybody has dreams about flying. Thomas flew. One of his dreams came true for a second, just enough to make it real" (71).

Thomas rejects the vision of inevitable hopelessness and despair accepted on the reservation. In "A Drug Called Tradition," Thomas affirms Victor and Junior's desire to find new names, "That is the problem with Indians these days. They have the same names all their lives. Indians wear their names like bad shoes" (*Tonto* 20). Although Victor avoids and ridicules Thomas along with the other adolescent males on the reservation, "[n]obody wanted to be anywhere near him because of all the stories" (72), Victor allows

Thomas to attach to him. Thomas's persistence in locating and defining identity through storytelling is what Alexie means when he comments "there is always something that only [they themselves] can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalizing secondhand definition" (Qtd. In Skeletons 91). Thomas's important task is to extract identity from a nearly eradicated history. Thomas's identity in the holy trinity is the restorer of true narrative, "We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination…I have only my stories which came to me before I could speak" (Tonto 73).

For Thomas, identity is fluid yet enduring, located synchronically and diachronically, as he manages to "keep moving, keep walking, in step with one's skeletons" (21). In "This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona," Thomas transverses circular time as he holds half of Victor's father's ashes, "closes his eyes" and tells a story, "your father will rise like a salmon, leap over the bridge, over me, and find his way home" (74). Victor's cynicism converts to belief that reconnects him to his father, convinced that Thomas tells the truth when he says, "It will be beautiful" (74). Denuccio asserts that Thomas' story "reveals the boundary that Victor has imposed between them as a restriction, not constituent, of identity" (95). Thomas restores the piece of identity that was fractured when Victor's father abandoned him. An intimate bond is established between Thomas and Victor upon completion of their journey together, although Victor acknowledges that they would return to their identities on the reservation and would not be friends. Thomas tells Victor "nothing stops, cousin" and asks that Victor would "just once" listen to a story and Victor waves in agreement (75). With this gesture, they become part of each other's larger and holistic identities.

Thomas could possibly be misrepresented with oversimplification and a default characterization of sentimentality. Alexie prefaces the story "The Trial of Thomas-Builds-the Fire" with an epigraph quoting Franz Kafka, *Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning* (*Tonto* 93). The hostility of the white justice systems toward indigenous people lands on Thomas as he is arrested for a "storytelling fetish accompanied by an extreme need to tell the truth" (93). Alexie argues that "sentimentality" is "not the right word" to describe Native literary characters, "[b]ecause our identity has been so fractured, and because we've been subject to so much oppression and relocation—our tribes dissipated, many destroyed—the concept of a pure Indian identity is really strong in Indian literature" (154). Thomas's defense becomes an indictment of colonial slaughter of the Spokanes within the mock trial. An historical event of U.S. Calvary Colonel Wright's theft of 800 Spokane ponies that he then slaughtered as a tactical strategy to defeat the Spokanes, is retold by Thomas as he assumes the identity as a pony who survived. Thomas' imprisonment for a murder committed in an 1858 battle attaches to him in a pastiche of Indian injustices during colonialism.

Thomas' performance of eyewitness to atrocity underscores a quiet defiance that patiently tells a story repeatedly until it is finally heard. McFarland asserts "[i]f Victor Joseph represents the rational aspect of Alexie's 'trinity,' Thomas embodies the inspired imagination; consequently, he is regarded as 'strange' or 'mad' by others in the community" (36). Consequently, the other Indians, even Victor, treat Thomas as a misfit, subjected to abuse and ostracized. True to his shaman identity, Thomas gains strength and power through suffering, perseveres and endures in representation of his culture. In

his paper researching social realism in Sherman Alexie's works, Amir Hossain comments: "Alexie wants to unmask the…cruel traits of human character" (387).

Thomas aids in the healing of his people's soul wound by remembering the past with honor. He facilitates transformation in Victor and Junior's characters so that they are able to recapture an identity fractured and inaccessible due to issues of isolation and alienation because of reservation poverty, alcoholism and violence. Thomas's stories of forgiveness and reconciliation provide a mechanism for the holy trinity to reintegrate into a whole identity able to escape the hopelessness of reservation fatalism.

Junior Polatkin

Junior appears as the friend of Victor and Thomas in chapter two, "A Drug Called Tradition," and presents the third iteration of the disenfranchised Indian adolescent in Alexie's holy trinity of himself. McFarland points out "it is actually Junior who bears Spokane Chief Polatkin's name," leader of the "Spokane, Palous and Coeur d'Alene" (33-34). In contrast to the image of a fierce warrior Indian chief, Junior is good-natured and laughs easily at tribal irony, such as Thomas' vision of Victor stealing a cow (instead of a horse), serving as a counterbalance to Victor's intense anger and Thomas's mysticism.

Junior completes the holy trinity with his objective neutrality. He drives the trinity to the vision quest at Benjamin Lake and directs Victor to "[g]ive me some of that stuff," insisting that being high will make him drive better (*Tonto* 16). Junior's vision sees Thomas dancing the ghost dance naked, weak with smallpox and still managing to drive the whites away in ships back to Europe (Tonto 17). Kathleen L. Carroll asserts that one of Alexie's writing strategies is "overlaying stories about heroic Native Americans of the past (diachronic moments) onto stories where Native Americans are trapped within modern stereotypes (the synchronic moment)" (75). Junior's risky drug experimentation evolves from modern adolescent rebellion and tires to replace a warrior identity.

Carroll notes that "by drawing the past into the present, Alexie brings the subordinate and the dominant cultures into conversation" (75). Junior's lack of a clear vision of his identity reveals his vulnerability to suggestions of identity from easily accessible images of pop culture, and materializes as a guitar player wearing a ribbon shirt and jeans in Victor's vision. Junior hallucinates a world where Edgar Crazy Horse is

president of the United States and white people sit in the back, momentarily gratifying. Once the drug wears off, Junior and the others dismiss its benefits, and instead, redirect their gaze to tangible proof of their identity, Big Mom's tribal drum. The three friends decide to try the vision quest once more without drugs or alcohol, they "sing and dance and drum," (*Tonto* 21) and the real visions of their true identity materializes

In "All I Wanted to Do was Dance," Junior reflects Alexie's difficult experiences in mixed race relationships. Junior's account of working in a 7-11 in Seattle is semiautobiographical of Alexie after he dropped out of Gonzaga University and moved to Seattle. Junior's identity crisis comes from a guilt of betraying his tribe with his involvement with his white girlfriend who is never named. Characteristic of Alexie's character formation, identity is processed in dreams. Junior is unable to reconcile what he perceives as transgression and sabotages the relationship. Denuccio asserts that "[t]his blurring of internal and external…both inside and outside his own experience" that terrifies him (90).

Junior's identity formation throughout the collection of stories is mainly subordinate to Victor and Thomas. Junior's assimilation of opposing identities culminating in an interracial relationship is an added chapter "Junior Polatkin's Wild West Show," in the 2005 re-release of the original *Tonto*. Junior merges his reservation identity with white culture as he becomes a first generation college student with a biracial child in an aggregate identity, now with blood ties in both worlds.

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The holy trinity of Victor, Thomas and Junior integrate a multifaceted identity formation through stories of lost identities caused by racial marginalization and isolation

within a dominant social structure. Throughout *Tonto,* the deleterious effects of alcohol, violence and poverty reveal the challenges Alexie observes in adolescent transition to adulthood concurrent with the disorientation of straddling two cultures. Erikson's concept of the interdependency of psychological and sociological framework in adolescent identity formation is meaningful to an analysis of the holy trinity in *Tonto.*

Grassian's observation that *Tonto* establishes Alexie as a "moral and ethical writer" is substantiated by Alexie's comments in the Nygren interview, "[w]e write about being humiliated a lot. And that takes physical forms, emotional forms, and mental forms. I think Native literature is the literature of humiliation and shame" (155). In the identity formation of the holy trinity, Alexie restores memories of historical figures and events through the authenticity and benefit of his culture's tradition of oral storytelling. In the Himmelsbach interview, Alexie explains that he "grew up in a culture where you are taught that songs and stories have specific owners…I'm always operating with some sort of tribal responsibility" (33).

First person narration explicates particular identity traits of each of the three main characters, often predicated by third person omniscient perspectives. Alexie comments in the Bellante interview when asked about Victor's fluidity between these two perspectives that "[w]hen I'm writing in the third person; I'm looking at *everybody* with a larger eye than just what Victor could provide (5). Alexie demands honesty and realism in the corrective retrieval of native identity from the fallibility of the human experiences of his holy trinity. Victor's anger, Thomas' escapism and Junior's failed romanticism own collective truths in a representation of young Indian males.

Carroll quotes critics Randall Hill and William Bevis who note: "[i]dentity creation for Native Americans is not a matter of finding one's self, but of finding a 'self' that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place" (Qtd. in Performance 76). McFarland asserts that one of Alexie's strength in character development is his "capacity for building characters incrementally" (33). Identity forms in the three characters as their relationships intensify with the polemics of the childhood maturation process. The effects of alcoholism and neglect from their parents frustrates them as they struggle to form identity, but each individual proves resilient and reaches adulthood. Familial and communal bonds anchor Victor, Thomas and Junior as their journeys into adulthood diverge. Alexie demythologizes of old narratives allow identity formation in the holy trinity to develop separately, yet holistically through shared experiences and memories.

Chapter Three: Fragmented Identity in *Flight*

Following the critical success of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (*1993*)* as well as adult novels *Reservation Blues (1995), Indian Killer (*1996*),* and *The Toughest Indian in the World (2000)*, Black Cat books published Sherman Alexie's first young adult (YA) novel *Flight* in April 2007. *Flight* recounts the life of a half-Native American, half-Irish American teen-ager, orphaned and adrift in an institutional environment that causes marginalization and alienation. Nicknamed Zits for his pockmarked skin, the protagonist narrates a loss of place and identity as an abandoned half-breed urban Indian, unable to self–recognize as white or Indian. At the age of fourteen, Zits rages away from his twenty-first foster home and lands in jail where he meets a young white career criminal named Justice who convinces him he can find his true identity once he kills his white oppressors.

A fragmented identity emerges as disillusioned and enraged, Zits attempts mass murder at a bank and appears to be shot and killed. At the moment of his assumed death, he dislocates in time and embodies past lives of old and young indigenous people, a white Indian scout, an FBI agent in pursuit of American Indian Movement (AIM) members in the 1970s, a pilot who gives a terrorist flying lessons and his biological Native American father. The recurrence of violence, betrayal and compassion Zits witnesses in the various identities he assumes affects a transformation in his character that enables social rehabilitation and assimilation with an emergent hybrid identity in place of the hopelessness and fatalism.

His Native American father and his Irish American mother's death from breast cancer establish disorientation and dislocation in the beginning of Zits's narrative.

Subsequently, he becomes lost in the institution of the foster system: "This morning I wake up in a room I do not recognize. I often wake in strange rooms" (*Flight* 1). Zits's estrangement renders him unable to emotionally attach to anyone, unable to voice his real name, "[c]all me Zits" (1). His refusal to speak his real name reflects a refusal to identify himself amidst constant disruption, unfamiliar surroundings and people he does not trust. He locates identity through cultural artifacts such as his mothers' favorite band, Blood, Sweat and Tears, and her favorite song, "I'll Love You More Than You'll Ever Know" (1). A photograph of his father with an "acne-blasted face" reinforces Zits's estrangement and his negative self-image (4). Disorder and absence as he is left only with memories of a lost family diffuse his materiality: "I'm a blank sky, a human solar eclipse" (5).

Alienation dominates Zits's early identity formation: "A social worker…once told me that I never developed a sense of citizenship…you've never learned how to be a fully realized human being" (*Flight* 5-6). In an interview with Dave Weich, Alexie emphasizes the significance of orphan as representation of colonization:

> Displacement, the killing of your birth parent and the substitution of an adopted father. Think of your birth parent being your original culture and your adopted parent being the colonizing culture. In a sense, Native Americans. Anybody who's been colonized, they're in the position of an orphan. (169)

Constant resettlement prevents Zits from acquiring a sense of community or social identity, "I've lived in twenty different foster homes and attended twenty-two different schools" (7). Rootless, his "entire life fits into one backpack" (7) that includes three novels, one of which is *Grapes of Wrath* about a displaced migrant family. Alexie consistently creates literate characters who love books, life preservers that offer a means

of escape from despair and despondency. Zits's books anchor him somewhat; however, he identifies and feels more at home with the "homeless Indians who wander around downtown Seattle" (7) than his many foster parents.

Detached identity leads to disassociation and creates a psychological fragility at an extremely critical stage of adolescent development. Zits's disenfranchisement and lack of visibility enables foster parents to abuse and exploit him: "When it comes to foster parents, there are only two kinds: the good but messy people who are trying to help kids or the absolute welfare vultures who like to cash government checks" (8). Jeff Berglund asserts that urban Indians enmeshed in a dominant culture are "living in a multiethnic environment in situations where identity and cultural loyalties are questioned…" (*Critical Essays* xii). Zits's experience with Edgar, the Native American foster parent who destroys the model airplane he gave Zits as a gift, confuses and frightens him and further fragments identity.

Flight reveals that perpetual dislocation may contribute to social dysfunction and subsequently creates emotional detachment and a fractured self-narrative. Zits lacks biological social references and therefore constructs identity from unreliable narrators, "Everything I know about Indians (and I could easily beat 99 percent of the world in a Native American version of Trivial Pursuit) I've learned from television" (*Flight* 12). This reference to the contemporary board game of Trivial Pursuit as well as television further demonstrates the vagary of Zits's subjectivity informed by a collage of virtual images. Consequently, Zits's self-identity is holographic and dissociative, precariously situated within iterations of strangers and foster homes. As an adolescent who must navigate the transition from child to adult while straddling two cultures, essentialism

becomes urgent as Zits grasps for identity: “Maybe I can’t live like an Indian, but I can learn how real Indians used to live and how they’re supposed to live now” (12).

The inability to attach materially and emotionally to his environment causes a detachment that culminates in an eventual break with social constraints, “I get into arguments and fistfights with everybody. I get so angry that I go blind and deaf and mute. I like to start fires. And I am ashamed that I’m a fire starter” (*Flight* 8). Shame and self-hatred fill the cavities of unformed identity. Typical of normal adolescent, Zits relates more to his peers and therefore extracts identity cues from them. Zits’s peers are located in the juvenile justice system due to his criminal behavior. Following an attack on his twenty-first foster parents, Zits is sent to a detention home where he meets an attractive white seventeen-year-old male metaphorically named Justice. In addition, Zits encounters white Officer Dave who he decides is trustworthy and “okay” (Flight 19). Officer Dave’s ability to intervene is diminished due to his position as an adult authority figure.

Justice serves as a mentor and catalyst in Zits’s devolvement into violence that ultimately catapults him through a break in materiality and time. Mark Vogel asserts that “young adults look for insight everywhere…they do so to discover new rules for a new world,” (107) and adds that Alexie’s YA novels present “twisted and ‘bent’ stories reflecting a world turned upside down, where urgency exists to find a self-identity and move toward a future” (109). This explains Zits’s mystical empowerment from the 1890 Ghost Dance that Justice continually projects onto the gaps in Zits’s identity. In fulfillment of the trickster’s responsibility to create chaos, Justice also places a real gun and a paint gun in Zits hands and with a hug leaves Zits to commit mass murder in a

downtown Seattle bank. Shot in the back of the head by a bank guard, Zits dies before he "hits the floor" (*Flight* 35).

Through the literary technique of magical realism, time and space are breached, reality transgressed and Zits transformed into historical characters throughout time. Alexie comments in an interview with Weich that *Flight* was heavily influenced by *Slaughterhouse Five,* Kurt Vonnegut's anti-war novel whose protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, becomes "unstuck in time" (Revising Sherman Alexie 169). The epigraph in *Flight*, "Po-tee-weet" symbolizes the senselessness of violence with the unintelligible sound of a bird's tweet. Zits first awakening occurs within the body of Hank Storm, a FBI agent in the 1970s during the American Indian Movement (AIM) who successively witnesses the torture and murder of Indian activists betrayed by double agent Native Americans. Here, Alexie emphasizes identity markers of suffering and betrayal as a byproduct of violence his fictional characters either experience first-hand or witness. In the interview with Weich, Alexie talks about the culture of violence that informs him:

> I grew up in a violent world. It's what I saw…it's still ingrained in me. I've met all sorts of people from other backgrounds, generally from poverty, whose first instinct is to throw the punch. Chris Offutt, an Appalachian writer. Black writers. Chicano writers. We've talked about this. As young men we were taught to fight. It's still the case. (170).

The distance created by time travel and the assumption of different identities provides a space for Zits to mature into a capacity for reflection. Bernardin asserts: "Zits, too, must confront his own complicities, having just massacred customers in a bank, the act that catapults him through time and space" (Alexie-Vision: Getting the Picture 53).

Fractured time initiates in a linear trajectory, and then begins to curve slightly to locate further back in time within pivotal historical events that fill in Zits's identity cracks. Zits relocates in the body of an early teen-age Indian boy who is mute and accompanied by his father in war paint. The silenced voice of the young narrator is another metaphor of stolen identity. Zits's elation of finally having a father who has conversations with Crazy Horse, the "magical one" and Sitting Bull is short-lived as he realizes that the camp where he landed is about to be slaughtered by U.S. Cavalry soldiers" (*Flight* 66). Alexie takes the opportunity in the liminal space of shifting realities to examine Native American history as an eyewitness observer:

> They'll be packed on train cars and shipped off to reservations. And they'll starve in winter camps near iced-over rivers. The children are going to be kidnapped and sent off to boarding schools. Their hair will be cut short and they will be beaten for speaking their tribal languages. They'll be beaten for dancing and singing the old-time songs. All of them are going to start drinking booze. And their children will drink booze (66).

Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco comment on remarks made by White that "narratives-historic or otherwise…are in fact plagued by gaps in and absences of events and figures that, for different reasons, were left out of the picture" (Qtd. in Undone and Renewed by Time 30). Accordingly, Alexie creates a space to rewrite a historically informed identity. Bernardin asserts that "Native Americans are hypervisible as cartoons, commodities, and casino caricatures yet virtually invisible as diverse, real people" (52). Zits testimony maps an identity obscured by the distance of unauthentic cultural representation.

Through various identity transformations, Zits experiences individual representations of significant historical moments in Native American and national history. Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco assert that the "figurative journey through history allows Alexie--and Zits—to dig deep into the motives behind conflicts that may explain the plight of Native Americans today" (Undone and Renewed by Time 27). Alexie's formula "anger x imagination = survival" informs the motivation for utilizing magical realism as a technique to rescript his/Zits identity. Ibarrola-Armendariz and Vivanco add further "*Flight* represents, therefore, an illuminating instance of historiographic metafiction in which the writer manages both to retrieve and reconstruct important fragments of his peoples' collective past and to surmise the kind of light that those events cast on their present condition" (27).

Alexie intends for Zits to become "unstuck" so he can not only separate from thinly written false narratives, but is also empowered to move beyond defining identity in terms of physical appearance. Thinly written narratives dissolve in Alexie's sarcasm and humor: "old-time Indians have dark skin" and are the "real thing" unlike "half-breeds" like him. Yet he finds affirmation with the realization that Crazy Horse was also a "half-breed" (*Flight* 60 & 67). However, it is the touch of a scar across the young Indian's neck and a command from his father to slash the throat of a white soldier his age that associates with a memory of sexual abuse from a foster parent. The desire for revenge is mitigated by a realization of the circuitous nature of violence and the humanity of the young white soldier: "If I kill him, do I deserve to be killed by this white soldier's family and friend" (Flight 77). Berglund asserts: "Zits is led away from nihilism and self-destruction to realize that 'revenge is a circle inside of a circle inside of a circle' (*Flight*

77). Berglund adds, "[t]o end violence, one must get outside of it" (An Introduction to Sherman Alexie xxv). Zits's pause before he acts violently indicates he is stepping outside identifying with violence.

Identity formation in the time-travel sequences continues to transgress materiality as it parallels an arc of transformation in Zits's awareness of self. In the assumption of a white Indian scout who speaks with an Irish accent, Zits awakens to the sound of a bugle and a realization of an impending battle, "I wonder who I might have to kill now. I want this to stop" (80). Here, Zits's saturation with violence as an eyewitness of horrific brutality alters his worldview. A sadistic Calvary officer nicknamed Colonel Mustache informs Zits of his next reincarnation as Gus, an Irish Indian guide. In a circuitous reference to the unending cycle that acts of violence set in motion, Gus attempts to lead the soldiers away from the Indians about to be slaughtered, and finds he is moving in circles.

Here, Alexie communicates that identity can be slippery to define, as the colonel who leads the slaughter is white and the man who tries to save Indians is white. This leads to Zits adoption of a broader philosophy regarding cultural identity, "These guys are soldiers… [b]ut they're still just kids, cruel and impulsive" (82). Zits recognition of his self in the cruelty and impulsivity of the young soldiers motivates a desire for change. However, most relevant to a change of identity is the account of Small Saint, a young white soldier who rescues a five-year-old Indian boy named Bow Boy as he aims an arrow at the army, "Somehow that one white boy, that small saint, has held on to a good and kind heart" (*Flight* 92). Gus sweeps the two up on his horse as the three represent the potential for a different outcome, although not without difficult decisions.

A stronger sense of self empowers Zits as he confronts betrayal and gains an understanding of the flawed humanity that transfers across cultures. In the next incarnation, Zits lands in the body of an adulterous American pilot named Jimmy who teaches an Arab terrorist Abbad how to fly. Steven Salaita comments that Alexie "reinforces…liberal Orientalism" (35) in this depiction of a minority Muslim living in the United States. Alexie does veer from the identity issues presented in the previous chapters although he persists in exploring the motivations for violence that is important to Zits's identity formation. In an interview with Duncan Campbell, Alexie referenced 9/11 as a profound influence on his own identity formation: "What changed me was September 11: I am now desperately trying to let go the idea of being right, the idea of making decisions based on imaginary tribes. The terrorists were flying planes into the building because they thought they were right and they had special knowledge" (Voice of the New Tribes 117). Zits becomes aware of the implication of self-betrayal that allows for a breach in identity and thereby destabilizes the individual that extends outward to a weakening of societal structures.

Adolescent self-acceptance culminates from self-recognition informed by familial and communal relationships and the opportunity to create a new identity narrative that represents the individual authentically both psychologically and sociologically. Vogel asserts that "[a]dolescence is a move toward independence. In the process, young adults often experience a love-hate relationship with the world they seek to leave, seeing with disdain family, community, and even the landscape of home" (115). Conversely, Zits dislocation from a place defined as home forces a premature move toward independence.

The literary device of time travel and the embodiment of various identities creates what Alexie refers to as a "potlatch culture" (Weich 169) and resets Zits's identity narrative.

At this point, Zits begins the return flight home, back to real time and the material world. Amir Hossain contends that "Alexie wants to show a faithful image of social realism of postmodern age through creating characters, plot-construction, and themes" (*Sherman Alexie's Literary Works* 385). This appears accurate as Zits's final transformation occurs in the body of his biological Native American father lying in "garbage and dog excrement" who vomits blood (Flight 132). The gritty realism reveals the identity of suffering witnessed in the contemporary urban Indian. Alexie comments, "One of the ways in which colonization works is that it destroys family units" (171). Zits faces this reality and gains a sympathetic understanding of his father's reality that allows him to let go of resentment, an important step toward self-acceptance.

A return to the present reorganizes time and allows reflective thought to change the dissolution of identity. With the guns concealed in his coat, and still resentful of the seemingly happy and carefree lives of the people in the bank, Zits tries to enter the body of a young blue-eyed boy he believes is the only way to escape loneliness and despair. Unable to dislocate again, he embodies a newly reintegrated identity that chooses not to hurt anyone: "I am tired of hurting people. I am tired of being hurt" (162). Finally, Zits recognizes his need for help and reaches back toward the white officer Dave. Alexie remarks that Zits must learn "how to be human, rather than a feral orphan" (Vogel 119). Parallel to the healing of his scars, Zits establishes a healthier sense of self and reveals his true name, "My real name is Michael. Please call me Michael" (181).

The hopeful conclusion of *Flight* reveals Alexie's intention to motivate adolescent males to envision a better future. Although he targets Native American boys in the protagonist Zits, he empathizes the racism of "us" and "them" and shows that fragmentation is unhealthy for the individual and society as a whole. Bernardin asserts Alexie "enlarges his ongoing concerns with the living legacy of genocide against indigenous peoples to complicate any easy sympathies, any tendency to fix people" (53). *Flight* also reinforces a negative view of violence as justification. In summary, Alexie views Zits problem as "having no identity" (Qtd. in Hybrid 120). Vogel surmises "[t]he book's title, *Flight*, has come to represent a symbolic flight from Zits's broken past and from this lasting culture of anger, revenge, and violence" (120). The hopeful ending brought criticism from critics who contend that *Flight's* conclusion is unrealistic causes Alexie to insist that the process of imagining a hopeful future contains the possibility of one becoming a reality.

Chapter Four: Multi-Identity in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Five months after the publication of *Flight,* Sherman Alexie published his second young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (further referred to as *Diary*), in September, 2007. In this novel, categorized as literary realism, Alexie revisits the concept of an Indian bildungsroman with an autobiographical narrator and protagonist who is fourteen-years-old. He is known as Junior on the reservation and as Arnold at Reardan, a predominantly white high school. In *Diary,* identity is equally located on the reservation and within a predominantly white community, and raises questions concerning insider and outsider status. Ultimately, Junior/Arnold pieces together a mosaic of multi-identities formed from shared memories as well as shared interests within liminal spaces of adolescent transition and transcultural assimilation.

Alexie affirms that *Diary,* narrated from the perspective of a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian adolescent male, mirrors his early life from birth to Reardan: "Arnold is me…largely autobiographical" (Davis and Stevenson qtd. in *Conversations with Sherman Alexie* 189). Arnold begins life as Junior, born with hydrocephaly on the Wellpinit Reservation in 1966: "I was born with water on the brain…weirdo me" (1). His physical deformities invoke ridicule and name-calling: "kids just called me Globe" (3). He also experienced frequent beatings that occur at "least once a month" and qualify him for the "The Black-Eye-of-the-Month Club" (4). Isolated by his handicaps, Junior escapes through reading and negotiates self-consciousness through the art of drawing. Junior's excitement at attending Junior High turns to rage with the realization that his reservation textbook was assigned to his mother thirty years earlier. With the encouragement of the

reservation teacher, Mr. P, at whom Junior hurls the textbook; Junior decides to leave the reservation to attend Reardan, twenty-two miles away.

Junior's reservation identity was largely defined by illness, physical abnormalities (hydrocephaly left him with an enlarged head, poor eyesight and prone to seizures until he was seven), framed within the effects of ongoing generations of colonization and genocide that demoralized and demotivated his native community. Alexie begins the novel with a taciturn acknowledgement of systemic racial discrimination and marginalization of Indians; "I have considered the genetic, cultural, political, spiritual, and economic aspects of 'Indianness'" (*You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* 259). Alexie emphasizes the depth of deprivation on the reservation, "Poverty was our spirit animal" (9) metaphorically interiorizing his identity with destitution. Jeff Berglund stresses the influence of reservation life on identity development: "Alexie's formative experiences as a child reared in the midst of alcoholism in the harsh economic realities of rural reservation life are focal points in his early fiction and poetry" (Qtd. in *A Collection of Critical Essays* xi).

The decision to leave the reservation is the portal for Junior's hero's journey although he leaves with conflicted feelings of guilt, betrayal, and a relentless hope for a better life in the social constructs of white privilege. Junior's parents' unequivocal answer, 'White people,' to his question, "'Who has the most hope?' (*Diary* 45) affirms his young worldview. Vanja Vukicevic Garic's article, "Part-time identities and full-time narration as an absolution in Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,*" explores what is constituent to identity early in the narrative, "Junior's search… [is] a quest for a more stable, a more unified and comprehensible identity that could hope to

bridge many gaps in his fragmented and "halved" styles of living" (192). Hopelessness that threatens to overwhelm Junior when his father shoots their sick dog Oscar due to a lack of money to pay a vet demoralizes him, and at the same time motivates him to strive for greater opportunities (*Diary* 136). Junior faces his fears of estrangement and moves out of his comfort zone: "[t]raveling between Reardan and Wellpinit, between the little white town and the reservation, I always felt like a stranger" (*Diary* 191). Junior's fragile reservation identity is disrupted as he transitions to Reardan. Garic notes:

> Leaving one battlefield of fear and violence, deprivation and helplessness, for another battlefield of a subtler cultural bullying contained in, at best, the indifference openly shown by his white schoolmates, Junior enters a struggle which will outline his development in psychological, social, and cultural terms, making his inner split both the consequence and the agent of transformation (191).

As Junior becomes Arnold at Reardan, he struggles to reconstruct both "part-time" identities into a new identity that honors the past, yet relocates in the larger world. The identity split initiates with a change from his reservation nickname to his biological name: "My name is Junior…My name is Arnold…I feel like two different people inside my body" (*Diary* 60-61). As Junior transitions to Arnold, loss comes into sharper focus, obviously important to Alexie's writing as he emphasizes in *Diary*: "[w]e Indians have LOST EVERYTHING. We lost our native land, we lost our languages, we lost our songs and dances. We lost each other. We only know how to lose and be lost" (173). The knowledge of his lost heritage further complicates Arnold's sense of guilt and betrayal in his seeming abandonment of his tribe, intensified by rejection from his reservation

childhood friend Rowdy: "[m]y heart broke in fourteen pieces, one for each year that Rowdy and I had been friends" (52). Arnold's request for Rowdy to transfer with him to Reardan signifies a desire to retain his tribal connection and suggests a fear that his Indian identity may vanish with assimilation at Reardan. The authors of "Leaving the Reservation: Reconstructing Identity in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,*" assert that Alexie "reflects on his own inner conflicts through Arnold, who feels caught between the whites and the Indians as he goes back and forth between the reservation and his school" (Li Ping Chang, et.al. 2). In "Navigating the River of the World" (further referred to as Navigating), Wahpeconiah describes the rage and pain expressed meaningfully by Rowdy in a voiceless physical violence as "transgenerational trauma" and adds further, "traumatic events cannot be adequately remembered, all that is left is 'a gap in the unconsciousness'" (Qtd. in Navigating 48-49). As Chang, et.al., point out, "[a]lthough leaving the reservation might mean losing touch with traditional Native American culture, in Alexie's world it is the only way to escape a killing despair" (2). There is an urgency that compels Arnold to leave even though it cost him the loss of Rowdy, representative of his reservation identity.

Alexie's realistic exposé identifies quotidian reservation life as a "beautiful and ugly thing" (*Diary* 151). In an interview with Tanita Davis and Sarah Stevenson for the 2007 "Finding Wonderland" blog, Alexie asserts the "reservation system was created to disappear and murder Indians" (189). Wahpeconiah agrees with Alexie's position: "Reservations were created by white people for the Native Americans/Indians to live on and they were plots of land that nobody wanted and were just god-awful" (35). In an interview with Daniel Grassian, Alexie elaborated on the historical context of his own

tribe's loss of natural resources: "We were devastated by the Grand Coulee Dam. It took 7,000 miles of salmon spawning beds from the interior Indians in Washington, Idaho and Montana" (*Understanding Sherman Alexie* 1). Arnold's tribal identity, strong familial bonds, and the ability to survive in a harsh environment represent the beauty found on the reservation. However, the festering despondency, fatalism and despair with roots five-hundred years old overwhelm the community. As Chang, et.al. comment: "there is no way for Arnold to change the whole reservation and turn it into a good place…Arnold saves himself" (2). Arnold's survival may disrupt the acceptance of hopelessness and inspire a desire for more than merely existing.

In "Healing the Soul Wound in *Flight* and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,"* Jan Johnson examines the possibility of Arnold's exodus to "implicitly explore the possibilities for healing the tragic legacy of genocide and colonialism…empathy, compassion and forgiveness mark a possible way out of suffering and grief" (224). Arnold's soul wound does begin to heal as it is exposed to an expanded awareness with the revelation that in spite of the advantages of white privilege, Reardan students also have pain and fear the limitations of small town confinement. Arnold initially objectifies Penelope who has "skin…pale white. Milky white. Cloud white. She was white on white on white" (*Diary 114).* Once a real relationship develops, Arnold gains an understanding of Penelope as a complex human being who aspires to be an architect, suffers from bulimia and is victimized by an oppressive racist father. In an interview with Mellis, Alexie parallels a movie character who asks 'is life this hard or is it just when you are a kid?'" to Arnold and rephrases the question, "Is life this hard or is it just because you're an Indian?" (185). Alexie concludes, "no, life is hard for

everybody" (Mellis 185-186). When Arnold tells Rowdy, "I'm in love with a white girl," Rowdy points out Arnold's own racism and hypocrisy, "I'm sick of Indian guys who treat white women like bowling trophies" (115). A self-recognition in opposing identities helps propel Arnold to a deeper understanding of his own humanity.

Self-expression also enlightens Arnold as he progresses toward an integrated identity. Garic asserts that intertwined in Bildungsroman, a Kenstlerroman (artistic development) emerges from Arnold's "continual self-questioning and painful building of self-awareness" (192). The pastiche of identity exposed in Arnold's written narrative is visualized in Arnold's drawings (created by artist Ellen Forney). Humorous illustrations complement Arnold's episodic diary entries. A split panel visualizes Arnold's Indian figure with a garbage bag and canvas tennis shoes next to a white Reardan student with an ergonomic backpack and Air Jordans in a portrait of cultural disparity (*Diary* 57). Garic points to Arnold's "life-writing or self-writing" merged with the directness of illustrations as representative of an emergent multi-identity incorporating a European narrative style and Native American dynamic storytelling (193). Art, by nature subversive, explodes dimensions of materiality and according to Garic, is important as it "destabilizes [forms and narratives] homogeneity and evenness, and enriches with heterogeneous elements of other traditions and cultures, opening up new communication and dialogue" (193).

Alexie unifies identity within the person rather than an associative identity with static social institutions and thereby creates the capacity for transformation and self-determination. In this way, Alexie decolonizes the Indian entrapped within an immobile identity enclosed in a specified geographical location. Alexie's grandmother illustrated

with a belt that reads "Rodeo King," around a calico dress and makes her living from selling key chains on eBay (*Diary*), anchors his Indian identity. The Reardan basketball coach who mentors and encourages Arnold nurtures identity connections in the white world. Arnold transgresses insider and outsider designation and successfully disrupts false narratives. The "gap in the unconscious" that silenced "previous generations," and dug the "tomb of others," is undermined as "Junior finds a way to move from trauma to a place where his multiplicity of selves is integrated "into a contradictory coexistence producing recognizable…multiple identities within a single self" (Qtd. in *Critical Insights* Lewis 49). As Arnold assimilates into Reardan, a reconciliation of his multi-identities occurs and he no longer views himself as the stranger.

As Alexie embraces a newfound hope, he reflects back on the hopelessness and fatalism of the reservation and a need for a change of perspective through refreshed self-awareness. Arnold learns to let go of self-loathing and a sense of inferiority: "Reardan was the opposite of the rez. It was the opposite of my family. It was the opposite of me. I didn't deserve to be there. I knew it; all of those kids knew it. Indians don't deserve shit" (*Diary* 56). Garic points to the tension Arnold experiences as he resists a negative self-image: "A great part of [Arnold's] inner duality is reflected in his awareness that he himself is also a [prey] of the common and stereotypical modes of thinking" (191). Alexie enthusiastically embraces a change he perceives in contemporary Indian writers coming after him that attempt to re-script Indian narratives: "A lot of younger writers are starting to write like me—writing like I do, in a way, not copying me, but writing about what happens to them, not about what they wish was happening. Alexie supports young Native American writers who resist "writing wish fulfillment books," and instead are

"writing books about reality," and not "[t]he kind of Indian they wish they were," but "the kind of Indian they are" (Crossroads Purdy 43).

The integration of Junior, the reservation Indian, with Arnold, the Reardan student, culminates from self-recognition as a member of "many tribes" (*Diary* 217). Arnold realizes he is more than "an apple…red on the outside and white on the inside…a traitor" (135). Tribe is re-categorized, "[t]he world is broken into two tribes: The people who are assholes and the people who are not" (177). Arnold explains further, "I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms" (217). For Arnold, identity forms circuitously, with the present mapped onto the past. Garic observes the fluidity of Arnold's identity as written in *Diary*, "identity is continuously modified in the very process of (self) writing…always 'hypothetical and contingent, always coming into being" (Qtd. in Part-time identities 195). He adds further that a "navigation" of "self" is "necessarily a mediation between self and the other…as in Junior's case, his Indian part-time identity is always recontextualized and slightly modified when placed outside the reservation" (195). The Indian identity remains intact, complemented by new intersections of commonality.

Arnold's identity travels literally and metaphorically on a two-way street, twenty-two miles and hundreds of years of colonization apart. The Spokane salmon boy that inhabits Arnold goes with him on his daily commute from the reservation to Reardan. Mark Vogel points to the duality and oppositional identity in Junior, similar to previous Alexie characters, "when the protagonist leaves the immediacy of his culture, he becomes acutely aware of what it means to be Indian…beyond the reservation while remaining

entangled in Indian culture" (Half-Child, Half-Adult 117). "). The upstream swim that the Spokane spirit animal, the salmon, struggles against in counterforce defiance, parallels Arnold's effort to push against marginalization. Vogel points to the distance Arnold must go in a "battle with alter egos (old friends) who stay on the reservation," as he moves forward in his identity formation. Junior's motive for leaving the reservation was not to acculturate at Reardan, yet he does due to an affinity with the white students' intellectual curiosity and visions of possibility. Vogel notes Arnold's awkwardness as he "straddles two worlds", with "clumsy moves from insider to outsider viewpoints" (117). Eventually, Arnold acclimates both Indian/white rules for living" (117) with an assimilated identity.

A pastiche identity connected to both the reservation and Reardan obscures concepts of us and them, insider and outsider. Junior, ostracized by tribal peers because of his physical handicaps, was born an outsider within his own culture. Ironically, the white students at Reardan's acceptance of Arnold as a flawed, but multifaceted human being guide him toward an empathy with his own people as he recognizes the depth of their suffering from centuries of deprivation and loss. As Arnold befriends Penelope and other white students at Reardan, also transitioning into adulthood, he realizes that their world seemed to them as small as his did to him. Alexie explains how seemingly disparate worlds can be equally confining, "I would also love my readers to recognize that a small white 'mainstream' town can be a kind of death trap, too" (Davis and Stevenson 189. Once Arnold sees that Reardan students share his restlessness and discontent, he accepts them as members of a newly formed tribe. Alexie explains the broader picture that affords inclusivity, "[m]etaphorically speaking, we all grow up on reservations, don't we?" (Davis and Stevenson 189).

Alexie's literary subversion is intended to disrupt defeatism for all marginalized people as he remarks, "I'm really hoping [*Part-Time Indian*] reaches a lot of native kids certainly, but also poor kids of any variety who feel trapped by circumstances, by low expectations, I'm hoping it helps them get out" (Mellis 183). Alexie wants to counter the voice of failure with "You can do it," (*Diary 189),* in affirmation of a burgeoning young adult need for reassurance, to know he "is loved," (189) seen and accepted into multiple tribes. Wahpeconiah refers to the psychologist Eric Erikson's explanation of the role of community as a scaffold for identity formation, "[i]t is community that offers a cushion for pain, the community that offers a context for intimacy, the community that serves as the repository for binding traditions" (Navigating 50). Alexie unifies multiple identities through subversion of preconceived stereotypes and false narratives that divide and separate, "I like to make the profane sacred and the sacred profane" (Mellis 186). Alexie comments to Davis and Stevenson that he maintained for years that his "strongest tribal affiliations are not racially based…my strongest tribes are book nerds and basketball players, and those tribes are as racially, culturally, and spiritually diverse" (190). Like Arnold, Alexie claims he belongs to "a hundred other tribes, based on the things I love to read, watch, do" (190). Ultimately, Reardan's Arnold assumes Junior from the reservation into one identity, diversely whole, confidant to move beyond the small worlds of ignorance, racism and bigotry.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Sherman Alexie defines identity formation as a process by which one learns to know his world and acts accordingly. Alexie first learned his world as hydrocephalic and impoverished on an Indian reservation within a dysfunctional, yet supportive family. The title of an interview with Terrie Gross on a broadcast of NPR, June 20, 2017, "Sherman Alexie Says He's Been 'Indian du Jour' For A 'Very Long Day'" points to the personal and professional importance of identity formation for Alexie. His complicated perspective of identity is clarified with the passage he choses to read on air from his most recent memoir, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*," I am related by blood and marriage to men who hit women and to men and women who hit children…and failing and failing failing" (117). The long and painful journey that Alexie experiences in the recognition of his own multiple identities: recovering alcoholic, bipolar, devoted husband and father, indigenous American, lover of words and language, and gifted writer informs his literary protagonists' multi-identity formation.

In an interview with Ase Nygren, Alexie's comment, "I was simply finding who I was and who I wanted to be" (152) resonates within the three main characters known as the holy trinity, composed of Victor, Thomas-Builds-the-Fire and Junior in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven.* Victor becomes the prototype for later characters such as the angry and defiant Zits in *Flight* and the soul-searching and conflicted Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.* Alexie's approach to identity formation in these three narrative works incorporates the disparate genres of magical realism and gritty truthful portrayals of multi-dimensional characters. The integration of the European episodic narrative with a dynamic and direct Native American oral tradition

subverts writing style as Alexie attempts to deconstruct Native American identity. Additionally, part of who Alexie was and is includes an array of pop culture references and contemporary slang that he employs to connect across cultures in an open invitation to any adolescent reader with feelings of estrangement.

Anger, creativity and resilience resonate in the identity formation of Alexie's protagonists. Anger and frustration as a product of fear and uncertainty dominate early identity formation. These two emotions are reinforced by a perception of outsider dominated by a conquering white culture. Suffering caused by transgenerational trauma and abandonment propel the trajectory of development common to all of the protagonists, but resonates as anger predominantly in Victor and Zits. Poverty, violence and addiction on the reservation further reinforce a sense of loss in an eradication of native language and vanished tribal traditions, as absence is the negative space that defines identity. The holy trinity seeks to fill in gaps of identity with hallucinogenic drugs and victories on the basketball court in a contemporary cultural replacement of the lost traditions of vison quests and hunting rituals. Victor, Thomas and Junior's search for identity is symbolized by their desire to find an adult name in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* story "A Drug Called Tradition". In *Flight*, Zits experiences trauma as a young urban Indian adrift in the rootlessness of the foster system, unable to connect with either his Native American father who abandons him, or his Irish-American mother who dies when he is six years old. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,* Arnold suffers from complications of physical abnormalities that complicate his soul wound, but is comparatively less angry and more stable, surrounded by an intact, albeit dysfunctional, alcoholic, family.

Ongoing colonialism contributes to identity formation in Alexie's work. Broken treaties, broken promises and a breakdown of institutional support systems inform a strong mistrust and sense of betrayal in the collective memories of the protagonists. Alexie sheds light on the way Indian children were treated in reservation schools in "Indian Education", part of the *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* short story collection. Victor recounts the story of his second grade teacher's demand of his parents to "either cut my braids or keep me home," and the racist dismissal of his family as "Indians" with a small "i" (173). Like Alexie, Victor and Arnold overcome systemic racism by excelling academically, and therefore force admission into the more resourceful white community. In contrast, Zits, as an urban Indian, is sexually and physically abused by both white and Indian foster parents, and consequently recoils from identification to the social institutions that fail him. Zits's identity is obscured by constant relocation, like generations of his ancestors forced into confinement on reservations. A new identity for Zits occurs when he finds acceptance with white foster parents who enroll him in school and provide his first sense of home. Thomas-Builds-the-Fire finds contentment to stay on the reservation with his grandmother and tell stories. Junior, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* goes to college and enters into an interracial relationship where he accepts invisibility and the designation of outsider by the white girl's parents.

The common thread of marginalized socioeconomic status is displayed in various outcomes with each individual character. Victor reconciles the loss of father figure through an odyssey to recover his father's ashes in Phoenix, Arizona. He experiences a transformation as pieces of his father's identity are revealed to him, and he gains an

understanding of his father's struggles and painful loss of identity. Zits is enabled through the fantasy of magical realism to transverse time and reconstitute identity in the embodiment of past historical figures, both indigenous and white. In this reimagining, Zits is able to obtain a "potlatch" (Weich 169) identity that allows for self-acceptance and assimilation into a nurturing white foster family. Zits reveals his biological name Michael when he becomes part of a healthy family. Junior on the reservation becomes Arnold as he transfers to Reardan High School where most of the students are white. By simultaneously crossing reservation borders and co-existing in both Indian and white cultures, Arnold successfully processes the transition of adolescence into adult. Through stories from the past, Victor learns to see the humanity in his father's own struggles with forces of marginalization and is able to reconcile his memories.

Gaps caused by cultural marginalization and adolescent estrangement result in varying degrees of dysfunctional behavior and questioning of social conventions. Thomas-Builds-the-Fire retains tribal identity with his visons of past glory within the trope of the archetypal Indian storyteller. He hosts the party that leads to the vision quest where he, Victor and Junior seek to retrieve their lost names, and thereby attain adulthood. Zits communicates the inability to envision self, "I'm a blank sky, a human solar eclipse" (*Flight* 5). Junior's artistic cartoon sketches materialize a vision of identity, but he also searches and longs for greater agency, "I wish I were magical, but I am really a poor-ass reservation kid" (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* 7). Zits becomes a petty criminal who like Victor, Thomas and Junior, uses drugs, but sinks further into criminal behavior such as starting fires and eventually attempts mass murder. Junior in the *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, like Junior in *The*

Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, embodies a more optimistic character who displaces adolescent angst through intellectual accomplishments. Victor, Junior, in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,* and Arnold in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,* cross cultures in intimate relationships with white girls as they question their cultural identity. Zits's rejection of criminal behavior and violence allows him to be rehabilitated and accepted into mainstream culture.

Transcendence of marginalization and fatalism requires all of the characters to travel beyond their geographical and sociological borders. Psychological associations with social places inform identity formation for all of Alexie's alter ego protagonists. Alexie comments that in his writing, he is always leaving the reservation. Victor acquires agency as he reconnects to his father through the tradition of storytelling. Zits must relocate reality in order to overcome a lack of agency. Arnold has to leave the reservation in order to acquire agency through the resources of a white cultural institution. Victor, Michael and Arnold move beyond boundaries of social class and physical boundaries in order to reconstruct an identity capable of making the transition from childhood to adult. Victor and Thomas travel to Phoenix and challenge the white world that encircles their reservation identity. The boundaries of Indian and white society are breached with an intact interior Native American identification and the realization of "hope" beyond the boundaries boundaries of the reservation.

Identification with different races and culture expand the scope of their vision of self and allows for a mosaic of multiple identity. Breaches of time and space inevitably occur as questions the narrators ask about their identity locate are answered. In Erikson's work with Oglala Sioux and Yurok tribes (salmon fishers), he observed that the

reservation had effectively erased a Native American cultural identity, "traditional rituals, such as rites of passage, had been abandoned" and as an effect, "[c]hildren, who at one time had matured in the individualist system of the tribe were now forced to attend state boarding schools (sites.google.com/ erikeriksondl825). In his memoir, Alexie writes of his mother's transgenerational fear of Indian children being taken from their families and disappearing into white institutions. The psychosocial development of Alexie's protagonists is influenced by their history and the search for their individual identities' relevance in modern society. Education affords social mobility for Arnold as he transfers to Reardan. Victor and Junior overcome the disadvantages of a reservation education as Victor graduates as valedictorian and both go on to college. Enrollment in a white school also indicates Zits' movement toward the opportunities of higher education. The willingness to transgress long established borders transfers to a resolution of identity confusion in adolescent development.

Athletics and physicality assist in stabilizing identity formation in Alexie's young male protagonists. A pivotal scene in the movie *Smoke Signals* climaxes with the image of twelve-year-old Victor driving a basketball down court to soar over the head of a redheaded Jesuit priest and win the game for the Indians. Poignantly, as the voiceover of Victor's father recounts the story, he bounces a basketball on a dimly lit pavement with the soundtrack highlighting the percussive sound, reminiscent of tribal drumming. Victor will later say that he actually missed the shot, but the comment by his father, "this one time, we won" conveys the tribal pride that reunites father and son (*Smoke Signals* 1998). Arnold's acceptance at Reardan, symbolized by making the basketball team, signifies the apex of his dramatic arc. Arnold's tribal rite of passage was leaving on his quest to

Reardan; his adolescent rite of passage comes from his strength of character shown on the basketball court. In contrast, Zits's urban identity separates him from Victor and Arnold in this respect. Zits's physicality is expressed in a darker psychologically disturbed persona as he finds empowerment from shooting guns rather than basketballs. However, Zits's eventual denunciation of physical violence empowers him sociologically. Ironically, Thomas's lack of male physicality identifies his mysticism in his attempt to fly. Junior expresses his physicality in a sexual relationship with a white woman that produces a mixed race child who symbolizes the hybrid identity of multiple cultures and addresses the materiality of racism.

Erikson asserts that childhood identity formation culminates with an integration of multiple identities as individuals establish connections within a larger community. Wahpeconiah notes: "Erikson points out, 'It is the community that offers a cushion for pain, the community that offers a context for intimacy, the community that serves as the repository for binding traditions," (50). Arnold (referred to here as Junior) represents the healing of the soul wound scars, "In accepting seemingly contradictory selves and communities, Junior achieves integration" (51). The holy trinity in *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* bond through common suffering and support the healing processes of broken relationships, isolation and alienation because of transgenerational trauma. Zits's unstable identity because of dislocation in the urban Indian diaspora, finds cohesion through an enhanced perspective of the human condition and a rejection of violence. Intersections of identity recognize that cracks in an existing identity may be filled in as new identities form, flawed, yet able to hold multiple influences. Arnold enfolds the reservation Junior within him as he forces an unwilling culture to open its

opportunities to him. Alexie's protagonists move forward as they unify and traverse artificial designations of insider and outsider. They learn to accept the complexity of an identity perpetually in flux, influenced by transitions in human development and an ever-changing external world.

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